Exposed

by gatepromise

Summary

Bradley and Colin are in a play directed by their Merlin co-star Richard Wilson. The play has them portraying lovers, and there is nudity involved. Bradley and Colin are not lovers when they take on the roles, but...things happen. Set between series 4 and 5 and continuing to the filming of 5.13.

Notes

This was originally posted just before fourth season, and then taken down between seasons 4 and 5, for "reasons".

This would never be re-posted if not for the hateful rancor of one Conspiracy Anon and her proxies over at the mm (one of the nastiest snake pits ever, home to dodos, cows, sows and poisonous reptiles). She is so fixated and obsessed with me, claiming that since I like Colin, I therefore hate Bradley. But she cannot come up with one actual quote, not one, that would prove this. She claims that since I think Bradley *exaggerated* all those flattering offers he’s been receiving and declining since Merlin, and because I wanted he and Colin to have a photo shoot together before the end of the show (rather than he and Angel), and because I wrote Exposed, this is "proof" that I hate Bradley and cannot allow anyone to share in Colin’s "light".

Dear readers, please read Exposed and tell me if you see any Bradley hate.

She’s even recently accused that it is "so important" to me that Colin be straight! (This must be why I write Brolin fanfic...because it’s "so important" to me that both Colin and Bradley be straight. Everyone that writes m/m fic must be a homophobe. Makes perfect sense, right?

Exposed

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/955805.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: M/M
Fandom: Merlin (TV) RPF, Merlin (TV), Real Person Fiction
Relationship: Bradley James/Colin Morgan
Character: Bradley James, Colin Morgan, Richard Wilson, Georgia May King, Anthony Head
Stats: Published: 2013-09-05 Completed: 2013-12-26 Chapters: 18/18 Words: 152942
To someone as strait-jacket nuts as CA and her little proxies.)

Thus are the unfortunate torments of her unhealthy, unstable mind. Just the other day, someone said Bradley's shoes were ugly and she threw a tantrum.

PA wrote a great short story in which Bradley was not happy with being out of work for almost a year and CA said she (PA) also hated Bradley and had written him as a loser. It just goes on and on!

I just have no idea why she picked me out of the crowd to focus her volatile temper on as this imaginary Bradley hater. Repeated requests for some kind of example, a quote of some sort, are met with silence. Me denying any ill will towards Bradley James is met with "Don't you say you're a fan of his! You do so hate him!"

What can I say. I really don't. Attempting rational conversation with CA and her "pals" is like trying to reason with 3-year olds. Very vitriolic, maddened, antagonistic 3-year-olds.

To be fair, CA thinks EVERYONE has plotted against Bradley from day one. She says the Js hate Bradley so much that they "wouldn't let him go" to SDCC 2012 because he'd outshine their favorite, Colin. Merlin Official hated him and so wouldn't announce any of his projects, wouldn't market him properly. People on twitter hate him every time they post something about Colin, or hope to see him with Colin, or love it when they're sighted together. And Colin himself hates Bradley. It's so plain, to her! He didn't mention him by name in his NTA speech! It's a global conspiracy against Bradley, even a year after Merlin ended.

Yes, unfortunately I really am serious.

So, in response to her paranoia and her inability to let the subject of peanut butter go, I decided to dig this out and share this again with anyone who loves both Bradley James and Colin Morgan equally. I love them both individually, but most of all, I love them together (in whatever form anyone wants to think they are). I love them as Arthur and Merlin, but most of all I love their rapport and chemistry in interviews together as themselves. (The last Merlin PR day is probably my favorite.) I love the odd sightings too: Bradley showing up at the Globe on opening night, Colin being seen on the tube wearing a Heat hat right after Miami won the championship and Bradley tweeted about it. The origami interview. They are my favorite pair of weirdos.

This story is complete and will be posted in parts over the next few weeks, with ongoing editing being done probably until infinity. It's a little different from what was originally posted...but not too much so. Many of the events in it were inspired by real life happenings, but I want to stress that many, many of them are not. It's a work of fiction, after all, not to be taken as "truth" for one moment. I don't know these people, and I don't claim to know anything about how the real Bradley James and Colin Morgan (and their friends) would behave. The characters in this story are fictional constructs. No disrespect or offense is meant towards anyone depicted here.

And that's my "official" disclaimer!

As with all fanfic, it's a labor of love.

Reposting it means that something positive has come from CA's mental illness and hateful misconceptions.
*waving at you, cray-cray CA*

So, that said, I dedicate this story to Conspiracy Anon and her little cronies (proxies). Take your meds.

ETA: 1 Oct 2013: Seems that batshit "CA" & her cohorts/proxies found this today and took exception! Like all confronted bullies, liars & delusionists, she's not a happy camper right now. Still accuses me of hating Bradley and is still not able to come up with a single iota of evidence. Bwhahahaha!
Chapter 1

Bradley was so very rarely speechless, but when Colin called him and told him he had a business proposal for him, and began to describe just what it was, there was nothing but the sound of air for several moments.

“Bradley? Have I lost you?” Colin’s brogue came over the mobile.

“I’m still here, Cols, I just…I really have no idea what to think…are you serious?”

“Of course I don’t expect an answer right away. Why don’t you come to Covent Garden, meet up with Richard and I for dinner and we can really talk about it in depth. Richard says he hasn’t even started official auditions yet, so…”

“Does he know you’re talking about this with me? I mean, maybe he would have someone else in mind for this.”

“I suggested you to him, and he was really excited about the idea. He said he never would have thought of it, and his only concern was that you wouldn’t be willing to accept it.”

“Yes, well…”

“Look, Bradley, let’s get together, yeah? The few words of summary I just gave you don’t do it justice at all. We haven’t seen each other in a month, and you would have nothing to lose just to listen.” Colin’s voice, as usual so reasonable and quiet, was ultimately Bradley’s undoing.

Well, that was easy enough, no pressure in just getting together to socialize a bit and converse.

“You’re right; it’ll be good to see you both before Christmas. Let’s meet up this weekend…”

And before he’d hung up, Bradley had himself a dinner meeting with two of his co-stars from Merlin, his mate Colin, and their formidable, and well-liked, but somewhat intimidating friend and director of the play in question, Richard Wilson.

It wasn’t until midway through their dinner at a classy, upscale restaurant that Bradley realized, in a sort of panged, “I really am an idiot” sort of way, that he’d never socialized with Richard outside of Merlin. He already knew the actor who played Gaius was funny, and smart, and insightful, but he was now revelling in the delightful stories he was telling of old theatre days.

“….and that, my young friends, is why you never, ever let your best mate faff about with any of your costumes before shows.” Richard concluded, and basked for a moment in Colin and Bradley’s appreciative guffaws.

They’d been plied lightly with wine—Richard was sipping a wonderful cognac, Bradley had only sipped politely at his wine, most of which remained untouched next to his second beer—and Colin had had only one Bloody Mary, and was now drinking coffee and looking very, very content and full after his meal of no-cheese risotto and a steamed vegetable platter. Colin had always had such a dainty stomach, Bradley thought wryly; he and Richard had eaten like men, Richard opting for a fine lamb dish, Bradley for steak, medium well, with baked potato. It was a marvellous evening, but there were serious business matters to be dealt with.

He waited for a moment after the laughter had died down, and gently prompted Richard.
“So, Colin has told me a little bit about the play…”

“Ah, yes. I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you are even considering this. I know that the subject matter is certainly out of your comfort zone, but I also have no doubt that you could be magic in the role, and stretch your acting muscles too.”

Colin said nothing, just followed the conversation, shifting his eyes from one to another, and his expression alert and interested.

“That’s kind of you, I’m very flattered.”

“No, Bradley, don’t be. This isn’t a favour to you. This is indeed a very challenging role, and you may find yourself yet not up to the task, emotionally. Consider it carefully, for the subject matter is quite intense, and I’m sure that Colin has already told you that there is nudity involved.”

“He did.” Bradley glanced at Colin, who said nothing, only quirked his mouth slightly at him. “And I have to admit, that gives me pause, that more than anything.”

“Of course. It isn’t just taking your top off gratuitously like Arthur. You will be full frontal in front of a live audience for a few moments, not very long, but it will seem an eternity if you do not decide early on to immerse yourself fully in the life of your character, Carr.”

Bradley smirked. “I’m really not that modest, but…”

“It’s not really a question of body modesty.” Colin spoke for the first time since they’d started conversation on this topic, and Richard and Bradley gave him their full attention. “You know that I was nude onstage briefly right before I got the Merlin part, when I did A Prayer For My Daughter. The first few performances…I’m telling you, I thought I was going to faint. I was like, oh my god, oh my god, the entire time. And then I had to crawl into my fully clothed co-star’s lap in a foetal position…we got to know each other intimately, he and I, let me tell you.”

The three chuckled together at that.

“We’ve never talked about that role of yours before, but I’d like to hear about it now”, Bradley told him. “Why did you decide to do it, and how did you deal with it?’

Richard nodded, indicating his own interest and that Colin should continue describing his experience.

“I was just twenty two at the time, barely out of drama school, and it was at the Young Vic—” Colin named one of the premiere theatres in London.

“I knew it would garner attention, and I was thinking, as I always am, of the next role after that, that if I did well with this, then more would come.”

Bradley nodded; he knew that reviews of Colin had been very positive indeed, and had also brought him attention from the Merlin show runners, so his career had been furthered by the risk he’d taken.

Colin continued, “I don’t want to seem cliché, but the script was awesome, and the nudity just fit in and was needed. It wasn’t just plopped in for the sake of being edgy or brave. It certainly wasn’t sexy. And you know, I don’t know if it’s the same for the both of you, but I think a lot of actors have a bit of exhibitionism. They want to be seen, not necessarily without their clothes, but they want to expose as much of themselves as they can.”

Colin paused, sipped his coffee, and seemed to choose his next words carefully. “I won’t lie, it’s not
easy. I almost chickened out in the dress rehearsal, the first time I stripped.”

“That would be the un-dress rehearsal”, Bradley interjected.

“Yeah, right”, Colin’s eyes crinkled, and Richard rolled his.

“So what did you do to deal with that nervousness, that oh-my-god feeling, then?” Richard queried.

“I put it aside.” Colin answered bluntly. “I was playing a role. Jimmy, my character, was the one naked in front of hundreds up there, not me. I just didn’t take it with me when I went home.”


“Easier said than done.” Bradley murmured. “I’m not method…”

“It is.” Colin agreed. He tilted his head slightly, took a breath. “I don’t know if this helps you at all, really. You have a different approach when you work, from what I’ve seen. But the nudity…its three minutes of a two hour play. Don’t let that become what it’s about for you. The role is challenging in many different forms, and it’s not frivolous, it speaks significantly to a lot of different issues. It could be very satisfying to play….”

“Let me ask you this.” Richard leaned towards Bradley slightly. “Colin said he approached you about this and you seemed to have no qualms about it at all, until he told you about being required to be au natural onstage. Is that your only reservation about it? You don’t have any other trouble with the subject matter?”

Bradley knew what Richard was asking him now. The character Richard had in mind for him to play, Carr, was openly gay, like Richard himself. Like the role Colin was already locked in to play, Nigel.

“No, Richard, I don’t have any problems with gays, you know that.”

“No problems with homosexuals as individuals, no, but becoming one yourself, for two hours a night? I’m confident you don’t have a point of reference for that.”

“Not first-hand, no, but I have plenty of friends who are gay, after all. I did go to drama school.” Bradley’s voice took on a slight edge of defensiveness.

Richard just raised an eloquent eyebrow.

Bradley felt his cheeks start to heat in embarrassment. How could Richard think he was a homophobe? That was just insulting. He was, he knew, pretty aggressively het, but he wasn’t a Neanderthal about it.

Was he?

As if sensing the air beginning to be charged with a challenge, Colin interrupted. “You should read the script, Bradders. I thought it was brilliant, or I wouldn’t be pushing it like this.”

“I would like to, yes. From what you’ve told me, it sounds intriguing.”

“Then read it you shall.” With a flourish, Colin produced a script from the chair next to him and handed it to him.

Where had that been? Bradley hadn’t even seen it.
The evening ended shortly after that. Bradley was staying with Colin in his flat for the night, and then would take the train the next day to his family’s home in Devon for the Christmas holidays. Colin would be flying into Belfast the day after that. They shook hands and embraced Richard before leaving, Bradley clutching the script and promising he’d call Richard with a decision before the holiday. Auditions would begin right after Boxing Day, after all, and two weeks of intense rehearsals were slated for January the third. They were coming right down to the wire. The show would only run for four weeks, and then it would be back to Merlin for fifth series.

Bradley knew his decision was already made before leaving the restaurant.

Once arriving in Colin’s small but comfortable flat, they fell into familiar routines—Colin prepared tea for Bradley and more coffee for himself while Bradley began reading the script. He was also aware of Colin slipping away into his bedroom and coming back out in comfortable sweats, slippers and a thermal shirt against the December chill. Bradley remained as he’d been; dressed for dinner at an elegant eatery, save for having removed jacket and shoes.

Before long, Colin joined him on the couch, and they ran some lines, sitting close together and holding the script between them as they did so many times when preparing for scenes for their television show.

One thing was for certain, the subject matter they were reading aloud was about as far from anything on Merlin as it could be. Bradley didn’t want to say that it was “adult”—the connotations of that wasn’t something he wanted to be a part of—but it most certainly was the most mature subject matter he’d ever had the opportunity to be part of.

The truth was, he loved playing Arthur. He was given a lot of leeway in the role, and it afforded him a great deal of variety: drama, humour, action. He got to play the swashbuckling, derring-do hero of legend and lore, riding horses, swinging a sword, wooing the girl, running a kingdom. It was any boy’s fantasy come true, especially one with as much of an athletic bent as Bradley had. He was surrounded by talented, hardworking, creative people, and he loved the actors he worked with, often having to contain his excitement at some of the guest stars that were brought in. He’d found a father figure in Tony and great mates in the knights. There were times, though, that Bradley wanted to scream at the sheer simplicity and plain gormlessness of some of the stories. There were aspects he didn’t like either, such as Arthur’s continuing obliviousness to Merlin’s magic, which made Arthur seem quite stupid by Bradley’s lights, and most of their fan contingent too, at least those over the age of six.

There were other downsides too. He’d acquired a stalker at some point, a twenty-something resourceful woman who’d followed him home, staked out his flat, and harassed his girlfriend Georgia in online forums. He’d been truly frightened more than once, and often vastly annoyed, at some of the crowds they filmed in front of in France at the castle; there always seemed to be a camera pointed at his face, no matter what he was doing.

In response to that, he was far more wary of any strangers who approached him, and he very rarely twittered publicly any more. He had found himself with an unfair reputation as being sullen and unfriendly with fans. It was so far from his genuine personality, that of extrovert and life of the party, but he had come to feel that he needed to guard and protect himself, lest any other slightly deranged person got the wrong idea and misconstrued his friendliness as a “special relationship” with her.

Quite frankly, Bradley needed a break; something to remind himself why he’d spent four grueling years at the London School of Drama, and was continuing to toil in a “family show” on the BBC in Wales, often in bitter cold, rain, or sweltering heat.
So he and this man he’d built an odd friendship with over four and half years—very odd—read a very complex and tragic script of two gay lovers living in the late eighties in London, one a high profile business man, (Bradley’s character) the other an artist, a sculptor (Colin’s character).

They read about how they were both firmly entrenched in the closet, both of them terrified of being found out, yet impatient and sickened with the constraints of their society. They read of small triumphs, and of the girlfriend of the businessman, the pretext who was actually in love with one gay man, while the gay man’s lover seethed in the background, symbolically gagged. They read the nude scene, which turned out, wasn’t anywhere near as explicit as Bradley had thought it would be, but sensual and loving and quite bittersweet. It called upon the actors’ to mime sex, and Bradley thought for a long time how Richard might intend to stage it, make it tasteful and honest. And he noted that the two characters kissed each other frequently, and touched, and well...behaved as lovers did.

It was a complicated and very full story with a great deal going on it, and the dialogue in it snapped with the realness and harshness of a time gone by, not that far ago, honestly, when whom one took to one’s bed could mean a lost career, even lost family.

Bradley shook his head, turned the script back as he had several times to gaze at the name of the writer. A woman’s name, one he didn’t recognize. Richard had told him earlier in the evening that she was fairly young, that this was among only a few plays she’d written. If all her creative works were this good, Bradley marveled now.

And he read how hate killed one of the lovers, Colin’s character, which died in the arms of the character Bradley was pretty sure he had to play.

He sat there, feeling drained and flayed emotionally. Bradley was exhausted physically, and it wasn’t that late, and he’d only had two beers. He leaned his head back against the couch, ignoring Colin for the moment, trusting him to understand that he needed to gather his thoughts and his emotions.

Bradley was practically dozing in that position before Colin spoke. “Do you want to lie down, get ready for bed? Your train leaves before nine tomorrow, yeah?”

“No, I’m not ready for bed yet”, Bradley answered, lifting his head and adjusting his posture into one of less of an insouciant sprawl. “Just trying to process…you weren’t kidding about this script, it is something amazing. I’m wondering how I would do that scene, your death scene, maybe with your head in my lap…the sex scene doesn’t intimidate me, now I’ve read it, either, I’m thinking my bum is the only…what are you grinning at, anyway?”

Colin chuckled. “The way you’re talking…you’re going to do it, aren’t you.”

Bradley stopped for a moment, sucked his lower lip between his teeth. In his mind, he’d already committed, had begun trying to sort out how he’d approach this moment or that phrase. But he also realized that…

“Well, actually, I think I’d already decided before we left the restaurant. Didn’t want to tip my hand, though…”

Colin full out chuckled now. “You just wanted to be courted.”

Bradley shrugged, grinned. “I suppose. I’ll call Richard in the morning. Pack your panties, Morgan, you and me are going to have sex together in public. The fan girls have suspected for years, after all. God save the queen.” He imitated a porn movie’s soundtrack, head jerking, eyes bugging, “Bow chicka wow wow…”
“You’re hopeless, James. You really are. And yeah, you’re right. It’s going to be brill.”

So they laughed, and Colin got them both more coffee and tea, and Colin made a goofy face at Bradley when he warned him that he wouldn’t be able to get to sleep with all the coffee he was drinking that night. Colin told him it was decaf and to stop his mother henning, and what did he think of this scene…

They pretty much ran through the entire script again, and ran scenes they both liked or weren’t certain of or were intrigued by, and talked about how they pictured how it could be staged, or how they thought Richard would run with it. They were two men who’d been starring in a television show for four years, and Bradley realized, as his jaw popped on a wide yawn, that he was being reminded tonight why he’d settled on acting as his course in life.

He was falling in love with acting all over again.

It was the ever-practical Mr. Morgan who reminded him that he had a train to catch in less than four hours…and how on earth had they stayed up the entire night, anyway? It was almost five am! He supposed that he could always sleep on the train…

“Did you want to hit the sack now, Colin? Sorry to keep you up like this, I’m just really…more excited than I’ve ever been about this project…”

“It’s not a problem. I’ll see you off to your train. I really don’t have anything planned until tomorrow, well, today, tonight…you know what I mean. I can sleep later.”

“Ah…you’re excited too, then, aren’t you.”

“It’s Richard’s direction, you’re in it, it’s going to be a challenge…I’m seriously chuffed. I may burst into song at any moment.”

Bradley rolled his eyes. The idea of the reserved Colin going off like that…”Be my guest, mate. Just so long as you’re not singing any of that Indie crap you like so much.”

Colin gave him a mock-outraged look. “And what would you prefer, Mr. Musical Connoisseur? The Buffy musical?”

“Keep it up, and I’ll tell Anthony you’ve besmirched Once More With Feeling.”

“Anthony besmirches Once More With Feeling!”

“Only when I sing it for him, and how about if I besmirch you.” Bradley picked up a throw pillow, stuffed it in Colin’s face.

After that, things went kind of south, as the two actors turned into eight year olds, hitting each other with pillows, chasing each other through Colin’s flat, and wrestling on the couch until they fell on the floor, Bradley barely missing smacking his head on the coffee table.

The shenanigans only came to a halt when Colin’s downstairs-neighbour pounded on the ceiling, the universal signal for "Stop making so much noise!", and reminding the two of them that though they didn’t feel tired, it was still the wee hours of the morning for normal people.

“Shhhh!” Colin said loudly, dramatically, and Bradley hoisted himself back up on the couch, dragging Colin’s thin frame with him. He fished around on the floor, came up with the script that had fallen amidst all their juvenile horseplay.
For a moment they just sprawled together, shoulders nearly touching, trying to catch their breath. Bradley idly rifled through the script.

“Listen Cols…I want to ask you something. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Colin just looked at him, open and expectant.

“We haven’t talked about it before, because, you know, your personal life isn’t any of my business, no one’s really but your own, but I’ve been wondering for a while now, and I know you’re always so focused on the work that you don’t really have any time for relationships, not like me, because I haven’t been able to find any work on hiatus, but you, you’ve always got things going on, and…”

“Bradley.” Colin cut off his rambling. “What’d you want to ask me? Something about my relationships?”

“Yeah. Like I said, you don’t have to answer, but—the play has us as gay lovers, and I’m wondering if you’ve ever… I mean… are you gay?”

Four years of almost constant contact with this enigmatic, private man, and Bradley still didn’t know for sure. Bradley wore his heart on his sleeve while Colin was so good at keeping himself to himself.

Colin didn’t appear at all offended by the question. He shrugged one shoulder. “It’s a legitimate question, considering the subject matter we’re about to act. To answer your question, no, I don’t consider myself gay. All of my sexual encounters have been with girls. There haven’t been very many. But… to be honest, I wouldn’t be opposed to experimenting either. I guess you could say I’m het but curious. What’s the label for that these days? Bi or something like that? I don’t think about the labels that much…”

Bradley nodded his head vigorously. “Yeah, yeah. You’re het but open.”

Colin looked at him for a moment, smirked a little. “Are you relieved? You thought I was gay?”

Bradley shook his head once. “No, I honestly didn’t know, and if you were gay, or bi, or into you know, S & M or whatever”-- he chuckled as Colin rolled his eyes---“It wouldn’t change a thing between us.”

Colin did that unique quirk of his lips that made his dimples show, but said nothing, seeming to wait for Bradley to continue.

When nothing more was forthcoming though, he gently prodded, “So, I know that you’re straight. You’ve never thought about, you know, the other side? Not even as a lark, or for the experience to draw on in acting?”

Bradley took a breath. “Actually…I have thought about it. Experimenting, I mean. I’m like you; all my encounters have been with women.” He deepened his voice, teasing with his most over the top “manly” voice. “And there have just been hundreds of women, just…well, you know how I have to beat them off me with a stick…”

Colin picked up another pillow from the couch, smacked him with it. “You’re impossible”.

“I know”. Bradley grinned at him.

“Go on” Colin gestured for him to follow through with his train of thought.

“Well, that’s it. I guess I’m just waiting for the right circumstances, the timing to be right, everything,
you know. It may never happen, I don’t know. The guy would have to be…” Bradley just made a helpless kind of shrug. “I don’t even know. Just someone who had his shit together, I’d say. Because I don’t claim to, that’s for certain.”

And suddenly, Bradley felt the time catch up with him, and he was exhausted, and needed sleep in a way that made his head hurt. He scrubbed a hand over his face.

“Jesus, Morgan, the things I get up to with you, the things we talk about.”

“Worse than two old ladies”.

“Worse than my sisters and mum”.

“Worse than Katie and Angel.”

“I wouldn’t go quite that far.”

And they were giggling again, the two of them.

When Colin finally wandered off to his bedroom, setting the small alarm to wake them in only two hours, Bradley lay on the couch in the dark and thought about this night, and the changes it had brought. And how he’d voiced something to a mate he’d never told anyone before in his life. He knew he never would have been able to agree to accept the opportunity this play presented, both professionally and emotionally, if he hadn’t implicitly trusted the actor he’d be with, if he didn’t completely trust Richard’s guidance as a director.

Despite his exhaustion and growing headache, Bradley found himself smiling. He hummed one of the Buffy musical songs quietly to himself, “And we will walk through the fire…” and giddily thought about what a giant dork he was before sleep finally claimed him.

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“Morgan, that is the most obnoxious alarm clock I’ve ever heard…”

“They’re all obnoxious.” Colin shuffled past the couch and into the kitchen, presumably for more of the coffee he was always guzzling.

With a loud and melodramatic groan, Bradley levered himself upright, into a sitting position on the couch, wrapping his blankets around himself more securely. How had it gotten so chilly in two hours? It was warm enough when he’d gone to bed…

Well, he supposed the fact that he’d taken off his clothes and had nothing more on now than briefs and a tee-shirt plus the blanket might have had something to do with it.

He stared muzzily at the wall for a moment, trying to organize his mind, and then glanced over at Colin again. Colin, who was yawning in the kitchen and scratching his stomach, eyes blurry, hair sticking up at odd angles, face stubbly.

He supposed if the girls could see him now, they’d think he was adorable.

“Hey, Cols”, he called. “Looking fab right now, you are” He smirked at Colin’s answering dirty look.

“Oh, not as fab as you. I think you’ve got some old potato crisps from the sofa cushions stuck to you face.”
He didn’t, he knew. “Sod off, Morgan”.

Colin just chuckled. “You want some cereal? I’ve got only soy milk to go with it…”

“Soy? Ugh, Morgan, no wonder your arse is so bony.” He ignored Colin’s asking him how he would know, opted instead to get up and join his friend in the kitchen. “Got any bread for toast?”

As it turned out, Colin did have bread, the cinnamon raisin kind that was Bradley’s favourite. No butter, though, only soy substitute that was really little more than grease as far as Bradley was concerned.

No matter. It was only a short time later they were both back on the couch, Bradley happily crunching his toast, Colin his cereal. “Don’t forget to call Richard”, Colin reminded him abruptly.

“Oh! What time is it? You think it’s too early?”

“I dunno, I think he said at some point he’s an early riser. You can always leave a voice mail.”

So at just a few minutes past eight in the morning, Bradley phoned Richard. It was answered on the second ring. Bradley thanked him again for the dinner the night before, and then told him he was accepting the part.

He held the phone out at arm’s length from his ear at Richard’s response. “Colin”, he told his friend in a tone something like wonderment. “Richard just whooped.”

Colin snickered.

Richard told Bradley that the business paperwork would be delivered to his home in Devon, and that his agent would be contacted. Then, in a warning tone of voice, he reminded Bradley that while this was professional theatre, it would not make him rich.

Bradley realized then he’d never even stopped to think how much the play would pay. He had more than enough money from what he made on Merlin to support himself for several years. Bradley lived frugally.

“Oh. How much?”

“Just a bit more than scale.” Richard named the figure.

Well, that was fine. He’d put it in savings, or donate it to the hospital charity he had done work for in the past.

The payoff would be in the satisfaction of successfully doing this play.

When had he, as an actor, started thinking like this, anyway?

He and Richard briefly went over other business aspects of the agreement, with Richard promising he’d have everything in writing and sent to him, (and a copy to his agent), by the end of the week. A detailed schedule would also be included. “We will start the actual rehearsals on January the third, but I’d like to meet with you and Colin and the other cast members before then to go through a table read. Can you make it back on the second?”

Bradley agreed, and after thanking Richard again, and wishing him the happiest of holidays, he passed the phone to Colin, who’d been waiting unobtrusively beside him.
Colin immediately crowed into Bradley’s IPhone, “I told you Richard! You owe me a beer!”

“Bastard”, Bradley muttered good naturedly, and nudged Colin’s shoulder with his own. Apparently Colin and Richard had bet on whether he’d take the part or not. Richard had bet against it. Hmmm.

Bradley was subject to five more minutes of one sided conversation as Colin and Richard exchanged their surprise and pleasure at Bradley being on board with the project. Colin then wished Richard well for the holidays and agreed to return to London on the second, which would be the day after Colin’s twenty-sixth birthday.

“This is going to be something”, Colin declared happily, signing off and handing Bradley back his phone.

“Conspired against me, the lot of you didn’t you”, Bradley murmured. He again felt that warm, flattered feeling that had begun when Colin had first brought him news of the show.

“Aye”. There were times when Colin played up his accent on purpose. “Proud of it, too.”

“You are a leprechaun with big ears who conspires against his mate, that’s what you are.”

Colin just grinned and told him he was going to get dressed, leaving Bradley alone with his phone on the sofa.

Bradley sat there, just savoring his happiness for a moment, and then sighed. Richard had reminded him of something that he’d just as soon not have to deal with at all, but business with business, and there was no time like the present. Putting it off wasn’t going to help any.

Sighing, he scrolled through the numbers on his phone until he found his agent’s.

Every hiatus since he’d begun working on Merlin, it was the same thing: He’d plead, he’d beg, he’d cajole, he’d asked nicely, he’d demand, he’d harass his agent to find him work, something different than Prince Arthur. Nothing ever happened. She’d offered him a grand total of two possibilities, both of which had him playing a teenager fresh off the farm. That was it, that was all she’d come up with, and had been quite displeased when he’d turn them down flat. And verbal about it, too. She was very old school, very determined that Bradley should continue to nurture the clean-cut, family oriented image he’d been thrust into as Arthur, despite Bradley’s protests that he was an ACTOR, for god’s sake, and wanted to just do something different once in a while. He wanted to work, wanted to be seen, wanted to pad his CV. Merlin wasn’t going to last forever, after all.

It should all have been simple enough. It was a reasonable request, one every actor made of their agent: “Find me work.” And to be fair, this was the agent who had found Merlin for him. He was sure that she was doing her due diligence, making the effort. In spite of appearances, Bradley wasn’t naïve; he knew how the business worked. So much of finding success was due to timing and luck. Talent and appeal and experience helped too, but it wasn’t everything, and competition was cut throat. He had quite a few friends, both from drama school and elsewhere, whom he considered far more talented than himself, and they were struggling for work.

On the other hand, there were also people like his friend Katie McGrath, who had had no experience and no training when she’d been cast as Morgana, and hadn’t even known what a bloody mark was. The production cast had had to take special pains and patience the first season. She’d smirked her way through the entire third season, and then landed a role in a film with, of all people, Madonna. Bradley’s teenaged wet dream.
And no, that wasn’t fair either. Bradley felt embarrassed and ashamed for thinking such petty, jealous thoughts about his co-star. There was no one better at marketing herself than Katie. She had an intangible quality about her that people responded to, and took great joy in what she was doing. She’d been in the right place at the right time, and taken full advantage of the opportunity. He couldn’t begrudge her her success. He was sincerely happy for her.

But then, there was Stella’s personality, too. She treated Bradley like he was a child, and a mentally challenged one at that, calling him “honey” and “sweetie” and often beginning her sentences with “In the twenty five years I’ve been in the business…”

Steeling himself, he listened to her phone start to ring. Maybe he’d get lucky and just get her voice mail, not have to talk to her at all…

“Honey! Good morning! What can I do for you today?”

No such luck, apparently.

“Hi Stella, its Bradley…”

“Well, of course it is, sweetie, I can see your caller ID number, right there.”

Bradley forced himself not to let an edge show in his voice.

“Okay, I have some good news. I have a part I’ve been offered, and I’m going to take it. You’ll get the paperwork in the next few days.”

“Oh. Oh! Well, honey, you know, that’s nice and all but that’s just not the way things are done. It’s not really professional.”

Bradley gritted his teeth, refrained from pointing out that the way she’d been doing things hadn’t gotten anything done.

“Yes, well. I know it’s unorthodox, but friends of mine offered the part to me, we met over dinner, I read the script, and it’s brilliant. It’s a theatre play, doesn’t pay much, but you’ll still get your cut.” Bradley didn’t add, “Even though you did nothing to earn it.”

“Oh, dear. Oh, honey, sweetie, you must listen to me. Theatre just is not worth it. It’s a great deal of work for extremely little reward, little more than scale. In the twenty five years I’ve been in the business…”

And Stella was off, expounding on how she just knew that the part, whatever it was, was not right for Bradley, that he was worth so much more, and that he had to trust her to find him parts that were tailored made for him and pay him a sum more befitting someone of his golden talent.

Bradley knew bullshit when he heard it.

“Listen, Stella, I’m going to have to cut you off here. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m catching a train in a few minutes. You’ll be getting the paperwork in a few days from Richard’s people…”

“Richard? Is that Richard Wilson, your homosexual friend from the show?” Stella’s voice sounded alarmed.

Bradley found himself actually clenching his phone so hard that the plastic casing make cracking noises.
“Yes, Richard will be directing. Colin is also in it.”

“Sweetie! Oh my goodness, this isn’t a show about gay people, is it?”

Stella didn’t wait for an answer, just plunged on, her voice taking on an almost wailing quality.

“I know that Richard Wilson person, that’s the kind of thing he’s always involved in. Listen to me very carefully, honey. This is so important. You cannot associate yourself with those kinds of projects. Now we’ve worked very hard to present you as someone to appeal to everyone, to families. You have such a wonderful, fresh scrubbed look about you, and so funny and lovely, and you have that wonderful physique, so athletic. You are going to be the future James Bond, or the next famous action hero, mark my words! But you must trust me. I have worked in this business for twenty-five years, after all. This is not the kind of work you want to take on, at this time. All right, honey? You haven’t signed anything, so you just sit tight, and I’ll call this Mr. Wilson and straighten this all out.”

“Stella”, Bradley said, very, very quietly. “Shut up.”

There was a stunned silence from the other end of line. Bradley never spoke like that, not to anyone over the age of forty.

“You don’t even have any idea of how many ways what you just said was offensive, do you?” Bradley asked, and then took a page from her book and just talked over her when she began, “Listen, honey…”

“No, you listen. I’m doing this play. I am going to be bullocks naked in it, and I’m playing one of those homosexual people in it, and I’m going to be fucking Colin bloody Morgan in it and my gay friend Richard is going to be directing it. You’ll get paid for sitting on your pompous, homophobic, fat arse, and if you don’t like it, you can go fuck yourself!”

He’d begun the tirade in a normal tone of voice, and ended in a bellow, throwing the phone against the far wall of the apartment. It broke apart on impact, the battery falling out.

He stared at it for a long moment, contemplating how he hadn’t known he even had such an intense trigger.

He heard a sound to his right and turned his head to see Colin in the bedroom doorway, watching him silently, eyebrows raised.

“Top o’ the mornin’ to ya, mate”, Bradley muttered.

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Bradley did a fast clean up in the loo, not bothering to shower or shave— he really didn’t have much time if he was going to catch his train to Devon. He brushed his teeth too hard, making his gums bleed, and then splashed cold water on his face, trying to shake the cobwebs and his mood. He then just leaned over the sink for a moment, face dripping, and squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

Obviously, he was going to have to make a decision about his agent, and soon. It so happened that her contract was up in February—right before he started the new series of Merlin, and right around the time the play would wind up.

His frustration with her had been on-going for a couple of years now, and he’d vented about her to Colin, Anthony and Richard, and other friends in the industry, more than once. He had a sinking feeling that she’d outlasted her shelf date and should be replaced, but dammit, she’d been so kind to him in the beginning, when he’d had no experience and was so uncertain about himself and his
ability to make a living in acting. She’d found him the part in Merlin, after all. He hated conflict and he hated hurting people’s feelings, but….well. Abruptly, he straightened up, changed into his clean clothes for travel, and gathered up his used briefs, socks and tee shirt. He didn’t have to decide this moment, after all. There were other more pressing matters at hand, like making it to the train on time.

When he made his way back into Colin’s living room, he found Colin fiddling with his phone—he’d managed to reassemble it, and had even checked that it still worked by calling it from his own Blackberry. His backpack was open and waiting for him, everything organized. He looked at Colin, startled—“Cheers, mate”, he thanked him, simply but sincerely, and Colin just shrugged and quipped, “I’m not a manservant, but I play one on the telly.”

There were the usual disclaimers exchanged about how Colin didn’t need to see him to his train, it was fine, and Colin telling him that of course he would, don’t be silly, they had already planned it. Ten minutes later, they were piled into a taxi and on their way. Bradley clutched the rolled-up and already dog-eared script in one hand and his one bag in the other, relieved that he’d thought to post the bulk of his Christmas presents to his family ahead of time. “Layers” Morgan was silent beside him, bundled in beanie, scarf, a couple of hoodies and winter overcoat, in the relatively balmy December morning. (“If you’d just learn to eat like a normal person, you might actually put on some body fat and wouldn’t need to keep the hoodie and beanie manufactures in business all by yourself”, Bradley had scolded along the way. It was an old argument that- wasn’t. Colin took a lot of ribbing from everyone, all with his good nature still intact. Bradley always wondered how he did that and just what did one do with a mate like that, anyway…)

They made it to the waiting train, with even a few minutes to spare, and exchanged quick “Have a good holiday and birthday”, “Rest up, you’re going to need it”, “Thanks for everything!”, “Give my best to your family!”, and a manly one-armed, back slapping embrace before Bradley turned to go.

Colin put his hand on his arm. “Wait, I’ve something for you.”

Bradley’s heart sank. This was awkward. They’d never exchanged Christmas gifts before, it wasn’t really something blokes did, he had nothing for Colin….

But then Colin was holding out a business card for him, and Bradley took it, more puzzled than anything. He glanced at it, and then glanced back at Colin. “My agent. I mean, if you want, don’t feel obligated, but he’s done pretty well by me. It’s an option.”

“Thank you, again. You really are a font of helpfulness, Cols. I’ll call him.”

“Okay, yeah—he, you’d better go!”

And Bradley was on the train just before the doors closed. His last sight as the train pulled away was of Colin’s smile and wave.

Usually Bradley hated traveling. Well, he liked going to other places, it was just the getting there that made him a little stir crazy. He was just lousy at sitting still for any length of time. Anyone who had spent more than a half hour with Bradley James could concur on the subject.

But today seemed different. He’d managed to shake his bad mood, and sat alone with his ear buds in (and at times he didn’t even have his iPod on, a trick he’d learned since becoming recognized). He alternated between dozing and looking over his script, and at one point he pulled out a pen and paper, jotting down the last few things he needed to shop for his family, particularly his nephews.

His phone rang twice, both calls from Stella, and he sent them both directly to voice mail. He didn’t want to even think about her. As far as he was concerned, to her he was off the clock until after
Christmas, and then he’d arrange a meeting with her in London and would have a serious discussion about where they should go from there. His phone beeped again, signalling a text message, and he checked it, gusting air out of his mouth noisily when he saw it was Stella again: “CALL ME RIGHT AWAY I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU”. Bradley wanted to text back that she failed on her caps lock, but thought better of it, deleted the message. All this time, she’s never had anything, and now she “HAS SOMETHING FOR HIM”. He grimaced at the “coincidence”. He found, to his surprise, that he was looking forward to telling his family about the play, despite its somewhat not-safe-for-family subject. He’d been blessed with an open-minded and supportive batch of folks, and while they could drive him a bit mad at times with being too caring, too involved, he knew they’d accept his choices and wish him well.

Although, the thought of his mother seeing him starkers in public was rather bracing. Bradley shuddered, started thinking of ways to convince her not to come see him in this production. Hell, having her onset while filming Merlin had made him terribly nervous, for unfathomable and myriad reasons.

He’d need to call his dad in the States, too. He wasn’t sure what his father would think of the whole matter, but their relationship was complex and stuffed up and sometimes a source of sadness for Bradley. Most likely his father wouldn’t voice any disapproval if he felt it, would simply wish him well and change the subject. Bradley made a note in his IPhone to call his father on the 24th, both to wish him happy holidays and share his news, and to check to make sure the gifts he’d sent had arrived. He usually had to be the one to initiate contact between them… He was startled out of his wool gathering when his phone chimed with another call, and he darkly thought that it had better not be Stella again. He was more than a little stoked to see that instead of the source of his recent irritation, it was his girlfriend, Georgia King.

“Hi, beautiful!”

“Bradley, how are you?”

“I’m well and vastly looking forward to the holiday and seeing you, and I’ve got some great news I can’t wait to tell you about, but I want to do it in person! How are you?”

Georgia giggled. “Your lung capacity never ceases to amaze me! All that in one breath!”

Bradley lowered his voice seductively. “You know what else I’m good at doing while holding my breath…”

Georgia laughed again, but before Bradley could take the teasing any further, she interrupted. “I’m afraid I’ve got some really disappointing news. I mean, good for my work and all, but not great for our plans. I’m afraid I’m not going to be able to meet with you at the train station. The movie’s schedule has been blown to smithereens, and I’ve only got Christmas Day, Christmas Eve, and Boxing Day off, and then I have to go right back to London for pick-ups! I’m so sorry!”

Bradley groaned so loudly that those in the seats near him turned to look. He ignored them. “Oh, Georgia…that blows. I was so looking forward…”

“I know, me too. Well, we’ve got the three days, and then I’ll have some time after New Year’s, when we’re scheduled to go to Scotland. That’s what I’m calling about, I know it’s off the beaten path, but I wanted to make a consolation offer. Why don’t you come up with me? We can get reacquainted, the schedule won’t be quite so consuming…”

Bradley pinched the bridge of his nose, felt the fatigue headache from last night begin to resurface.
Fuck, fuck, fuck… timing really was everything.

“I can’t, darling—I’ll be in London then. I’m doing a play, with Richard and Colin. That’s what I wanted to tell you about…”

“Oh! Well I’m happy you’ve got something too, but—wait. You’re working with Colin and Richard? I thought you’ve been saying you wanted to get away from the Merlin thing if you could during the off season…”

Bradley felt himself deflate further. “It’s about as far from Merlin as you can imagine, believe me. Ah, Georgia, we never seem to be able to get together anymore…”

Okay, that part had slipped out, he hadn’t meant to verbalize it, but it was true, too true.

“I know. I’m sorry. I truly am. We’re both so busy. You know what they say, strike while the iron is hot. Well, we do have those days at Christmas, and maybe we can work something out…”

“Yeah, we’ll give it a go.” Even as he said it, Bradley knew it wouldn’t happen. Georgia’s career had really taken off since they’d met while filming on Merlin a year ago. He had liked her immediately, for she was smart and funny and pretty and from his own home town in Devon, but from the start, their schedules always seemed to work against them.

Their time together was always few and far between.

Georgia seemed to know it too, for there was silence on her end.

“I’m really sorry, honey”, Bradley spoke honestly. “But we’ll see each other at home, and we can chat then, yeah? You take care until then. Don’t work too hard.” Somehow, it sounded like dismissal, even to him.

“I’m sorry too. I was so looking forward to this.”

“It is what it is.”

“Love you, Bradley”.

“You too.”

Bradley didn’t throw his phone this time.

Bradley spent a good twenty minutes thinking of ways he’d fucked this up, this thing, whatever it was or had been, between himself and this girl. Before a true funk could set in, he picked up his phone again. And then he put his phone down, shaking his head at being such a gigantic needy clod.

After a moment, he picked it up again, scrolled to Colin’s number. This was stupid; Colin had probably gone back to bed after Bradley had kept him awake all night, playing with their shiny new toy. And Colin had other things to do, a life of his own.

Sighing, Bradley texted him anyway:

R U there? Am so bored

He sent the message, tucked the phone into his backpack, and leaned his head back against the seat cushion, trying to doze.
After about a minute, the phone chirped. He embarrassed himself with how quickly he dug it out again. The text was from Colin:

*Hang on*

So Bradley did, not bothering to put the phone away.

About two minutes later, another message, and an attached video:

*Americans r so funny. Put your ear buds in*

Bradley already had his buds in, so he watched the vid, a clip from the American version of Whose Line Is It Anyway. The guest star was Richard Simmons, and the skit was so ribald and had so much innuendo that the live audience were almost falling out of their seats in their hilarity.

Bradley was having a similar reaction, throwing his head back and laughing so loudly that people were looking at him again.

When he got himself under control again, he text back:

*Thanks mate again needed that*

Thirty seconds later:

*U ok?*

Bradley smiled slightly, considered calling Colin and venting, and then thought better of it. He’d tell Colin the whole sorry story later, but now the guy no doubt had prep of his own for his trip to Ireland tomorrow.

He’d leave him in peace. For now.

Bradley text back:

*Mostly good no go with G. will tell details later*

Colin’s answering “*I’ll b here*” warmed him a ridiculous amount.

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After that, he’d taken a call from Johnny Capps, of all people—the fact that the head producer of Merlin was calling him directly during his hiatus had kind of surprised him. Johnny had exchanged pleasantries and then quickly gotten down to business, asking if he’d be willing to do a conference-call interview with Colin with a rep from an American station, one he and Colin had done the same type of interview with the year before. Bradley remembered that interview, the one where he’d discovered that Colin was lactose intolerant, and again been nonplussed by how much he didn’t know about his friend, even after all the time they spent together.

Bradley told Johnny that was fine, as long as Colin would be willing also, and asked him to forward the details to his phone. The interview was scheduled for the twenty eighth of December; right before the first episode of fourth series was scheduled to air in America. “So put your fourth series thinking cap back on”, Johnny told him.

*Ah, producers and their so-witty humour*, Bradley thought, adding another date to his phone’s calendar. His dance card was becoming quite full, that was for sure, but Bradley accepted the interviews and such that came with doing a show. Doing PR was part of the job, he supposed.
The train was delayed a good half hour getting into Devon due to…something on the line, no one was quite forthcoming with the details, although speculation among his carriage mates suggested the train engineer had gotten them lost and was trying to cover his arse.

Bradley liked that explanation, the silly humour lightening his mood further. When the train finally arrived at its destination, and he made it to the platform and the open armed hugs and squealing exclamations from the bevy of women that made up most of his immediate family, his good spirits had returned.

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Bradley found himself in a whirlwind of shopping and putting up lights and decorating and otherwise helping his mum and sisters prepare for Christmas. He re-connected with old friends from finishing school and footballs leagues he’d been involved with. He ate voraciously, his mother’s cooking and the delicious seafood the Devon area had to offer causing his appetite to increase to what he described to a mate as “glutton level.” He didn’t worry too much about gaining any weight, though—he was working out every day at his friends’ gym, unashamed to admit that he wanted to look presentable onstage, (particularly since quite a bit more of him than usual was going to be seen) and meeting with old mates to kick a ball around every chance he got. And he was also chasing after his nephews, forever mock-sword fighting with their Uncle-Bradley-supplied plastic swords and armour. They were, of course, Arthur’s biggest fans. There was nothing quite like being a hero to children. Bradley loved it, even though he knew they were full of beans.

He socialized a lot with his family, sitting and chatting with them at the kitchen table sometimes late into the night, often helping his mum with baking chores. As with all families, they had their holiday rituals, and one of theirs had always been for Bradley to knead the dough for bread making. It was his time to bond with his mum. He told her about Georgia, and that he didn’t think things were going to work out between them, though they still were fond of each other and still had plans to get together when she was able to. His mother hid her disappointment well, just reiterating that it was no one’s fault then, that when he found the right person, he’d make time for her. Bradley said nothing more, but he knew she was disappointed. He’d remembered her once remarking, only half-jokingly, that if they married, Georgia would be Georgia King James, like the Bible, and wasn’t that cute. She’d no doubt entertained hopes of more tow-headed grandchildren with odd teeth in a few years, too.

_Sorry, Mum…_

On the twenty-third, both of his sisters were over, helping decorate cookies for the kids and trying to convince him to go carolling with them. They were also asking him about Merlin stories, forever entertained by his tales of on set and his co-stars. He chose that time, with most of his family together, to tell them about his new project. Predictably, they were happy for him, though his mother of course wasn’t crazy about the nudity. That inspired a round of jokes from his sisters about how terrifying seeing his bared arse would be, and poor Colin for having to deal so closely with it.

While they giggled, and Bradley only blushed a little, he told his mum, “Well, good for you, then, you won’t be seeing it.”

“And just where did you get that idea? You’d better send me tickets. Good seats, too, front and centre.”

“Oh, come on, no—”

“Your fan girls may think you’re otherworldly, my dear, but I changed your nappies. Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

His sisters were nearly hysterical with laughter at this point, but Bradley tried to point out that the times of changing his nappies had been awhile back, and things had changed since then. “Just bigger and hairier, that’s all”, Mum had intoned, pulling out her rarely-seen earthy side.

Bradley just called it quits while he was still ahead and stopped arguing with her. No fool, he.
Despite his embarrassment, Bradley again thanked whatever forces had been at work for gifting him with this family, crazy though they may be. He read his script every night before bed, and actually had it pretty much memorized, although memorization had never come as a difficulty before. He’d always had a good memory, was able to master and remember a lot of dialogue and complex sword routines pretty quickly. His excitement for the ever-coming-closer start of the project began to grow a bit more each day.

He didn’t hear from Colin or Richard at all since the day he’d left on the train, although most of the other Merlin cast members, including the girls, Tony, and most of the knights, e-mailed or text him to wish him happy holidays. He returned their good wishes, even calling Tony back to tell him about the play. And Tony had also responded just as he thought he would, with excitement and pride and a promise that he would make it to one of the shows to cheer him and Colin on. “You are just going to knock people’s socks off with this, my handsome son” he’d teased.

He met with Georgia the day before Christmas, as they’d planned, but only for lunch at a casual eatery near his mother’s home. It was uncomfortable, partly because the shops and stores and restaurants were so crowded and bustling with crazed last minute shoppers, and partly because they both seemed to realize that things were over between them. They exchanged gifts—he’d gotten her a funny book, and a pretty bracelet, and a music box he’d seen her admire when they’d been in France together earlier that year, and she’d thanked him profusely, kissing him on the cheek. She gave him a football jersey with, of all things, a knights pattern on it—he’d always loved and appreciated her sense of humour—and a framed picture of the two of them at the zoo in France. That’d been on a day when she’d been able to slip away from her London shooting to meet him while he’d been at Pierrefonds. He remembered the day that photo was taken—a bright, sunny day in April, him wearing his aviator sunglasses, and she’d had her arm around his waist. They’d smiled broadly, and the elephant in the background looked like it was trumpeting.

After that, there wasn’t much to say except thank you, best wishes, you’ll always have a place in my heart, and maybe we can get together on your days off…

He knew, with a sad but accepting certainty, he would probably not ever see her again.

Bradley returned home a bit disheartened, only to find the promised paperwork from Richard had arrived.

He did what he used to do as a boy whenever receiving something exciting or long-awaited in the post: He took it into his bedroom and shut the door. There were no surprises; everything was just as Richard had said, with the usual disclaimers, the options, and the rather paltry sum. Bradley saw that Stella’s firm was cc’d on everything, reminding him that he needed to call her back at some point. He hadn’t heard from her again since the morning he’d shouted at her. He read it all over twice, and then signed with a bit of a flourish and a slight trembling of his hand. This was it, this meant it was all real now, it was truly happening. In only a week’s time, he’d be in rehearsals for this show.

He called the delivery company and arranged for pick-up of the documents. Somehow, even though it was the day before Christmas, they agreed to take care of it today, and Richard’s production company would have it by Boxing Day.

After considering for another moment, Bradley called Richard’s number and was startled again when Richard picked up almost immediately. He sounded like he was in a public place; there were muted sounds of conversation in the background.

“Hey, Richard, it’s Bradley—I got the paperwork, sending it back to you today.”
“Ah, well done, then. I trust everything is in order? No problems?”

“No, everything is fine. Sorry, I don’t mean to disturb you, I know you’re celebrations are probably in swing now…”

“You’re not disturbing me, you never do. Well, except perhaps when you do your Elvis impersonation…” Bradley huffed out a laugh and Richard chuckled softly. “Did you have any concerns about the production?”

“No, none. In fact it’s all I’ve really been focused on since I read the script. I pretty much have everything memorized.”

“I’m not surprised, you’re always well prepared. But, we both know, learning the lines is the easy part. It’s bringing the words to life that may rip you apart.”

“…and possibly rebuild me. This is why I went to drama school…”

“Yes, quite.”

“Well, anyway, I just wanted to check with you about something.”

Richard hummed in an ‘I’m listening’ way, encouraging Bradley to continue.

“Colin and I have a radio interview to do in a couple of days, some American station. I can’t remember now if the States’ Syfy channel are just starting or just ending fourth series of Merlin there, I’m not sure which. Johnny told me but it escapes me now. But anyway, it’s PR for that. And I just wanted to check with you, if it’s okay, or how much I can say….”

“You want to know if you can talk about the play, I take it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well that will bring us quite a lot of attention, won’t it. That can only increase box office sales. By all means, say what you are comfortable with about the play. You might want to talk with Colin first, too. We’ve discussed this a little before now, and I know you know this—that it’s not about the young men of Merlin being in their birthday suits up there and humping each other. We do not want caterwauling and knicker tossing at the stage. This isn’t panto.”

Bradley squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly both fighting the urge to giggle hysterically and also a tad embarrassed, like he’d committed a faux pas. This was something he did know about Richard, that while the elderly thespian was cordial and friendly and witty, he was also quite serious about the craft, even fiercely so, and expected anyone else who considered themselves a part of it to take things just as seriously. Richard Wilson did not suffer fools gladly, and Bradley had heard a time or two when Richard had spoken to someone curtly or sharply for what he felt was an unprofessional behaviour or approach. The people involved with Merlin were all seriously dedicated and skilled, so it was rare, but it had happened, and had left a lasting impression on Bradley.

The truth was that the man playing Merlin’s old, gentle, kindly mentor could be an intimidating force to be reckoned with when he wanted to be. And Bradley was going to be under his direction for the next two months.

“I get that, Richard, I do.”

“Yes, I believe you do. I’m just somewhat doubtful that some of the younger female fans will. But I think you should mention the play in your interview, you and Colin. Just do choose your words
carefully.”

“I will, thanks, Richard.”

“I have the utmost faith in your professionalism and talent, young Bradley. I wouldn’t have offered the part if I didn’t. And I have an interview as well, one right after New Year’s, though I don’t think it will reach as wide an audience as this one in question is bound to. We will emphasize the challenge and the significance of the material, not the potential controversy or titillation of it, yes?”

And Bradley agreed, telling Richard that he wished it was time to start the rehearsals now, as the waiting was making his nerves jangle.

Richard had merely chuckled, reminding him that it would soon enough, and wishing him and his family well before signing off.

Bradley hung up and immediately hit Colin’s number. He felt guilty, it was the day before Christmas, after all, and Colin no doubt was celebrating with his family and friends in Armagh. They didn’t usually have much contact at all between hiatus on Merlin, mostly because they moved in different social circles, had different interests. Interrupting Colin’s private time like this was rude and thoughtless.

He was about to hang up when Colin answered. “’Lo?”

“Hey, mate, Merry Christmas.”

“Likewise!” Colin’s voice was cheerful as always. “How’s everything? Did you get the business paperwork for the play?”

“Yep, just today. Just talked to Richard too.” Bradley grabbed the envelope of documents in question, moved to the kitchen so he could be ready to hand them off when the courier arrived.

“And? No second thoughts, I hope…” Okay, Colin wasn’t sounding quite so cheerful now.

“God, no, no second thoughts, just probably too anxious about it, wanting to tell everyone but not wanting to, you know, and, well, a lot going on. I don’t want to keep you; I know you’re busy…”

“Its okay, Bradley. I’m here with the folks, but I’ve got a few minutes to talk. What are you anxious about?”

And so Bradley told him about his conversation with Richard, and the upcoming interview and they discussed what they’d say. They agreed Colin would do most of the talking concerning the project. They talked more about the script, and Colin asked him about Georgia and got the whole story, though somewhat condensed, and made sympathetic noises and only remarked that it must not have been meant to be. They exchanged the reactions of their families when told about the play (Colin’s family was accustomed to him being either gay or naked on stage, sometimes both, and he laughed when Bradley told him about his mum and sisters teasing him within an inch of his life). And then they talked about their holiday, and their preparations, and their families, (Colin’s mam had made him his favourite nut roast, to which Bradley’s response was a loud, resounding “Eww!”)

The delivery service came and went, the December sky started to darken in the late afternoon, and suddenly Bradley’s phone was beeping. “Hang on, mate, I think I’ve got another call coming in.” He pulled the phone away from his ear, checked it. No, it wasn’t another call—it was the signal that his battery was running low. Bradley did a double take—he’d been talking with Colin for more than two hours. It hadn’t seemed that long…
"My word, Col, why didn’t you shoo me off? You need to get back to your family, and mine are all spilling back in as we speak..."

Colin just made “not a problem” noises and wished him a good holiday, and that they’d talk again during the interview on the twenty-eighth.

They ended the call with a chorus of “Merry Christmas!” to each other.

Bradley’s warm, content feeling settled around him like a blanket, and he hurried to help his family carry in presents and children and to begin the home holiday merriment.

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The after-Christmas interview went about as expected, which was to say, Bradley did a great deal of the talking, and Colin occasionally added to his comments or laughed at his jokes. To her credit, the interviewer was better than most, making no bones about the fact that she watched the show and was a fan herself, (and, Bradley had suspected from talking with her the year before, also an Arthur/Merlin shipper), and demonstrated quite a bit of insight about it. Her questions thankfully went beyond the cringe-worthy, worn-to-a-nub “What’s your favourite episode?” style.

They talked about the knights dynamic, and how having that many new cast members had changed things quite a bit. Bradley admitted he’d greatly missed interacting as much with Anthony as Uther, since his role as the shattered king had been so reduced, but also that he loved having the knights there, to have so many new mates to kick a footbfootball around with, go out clubbing with. Colin had joked about the increase in testosterone, and the interviewer—Courtney, if Bradley remembered correctly—then delved a little deeper and remarked that while the fans greatly enjoyed the knights and especially the eye candy they provided, they’d also been a bit disappointed at the minimal amount of time that left for any Merlin-Arthur-alone moments. And Bradley had to admit, that was true, Merlin and Arthur hardly had any scenes with just the two of them any longer. Colin pointed out that it was only natural, since the characters were maturing, and that they’d continued evolving none the less. He also added that he, too, had missed scenes with just himself and Bradley, and the interviewer actually awwww’ed. Bradley made a mental note take the piss out of Colin for that later, for it was remarks like that that always had the fan girls wanting to coo and cuddle and take care of “sweet Colin”.

She then went on to a subject Bradley always despised being asked about: Arthur-and-Guinevere’s hook-up. In his mind, it was a hook-up, even though he knew that many, many fans were crazy about the “romance”, writing odes and making videos and generally treating it as the greatest love story of all time, apparently forgetting completely about Lancelot and the triangle of legend and how that story ended in tragedy. For him, the show had handled the show’s version of it all badly, rushing the bond between Arthur and Gwen, having Arthur behave like an infatuated teenager. He had been scolded before by the show runners for his candid remarks and opinions on it, and it was another bone of contention for fans with him. Even Angel had become a mite perturbed with him over it, and he considered her a friend. He’d face-palmed himself after seeing photos taken by fans during the past series at various locations with “Gwen”—she looked like she was glowing happily, he always tended to look rather pained.

He’d been attempting to learn the fine art of diplomacy from Colin for along time now, and so he now gave it his best shot. He used buzzwords like “evolving relationship” and “not everything is as it seems” and pointed out how beautiful the Arthur-Gwen scenes always appeared, with their striking lighting, slow-motion kisses, sweeping music. He didn’t add that that was because as an actor, he found those scenes the most difficult at all and never seemed to be able to bring it to the notch he, himself, needed it to be, and the crew had to work extra intensely to give the scenes the fairy tale quality that was expected.
Well, not everything about the show could hit the right buttons for everyone, he supposed, including the actors playing the characters. As Anthony liked to remind him, “Some days are diamonds, some are coal.”

The interview seemed to be going quite swimmingly, and he suspected, again, that the interviewer was again agreeing with his couched comments regarding Gwen, closet Merthur fan that she was. And then it came: “I know last year at this time, Colin, you were doing the promotions circuit for Parked and Island, as well as appearing in a play.

"So what are you gentlemen doing in your off-season this year?"

Yes, Bradley remembered that too and how he’d had absolutely nothing going on…

Well, not true this year.

After Colin’s quiet affirmation, Bradley answered, “We actually have a joint project we’re working on, a play at the Ormond in downtown London, an old and elegant theatre you may have heard of. Richard Wilson, who plays Gaius on the show, will be directing us in a play called Exposed. Colin and myself portray gay lovers in the late 1980s….”

He could actually hear the gasp over the conference call connection.

“You’re joking”, Courtney-the-Interviewer said. She sounded a bit shrill.

“It’s true, actually”, Colin took over. “It’s a quite serious play, very topical, dealing with the prejudices and homophobia of that time. Very dark overtones, with some exploration of how homosexuals were shut out and denied opportunities and acceptance then. That wasn’t that long ago, after all. Bradley and I are looking forward to the challenge.”

Courtney really couldn’t contain herself. “This is going to spark a great deal of excitement amongst those Merlin fans who have long loved Arthur and Merlin’s bromance.”

Colin responded calmly—and just when had he become so glib, so assured in interviews, Bradley wondered briefly—“This is a complete departure from our roles as Merlin and Arthur. I don’t believe the subject matter will appeal to the same audience despite our presence. This is for a mature audience only, and there is an age stipulation for admittance.”

Okay, now the interviewer did shriek a little, her voice disbelieving.

“You’re kidding! You’re not saying there is nudity involved…”

“There is, actually”, Bradley confirmed. “I will leave it to you to discover who and to what degree. You should come, Courtney, and see the play yourself.”

Courtney spluttered something along the lines of most definitely liking the idea and that she would make the effort, and Bradley had to bite the inside of his cheek to contain his snickers. He was a perverse one, he happened to love seeing the media lose their cool.

She ended the interview shortly after, and the conference call connection was cut. Bradley immediately called Colin back.

“Hi…”

“Colin, I think the lady had to go and change her pants…”
Katie McGrath was so bloody predictable.

Bradley knew that the interview was scheduled to be released online and in some radio markets in the States on the last day of December, but he didn’t know exactly what time…until his phone rang, and he swore the ring sounded louder than usual.

He smiled wryly when he checked the caller ID. Ah. So, she’d heard.

When he answered, all he could hear was Katie squealing incoherently.

This continued on for about five minutes.

Finally, in a last-ditch effort to salvage his eardrums, Bradley asked, “Did you call for any particular reason, McGrath? Because you’re setting off car alarms and motion detectors with all your carrying on…”

“Why didn’t you tell me?! Nobody tells me anything! I am so proud of you; I never would have thought you’d have the bollocks to do this kind of thing. Did you tell Johnny and the Julians yet? You do realize, don’t you, the can of worms you’ve opened with this… You thought the speculation was ripe on you and Colin before, just wait until the play opens! Merlin fans are going to be out of their minds! I imagine they’re all already writing fanfics…”

Bradley could just picture her, her wide toothy grin, her head tossing, hands fluttering. He shook his head fondly, again.

“Just because, yes, no, yes, yes, and yes, Katie. I’m fine; thanks for asking. How are you? Happy New Year, by the way…”

“Yeah, yeah—no, seriously, are you going to be in the buff in this production?”

“It isn’t about that that, you know, there’s some heavy stuff in the play.”

“You are, aren’t you?!”

“I am. Morgan is too.”

She squealed again, of course, and based on the strange sounds coming from her end, he was fairly certain she was jumping up and down. “Tell me everything!”

He didn't tell her everything, but he did give a brief rundown of the sequence of events, starting from the dinner with Colin and Richard, and how twitchy he’d been ever since, so excited and wanting to get into it right away.

“Hey, I am so happy for you, I mean it. I know you’ve been wanting something you could sink your weird teeth into for some time.” She cackled when he called her a harpy and invited her to bite him. “But seriously, have you thought about what fan reaction is going to be to this? This really is going to bring some of the crazies out of the woodwork.”

“Yes, that did occur to me and we've spoken about it a bit, Richard and I, but quite frankly I’ve been more focused on the work and the creative aspect of it than how fans will react. I’m trusting that the material itself is serious enough to deter the more frivolous. Well, that and ticket prices.”
“Good thinking, expecting reason from insane people. That’s worked well in the past.” Despite her sarcasm, Bradley could sense Katie’s concern.

“It’s a professional production, Katie. Security will be available if needed. I’m thinking positive here.”

“Yes, and you’re sounding very grown up about everything, too. Good lad. I can’t wait to see the play.”

“Yeah, well, if you think you and your blushing eyes can take it.” Oh, lord, did he really want Katie McGrath, of all people, to see him undressed, and as Colin’s lover?

“Pfft. I’ll have you know that me and my blushing eyes can handle whatever you’ve got. Bring it on.”

Bradley had to grin, in spite of himself. “You bring it. And why don’t you go stir your cauldron, I’ve got things to do.”

They wrapped up the call, Katie wishing him well and congratulating him again, and extracting a promise that he’d let her know when tickets were available so she could come and ogle. Her last words before hanging up were, “I’m going to go and harass Colin now.”

Katie’s was the first call. After that, it was like a dam had been broken.

His phone chirped and beeped constantly with calls, most of which he allowed to go to voice mail. There was a plethora of texts too, including several from the knights from the show, wishing him success and making cracks about seeing more of him. And there was one from Georgia too, saying that she’d heard and congrats again and happy new year. He considered answering for a moment, had even pushed the respond button, but then thought about what his sisters had said about “detaching with love”. He sent her text to his save box.

He sent only one text, and not in response to one he’d received. It was for Colin:

Happy 2012 & Happy 26 bday mate

After that, he set his phone to vibrate and went off to his room to get ready for the night’s new year’s eve festivities.

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Bradley had never been more relieved to get off a train and find a taxi in his life.

The trip back to London had left him feeling claustrophobic and ready to crawl out of his skin. From the time his mum and sisters had seen him off at the platform, he hadn’t had a moment’s peace. He’d had people coming up to him in the train carriage, asking for autographs and pics and wanting to talk about the show. Which would have been fine, but…some of them had stood in the aisle, hovering over him, blocking any hope of retreat from them, and not said anything. Just…looked at him. It was terrible.

He knew better than to assume that the radio interview was the cause. There hadn’t been any mention of the upcoming play or the new direction he was taking. No, these people were just that percentage of a percentage of fans that didn’t quite get the concept of personal space or privacy. Truly, Bradley didn’t usually mind meeting and talking with fans, as long as it didn’t interfere with his work and concentration. He especially loved talking with kids, who still had that wide-eyed wonderment and thought he really was Arthur. He understood that completely—he’d been that kind of kid himself, and was still a genre geek. His personality was
naturally outgoing and extroverted, and fan meetings were usually sweet and appreciative, if somewhat awkward. He liked the attention, usually. But then he’d been severely disillusioned when his friendliness had backfired and he’d found the attentions getting way, way out of hand.

It was those who refused to acknowledge boundaries, who had no manners, that Bradley had a tough time with. He’d been raised to be courteous to everyone, and had been made acutely, and somewhat painfully, aware that every action he took, every word he said, was likely to wind up online and public in someone’s live journal or Facebook or tumblr account.

Plus he did feel a sense of appreciation that there were people out there who supported his career and enjoyed the work he was doing. But he still hadn’t quite learned how to excuse himself gracefully, and the train atmosphere didn’t really offer any type of escape.

He all but ran to a cab when he finally, finally was able to get away, after hours of that. It was early afternoon on the second day of the new year, but he had so much to do before the table read tomorrow, calls he’d planned to make on the train that hadn’t happened, and he wanted to go over the script one more time (also something he’d intended for the train ride, but he’d tucked the script away after a while, not wanting it to be seen by his unmoving “admirers”.)

Colin bloody Morgan never had these bloody problems, he thought, somewhat resentfully. Colin was the ever-smiling, always-adored darling of crew and fans alike. There was something about him that made people want to take care of him. And Colin was so intrinsically reserved and careful that he exuded a kind of protective bubble around himself, a dignity and proprietary sense of “Don’t get too close.” People who didn’t know him didn’t always realize what a strong personality Colin had, that he could be stubborn when he felt like it, dig his heels in, and not be made to do anything he didn’t want to. He never said too much about himself, was always polite, but was also a master at talking without ever really revealing anything about anything.

Whatever it was, it worked, and Colin had managed not to have the same kinds of demented fans showing up on his doorstep, or velcroing themselves to him on train trips, unlike one Bradley James. This wasn’t the way he’d hoped to kick things off, exhausted, in a foul and grouchy mood and feeling harried and time crunched.

He made it home without incident, and happily there were no squatters waiting for him at his flat. He unpacked and organized—there was a lot more on the return trip than what he’d left with, due to his mother and sisters’ Christmas generosity—and then, finally, sat down to deal with his phone messages.

He made the call he’d been dreading, to his agent Stella, and asked to arrange a meeting with her to discuss things. She’d asked him if he could tell her what the meeting would be about—playing dumb, Bradley was sure was sure of it, and he just didn’t have the patience at this point. “I appreciate all you’ve done for me, but I think we have very different ideas as to what directions I’m heading. I just think it’s time we both moved on.”

Stella made a “tch” sound. “Oh, honey, I think you’re making a big mistake. You shouldn’t be making these types of big decisions right after a little tiff. We want you to be prime material for a sixth series of your show, you know, and this isn’t the way. Why don’t you think about it…?”

“No, I’ve thought about it. This isn’t because of offense or anger. It’s just time. You have different notions as to what type you want to cast me in, but I am the client, Stella. I know what I need now. I’m not twenty two any longer.”

It was true, and he had thought about it. Stella’s homophobia had offended him, but she was the type who didn’t even realize she was homophobic. It wasn’t even about that, it wasn’t the point. This was
a career decision, one he was confident in, not because of an argument and not in retaliation because he disagreed with her.

Well, that and the fact that she refused to listen to anything he said.

“Well, it’s very difficult to find an agent during these times, you know….”

“I already have someone in mind, I’ve had some help. I wanted to say this to you in person, but perhaps it is best this way. I’m very grateful for all the help and guidance you’ve given me. You’ll still be getting residuals from my work on Merlin, since you found that for me. Thank you. I wish you well.”

And Stella had sniffed and said “All right, dear”, and hung up.

That had actually gone much easier than he’d thought, and Colin’s agent had indicated positive interest in signing him. He had an appointment with him right after the play wrapped, and before Merlin’s fifth series began. He did feel a bit badly about sacking his long-time agent, though it couldn’t be helped. He made arrangements for flowers to be sent to her with a note of thanks, and reminded himself of his sister’s kooky, new-agey philosophy of “detaching with love.”

He listened to his long cache of voice mail, most from friends wishing him well and happy new year, and wrote down their names to follow up with them with texts or e-mails later.

His phone buzzed again, and he was going to let it go to v/m too, but gave it a cursory glance. Colin.

He fumbled with the buttons, nearly dropping it in his haste to answer.

“What’s it, mate? You in London yet?”

“Hey, Bradley, yeah, arrived last night.” To Bradley’s ear, Colin sounded tired, weary.

“Listen, sorry I wasn’t able to get back to you on New Years’. I’ve been inundated with calls. I think the word’s out on us, friend.”

Bradley chuckled. “You think? You should have seen what happened on the way back on the train. People just stood there staring at me…”

“It was the same for me. I usually get to sleep on the plane, but I couldn’t this time. My face hurts from smiling; my tongue hurts from trying to make small talk. No one’s actually said anything about the play though, they were talking Merlin, but it’s like everyone whose ever watched the show has banded together.”

“The news is out there, in the ether, and the world’s reacting to it.”

Jesus, he was really going to have to start ignoring his sister, now he was quoting her. “You ready for tomorrow?”

“I am so ready. It’s kind of hit me in the past couple days, that we’re Have you seen the theatre? It’s got eight hundred fifty bloody seats!”

They commiserated, the two of them, and somehow Bradley forgot his lousy mood and annoyance with Colin for being so well-adjusted, and they agreed to get together for supper later. The theatre was only a twelve-minute train ride from Bradley’s flat, (and almost thirty from Colin’s), so they made plans to stop by to have a look at what would be their home away from home for the next two months.
Bradley presented Colin with a birthday gift (a day late), over their casual meal, a mug he’d spotted in a gift store in Devon. The mug had copious amounts of stars and glitter on it, and pictures of a top hat, a rabbit, a magician’s white-gloved hands, and other tools of the trade. It proclaimed in great, bold letters “MAGIC MAN!” Bradley had thought of Colin right away when he’d seen it.

Colin didn’t disappoint him when he saw the gaudy thing, either—his eyes had widened in apparent disbelief at Bradley’s usual sophomoric sense of humour, and he’d deadpanned, “You shouldn’t have. Really. You shouldn’t have.”

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Bradley read his script through once more before going to bed that night, his anticipation buzzing. Tomorrow, it would start. Tomorrow was the table read. He was ready.

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He had worried when he slipped into bed that he wouldn’t be able to sleep at all, his excitement and nervousness was so prevalent, but when his alarm clock went off at 6:15 the next morning, he realized he’d slept the night, a deep dreamless sleep.

He felt like he had on Christmas mornings as a kid. He went from sound asleep to fully awake in an instant, and resisted the urge to shout “Father Christmas came!”

He rode his seldom-used exercise bike for thirty minutes while watching the early morning news, thanking his foresight to have bought it a year ago. Rehearsals were going to be twelve hours a day, seven days a week for the next three weeks, not giving him any time for workouts or football. He was the kind of man who went a little crazy, and drove others mad along with him, if he didn’t expel some of his natural energy every day with exercise.

At six forty-five, he was in the shower, and by seven, he was dressed and groomed and ready to leave the flat. He checked his phone’s charge, grabbed up his travel mug and his backpack, ensuring that his script was safely inside, zipped everything up, and then took a deep, cleansing breath. It was finally time. He couldn’t help grinning as he stepped out the door and began jogging the short distance to the tube. He wanted to be a bit early, to check out the theatre, the ambiance.

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Bradley met everyone at the theatre for the first time—Colin and Richard were the only people he knew, but that was fine. Betty was the redheaded girl who would be playing his pining pseudo-girlfriend, Becca. She was quite a looker, with a low-cut top. He nudged Colin and mouthed “ginger” at him, when she wasn’t looking. David, the guy would be playing his tough boss, Jack, was bald and rotund and Bradley wasn’t sure he’d like him... until he took his jacket off and revealed an Arsenal jersey. He smiled broadly at him, unable to help himself, and the man, who Bradley suspected was long past his playing days, nodded at him in kinship. And other blokes too—the three who looked like hooligans and would play the feckless thugs who beat Colin’s character, the black woman playing the psychiatrist, the office workers, and the police officers. There were twelve cast members in all, plus Richard and the two assistant directors he introduced as his “right and left hand men.” Richard was enthusiastic and energetic, but he was also nearly eighty years old and didn’t have the stamina to work the intense schedule the rehearsals were going to call for. The two A.D.s would assist when Richard was resting in the afternoons.

The read-through began at precisely half past eight. Richard gave a very short welcoming speech, reminded everyone that punctuality was going to be expected of everyone and to be prepared to work harder than they ever had in their lives, and then nodded to Colin, who had the first line of the show.
It was serious, but it wasn’t grim. Everyone seemed as excited and as well-prepared as himself. The actors mimed many of their actions at the table, and when it came time, Bradley mimed kissing Colin by air-kissing, which earned chuckles all around. Laughing was a common enough occurrence, and Richard didn’t discourage it, sometimes making a naughty or off-colour remark that cracked everyone up. He also made occasional quiet suggestions or directions in inflection or the delivery of a line, sometimes explaining a gesture he wanted made or movement they would try once they moved to the stage. Bradley made copious notes in his somewhat-tattered script copy, and saw Colin doing the same.

When the final line was delivered, the fifteen people at the big table in a backroom of the Ormond theatre in London gave themselves a round of loud applause. Richard only intoned quietly that he now had confirmation that he’d chosen the right people, and that lunch would be brought in and they would resume rehearsals with the first blocking on stage in an hour.

Colin got up to speak with Richard, and Bradley looked at his watch. It was a few minutes past noon. How had a two-hour play taken three and half hours to run through? He hadn’t felt inclined to look at his watch or fidget or otherwise let his mind wander to anything else, the entire time.

He felt exhilarated. Exhausted, but elated.

The room filled with conversation as lunch arrived and everyone tucked in, talking and laughing and getting to know each other. Bradley mingled, exchanging pleasantries with his co-stars and tried not to watch the clock again. He was itching to get back to work.

They ran through it again, this time onstage, and time went much slower now as Richard divided everyone into three groups —“We have ourselves now as Richard divided everyone into three groups —“We have ourselves a three-ringed circus, here”—and blocking began. This was the most tedious part of the work for Bradley, it always had been —setting up where to stand, where and when to sit, to move, to pick up this prop, what to do with his hands, his feet, how and when to move past his costars.

It was tiring and time consuming, for all its necessity, and there were times when he found himself inwardly sighing. Minutiae was not his friend. Nonetheless, he concentrated on memorizing his instructions, making notes again for anything that pertained to him and carefully observing his co-stars, how they interacted as people as well as characters. Most of Bradley’s scenes were either with Colin (as his lover, Nigel), Betty (as his wanna be girlfriend, Becca), and David (as his boss, Jack).

During blocking, they were all also receiving instructions on their dialects, their wardrobe, and their appearance. Colin was instructed to affect a more working class English accent, a bit skewed from his better-known Merlin one. Colin kept them all entertained for several minutes with one that sounded like he was a Beatle, before settling on a harder edged one. Bradley was told to simple keep his own rather posh speech pattern—probably Richard’s tactful acknowledgement that Bradley didn’t share Colin’s gift for different accents. He was also instructed not to shave with a blade, but an electric shaver, so that he’d always have a bit of stubble…but not too much, as he’d be an executive in an office. Bradley cracked everyone up by asking if they were going for the Miami Vice look of the eighties. Colin, who always allowed his hair to grow longer and over those infamous ears in his time away from Merlin, was told not to cut his hair, and to keep the hirsute scruff he was sporting.

When Richard was satisfied with their looks, he moved on to Betty and David, and the wardrobe department was brought in for costume fittings. Again, this wasn’t Bradley’s favourite part of the job; it just bored him, standing there and being measured, and trying on clothes like a fashion model. Nonetheless, he treated it as simply another component of the job. Not everything could be exciting, after all…
He was shown sketches of what they had in mind for him, and was suddenly reminded of how very awkward and minging the eighties had been in terms of hair and fashion. The business suit was a three-piecer, nice enough, but the rest—the silk shirt with the big collar, and they even wanted to put him in leather pants. It was all accurate to the time period, but was going to take some getting used to. He was more comfortable in armour and chainmail than this…but then again, no one needed him to feel comfortable.

Measurements were taken, and then the wardrobe gal—Melissa, she’d introduced herself as—kind of smiled and handed him two pairs of spandex bike shorts. “And here’s your modesty garments, for your nude scenes.”

He looked over at Colin, smiled and waved his black spandex shorts.

Colin held his own up, smirked back at him.

Bradley knew what these were for. They wouldn’t strip until the very last rehearsal, but they’d be wearing the shorts under their own clothes, and they’d be taking everything else off but that. The spandex was formfitting and light and felt like a second skin. It was the closest they’d get to naked without being naked.

At seven PM, Richard clapped his hands together, thanked everyone for a very productive first day, and sent everyone home with the promise of “Tomorrow we will run through everything with the present blocking in place. Rest up, this is your last easy day!”

‘Easy day?’ Bradley thought, wearily gathering his things. ‘Helluva sense of humour, Richard has…’

Except, he knew Richard wasn’t kidding.

The second day was a repeat of the first, without the table reading. Bradley grappled his way through a complete run through, feeling a bit clumsy and out of his depth at times. Those weren’t feelings he was familiar with. His comfort zone disappeared. He shared the few quick kisses the script called for with Betty, and exchanged a roaring shouting match with her where her character gave him two pretty violent shoves. She was a strong girl. Richard had dryly intoned, “Very convincing, my dear, but do keep in mind that I must have him back to the BBC in one piece in a few weeks.” Together they worked on ways to make things appear more intense while lessening the risk of actual injury.

By unspoken agreement, he and Colin continued to mime intimacy, and stayed fully clothed during their sex scene. They were physical, however—they embraced when called for, and Richard worked with them as they lay together on the stage bed, instructing them in ways to move that would partially (but not completely) conceal their bare bits to the audience. There were ways to do this without looking like that was what was intended. Bradley had always been comfortable with Colin in close physical proximity, but this—this was very different.

Bradley felt like he was in drama school again, in an incredible accelerated program filled with expectations and with higher stakes than he’d ever had to deal with in those days.

On the third day, London plunged into a cold snap of the likes the region very rarely saw. Bradley huddled in his extra layers on the train, and arrived at the stage door at a quarter to eight, feeling like a popsicle, to find Colin there, surrounded by about a dozen fans and holding what looked like an overnight bag. Colin’s lips were slightly blue, he was shivering in his polar layers, and though he smiled pleasantly at Bradley, his eyes were screaming “Help me!”
They had been dealing with small groups of fans since the day of the table read—and how the fans had found out the dates of rehearsals remained a mystery, but there they were. So far, things hadn’t gotten out of hand, but today, it was so cold… he was actually just as worried about the red-faced girls getting frost bite as Colin and himself. He helped extricate Colin as quickly as he could, (playing the bad guy as usual, he thought acerbically), and he and Colin finally managed to spill into the warmth of the theatre by their expected eight AM call time.

Once inside, they looked at each other for a moment. “You think maybe we should talk to the theatre about security?” Colin asked wryly.

Bradley rolled his eyes. “It’s already come to this…” Colin’s lips just twisted in a grimace, and Bradley asked, “What’s with the bag, there, Morgan? More layers? It’s warm enough here in the theatre…” Bradley was already removing his coat, gloves and muffler.

“It’s…just my stuff. The heat’s out in my flat, so I’m going to stay at the hotel around the corner tonight.”

“You’re…what?” Bradley stared at him incredulously as they moved to their places. “When did your heat go out? And why would you stay at a hotel when my place is less than fifteen minutes from here, anyway? Don’t be ridiculous, you’re staying with me, my couch opens into a bed and I’ve got plenty of extra blankets to cover your pasty Irish backside with.”

And before Colin could even give a token protest, Richard was calling everyone to places for another run-through, and the conversation had to be put on hold.

That day was also the first day that Bradley and Colin kissed each other.
Chapter 3

With the other actors all separated into their groups and working around them, Richard had Bradley and Colin stand close to each other, and then, when they were standing toe to toe, he told them, “Now, look at each other. Don’t look at me, just listen.”

And Bradley looked at Colin. He’d seen him before, of course, and at times pretty closely, but now he noticed the pores in his skin and how he would occasionally flick his tongue out to lick his lips. He could smell Colin too—the unique scent of Colin, something else that wasn’t unfamiliar to him, but now, he separated and categorized each component—the coffee he’d been sipping, his nervous sweat—or maybe that was his own, Bradley wasn’t sure—the slight scent from his shower gel that morning, and something else he couldn’t define as anything else but Colin.


And Bradley hesitated but a moment—Where should he put his hands?— and started to lean in.

“No, I said, don’t think. Just do. Don’t worry about your angle, or what to do with any other part of yourself but your lips. Just—kiss him.”

Bradley leaned in and pressed his lips very lightly to Colin’s mouth, the faintest of kisses. He felt the stubble from Colin’s chin, just a fraction of a moment, before pulling away.

He looked at Colin. His expression was completely neutral, unreadable, giving nothing away. Except—

Whoa.

The pupils in Colin’s blue eyes were blown wide.

“Okay. “ Richard’s quiet voice continued, not giving either of them a chance for acknowledgement or thought. “Colin. Do the same.”

And Colin leaned in, and his lips were touching his for a fleeting moment. Bradley didn’t allow himself to close his eyes, but felt his lids flicker.

This was…well. Nothing like drama school, that much was certain, for all its obviously teaching goals.

Colin pulled back, and they were back to almost nose-to-nose again.

“Good. Now, I want you both to lean your foreheads against each other for a moment, yes, just like that. Just very lightly rest there for a moment. Don’t touch anywhere else…”

Richard got up from the stool he’d been perched on beside them on the stage, moved around them. Bradley found himself actually closing his eyes. He could feel Colin breathing, very gentle breaths against his face. He didn’t think, didn’t think.

“How do you both feel?” Richard asked quietly, from somewhere behind Bradley.

“Fine”, Colin murmured, and Bradley almost whispered “S’okay.”

“And what do you think the audience would be seeing right now?”
Bradley didn’t know, didn’t say anything. After a moment, Colin’s quiet voice answered, “Comfort”.

“Yes, quite so. And rather sensual comfort at that.” Richard sounded pleased, moved closer to the pair of them, and gently eased them apart.

“You two are going to be just fine in these roles. “Before you leave for home today, you will be comfortable with kissing each other as Carr and Nigel.”

Colin and Bradley just looked at each other.

They spent the day kissing each other, Colin and himself.

That was a sentence he never would have believed he’d think, let alone actually be true, but that is what they had done. Upon Richard’s quiet instruction, he and Colin were put through their paces, told where exactly to place their hands on each other—“A bit higher on his hip, Colin, yes there—no, Bradley, your hand at his cheek will block him from the audience. I know it seems natural, but—that’s right, the other hand at his nape, very good. All right, now, keep in mind, gentlemen, tongue isn’t a bad thing…” And he and Colin had laughed, the both of them, more than once, as they’d practiced this whole stage-kissing business, and Richard hadn’t minded at all, told them to remember that it was all nine-tenths smoke and mirrors and angles, and the other tenth was up to them, and their faces and bodies.

And they kissed. A lot. In some cases so intensely their teeth clacked together and bruised their lips, and others so feather-light, butterfly kisses, meant to convey just sweetness…and all at Richard’s command, separating them all into categories and making them into just one more way of convincing an audience.

He tasted Colin over and over again, felt his chin and his cheek and those so-often-talked-about cheek bones, raised his own chin to bare his neck, and felt Colin’s slender hands cup his jaw.

It was the most intimate acting he’d ever done in his life.

It should have been mechanical, standing there being told how to touch another actor, how to angle his head, his hips…but it wasn’t. He was hypersensitive to everything, before too long, could feel the hair on his arms raise, truly taste Colin (even without tongue), and feel acutely the texture of his stubble, the warmth of his hands, the press of his legs and chest against him. Bradley forced himself not to look at Colin too often, really look, but to hone in merely on Richard’s voice, the puppet master, pulling his (kissing) strings. But he was also very, very glad for loose jeans and a long jumper. He’d hardened within a few minutes of the beginning of this exercise, and suspected he was going to stay that way for the beginning of this exercise, and suspected he was going to stay that way for some time. It wasn’t his fault, he allowed himself, during a moment’s break. With the way his and Georgia’s schedules had constantly conflicted, he hadn’t had sex in months, other than his own right hand. His cock didn’t know the difference between practice kissing and the real thing.

And then he’d forgotten his promise to himself, and stole a glance at him, really looked at Colin, and seen the slight flush across those damn cheekbones, and somehow he suspected that Colin wasn’t unaffected by it all either. He felt only slightly better in that.

He wondered how he must look to the man opposite him, and if he was radiating heat or his own eyes were dilated or Colin had noticed his little predicament…

“Bradley, you’re thinking too much! Don’t let yourself be distracted. Try it again…”
When Richard finally signaled a halt and called a break for everyone, murmuring a “Very good, well done” to Colin and himself, Bradley felt more sore and achy and exhausted than he did after playing striker on the pitch for an entire game. Wearily, he trudged after Colin, sat across from him at the table. Thankfully, now that they were back to being just Bradley and Colin, his erection had softened almost immediately. The other actors and crew milled around them, exchanging jokes and gossip He and Colin didn’t speak to each other, but Bradley felt a delighted amusement when he saw Colin using the silly mug he’d given him for his birthday, quirking his mouth up at his friend in acknowledgement. Colin nodded back, his own lips pursing, and continued his conversation with one of the actors playing one of the hoodlums.

Bradley was still chatting with David, enjoying his downtime (he cackled inwardly at the pun) when Betty returned from a quick fag break, her face almost as red as her hair from the cold. “Hey, loves”, she said, patting both Bradley and Colin on the shoulders. “Your groupies out there are turning into right icebergs, as we speak. I told them you probably wouldn’t be out, but I don’t think they believed me.”

“What are you talking about?” Bradley returned, and Colin furrowed his brow in puzzlement.

“Your Merlin fans”, Betty told them. “They’re here every day, waiting for a glimpse of your sweet selves”, she teased them. “But today it’s so bloody cold, I’m kind of worried about hypothermia for them…”

Bradley and Colin looked at each other. Oh, God…the fans.

Bradley had asked them that morning not to linger, that the weather was just too frigid for them to be safe. He was going to speak to management today, ask them if they could arrange for some security. But then they’d started rehearsals, and he’d forgotten all about everything but how he was supposed to kiss Colin.

He and Colin wouldn’t be leaving until after eight PM; after all…It couldn’t be the same fans, was it?

He’d started to lever himself up from the table, to go and speak to the theatre security, and saw Colin move to join him, when Richard’s voice intervened. “Sorry, I should have addressed this by now.”

He turned to Mike, one of the A.D.s. “Mike, would you go and take care of that with the management office?” Richard waited until the assistant had nodded his assent and was already hurrying away before turning to Colin and Bradley. “Don’t worry, we’ll have someone speak to them, explain that we’re concerned about their safety. They’ll give it a soft sell.” Richard shrugged his shoulders in a “Nothing else we can do” kind of apology before continuing his conversation with some of the lighting crew.

Silently, Bradley and Colin moved off to one corner, giving themselves a semblance of privacy.

“Well, we knew we’d be bringing the fans with us. Now that’s dedication.” Colin shook his head, and Bradley knew that he was still trying to wrap his mind around it, just as he himself was.

“It would be nice, but they’re taking it to the extreme, not using their heads. Who stands out in the cold to see someone for twenty seconds, anyway?” Bradley grumbled. It was seriously worrying, and he wasn’t able to view this type of thing as philosophically as Colin always seemed able to.

Colin shook his head again. “I have no explanation.”

“Well, you’d definitely better stay with me tonight then, rather than the hotel. They’d probably follow you to it. We can catch a cab to the tube…”
Colin breathed in through his nose, touched Bradley’s forearm. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Really, the hotel is fine.”

“Why do you want to spend money on a room when you can stay with me?” To Bradley’s way of thinking, Colin was being overly-polite, a phenomena he’d witnessed more than once from the other man. “Really, it’s no trouble to have you.”

“I appreciate it, I really do, you know that…”

“Well, what’s the problem? Am I really that bad a host?”

“I just…I think it may be too much, you know, doing the play, rooming together like that…”

Bradley suddenly felt unreasonably hurt by Colin’s reticence. He got what Colin was saying, honestly…and he was probably right. They would need space from each other, given the intensity of what they were acting every day. It made sense, really.

On the other hand, they’d all but lived in each other’s laps while filming Merlin for four years…Bradley couldn’t help feeling like a gigantic girl, rejected. So, he So, he did what blokes did in those situations. He slapped Colin on the back and told him jovially, “I’m not saying move in permanently, dunderhead. We’re not those guys from Supernatural, after all. Just until the heating in your building is fixed. You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but given the circumstances, I just thought it’d be safer and convenient. No big deal, never mind.”

Colin shook his head, seemed about to say something else, but then break time was over and the actors all moved back to the stage, and took their places again. Bradley was paired with David, and began run throughs with the actor playing his boss with all the concentration he could muster.

When the night was finally called, Bradley began gathering his things alongside everyone else, until Richard quietly asked to speak with him and Colin.

“Tomorrow, we shall begin on the bed scene again, only now we will begin acting it out fully. Please be prepared, wearing your modesty garments. Do you feel you are ready?”

And they’d both nodded acquiescence, and exchanged very brief comments with Richard before wishing him a good night.

Bradley finished adjusted his scarf, pulling on his gloves, and watched Colin wrestling with his night bag as they walked to the stage door. They hadn’t spoken to each other outside of rehearsing since Colin had told him he wouldn’t be staying with him.

“They told me security is in place, there’s a cab waiting.” He ventured. Colin nodded, smiled. “Yeah, it’s fine. I’ll just jog right across the street.”

It was true; the hotel Colin had in mind was so close that a cab would be superfluous.

“All right, then, have a good night. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Colin echoed the sentiment brightly, and Bradley swung the door open. He heard calls of “Colin!” and “Bradley!” faintly as he walked toward the waiting taxi, its exhaust almost blue in the sub-freezing weather. There were fans huddled across the street, waving frantically at them. Security had been able to get the girls to move off theatre property, but they couldn’t stop them from waiting anywhere else. He and Colin both waved back, and Bradley said very quietly to his friend “Be
“careful.” Colin nodded, grinned, and mouthed “‘Night” to him, and then took off at a lope towards his hotel.

Bradley just shook his head minutely. Well, Colin was a grown man; he could take care of himself well enough, despite what the fan girls thought.

He was in the warmth of the cab, and then the brightly lit tube station before he knew it, almost dozing as he waited the few minutes for his late train. He was exhausted. He was loving the work, but it was taking a lot out of him, that was for sure.

On the train, he pulled out his sad-looking, in-pieces script and thumbed through it idly. He wasn’t memorizing lines anymore; if he didn’t have them down by now, he probably never would, but he also had a very vivid, very common-to-actors fear of forgetting his lines during a live performance. This was theatre, after all. There were no re-takes, no do-overs. He had no safety net but his own preparation, and if he fell flat, he was going to go splat. And he had, on more than one occasion, forgotten lines he’d known a moment before, before cast and crew members of members of Merlin. It was called blanking, but giving it a name did nothing to erase the embarrassment when it happened.

He checked his phone messages and texts; it was too late to return anything now, and most of the people he cared about knew he was in rehearsals and would forgive him for being so isolated and non-communicative.

He was a stop away from his own place, some hot cocoa, and bed when his phone rang, startling him so that he nearly dropped it.

He checked the screen: Colin.

Briefly, he thought about ignoring the call, but he wasn’t that petty, he wasn’t.

“Hey mate, you all settled in for the night?”


“You all right, there?”

“I’m fine, it’s just—they followed me. A whole bunch of people followed me to the hotel, there’s about twenty people in the lobby and there’s some right outside my room. I can hear them talking.” He didn’t really sound scared, just very tired. Weary.

“Jesus, Morgan—did you call security?”

“What security? It’s a small hotel, I haven’t seen the guard since I got here.”

“Oh boy—okay, look, call the front desk, ask them to arrange a cab for you, and make a run for it. I know you don’t want to stay here, but you can find another hotel nearby.”

“Actually I was calling to ask if I could stay with you.”

Bradley couldn’t help it, he started to laugh.

“It’s not funny, James.” And yet Colin’s voice did sound faintly amused too.

“It really is, actually. You really should listen to me more often.” At Colin’s discordant hum, he relented his teasing. “Just—get over here, you fan magnet. I’ll turn the heat up and have hot
chocolate waiting.
And try not to get frostbite on your non-existent bum, yeah?” Bradley was still chortling when Colin agreed and they hung up.

And then cursed when he realized he’d missed his stop.

Thankfully, he managed to hail a cab and arrive at his flat before Colin did. He hastily turned the heat up a dozen degrees, changed out of his jeans to loose jogging pants and a sweatshirt, put the kettle on for cocoa, and was just pulling extra blankets and a cream-colored duvet from his linen cupboard when his phone rang again. It was Colin, telling him his cab was outside and he’d be right up. Smart thinking on his friend’s part; Bradley really did not fancy the thought of opening the door at this hour, in this weather, to someone he thought would be a mate, only to find a stranger wanting to have his babies. It wouldn’t be the first time…

He opened the door on the first knock, pulled Colin in by the arm and closed the door quickly, trying to not let any more cold air in. Jesus, but it was frigid…

“You okay?” He asked him. Colin was bundled up ridiculously, but his cheeks and his nose were bright pink—and that was just from the dash from the street to his door.

Colin just shrugged sheepishly. “M’fine, now. The hotel managed to scrounge up their security guard from wherever he was hiding and they hustled me out the back way to the cab.”

Bradley shook his head, and then indicated with a nod where Colin could hang up his coat and the various other outer layers he was shedding.

“Our lives are so weird; I almost shat myself when you told me what was going on…”

And Colin had just huffed out a laughed and went off to change into night clothes, and when he returned to the kitchen, Bradley had mugs out and was adding hot water to the cocoa powder.

“You want anything to eat? I’ve got some bread for toast with jam, or soup and crackers…”

“Nah, thanks, I’m still full from the theatre food.”

Bradley offered Colin an old sweatshirt of his that was warm and soft, and some tube socks, which his body insulation- challenged friend gratefully accepted, but not without correcting Bradley about the whole vegetarian thing Bradley was grumbling about.

“It’s not plant life’s fault I’m thin and cold. Look at Anthony, he’s a vegetarian…”

And Bradley just grumbled some more, and pulled the convertible couch out into a bed. Colin huddled under the mounds of blankets, and Bradley lay beside him, wrapped in a couple more while they watched an old Dr. Who episode on the telly.

“How’d you think today’s rehearsals went?’ Colin asked him, just as Bradley thought he was dozing off.

“The kissing? It was fine. Richard really is an incredible teacher isn’t he. I don’t think I’d be able to do this as easily without him. I trust him implicitly. And you, too, by the way.” He poked his friend’s ribs in camaraderie. “How about you?” Bradley forced himself not to ask Colin if it had been good for him, forced himself not to go there. Somehow the crude joke didn’t appeal tonight.

“The same. It’s really coming together.” Bradley nodded and they continued to watch the show in
silence a few moments. And then Colin asked, “You nervous about tomorrow?”

“Not at all” Bradley answered, and meant it. He’d come to terms with the nude scene some time ago. “I think the whole naked thing is a tempest in a teapot, really.”

Colin turned to look at him. “How do you mean?”

Bradley shrugged. “I just don’t see it as that big a deal anymore. I’ve spent a lot of time in gyms and shower rooms where everyone’s naked. Whoopee. And Hopper’s posed nude, Macken’s done mostly naked scenes, hell; you’ve done it, yeah?”

Colin studied him for a moment before murmuring, “Not quite the same, is it.”

Bradley grabbed the remote, turned the TV’s volume down. “Why? You’re not nervous about it, are you? I mean, why would you be?”

Colin gave the type of shrug that screamed feigned nonchalance, quirked an eyebrow at Bradley. “Maybe a little.”

“Why?”

But Colin went into clam mode, and Bradley knew from experience that nothing more would be forthcoming from him when he got like that. Not long after that, Bradley wished him goodnight and retired into his own bedroom. He lay awake for some time, pondering his friend’s odd response.

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“How does a grown man get so happy over peanut butter?” Bradley mused to himself, watching Colin beaming. And also, “How does he manage to smile with his mouth full of bread and peanut butter?”

Without even talking about it, their morning routine had synchronized like a NASCAR pit stop, with Colin up and showering while Bradley exercised, Bradley telling him when he emerged to help himself to the American peanut butter in the pantry, and anything else he wanted from the kitchen. Colin wasn’t the only aficionado of peanut butter from the States, after all, but only Colin got so ecstatic over it. He’d made himself toast and grabbed a banana from the bunch, and was sipping coffee and merrily munching while watching the news when Bradley emerged from his shower.

“Geez, doesn’t take much to make you happy, does it”, Bradley teased, getting his own toast and an orange.

“If you had porridge, my life would be perfection right now”, Colin told him.

Bradley rolled his eyes. “I refuse to allow that horrid gloopy paste in my flat, even for you. I don’t know how you eat that stuff.”

“S’good!” Colin told him, mock-indignant. He was accustomed to everyone around him mocking his food choices.

Bradley shook his head. “You poor thing. You are one sick puppy, you are, and you don’t even know what good is…”

They bickered easily all the way to the Tube, and were en route to the theatre with plenty of time to spare.
The fans. There they were, just outside the walk to the stage door, now close to fifty women, and quite a few guys too. Bradley and Colin both stopped walking when they saw them. Wasn’t security supposed to be handling this, herding them away somehow?

It was like running the gauntlet. Bradley tried to walk as quickly as he could to the door, but was soon surrounded. Papers and pens were shoved in his hand, and he signed as best he could with his heavy gloves on. There were questions being thrown at him, “Do you kiss Colin?” and “Are you really naked?” probably the most common. He didn’t answer those questions, mostly because, Goddammit, it was getting old.

Colin was off somewhere to his left, smiling and posing for pictures, laughing his funny wheezing laugh when asked the same questions. Eventually, security did arrive and got them inside, and Bradley had a quick but firm word with them about arriving before they did.

“Here, Colin, I’ve arranged for a space heater, for you in particular, while practicing these scenes in a somewhat undressed state. It’s because you’re so thin, I know how easily you become chilled…”

Bradley couldn’t help himself; he started laughing at Richard’s words, telling Colin, “See! Even Richard knows about you!”

It really was a very thoughtful gesture on Richard’s part, though, and it was appreciated by the two of them. They both thanked Richard, and Colin just gave Bradley a withering look and told him “I’m not cold from being a vegetarian!” That set off another round of laughter, from both Richard and Bradley. Richard too was well aware of the good natured bantering among the Merlin cast members, and the issue of Colin’s diet vs. his wiry frame. And sometimes he even took part in the teasing himself.

Colin just glowered at them both, but couldn’t quite contain a small smile.

“Thanks, you two.”

“All right then, let’s get started, shall we?” Richard moved to the everpresent tall stool he used while giving stage direction. “I’m going to have you both just take off your shoes and socks and shirts, for now, and let’s see how things go.”

Bradley wanted to tell Richard that there was no need to start off slowly or carefully, he was completely ready to rehearse the sex and nude scenes in just his spandex shorts. He opened his mouth to say so, and especially after last night’s still-puzzling, rather dicey conversation on the subject. Besides, Richard had yet to steer them wrong. He trusted and respected Richard enough to lead them through at whatever pace he saw fit.

Bradley and Colin both slipped out of their shoes and shirts. Around them, the other actors rehearsed their own scenes, ignoring them.

When they were topless and shoeless, Richard’s quiet voice spoke again.

“Yes, Colin, you have the first line, asking Carr to never leave you. You recall our discussions on blocking this scene. Good. Let’s try a run through then. And…action.”

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It was horrible.
Bradley was klutzy, alternately too aggressive and not enough so. Colin was stiff and unyielding. Bradley was certain, even as Richard gave quiet instructions, told them to put this hand here or put more emphasis on a word there, that it just wasn’t working.

About the only thing he could count as a positive to it all was that his cock was behaving itself. It remained flaccid, twitching only a time or two, usually when he and Colin were lying down in the bed, heart to heart. It hadn’t even made much of a fuss when Bradley had his hands cupping Colin’s arse, and Richard had intoned, “No, Bradley, not both hands, and don’t squeeze. Just place one hand, lightly…”

They both had their lines down pat. They both moved exactly as they were instructed. But the scene had no life in it at all. Bradley could feel his frustration and his embarrassment growing as they continued their efforts. He could sense the same from Colin too, who was in pretty much the same mind set now that he was. At one point, when Richard turned away for a moment to consult with one of the techs, he mouthed at Colin, “You okay?” Colin just shrugged back at him helplessly, looking near tears. Bradley could relate; he was almost there himself.

Every bit of confidence he’d had for this scene had evaporated.

They tried it again, this time with Richard standing behind them, watching silently. Bradley had noticed that Richard had become more and more quiet as their disaster unfolded.

Finally, after he and Colin had actually bumped noses, hard, when leaning in for a kiss—a kiss they’d performed flawlessly only a day ago—Richard leaned close to them and said quietly, “Okay, you can put your shirts and shoes back on, I don’t want you catching pneumonia. I’m going to call a break in a moment, but I’d like you both to stay onstage with me for a bit. I want to speak with you.”

Bradley stifled a sigh, knowing he was about to be scolded, and probably read the riot act. It was a piss-poor performance, he knew, and he had no idea how to make it better, no idea what was wrong.

Once everyone had left for the morning break, Bradley heard Colin murmur, “I am so sorry, Richard…”

Richard just huffed out something like a laugh. “What happened, guys?” Bradley and Colin both just shook their heads, Bradley muttering, “Fuck if I know…”

Richard looked at them both for a moment, expression calm.

“You do know, this is what rehearsals are for, yes?”

Colin shifted slightly beside Bradley. Bradley just hung his head, tried to think of something, anything, that wouldn’t sound pathetic, like “I’m trying…”

“It’s all right, it happens. What we will do is have you get away completely from it for the better part of the day. You will work with other actors and perfect your scenes with them. When I return to the theatre after 4 this afternoon, we will pick it up again. How does that sound?”

Colin murmured agreement. Bradley stared at the floor.

“Bradley, do you think that will be okay?”

Bradley breathed in through his nose, thought about just going along, and then thought about how that would just be totally useless, which was how he was feeling right now anyway.
“Honestly, Richard, I’m willing to try anything, but I don’t see how this is going to help.”

Colin turned to look at him, said nothing.

Richard pulled up his stool, sat down in front of them.

“Yeah. You two are having a bit of a day, I’ve seen.”

Bradley quirked his eyebrow at Richard. Yes? What was he supposed to say to that?

“I want you both to keep a couple of things in mind, here. Just listen for now, and then compartmentalize it, put it away until you need it.”

Richard looked away from them for a moment, seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

“I know you both know this intellectually, but you need to be reminded, I think. You’re simulating sex with each other, but your bodies don’t know that. You’re going to have responses to each other, sexual responses, in reaction to the stimulation. It’s perfectly natural, it’s an autonomic response. It is nothing at all to be concerned with. It may happen now during rehearsals, it may happen during the performances. Don’t be freaked out or think of yourselves or the other as unprofessional if or when it happens.”

Bradley thought about himself hardening the first time he’d kissed Colin during rehearsal. He thought about Colin’s reaction to the kiss. He nodded his head, chanced a glance at Colin. He was staring at Richard, focused and intent, didn’t meet his eyes. He knew this, of course. Third year biology.

Somehow it felt rather different when Richard voiced it for them.

Richard paused, letting that sink in a moment, and then said, “This also isn’t about sexual identity, remember. “

Bradley felt his face heat.

“Our current culture seems a bit fixated on applying labels to everything, in very black and white terms, don’t you think? We identify ourselves as a straight male, or a gay male, when in fact sexual response has far less to do with what we call ourselves and far more to do with our own personal response to an individual.”

Bradley was pretty certain he might spontaneously combust, any moment now. He felt like a teenager, getting “The Talk.”

“Richard, don’t you, yourself, identify yourself as a gay man?” he pointed out.

“Quite true, yes I do.” Richard responded easily. “It’s quite convenient, and I contribute to my own charities and political agendas for human rights, but I consider myself far more complex than that. You know, I’ve had many—many”—and here he winked at the two younger men, gave them a wry grin—“men in my time, but I’ve only been truly in love once, and she happened to be a woman.”

Bradley furrowed his brow at that.

Colin spoke for the first time since apologizing. “And, I take it; it didn’t work because you are gay?”

Richard quirked an eyebrow. “No, actually, it didn’t work because it never began. She was a married
woman, and therefore off-limits.”

Bradley shut his eyes for a moment. That was the saddest thing he’d ever heard. For a man like Richard to never have a life-partner, never have someone to come home to and share his life with…it was a heartbreaking thought.

Colin made a low, sympathetic, distressed noise, and Richard shook his head. “No, stop that, both of you. Don’t feel sorry for me. You’re over-thinking. The point I am trying to make here, is that you need to let go of your concepts of self-identity and orientation. In regards to this scene, anyway—what matters is your own response to each other as individuals. Don’t get hung up on gender, or we’ll be stuck where we’ve been all morning. Just let things happen, let go, and let’s see some of that chemistry your fans are always going on about.”

Richard had seemed to sense they were feeling a bit raw and frayed at that point, and so sent them off to join the other actors and members of the crew, “Go, eat something, get something to drink, call your mothers, look at a video, visit the toilet, talk to your fellow theatre mates, get out of your own heads…” Amusingly, Richard was still making suggestions on what to do with the remainder of their break time as Bradley and Colin retreated to the area the production was using as their break room and downtime gathering place.

Bradley didn’t speak, and neither did Colin, but like so many times before, a shared look between them was all that was needed to convey that they were feeling not quite as down now as they had before Richard had spoken with them. Richard still seemed to have faith in them, even if they weren’t so sure. They would rehearse other scenes, and then go back to it fresh, with a new perspective.

Colin wandered off to chat with one of the wardrobe girls from Ireland, and Bradley resolved not to think of it, the love scene—and he’d started referring to it as that in his head, the love scene, or the romance scene, and not the “sex scene”—again until he had to.

Bradley and David engaged in a rousing discussion on the latest addition for Arsenal. Thank heavens, at least someone in the show seemed to be keeping up with football; Bradley had found himself too tired and single minded even to keep abreast of the news of his beloved team. He rooted around for his phone from his backpack, checked it for messages. There was a bunch—for heaven’s sake, how could he get twelve calls in one morning?—his mum, his sisters, Anthony, Macken, Hopper, a couple of friends from London, several from Katie—Bradley rolled his eyes—oh, lord, now he remembered. Tickets for the show were going on sale tomorrow, and everyone wanted to come see him in his full glory. Well, he and Colin, and Richard too, honestly, were going to have to distribute their comp tickets among their Merlin cast friends. There was a message from his agent too—he didn’t think he could handle talking to Stella right now, so he just listened to the voice mail—there had been a request for an interview from a well-known magazine in London that catered to the gay community. Stella sniffed and said she was, of course, fairly certain he wouldn’t want to do that, but that she’d tell him anyway because that’s what she did in her twenty five years in the business, and…he cut off the message, sent it to his saved box. He didn’t know about that, he’d think about it and maybe talk with Colin and Richard, see what they thought. Maybe that could be interesting, he wouldn’t discount anything at face value now.

The last message was from his father. His father, whom he had called from London the day before Christmas and only spoken to for a few moments, His dad had sounded like he’d been drinking, which was fine, of course, it was Christmas and he wasn’t a drunk, but it had sounded like he wasn’t alone either, and that he wasn’t particularly interested in what Bradley was doing or why. He’d thanked Bradley for the gifts he’d sent, wished him Merry Christmas, and that was the end of yet another of Bradley’s seemingly endless, always fruitless attempts at maintaining communication with
his father. His fraught relationship with his dad in the States was probably why he was always able to get into Arthur’s brain about his complicated relationship with Uther. Bradley often thought, he was an adult, was successful and had his life under control, and yet still craved the attention and approval of a distant father. There were times when it was almost an emotional catharsis to play some of his scenes with Anthony.

But now, his father had called him and left a message saying that he’d spoken with Bradley’s mother and that he was going to be in London for a few weeks and could they get together? And also, congratulations on the play, it sounded brilliant, and he’d like to come see it. Bradley played the message twice more, texted his father with Wud luv 2 c u, will call with play dates, luv u xxoo and sent the message to his saved box. He was still fiddling with his phone when the assistant directors called everyone back to places again.

They left the break room as a group, everyone still chatting, and Bradley nearly jumped when Colin touched his elbow. “You okay, there? I saw you going a wee bit pale, listening to your phone…”

“I’m fine; it’s just, my dad called me. You know he never calls.” Unlike Colin, Bradley spoke openly and honestly about his private life with his friends, and Colin had more knowledge than most of his attempts at a more even father-son bond.

“He’s all right?” Colin was immediately concerned.

“Yeah, he seems fine, great even. He’s going to be in country and he wants to come see the play. I’m a bit stunned, to be frank.”

Colin just smiled at him, his unabashed happy smile, and Bradley thought for a moment he might have some slight inkling why the fan girls all found Colin so fetching.

“Call him at lunch!”, Colin called over his shoulder, before he was sequestered off into his rehearsal assignment, and Bradley shut off and tucked his phone away to get himself back down to business.

Suddenly not feeling as downtrodden and weary as he had fifteen minutes ago, Bradley stepped into place beside David and immersed himself once more in his character.

He worked on nuances for his scenes with David, with Betty, feeling his confidence slowly returning as he rehearsed scenes more familiar with him, if no less emotionally charged and challenging. God, this was a finely written play, and the people involved in it were all professionals, looking to make it the best it could possibly be. Slowly, subtly, the knot that had formed in his stomach over his failure of the morning began to unwind.

He did try to call his father back during the next break, but it went straight to voice mail and Bradley remembered belatedly the nearly twelve hour time difference between London and the east coast of the USA. He left a voice mail message, told his dad he’d try him again in the morning. And then he settled beside Colin on one side and Betty on the other to eat their midday meal and to try not to obsess again over what had gone wrong in the morning rehearsals. If he seemed too distracted to the others, they didn’t comment, and conversations of their crowd ebbed and flowed around them. Actors were, for the most part, used to other actors dividing their attentions.

He just didn’t consider himself good at scenes that called for lustful or passionate displays, he’d realized. He’d promised himself he would put thoughts of it aside until he needed to return to it, but they came to him unbeknown. In his professional career, he’d been paired with only two women as a love interest. One had him ridiculously miming sex in the most inappropriate and filthy manner in a public loo, (and he’d never admitted to anyone just how truly embarrassed he’d been by that, instead allowing his footie friends the barrel of laughs they’d had over it and smiling like he thought it was
the most hilarious thing he’d ever seen too.) That had been a learning experience for him, and a reminder to him that there were times when acting called upon oneself to truly make a fool of one’s self.

The other was with Angel as Guinevere. Angel was his friend, funny and down to earth and attractive. He’d always gotten along with his Merlin cast mates, and she was no exception. And yet, every photo taken of him with her in the past few years seemed to have him projecting a negative body language, with him leaning away as if to avoid her cooties. It had begun right around the time the “hook up”, as he referred to Gwen and Arthur, had begun to be more spotlighted, and it had been particularly glaring in a round of photos that had posted online from a convention himself, Colin, Katie and Angel had attended at the start of series four.

While he had angled himself away from Angel, there were other shots of himself and Colin at the same gathering with their heads almost touching, whispering and giggling together and looking like they were sharing secrets like a pair of adolescent girls. And they’d never discussed it, him and Angel. She was privately very vocal with him about feeling that he shouldn’t say he wasn’t all that thrilled with the whole Gwen-Arthur thing, for the sake of the fans. He’d protest that he hadn’t ever really, really come and said he didn’t like it, the ”romance”. They’d bicker and usually wind up tickling each other. But in her less playful, more blunt moments, though, Angel had also demanded to know why the hell he even cared where the story line went. They were actors, playing parts, and he would, she’d pointed out, get paid the same amount of money whether his character loved Gwen or he really wasn’t feeling it...

So he’d left it alone, and tried not to wonder if he was such a bad actor that his not being onboard for a storyline caused it. It was a storyline that seemed to be an either-or thing for the fans; they either loved it or hated it. And since there was a whole contingent who loved Gwen and Arthur, he reminded himself that at least he was playing out the writer’s intent convincingly enough for some.

At half past three, Richard returned and conferred with his assistants while Bradley, Colin, and the three blokes who would play Colin’s character’s attackers rehearsed their scenes together. This was probably the only other scene in the show Bradley felt he might need to work on more. He did not enter into it until after Nigel, Colin’s alter ego, lay dying, and he was called upon to hold him and weep while the love of his life slipped away. The few times they’d gone over it with Richard overseeing, Richard had merely instructed him not to try to force tears, that they would come if they were called for, and that that would be true during performances as well—sometimes there, sometimes not. They were going to have to come back to this scene, and soon, Bradley knew, for him to achieve the passion it called for.

At four PM, Richard called a change in everyone’s rehearsal partners, and came to speak to himself and Colin once more. He brought the space heater with him.

"Well, chaps, how goes the battle?"

Bradley and Colin both responded in the positive, saying things were working very well in all the scenes. Bradley mentioned that he did want to go over the death scene a bit further and Richard agreed. Colin even expounded slightly on one scene he’d managed to master that had been giving him some trouble.

“Ah, good to hear. And you are both looking much brighter and ready to tackle this challenge than when I’d last left you. Do you feel comfortable enough to take up this gauntlet once again?”

And they’d nodded, and Bradley felt that familiar feel of bitterness in his mouth, the taste of adrenaline. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation. There was a certain thrill to nervousness onstage, to making himself believe he would come to grips with an especially mulish scene.
“What I have in mind is for you to perform this now in real time. Begin the scene fully clothed, and as the scene calls for it, remove your garments down to your modesty shorts. You must practice removing them smoothly, not getting tangled up in trousers or shirt sleeves.”

“That’s the easy part!” Colin had laughed a little.

“Indeed it is. Let me add just one more thing here for you both to try and keep in mind. This scene you are about to do is not about sex, it is not about passion, it isn’t even about lust. It’s all about trust. These characters have given themselves over to each other in perilous circumstances. They have to trust completely and it is your job to make the audience believe that. I will give you no other instructions now, nothing else to think about while performing this scene other than to ask you to think about who you trust.”

Richard moved his stool away, to a vantage point that would not be in the way as Bradley and Colin moved about in the scene. Before him, Bradley saw Colin rub his forehead, that tic he had as he prepared for a scene, trying to mentally blanket himself completely in the scene and the character.

“And…begin.”

Colin’s mouth, Colin’s scent, the scratch of Colin’s beard on his chin. His world narrowed down into a seeming pinpoint. He tasted Colin on his tongue, gathered him against himself and felt Colin quiver. He said the memorized words, heard the expected words, felt them. He stumbled slightly when it came time to undress, but salvaged it quickly. He positioned himself according to countless directional instructions. He felt Colin’s chest hair against himself, and felt Colin’s pulse when they held each other, slotted.

And while his cock had displayed only feeble interest in the morning’s trials, it now seemed to be doing the happy dance. He felt a bit of a jolt when he and Colin eased to the bed in only bike shorts and he had confirmation that Colin was in a similar state.

When the scene ended, he knew it wasn’t perfect. But--

Colin actually rested his forehead against Bradley’s shoulder.

“Well. I knew you could do it.” Richard’s quiet and oh so pleased voice penetrated the haze, and he felt Colin raise his head to look over.

Richard was just beaming, adding dryly, “You two just needed a break.”

Bradley and Colin looked at each other, and Colin’s lips twitched in something like a tired, relieved smile. Bradley had to look away when he felt his eyes start to sting.

“Let’s try it again, from the top.”

They performed the scene in its entirety thrice more before the day was called and they were all released for home. Once again, Richard said very little, only adding an occasional, “Yes, so much better!” or “That’s right, very good…now take it up one more notch”.

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Bradley had never felt so tiredly triumphant.

He and Colin sat on the stage bed while putting their clothes back on, the others milling about,
gathering belongings and sharing conversations. Bradley noted that none of the others seemed to have the same bone-weary countenance that he and Colin were presently sporting. Some even invited himself and Colin to join them for drinks, which they politely declined. Bradley knew Colin never drank while working, and also knew that if he himself started drinking tonight, he probably wouldn’t wake up until next week.

The day had been one hell of a roller coaster.

Richard asked them both how they felt before they left, smiling like a proud father.

“Like I can do this” Bradley answered, and Richard’s eyes had widened.

“I never doubted for a moment.”

Colin voiced what Bradley had been thinking, that he knew the scene wasn’t yet where they needed it to be, and Richard had said only that it was so close. “I don’t think you’ve any idea…you put your hearts out there. That is what is needed. Now all we need is to hone and polish this jewel, and we will do that.”

So Richard had sent everyone on their way, reminding them all that next week would be balls-to-the-wall week, when the days would be no longer split into groups but complete run throughs. Bradley and Colin rode the train home in silence, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. Bradley felt almost numb with fatigue, not even bothering to put his ear buds in. Colin dozed beside him on the seat, head resting on the window. He had to nudge Colin when they hit their stop.

"Home sweet home.”

He shed his winter coat and gloves, dropped his pack on the floor, kicked off his shoes, and mumbled something to Colin about helping himself to whatever he wanted in the kitchen. He took his battered script into his room and lay down on the bed, still wearing his street clothes, idly rifling through the well-known pages.

He didn’t know how long he’d been there, thinking about the day, about his responses when they’d finally taken the scene by the bollocks and forced it into submission, getting it right after almost being convinced they couldn't. And he thought about Colin too, how he’d been able to feed off Colin in the scenes, so alike but so very different too from their working relationship on Merlin.

He heard a noise from the doorway and finally stirred him from his reverie. He looked up. Colin was standing there, looking concerned and tired and stressed and…something else.

He just looked back at him, trying to say without words what he was thinking. Hoping…hell, TRUSTING, that Colin was on the same page.

Finally, after long seconds of staring, Bradley moved over on the bed to give room for Colin to come and sit. “Awk-ward…”, he snickered nervously.

Colin moved abruptly, all spindly arms and legs…and moved to kneel on the bed, and then was straddling Bradley, knees on either side of his hips, hands coming up to grip either side of Bradley’s head. Bradley stared at him, wide-eyed, torn between relief and shock and desire.

“I…trust you”, was all Colin said, and then leaned in to kiss him hard.

Bradley returned the kiss with as much intensity as Colin, parting his lips and allowing him access. Their tongues tangled, were sucked and sucked upon. He demonstrated a rather unique skill for Colin he was rather proud of, the ability to lave the inside of Colin’s mouth with the underside of his
own tongue. Colin groaned appreciatively, and Bradley revelled in the sensation, the vibration of it. He was nearly overwhelmed with his surprise and the newness of some of what he was experiencing.

This wasn’t performing, they weren’t trying to control themselves or position themselves correctly. Bradley felt Colin’s beard, scratchy and rough, against his face, felt him holding his head tightly, almost to the point of pain. He gripped Colin’s hips, trying to draw him closer to himself.

It was all becoming more demanding and purposeful, more frantic, by the moment.

When he finally pulled away in order to take a breath, Colin’s eyes were huge, and nothing remained of his eye colour but a slight blue ring around black iris. His hair was standing on end, his naturally full lips were swollen and damp, and he was panting, making tiny, gasping sounds. He wondered what Colin was seeing now when he looked at him, if he looked as wild and desperate to him, if his own shock and fervour was as evident.

For a moment, they just held each other, Colin loosening his grip on Bradley’s head and moving his hands to his biceps. They rested their foreheads against the others, and Colin’s hips were making small, stuttering movements against him.

Bradley felt himself almost on the edge of hysteria, had to fight down a nervous giggle. Leave it to Colin, quiet, always polite, you-never-knew-what-he-was-thinking Colin, to be the initiator and the aggressor in this.

Colin, whom he’d known for more than four years and Bradley hadn’t known in all that time what his sexual orientation was. Colin, whom he hadn’t even been sure he had even liked when he first met him, unable to understand his accent or his dark humour or some of the off the wall things he came out with. Colin, whom so many of the fans, and a great many of the crew, seemed to view as someone unthreatening and even asexual, using words like adorable and cute and sweet to describe him. (Boy, if they only could see him now, Bradley thought ironically). Colin, with his bewildering eating habits, his glass-cutting cheekbones, his oversized ears, his face-lighting smile, his kind heart and old soul spirit. Colin, who had presented this professional opportunity to him, encouraged him to spread his wings, let go of his inhibitions, and trust in himself and in Colin. Colin, who was now cupping his chin with one hand and nibbling at his Adam’s apple, little butterfly touches of his lips that felt amazing, and was also grinding himself against Bradley’s very interested crotch with unmistakable intent.

Bradley fisted a bunch of Colin’s many layers of shirts, began to pull them up. Colin stopped his work at Bradley’s throat, looked at him with bloodshot eyes, but didn’t move to help him right away.

“You’re sure?” he asked Bradley hoarsely.

“Yeah, pretty sure” Bradley answered with a nervous laugh.

When they were both shirtless, Colin leaned against his broader chest until they were aligned from shoulder to groin. Colin was only this side of taller than Bradley, and to Bradley it seemed like he fit against him like he’d been made to. He nipped at Colin’s prominent collarbones, ran his tongue up the corded neck, and when Colin tipped his head back, offering his throat, placed kisses up and down until finally settling his mouth back on Colin’s mouth.

They were grinding against each other now, Bradley cupping Colin’s jeans-clad arse to try to pull him closer still. There was a name for what they were doing, besides dry-humping, Bradley thought.
He’d come across the term some late night while trawling one porn sight or another. Frotting, that’s what they were doing. Whatever it was called, it was making Bradley rock hard and damp in his jeans and cotton briefs.

Colin was making a lot of noise, quiet groans and hums of pleasure, and the vibrations against Bradley’s lips and tongue were going straight to his already overly stimulated cock. When Colin detached from his mouth and started to suck on a nipple, he actually gasped and jumped.

“Sorry, you don’t…?” Colin asked, apparently thinking he hadn’t liked it.

“I love it, I’m really sensitive there, but it’s, it’s almost too much you know? Here.” And he helped to draw Colin down onto the bed, onto his side, facing him, the feel of his chest hair tickling him and exciting him.

They were touching all over now, legs intertwined, thighs to thighs, rocking against each other. Bradley ran his hands over Colin’s sides and back, felt the expected prominent ribs, the sharp knobs of his spine, but something more, too. Colin wasn’t as thin as he looked; there was hard wiry sinew there too. He remembered that Colin had told him he had been a competitive swimmer when he’d been in school, and apparently still engaged in leisurely swims whenever he could find the time. It had given him a corded torso and more physical strength than one expected from one of such a slight frame. He was no weakling.

Bradley rolled, bringing Colin with him to lie atop him, and now there was no denying it, cocks pressing against each other. He held Colin in place, both arms crossing over at the small of his back, kissed his mouth, his chin, his ears, nipped at his shoulders, at the peaks of his areolas, fascinated by the coarse hair there. Colin was grinding down against him, making almost whimpering noises of want and frustration, and Bradley again pressed him to himself with hands on both of his arse cheeks, lifting his own hips slightly to meet each thrust.

Finally, finally, it was all too much, and he knew that if some agreement wasn’t made right now, he was going to embarrass himself and come in his pants like a teenager. He rolled with Colin again until they side by side, and very slowly, very tentatively, reached for the button of his own jeans. Colin watched him, eyes glittering, just nodded slightly, only once.

They helped each other out of the last of their clothes, finally laying facing each other, nude. Bradley felt himself trembling slightly. Unchartered territory. He’d never had sex with a man before, and somehow, somehow this was scarier than public nudity.

He’d told Colin the very night before that he spent a great deal of time in gyms and shower rooms with other unclothed men, and that was true. What was also true was that in those situations, no one actually deigned to look at each other—unless it was to take the piss out of one's mate over his being lacking in his nether regions, of course. Now, he looked at Colin, at Colin’s long, untrimmed cock, longer than his own but not as thick, that lay hard and upturned against Colin’s thigh, leaking precum, and at his tight balls, and at the shock of black pubic hair. He had to keep himself from grinning, remembering a review he’d read of Colin’s nude scene in A Prayer For My Daughter—some woman had really gone a bit overboard, describing Col’s package as “quite respectable” and how one of his bollocks had been trying to retreat upwards in the cool theatre.

Well, she hadn’t had the perspective he had right now. Colin’s package was quite a bit more than respectable. It was lovely, although the adverb made Bradley wince to have even thought of it.

He chanced to look back at Colin’s face, and Colin smiled a little at him, sweetly shy. Bradley felt his face heating again, and not from passion now. “You’re lovely, Colin”, was all he said, not caring how sappy or girly he sounded. He was lying naked as a jaybird in springtime in his bed with Colin
Morgan. He doubted using girly descriptions were going to be held against him now.

Colin’s pale skin blushed crimson at the compliment, and he whispered something that sounded like “You too”. And Bradley realized that Colin had no doubt been checking him out too, and he’d passed inspection, and maybe, maybe…Colin was as nervous about this as he himself.

Gently, slowly, he took Colin’s hand and guided it down to his dick. His hold on him was so light that Colin could pull away easily if he wanted to, but he didn’t seem to want to. He actually closed his eyes and moaned softly when Bradley guided his hand to wrap around his own length. And then Colin’s hand did the same for him, and there were no other sounds in the room for a few moment but skin on skin as they stroked each other.

At Colin’s first touch on him, Bradley had shuddered, so close to release that he worried he would finish far too quickly. So he took his other hand, from where it had been stroking Colin’s head, his shoulder, and squeezed the base of himself for a few long moments. It helped, and he managed to stave off his spending for the moment. He then reached to his night stand, grabbed some hand lotion, and messily squirted it at both his own and Colin’s dick and balls.

Colin started to laugh at the mess, and his flesh erupted in goose bumps, but it did seem to ease things up for a moment.

Without as much friction, it was easier to pump each other, and lazily roll the other’s balls in one hand, to stroke the others’ buttocks. Bradley was fascinated by Colin’s bare arse. He often teased him about “not having one”, but the truth was, like everything else about Colin, he packed a lot of impact in a small presentation. Colin was just full of surprises. His arse was curved pertly, lightly dusted with black hair, endearingly white and unblemished. He squeezed it lightly, pinched it gently here and there, and dragged his fingertips over it, all the while exploring Colin’s prick and bollocks with the other hand.

For his part, Colin was doing the same, and the almost-massaging, firm, circular motions he was making on Bradley’s arse cheeks were feeling wonderful.

Colin shifted, pulling Bradley by the hip closer to him until they could just manage both of their hands between them. Deftly, he maneuvered his own and Bradley’s cocks together, brought his own hand and Bradley’s around them, and changed the pace to a rapid pumping. Bradley forgot all about Colin’s arse, about his own, about all his ADD-type musings. His world simply narrowed down to the building tension in his cock and balls. He heard himself making low “Ah, ah, ah” sounds as he matched Colin’s rhythm, the lotion and their own pre-cum making wonderful, filthy squelching noises.

He shouted when he came, and Colin followed him over soon after.

For a long time, all Bradley could hear was the wild thumping of his heart, his harsh breaths, and Colin’s own mirroring racing heart and panting. Colin was still pressed against Bradley tightly, from ankle to shoulder.

Bradley was still shaking a bit from the aftershock of his orgasm, and the last sight he had seen before tumbling over the edge—that of Colin’s face twisted in almost pained intensity—was burned into his brain forever.

For all Colin’s acting ability, his talent for facial expressions and his own animated reactions, Bradley knew he’d never seen such a raw and open look from Colin. He was going to savour that moment forever. And Bradley also had a sense of wonder too, that he was privileged to have seen that, and that he’d been the one to draw that from Colin.
Bradley thought that this must be what ecstasy felt like. The emotion, not the party drug.

In truth, it was exhausted, sated, post-coital, almost-asleep ecstasy, but that didn’t mean he was any less happy.

After a time, when his trembling eased a bit and his heartbeat and breathing became something closer to normal, he brushed Colin’s fringe away from his forehead and kissed him. Colin blinked at him owlishly.

“I liked that.” Bradley said, simply and honestly. “I’d like to do that or something like that, again.”

Colin grinned at him, that crazy, like-the-sun grin. “So would I. But not right now.” His voice was rough, hoarse.

“No, not right this second.” Bradley agreed, reasonably. “But I also wanted to say, Colin, that I must apologize for a mistake I made.”

“What mistake?” Colin was rapidly losing the battle against sleep, judging by the dozy timbre in his voice, but he was curious enough to ask.

“The one where I accused you of not having an arse. You obviously have an arse. It’s a very nice one too. I like your arse very much.”

Amidst Colin’s amused, self-conscious laughter, Bradley was pretty sure he had called Bradley crazy.

Bradley managed to squirm himself under the covers and manhandle Colin with him, pulling the other man to him and resting his chin atop his head. It was warm in the apartment, but they would rapidly cool after their exertions, and he was mindful of how easily Colin became cold. His last thought before sleep pulled him under was that they were both sticky and messy and smelled kind of ripe.

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Bradley’s bladder woke him just after midnight, insisting on being emptied. He tried to leave the bed without disturbing a softly snoring Colin, but no such luck.

“Was’a’matter?” Colin mumbled.

“Nothing. Loo.” Bradley trailed his hand through Colin’s hair, and Colin closed his eyes again.

In the bathroom, Bradley took care of business, and then wet a warm washcloth and cleaned himself up. He looked at himself in the mirror for a moment with a rare sense of sentimental gratitude for the life he had. Despite all the usual ups and downs, he felt right now like he was almost living a charmed life. Sometimes, life could bring such unexpected revelations.

His reflection’s mouth twisted at that train of thought in disgust. He was becoming so smarmy…

Bradley wet another warm washcloth, grabbed a small hand towel from the cupboard, and did a quick circuit around the flat, switching off the lights that had been left on when they’d both gone to bed unexpectedly early.

He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, and then returned to the bedroom. Colin protested weakly when he pulled the covers down with “Hey…”, but relaxed again when Bradley began washing away the stickiness, first on Colin’s hands, and then at his groin. He gently cleaned the
crease between thigh and crotch, swiped the length of Colin’s cock a couple of times, and even lifted his legs to get the backs of his thighs. He dried him just as gently and efficiently, and then covered him up again, tossing the used towels on the floor.

Through it all, Colin watched him silently with warm, soft eyes.

“Thanks”, Colin murmured when Bradley was done, and was snoring again before Bradley shut off the small lamp at the bedside table and rejoined him in the bed. He was going to ask Colin if he wanted a sip of water, but…

“Welcome”, he whispered into Colin’s hair.

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“Oh! Jesus fuck! Colin, come on, get up, we’re going to be late!” Bradley had taken Colin’s arm and dragged a still half-asleep Colin almost to the edge of the bed before Colin gave any resistance.

“Wot? What’s going on?” Colin’s voice was near pornographic levels of deep and hoarse from sleep, but Bradley didn’t have time to appreciate it now.

“The alarm, it didn’t go off! We’ve got less than fifteen minutes to make it to the train.”

“Shite!” And Colin was running past him, into the loo.

They brushed their teeth in the shower, the two of them. It was a snug fit, and might have been fun on any other morning, but now they kept elbowing each other as they tried to wash themselves. After the night before, they really didn’t have the option of skipping at least one wash and rinse. Then they were both out, bumping into each other, scrambling for towels and then getting their slightly-damp selves into clothes and socks, finding their phones and knapsacks.

There wasn’t time to dry their hair, or get anything to eat, or any other part of the normal morning routine as they both frantically tried to get themselves together.

At seven minutes before their train was due, they tumbled out of the apartment and took off at a dead run for the tube. This was the kind of thing Youtube videos were made of, Bradley through wryly. He knew it took about five minutes to get to the station when he jogged there, so he was pretty sure they could make it. It was honestly a miracle that the notoriously gangly and accident-prone Morgan hadn’t gone sprawling by this point, too. Well, at least the cold snap appeared to be lifting. The weather wasn’t nearly as cold as it had been the last day or two. Colin may just not come down with the flu from being outside with still-wet hair.

When they finally reached the station and were jogging down the stairs with exactly one minute and thirty eight seconds to go, Bradley couldn’t help it—he let out a Tarzan-like yell and declared, “Yes! Elvis is in the building!”

The other commuters, for the most part being of rather stoic lineage, barely gave the soggy-haired, panting, wild-eyed madman a glance before they went back to reading their newspapers and waiting for their trains.

Bradley and Colin’s train pulled up just as they made it to the platform, and they slipped inside and collapsed on the nearest seat, Colin slumping low. When the train began to pull away, Bradley looked at Colin, and they both burst into laughter. That was just no way to start a day, but at least their blood was pumping and they were both wide awake.

Bradley looked away for a moment, and then suddenly remembered something. He touched Colin’s
hand. “Hey, Cols?” he said quietly.

Colin turned to look at him. “Erhm?”

“Good morning.”

Colin started to laugh again, shook his head. “You really are something else. I can’t believe we made it. What the feck was that?”

“Well…I suppose we wouldn’t die if we were late, but…” Bradley knew that Colin, consummate professional that he was, would rather die than show up late for work. He’d never been late once while doing Merlin, and showed up sick more than once. As for himself, well, he’d worked sick before too. And had been late a few times, but somehow, having Richard even assume that he wasn’t taking this job, this play, completely seriously…well. He was glad they’d made it, even if they had probably looked utterly silly getting there.

“What the hell happened with the alarm anyway? It worked fine yesterday.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I may have hit the snooze button. I’ve got another clock; I’ll plug it in tonight.”

Colin just smiled slightly at him. Bradley said after another moment, almost whispering, “Thank you for, you know. Being so bold. Last night.”

Bradley knew he was probably coming across as a complete big girl’s blouse now, but didn’t care. He was still a bit in awe about it all.

Colin really did smile then, that soft, intimate smile, and leaned in until their heads were almost touching.

“Well, you said you were curious.”

“Still am!”

“Me too. I have an almost insatiable curiosity about certain subjects.”

What Colin’s brogue did to the word “insatiable” made it seem marvellously filthy to Bradley’s ears.

“I’ll be happy to help you with that.” Bradley wanted so much to kiss him, but they weren’t alone on the train, and he knew how likely it was that pretty much every one of their fellow commuters had a camera phone.

Colin’s huffed a little laugh, just nodded. After another moment, Bradley told him, “I had the most bizarre dream last night.”

Colin cocked an eyebrow at him, apparently sensing a joke coming.

“You know that very common dream people have, especially teenagers, where you show up and your clothes are missing, and it’s really mortifying?” Bradley didn’t wait for Colin to respond, just continued, “Well, I showed up on stage with my clothes on, and I couldn’t get them off. It was enormously scary.”

Colin started to giggle, and Bradley joined in.

“I wanted to talk to you last night about something, but we got a little bit side tracked”, Colin said suddenly. “I’m kind of thinking we have this certain window of opportunity after the proceedings of
last night.”

Bradley smirked a little at him. What, they weren’t going to refer to having sex directly now? He leaned in again towards Colin, and almost at his ear, breathed, “You mean we fucked. Yeah, what’d you want to talk to me about?”

In the same low, private tone, Colin said, “We didn’t exactly fuck, it was more like…practice.”

Bradley felt his lips stretching, fought not to smile. “Whatever. I’m a big supporter of practice in all things. So…?”

Colin’s eyes were twinkling with suppressed humour too, but he continued on gamely. “Well, I’m just thinking, we kind of have a unique window of opportunity. We’re pretty comfortable with each other right now. Would you be opposed to asking Richard if we could try the scene in dress-rehearsal mode, go through the entire scene as its’ written? He’d probably be willing to clear the stage…”

“That’s fine by me.” Bradley didn’t even have to think about it. He’d run around the block streaking if Colin and Richard thought it was a good idea. “I don’t know about you, but they wouldn’t have to clear the theatre for me, really…”

Colin made a face. “That’s more in deference to other people, you know. Not everyone can deal with strange unclothed men in public.”

Bradley shrugged. “I’m unique, not strange, Morgan”, and before Morgan could tear that apart, he added, “Let’s ask Richard, see what he wants to do. It’s all good.”

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There was a cab waiting for them at their theatre stop, and they both sat quietly in the back, thighs touching, but not saying anything. This was probably the most nerve-wracking part of their days, the entry into the theatre, having to get past the fans. They had a deadline they were expected to start work. He hoped that security had remembered to meet them to get them in on time…

Colin nudged him slightly, motioning with his chin at something outside.

Bradley looked and…

Oh, my.

He remembered now, today was the day tickets to their play, to Exposed, went on sale. They’d been informed that forty percent of the seats were already held by season ticket holders, and the remaining seats would go on sale via phone, internet and in person today at noon.

There was a line in front of the theatre. And around the theatre. And down the block. And it wasn’t even eight o’clock yet. They were far enough away not to be noticed, another cab amongst quite a few others, which was probably a very good thing right now.

A few of the people in line were wearing neckerchiefs and brown suede jackets, or what looked to be…chainmail. And capes. Red ones, some with gold.

Security had suddenly remembered they had a job to do, and when Bradley and Colin arrived at the stage door, all of the fans had been herded behind barricades. They were waving and shrieking loudly and frantically. There were also two guards ensuring that the approximately one hundred people stayed where they were supposed to.
Bradley waved back, but strode purposefully to the door. There simply wasn’t time to sign autographs or chat. Colin kept telling people “I’m so sorry, we just don’t have time to talk now, we have a call time, I’m so sorry, no time now, we have to work.” Bradley said nothing, kept his head down and his eye only on the door.

And still, even more frequently than “Please, will you let me take my picture with you?!” and “Can I kiss you?” and “Would you sign this, just this one thing, for my sister, please?” was the ever-present question, “Do you and Colin really get naked in this show? Do you kiss? Are you lovers?” That last one tempted Bradley a bit, he wanted to look the asker in the eye and tell her “Why yes, as of about twelve hours ago, Colin and I are lovers, and thanks for asking”, but he knew he would catch hell from several directions if he even dared it. He and Colin hadn’t yet had time to talk at all about their status and who or even if they would out themselves. Knowing Colin and how carefully he guarded his privacy, Bradley had an idea that that day, if it even ever came, would be a long time in coming.

So he kept his face passive and his feet moving and imagined he was Paul McCartney, just arrived in America with the boys in the band, and managed to slip in the stage door just at eight o’clock.

Everyone was grinning at them.

Quickly, Bradley checked his fly—nope, it was closed.

Colin looked at him, eyebrows at full mast, and then back at their cast mates and crew. “Mornin’, all”, he tried.

Bradley could see Richard talking to the two assistant directors, but they’d stopped to look over at himself and Colin. Now Richard was grinning at them and shaking his head. It gave him an impish, mischievous appearance.

“What?” he mouthed at Richard.

Betty sashayed on over to them. “You can’t tell us you don’t know what’s going on?”

Bradley was pretty sure Colin and himself was wearing matching expressions of befuddlement. His own jaw was probably somewhere around his kneecaps.

Richard finally spoke up. “The box office is expecting to sell out today. That will be a record for the Ormond, and I’m sure you’re aware that this establishment has had some well-known names gracing their stage before now.”

Yes, Bradley did know that. Richard himself had performed here years ago. John Hurt had. The place’s list of who had performed there read like a Who’s Who in prestigious stage, movie and television celebrities.

Bradley suddenly realized what was being implied here: He and Colin were the draw. They’d seen the lines, and the fans in costume, and it hadn’t even occurred to him.

Colin just looked at him, and Bradley saw the pink tinge tipping his friend’s famous cheekbones. He just grinned back at him.

“Hey, Richard!” he called across the theatre. “I saw a couple people dressed in white wigs and robes out there!”

That broke up everyone, and drew the attention away from himself and Colin, which was what he’d intended. Richard just shook his head again, muttered something that sounded like “I’m sure”, and
called everyone to their places. It was time to work.

Bradley touched Colin’s shoulder lightly, and walked in step with him to speak privately with Richard.

“Can we try the nude scene again today, Richard?” Colin asked. Bradley winced, just a little; he’d prefer to kind of sidle up to the subject, really…

“Sure, we’d planned a complete run through this afternoon, gentlemen”, Richard answered, somewhat distracted. From his place amongst the seats, he called to some of the stagehands, directing them in his preferences for set up.

“We mean really do the nude scene. The nude scene, in the nude.” Bradley said quietly.

“Today? We don’t usually do that until the dress rehearsal. I don’t think at this point it’s something to be anxious over.” They had Richard’s full attention now, and he was giving them that quizzical look of his now, his infamous Eyebrow slightly atilt.

Bradley was about to say that he knew that, he wasn’t anxious, quite the contrary in fact, but again, Colin’s quiet voice interjected, “We feel quite comfortable with it now, just want to experience the full effect, as it were. Would it be too much trouble…?”

And Richard, bless him, tilted his head at both of them. Took a breath. Twinkled at them.

“We’ll send everyone out at meal time. It shouldn’t be a problem.” And before Colin and Bradley could thank him, Richard lowered his voice to an even softer level than the private one they’d been using, and inquired, “Tell me, has something…changed between the two of you?”

“He knows!” Bradley thought, fighting to keep himself from all but vibrating with the sheer incredulousness of it all. Damn Richard and his perceptiveness! He suspected something; Bradley was willing to bet on it.

But Colin just played it cool—hell of an actor, Bradley was reminded once again. He shook his head and said something about achieving a new level of confidence and comfort with each other after yesterday’s rehearsals, and Richard lowered his eyebrow and let them have their secrets.
They broke into familiar groups, and the morning was spent holding Colin in his arms and trying to will himself to devastation. Bradley wasn’t present onstage for the scene where Colin’s character was beaten sorely; his entrance was just afterward, the most melodramatic of climaxes. He said the words, and kissed Colin’s forehead, begging Nigel not to leave him, but the tears were forced, he felt, and apparently Richard thought so too. After two run-throughs, with Richard saying very little, Richard called Bradley down to the seating area where he’d been watching.

“You’re trying to force yourself to tears”, Richard pointed out gently. “Did you forget our discussion about that that sometimes they would come, and it is fine if they didn’t?”

In truth Bradley hadn’t forgotten, just felt that he wasn’t giving his all if he didn’t achieve a breakdown, and that the scene was not as powerful if he didn’t manage all of the emotion the scene called for. He knew he himself tended to be very tactile and demonstrative when it came to his own loved ones being ill or unhappy, usually having to fight against tears madly.

Richard told him to stand in the aisle next to him to gain some perspective on the scene before his entrance. He had Colin and the three actors playing the assailants run through the scene again, from the time they accosted him until what would be Bradley’s cue to enter.

It was horrifying.

Unlike himself, Colin could cry on command, but it wasn’t exactly crying he was doing now. The three actors with him in the scene—Jeff, Robin, and Aaron, Bradley knew—timed their actions perfectly, never once actually striking him, but placed perfectly at Richard’s direction so that it looked like they were delivering mortal blows. Colin reacted to each staged strike with grunts and cries and sobs of seeming-agony and terror, face twisted and near-purple, the vein in his forehead bulging out.

Bradley must have made some sound, or moved, or done something, because Richard, sitting next to him, took his wrist and squeezed it gently as they watched it play out.

When they ran the scene once more, with Bradley entering from the stage, he didn’t need to force tears. His heart was still thumping too fast in reaction to just the sounds of “Nigel’s” beating, and the tears of the moment, of perspective, came unbidden. Not sobs, not over-dramatic stage weeping, but a quiet, heartbroken and sincere reaction to his lover's demise.

Bradley had never been truly more in the moment.

He spoke the words of love and regret to his dying lover as Colin---Nigel---weakly stroked his face and slipped away.

Bradley was still wiping his face a bit sheepishly when Richard called a break and told him he’d done beautifully. And Colin smiled that smile of his and rubbed his shoulder.

Ah, acting, Bradley sighed inwardly. The highest highs and the lowest lows…

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In the break room, Colin reminded him to call his dad and they got into a brief discussion about how No, it wasn’t actually eight in the evening on the east coast of the states; it was really only three in the afternoon. Bradley sighed again, made some reference to having senior moments, (except that the
only near-eighty year old he knew was sharper than himself), and hit the speed dial on his iPhone.

“Hey, Dads, how are you? How’s things there in America?”

“Bradley! I’m so glad you called; I’m in good health, thanks. Your mother tells me you’re quite busy these days…”

Bradley gave him a brief run-down on the play, telling him how much he was enjoying the rehearsals and the people he was with, what a marvel Colin was, how decisive and sure Richard was in his directing.

“It’s a great opportunity for me, I’m having the time of my life, and I’ve never been so challenged. I was really happy to hear you’re coming, and you won’t mind seeing your baby boy in his natural state…”

Bradley’s father chuckled. “Well, the girls will enjoy it, I’m certain.”

“So you must have some business to deal with here…” Bradley prompted. Sometimes, getting any kind of straight answer from his father was like pulling teeth.

Okay, well, that was lip service, Bradley knew, but he appreciated the gesture. Bradley’s father’s business had suffered some blows when the U.S.’s economy had tanked, but his dad did have holdings in Britain.

“You aren’t thinking of moving the company here, are you? It would be bad for them, but great for me. We might actually get to see each other once in a while.”

“No, still hanging in there in these parts. I reckon I’ll be putting more emphasis on the branch there in London though. I’ll be there from the tenth through the eighteenth…”

So Bradley wrote down the dates on a scrap of paper he’d found in his wallet, and promised to text him as soon as he got his comp tickets, which would probably be that day. Briefly, he told his father what the presence of two actors from an international telly show was doing for the theatre’s ticket sales, and heard his father start to laugh.

“Oh, I know, believe me. Have you access to a laptop, there? Some of the ticket holders tickets are up for grabs on eBay…for as much as £300.00 a piece and rising.”

Bradley heard a buzzing in his ears. Oh, this was just surreal.

And his father had taken the time to actually check out the ticket prices online.

“You’re serious? I can’t quite believe it; wait until I tell the others…”

They finished the phone call on a very positive note, with his father promising to see him very soon, and telling him well done with the play and he should probably be getting back to work…

He must have looked as dazed as he felt when he emerged from the little alcove he’d slipped into for some privacy during the call. Colin and several others asked him if he was all right, and cheered and hooted when he told them what his dad had said. Everyone immediately started pulling out their own cell phones and checking for themselves.

The energy surrounding the play had been excited and charged from day one, and seemed to be steadily rising. Bradley again found himself in that place where he was so, so glad to be involved
with this project.

After the break, Bradley didn’t get a chance to speak with Colin at all as they were both busy with others in other scenes, but at half past noon, Richard clapped his hands and informed everyone that the theatre was being cleared. “I’m sure you can all guess why—our two young uninhibited actors here wish to rehearse as the script calls for it, without any barriers. You are all released for ninety minutes and are invited to go to the Italian bistro down the block. They are expecting you, and lunch is catered, compliments of the Ormond.”

Amongst all the cheers and conversation, and bustle of gathering things and laughter of the other actors, stagehands, and dozens of others that made up a stage production—none of whom would ever turn down free food—Richard spoke to Colin and Bradley again. “Not to worry, lads, we have lunch waiting for us in the kitchen, pasta and salad and decadent cheese and garlic bread. I am going to have Mike set up signs of No Admittance before the doors, and then we can get started.” And so they rehearsed the nude/lovemaking scenes again, with Richard being the only other person present. It was fine to proclaim themselves completely comfortable and ready for this, and yet still, when the moment of full nudity came, Bradley still found himself blushing furiously and covered in goose flesh. Even his chest was pink. If it were possible, Colin was even redder, and when they looked at each other again, determined to just continue with the scene, they instead found themselves bursting into nervous, embarrassed laughter. Richard’s dry voice pointed out, “Not as easy as you thought, is it”, and then just reminded them that it was perfectly fine to laugh and to continue when they were ready...

Bradley had been half-hard even before he’d stripped, but when they’d laid down on the bed, Colin was not quite aligned properly and his cock brushed lightly against Bradley. Bradley’s own dick jumped liked recognizing an old friend, and they were looking at each other again, both probably praying Richard hadn’t seen.

Of course Richard saw. Who were they kidding.

Richard said very little after the slightly teasing comment, only making gentle suggestions here and there or murmuring, “Yes, well done”. He had them run through it twice more before telling them to get dressed again.

“I believe you are both right where you need to be with this pivotal moment in the play. Do you agree?”

And they’d both said yes, and thanked him for his indulgence and patience, and invited him to join them while they grabbed lunch. They only had about twenty minutes before the rest of the cast and crew returned for afternoon rehearsals.

Bradley, Colin and Richard hadn’t socialized together or even chatted with Richard much since they’d begun rehearsals—a kind of acknowledgement of not socializing with the boss, even if an unspoken one.

Lunch between the three of them wasn’t awkward at all, mostly conversation based on how happy they were with how things were going and how they expected positive reactions and enthusiastic crowds. Bradley thanked them both once again for providing the opportunity to stretch his wings and fly. Colin laughed about how, when he’d done his first nude scene years ago, no one had talked about it all, it had seemed like everyone had deliberately avoided the subject, but now it seemed that that was all anyone wanted to talk about. And Richard just laughed and told a few funny anecdotes and seemed to be watching them thoughtfully.

At just before 2:00, Richard called his assistant director via his mobile and instructed him to remove
the No Admittance signs from the entrances and re-open the doors. Rehearsals resumed once everyone had returned.

About a half hour later, the theatre’s manager, a distinguished-looking gentleman with a neatly-trimmed beard, in a natty suit and tie—he rather reminded Bradley of an old-time Naval officer—entered the theatre and began speaking quietly with Richard. After a few moments, Richard called for everyone’s attention and they all listened to the gentleman—Sir Christopher Nealand-Roach, he’d introduced himself as—announce that the Ormand’s tickets for the show Exposed were completely sold out, and that they had been in less than two hours after going on sale. The whole place erupted into rather undignified cheers and shouts, and even the dour Sir Christopher allowed himself a smile. He thanked them all and wished them a good show.

They did a complete run-through of the show after that, broke for a half hour meal break, and then another run through. By the time the day was called, Bradley was glad of it, feeling as though for this day, at least, he was rehearsed out. Still, it was an extremely positive day, with great news all around. He was tired, but it was that same satisfied, wouldn’t have wouldn’t-have-it-any-other-way kind of fatigue that was beginning to be the norm.

Security had once again cleared them a path from the stage door to the waiting cab, but this time they both lingered a bit, randomly signed the odd bits of paper or pictures thrust at them and posing for a picture or three. It was another one of those unspoken agreements between himself and Colin. They wanted to say thank you for this day, for the way they felt tonight.

By the time they made it to the Tube, it was almost 9:00, and they had only a two minute wait time before their train arrived—they really didn’t feel like waiting for a later one.

They sank into their seat, and Bradley leaned over Colin as Colin began sifting through his bag for something.

“Alone at last”, Bradley said out of the corner of his mouth.

Colin looked at him and smiled tiredly. “Mm.” He finally managed to locate his phone from his bag—and just what-all did he have in there, anyway, that it would take so long to find it?

They sat in silence for a moment while Colin checked his messages.

“Hey, the heat’s back on at my apartment.” Colin said after reading one text.

Bradley eyed him. He wasn’t thinking of going back to his own place tonight, so soon, was he? Ditching Bradley? After last night?

Something must have shown in his face—no poker face, he—because Colin shook his head slightly. “Why don’t you stay with me at my place tonight? I need to get some clean clothes, I’m all out.”

“Missing your Death Cab For Cutie tee shirts, are you?” Bradley teased.

The man had the most eclectic collection of band shirts Bradley had ever seen.

“Something like that”, Colin returned. “I also have a working alarm clock, so we don’t have to do another Dance of the Bumblebees tomorrow morning.”

“I thought it was more like The William Tell Overture, myself”, Bradley answered, and Colin laughed.

“So, you’ll stay at my flat tonight then?”
Bradley was about to say sure, but then he remembered: He had no clothes of his own at Col’s, and wouldn’t have time in the morning to retrieve fresh ones. Colin lived further from the theatre than he did.

“I’ll need to stop at my apartment, gather some gear. Why don’t you go ahead, and I’ll meet you in a half-hour?”

They agreed, and Bradley was out and jogging up the stairs of the station at his stop before he knew it. He stuffed a few essentials into a duffle, checked his mail and his home phone messages, and was in a cab heading for Colin’s by 10:00.

Colin answered the door on the first knock. He was in his usual track bottoms and thermal shirt with a hoodie over it, despite the obvious return of the heat to his abode.

Once Bradley was in and had shut the door, Colin hugged him and they exchanged a sweet, soft kiss that may have deepened if Colin hadn’t pulled away. There was a hint of teasing in his eyes when he told

Well, the naughty things that Bradley could have done with that little suggestion, but instead he obediently followed Colin into his room.

“Oh, look, a bed! And a big one too. I’d wager two people could sleep in it comfortably, maybe three." At Colin's smirking eye roll, Bradley continued, "What’d you wanna show me?"

“Just this.” Colin hefted a big jar of peanut butter from the night table and grinned at him. Jif peanut butter, from the states.

"You're..brandishing sandwich spread at me. Care package from your adoring masses, is it?", Bradley teased dryly. Colin did tend to receive copious amounts of Jif and Skippy from the fans. Bradley, on the other hand, received sports jerseys. He liked them.

“My agent forwarded a package to me, yeah. I just wanted to try something…a little fantasy of mine.”

Bradley perked up a little at that. Fantasy?

“Yeah?” he said carefully.

“You trust me, yeah?”

“I think we’ve established that.” For some reason, Bradley’s prick was becoming very interested in this rather strange conversation. It stirred slightly in his briefs.

“Good. Take off your clothes for me, if you would.”

Bradley looked at him for a second. He had an inkling where this might be heading. And he was finding that Colin Morgan telling him what to do in a softly lit bedroom incredibly arousing. He did as he was told. (He’d been practicing all day, after all…)

When he was undressed, he just stood, eyebrows slightly raised, waiting. He wanted to kiss Colin again, but Colin was standing in the middle of the room, with a rather provocative smile on his lips… “Nice.” The up and down look Colin gave him and his very interested package was filthy. He never looked at him like that during rehearsals. Bradley licked his lips, suddenly very dry.

“Go ahead and get on the bed. Prop the pillows so you’re half sitting.”
Bradley did as he was told. This was really becoming quite intriguing.

When he was settled, Colin sat beside him on the bed, just ran a hand down his belly, and rested it on the treasure trail of hair just above his pelvis. He was smirking at Bradley. “Oh, Colin, you tease…” Bradley muttered. He wondered how long Colin had been planning this.

Bradley tried to move Colin’s hand down to his dick, but Colin wouldn’t let him. “Patience, Bradders. Good things come to those who wait.”

So Bradley waited. He waited while Colin unscrewed the jar of peanut butter’s lid, broke through the protective seal. He stopped Colin before he dipped his hand in. “Take off your own clothes for me, first”, he told him. He tugged a little on the waistband of Colin’s sweats.

“Oi”, Colin said, as if noticing just now that he was still clothed and joined Bradley in his nude state. “Happy now?”

“Well, very happy, thank you, but I have the feeling that even that’s about to improve.”

“Smart boy” Colin answered, and took a dollop of peanut butter on his finger, smoothed it over Bradley’s lips and warned him “Don’t touch it!”

He then wiped the excess on his fingers on each of Bradley’s nipples.

And then Colin licked and suckled and ate the peanutty spread from him. Bradley not only tasted the peanut butter on his own lips and tongue, but on Colin’s too, and sucked and licked from Colin’s mouth, both of them making slurping sounds.

When he’d cleaned Bradley’s mouth, Colin moved to his nipples, alternately licking, sucking and nipping what was probably Bradley’s most sensitive erogenous zone. He was groaning before Colin had even finished with one.

As Colin tongued at him, Bradley stroked Colin’s hair, down the ridged back, and kneaded and palmed the sweet arse that he’d gotten his first glimpse of the night before. Mmm. Very sensual, this.

He whined a little in protest when Colin pulled away, but stopped when he saw the intent in Colin’s eyes. He dipped his hand again in the jar and came out with a handful…which he promptly smeared on Bradley’s dick and balls.

Okay, the look of that wasn’t exactly sexy, Bradley decided. And it was feeling kind of sticky and thick. He’d played with food before with some girlfriends, honey with one, whipped cream with another, but not peanut butter.

Aloud he told Colin, “I want you to know that I’m very happy right now that that isn’t chunky peanut butter.”

Colin didn’t respond, just dipped his head and began licking off the gooey mess from his prick and sac.

“Oh…Oh!” Not very coherent, Bradley thought, but what Colin was doing with his mouth…Jesus. There was something about the thickness of the peanut butter, the fact that Colin had to smack his own lips, clear the roof of his mouth while he was doing it. The sounds he made, the slurping…and, he kept swallowing…how in the hell was he doing this so well? He’d said he’d never been with another bloke before…

“Oh, fuck, Colin, Jesus…”
His mouth stuffed full of Bradley’s cock, Colin smiled at him from under his lashes, laughed silently, and the vibration of that against him was just…

“Intense, Cols…”

Colin pulled off with a loud pop and kissed Bradley, allowing him to taste the peanut butter and his own pre-cum…

Through it all, Bradley’s mind was racing…another man was giving him head, and was doing it in such a way that it was making his eyes roll back in his head with the sheer delight of it.

Colin scooped another finger’s worth of the spread from the jar, applying it liberally under his sac at the seam, and along the bulging vein under his prick, and then went back to work.

At some point with his cock buried deep in Colin’s mouth and Colin drooling around it, and then swallowing, Bradley bucked, and Colin choked. He had to pull off quickly, his eyes watering.

“I’m sorry, sorry, Cols”, Bradley told him, cradling his head. Fuck, hurting him was the last thing Bradley wanted…

“S’okay”, Colin said, and smacked his lips a little, working up a bit more moisture in his mouth. Then he dipped his head and was back to licking and sucking Bradley’s member and pressing down lightly on his hip bones to hold Bradley in place. Bradley groaned, thrashed his head, kicked his legs a little until Colin took his legs, and made him wrap them around Colin’s waist. Bradley was getting so close, could feel his balls tightening, the tingle at the base of his spine. He didn’t know how Colin felt about him cumming in his mouth…girls didn’t always like it, so…

“Cols, I’m gonna cum…unless you want to eat peanut butter and cream…” His voice sounded strained and hoarse, as if he had the worst sore throat, even to his own ears.

Colin’s eyes had been closed, but now they fluttered open and he looked Bradley in the eye. His eyes were bloodshot, huge. He smiled around the appendage stretching his lips and sucked harder.

And the next moment, Bradley was arching into his orgasm, clutching at Colin’s hair and the sheets and giggling and babbling something along the lines of “jeezusfuckmorganiloveyourfuckingmouth”.

When his orgasmtastic stupor had cleared a bit, Bradley looked down to see Colin was now resting his head on Bradley’s hip, looking like the cat that ate the cream. There was a smear of peanut butter on his chin, some in his black hair, and a dot of stray come near the corner of his mouth. Colin was idly rubbing more peanut butter into the hair of Bradley’s inner thigh.

Bradley chuckled a little, pulled him up to lie on top of him, kissed him.

“You are the messiest, kinkiest thing I’ve ever seen…that was so fucking amazing. How’d you know how to do that anyway?”

“The peanut butter was just an idea, a little something on my bucket list. The rest is easily transferable from what I’ve liked with girls.”

“Mm.” Bradley said. He could go to sleep right now, but they were both such a sticky, gross mess, and he could feel Colin’s cock heavy against him, leaking precum over his thigh. He needed to take care of that for him. Least he could do.

He rolled with Colin to the side, sat up. He grabbed up the jar of peanut butter, but his own hands
and the jar were now so messy that it almost slipped from his hand. He took it up with both hands before it fell.

Colin just watched with gleaming eyes and a sly little smile.

“Here, roll onto your belly for me.”

Colin complied, looking over his shoulder at Bradley. “What are you…?”

“Just relax… I’m going to indulge myself here for a moment.”

He took too heaping handfuls of Jif, smeared them on each of Colin’s arse cheeks, making Colin start to giggle. “Bradley! You’re obsessed with my arse!”

“I am. It’s such a fine arse. Good enough to eat!” And to prove it, Bradley bent and nipped each side of the cleft at the roundest part, laughing silently at Colin’s little yips and yelps, and then soothing him with his tongue. He licked up all the peanut butter, sucking hard with his lips all over and doing all kinds of messy things before he turned Colin over to concentrate on his engorged dick. Bradley contemplated the tableau before for a moment. He had privately named the thick thatch of hair at Colin’s crotch “The Blackbush” for all its explosion of soft fur, and he palmed it now, rubbing it absently. He could see the outline of Colin’s pelvic bones, the jut of his hips, and he traced a finger over each. He didn’t touch the cock and balls— (what his mum referred to, embarrassingly, as a man’s tassel and pompons, and god help him for thinking of his mother right now) -- that Colin had been trying to rub against the peanut-butter-stained sheets so frantically a moment ago; no, he was watching, and enjoying, Colin’s frustrated efforts too much for that just yet. Now, Colin’s hips were making small, ineffectual little thrusts into the air, his cock weeping onto his own stomach.

Bradley had never thought he would enjoy the sight of a man’s cock, at least not to this degree. And he had done this. Colin was reacting to himself. It gave Bradley an almost giddy sense of empowerment, and a high-pitched giggle escaped him. And more than that—this was Colin, who so many believed to be such a reserved, reticent soul.

Colin seemed to grow impatient with his grinning and giggling and reached a hand to his own dick in an effort to stave off some of his need.

Bradley caught his hand, moved it away. “What do you think you’re doing, mate? This is for me…”

“Well, then, do something, will you? You laying there just staring at my junk and laughing at me is driving me crazy.”

“Good to know”, Bradley returned. He was finding he loved the power he could yield in bed, and loved even more Colin’s responsiveness. Colin apparently loved sex…

Before he decided to think about that much more, Bradley dipped his fingers again into the peanut butter jar—it was fast becoming depleted— and then applied a little of the spread to each stark hipbone. He’d really had enough of peanut butter, he realized. The room smelt like a cross between a circus and a sandwich spread factory, and he’d rather it smelled more like sex.

Colin actually cradled his head when he bent to lick and nibble at each of his sides, using the underside of his tongue to lave roughly, going up half-way to his ribs, feeling each in stark outline with his tongue before returning to Colin’s hips. Colin kept trying to push him down to his intended target, his crotch, but Bradley wanted to savour this, to draw it out, to have Colin tell him how much he wanted it, wanted Bradley to suck him.

And…that put words to it, didn’t it. He was going to suck off a man, something he’d never done
before, never really believed he’d have occasion to do, or even—want to do. He was straight. Well, he has been until just recently, apparently. Well, maybe he was still straight, with the only exception being Colin…

The man in question suddenly actually pulled on his hair, hard enough to hurt, and Bradley looked up at him in surprise.

“Bradley”, Colin said, his voice deceptively mild, his accent thickening so that his own name sounded like ”Bredley. ”Please quit fecking around and get my dick in your mouth, while you still have hair left on your head…” And he gave Bradley’s hair another small but sharp little tug.

And here Bradley had thought he was in control here.

Bradley was going to say something smart-arsed, was going to tease Colin further about his anxiousness, but as he watched, Colin’s face suddenly transformed, from mild irritation, lust and a bit of exasperation to a look of…being aghast. It was like a light bulb had suddenly gone off over Colin’s head (and Bradley cursed himself, not for the first time, for always thinking in cartoon terms). “What…?” He started to say.

Colin sat up, and the movement forced Bradley to sit back on his heels. Now he was really at a loss.

“Erhm. You don’t have to do this, you know. I don’t want you to if you don’t want to.” Colin’s face was a study in understanding, though his lips were tight. “I’m moving too fast. Sorry…” And he was starting to move off the bed.

“Are you crazy?” Bradley almost shouted. Geez, Colin….

“That’s not reluctance; can’t I just enjoy the view for a minute? I want to suck you; I’ve just had enough Jif. Just lay back down.”

Colin did, though somewhat warily.

Well, at least his erection hadn’t flagged too much…

“You are something else, Morgan. I’d never guess you’d be such a bold one in bed. I’m afraid I’m not as brave as you are. I kind of have to work up to it, doesn’t mean I don’t want it.”

“I’m not as bold as you think. I just thought, you know, with the peanut butter…it’s so silly and stupid that if you said you didn’t want to, well, we could both laugh about it and call each other ridiculous and ignore each other, no harm, no foul…” Colin’s brogue was as thick as when he’d been drinking, which was a sure sign of his mental state.

“Just…be quiet. Let me work, here.”

Bradley resumed his position, lying between Colin’s open thighs.

Apparently, Colin needed far less foreplay than any woman Bradley had ever been with. He just wanted to get down to it.

Well, Bradley could go with that.

He fisted Colin’s prick and pumped him a few times. It took only a half dozen strokes before Colin went from half-hard to fully interested again. At his sides, Colin’s hands made little fluttering motions. Bradley saw him swallowing convulsively.
Bradley licked along each crease between groin and thigh, feeling the sharpness of Colin’s muscles. The wiry hair there made his tongue itch a bit, so he moved lower, to Colin’s heavy balls, all the while leisurely stroking Colin’s cock. He nosed quickly at Colin’s sac, smelling more peanut butter than Colin-musk, and now Bradley was a bit regretful that Colin’s own scent was masked.

He took a breath, and took Colin’s sac into his mouth, rolling it gently with his tongue, enjoying the feeling of the slight twitching against the roof of his mouth. This was…interesting. Different, but not awful at all. He sucked on it lightly, and was rewarded with a quiet hum from Colin. Encouraged, he sucked a little harder, keeping his tongue moving. Colin’s testes were a thing alive—he could feel it quiver and twitch in his own sensitive mouth. It was the oddest sensation he’d ever experienced. He kept his right hand occupied with massaging Colin’s prick, which was now dribbling again, and allowed Colin’s balls to slide out of his mouth messily. “You like?” he asked Colin, not meeting his eyes, then licking at the strong seam behind, his own favourite place to be touched.

“Mmm, yes, yes” Colin ground out, accent so thick.

Bradley smiled against Colin’s thigh, licked a stripe from the underside of the scrotum to the base of Colin’s cock and back down again. Colin bucked, grabbed Bradley’s head again. It really didn’t take much…

He covered his teeth with his lips as best he could, and took Colin’s dick into his mouth, as far down as he could go.

Colin actually shouted in response.

Bradley ignored him, closing his eyes and letting his answering hum vibrate against Colin’s shaft. Judging by the slight twitching of his thighs, he was guessing Colin had felt the vibration too… probably down to his toes.

He remembered what Colin had said, about being sucked being a transferrable action—just do what he liked done to himself. So he simply bobbed his head up and down, getting a lot of saliva, and repeated the actions several times. He couldn’t take Colin’s entire long cock into himself without choking, and he realized he had a bit of a fear about that, that his gag reflex would kick in—but he kept moving, and stroked the base of Colin’s member with his hand so that it didn’t feel neglected.

Colin didn’t sound like he had any complaints about his technique, judging by the little sounds he was making now.

Feeling a little braver, Bradley stopped moving and just sucked loudly for a moment, and then moved to the head, experimentally swirling his tongue around the ridge before poking his tongue into the slit, tasting the salty-bitter tang of Colin’s pre-cum. He tried his favourite trick again, licking with the underside of his tongue, and then rapidly switching back again to lick the tip with the rougher side of tongue. He knew he was drooling, but he didn’t care…he was lying naked between Colin’s thighs, covered in spit and drying peanut butter—how he looked wasn’t a priority right now.

He took the head of Colin’s dick into his mouth again, swirling his tongue quickly over it again and again, almost revelling in the little spurts of precum he was tasting on his tongue. Colin seemed to really like this. This was power; this was, turning Colin into a writhing, mewling mass before him. Bradley found that not only was he enjoying being able to control like this, but giving pleasure on this level, reducing Colin to making little gasping noises and clutching at the bed sheets—there weren’t any words.

He kept his hands busy, one holding Colin’s hip to steady him and keep him from thrusting to far up, and the other massaging the rest of Colin’s cock, moving to rub and fondle his balls and then back up
again, paying special attention to the seam behind his sac. Colin seemed to be as responsive there as Bradley himself. Colin came abruptly when Bradley knuckled the spot just behind his balls, come pulsing on Bradley’s lips and chin and throat.

Bradley crawled up the length of Colin's body, knees on either side of him, before allowing himself to fall to Colin's side and gathering Colin to his chest. Colin was still panting, his pulse racing, and Bradley giggled a little, that high-pitched, maniacal giggle that was two parts amusement and one part hysteria. And then he kissed Colin, very gently, which seemed to rouse his dark-haired friend enough to start licking his own come off Bradley, suckling at his bottom lip, his chin, his Adam's apple, his collarbones.

Mm, but this was nice. Bradley just closed his eyes and hummed his approval.

After a long time, Colin tucked his head under Bradley's chin and nuzzled his chest. Bradley wrapped his arms around his back and dozed in post-coital contentment.

They probably both would have fallen asleep for the night like that if Bradley hadn't felt Colin start to shiver.

"Should've borrowed Richard's space heater" he muttered.

"Hmm?" Colin said.

"Never mind. Come on, we've got to get up. You're shivering and we're both sticking to the sheets, and not in a good way."

While Colin wandered off in the direction of the loo, Bradley snagged his bag and located his toothbrush. When he re-joined Colin, they both brushed their teeth at the lavatory, timing their spitting perfectly so none landed on the others' wrists and hands, a feat Bradley had never managed successfully when he'd lived at home and shared one bathroom with two obsessive compulsive sisters.

In the shower, Colin lathered Bradley's hair for him and soaped up his back. When Bradley turned around to return the favour, Colin methodically rubbed his soap-slicked hands over Bradley's dick, balls, and thighs, getting out all the sticky brown peanutty spread. Colin was nothing but thorough, and Bradley could feel himself beginning to hardening again. The warmth and comfort of the shower, the clean smell of the soap, and the gleaming, single-minded intent in Colin's eyes were all combining to arouse him once more.

Sadly, it was already nearly midnight, and they had a half-hour commute to the theatre in the morning, thanks to Colin's flat being situated somewhere in the boonies of London. They couldn't stay up all night. He moved Colin's hands away apologetically, and then gently turned Colin around to begin cleaning him up too.

Bradley returned Colin's favour, washing his hair for him and getting his back while Colin cleaned his own chest and arms. But Bradley couldn't help himself. Colin's pert little arse needed cleaning too, and Bradley rubbed at it with the soap with enthusiastic aplomb. Colin watched him over his shoulder, his eyebrows on the rise again.

"That's going to be one clean pair of buttocks." Colin remarked, brogue still thick.

Bradley said nothing, just grinned.

And he continued to not be able to help himself. When it appeared he'd gotten every last bit of dried peanut butter off Colin, he continued to knead and massage the soap into his friend, and Colin didn't
It was an oddity, this was. With his clothes on, Colin appeared to be nothing more than a gangly mass of too-long arms and legs. His forearms in particular were just too scrawny, and he'd eschewed every attempt Bradley had made to get Colin to work out with him, preferring his own yoga and his books. But his bottom...Colin's bare arse cheeks were things of beauty. They curved perfectly, were strong and tight, and the base of his spine had two small indents just before his back became his bottom.

Watching Colin now, arching slightly into Bradley's massage, Bradley thought him an unknowing sensualist, completely oblivious to his own physical attributes, unknowing of just how appealing, how desirable he really was. It was a thought Bradley had had many times before and still couldn't help but wonder how Colin couldn't know just how attractive he was.

Before the water started to cool, Bradley decided one more risk was in order for tonight. He soaped his hands and before he could think about it, ran the side of his hand down the cleft of Colin's arse. "Where no man has gone before", he muttered.

Colin gasped a little and then started to laugh. "Yeah, the final frontier", he agreed, and then "Rinse me, will you?"

So Bradley did. And Colin "helped" by angling his hips out towards Bradley to give him better access.

Okay, this was just... "Colin. Unless you want another round, and some exploration I don't think either of us is ready for, we should probably..."

Colin shut the shower off. "I know. I know....this is your fault, this time, you know."

"Yeah, yeah...that's it; blame me...not my fault if you're the horniest Irishman I've ever known."

"You haven't known many Irishmen, have you. Why do you think there's so many of us...?" Colin played up his accent. It had been at its most noticeable tonight.

"Because you're all Catholics, that's why..."

They continued their banter, holding off both their desire and their embarrassment with teasing and insults while they towelled off. Bradley used his own towel to roughly dry Colin's hair, laughing when he saw the results of his handiwork: Colin's fuzzy hair stick up in all directions. He called him "Whiz-Bang", and then, continuing with their current nuttery, picked Colin up around the waist and half-carried, half-dragged him back into the bedroom. They stripped off the probably-ruined sheets and helped each other remake the bed with clean linens.

When they finally settled into bed for the night, with Bradley spooning behind Colin, Bradley spent a long time trying to identify what it was he was feeling. He was laying in the dark with this man, listening to his quiet even breathing, warmed from his body heat and the fresh blankets. He was tired, and excited, and his mind was racing, and he was still a little horny, and yet at the forefront of it all was just a tiny fear and a sweet ache.

Bradley was pretty sure he was in love.

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Bradley surprised himself by waking early, long before the alarm went off or dawn had broken. He
couldn’t tell what had woke him—he was warm and comfortable and had slept deep and dreamless and content. Beside him, Colin slumbered on, oblivious to his musings. He was even drooling a little.

Bradley was careful not to wake Colin, not when there was still plenty of time before they had to get up and start getting ready, letting his own mind wander in whatever fuzzy directions it might want to. He shut his eyes, expecting to drift back to somnolence, any moment now...

And after ten minutes of that...Well, he never had been very good at being still, even asleep. Various past bed mates had confirmed the accuracy of that belief for him, it was true.

Coming to a decision, he gingerly eased himself out of bed, taking extra special pains not to disturb Colin. In the loo, he splashed a bit of water on his face, slipped into sweats, trainers, a couple shirts and a hoodie, and then grabbed a scrap of paper from his bag and scribbled a quick note to Colin:

*Gone for a run, be back in plenty of time. FYI, you fart in your sleep. It’s cute. Bradley*

Even with Colin’s flat being further from the theatre than his own, Bradley knew he had at least a good half-hour’s time that he could use to burn off some of his excess energy before having to think about catching the train. He did some quick stretching exercises in the living room, pulling his knees up to his chest, bending down to touch his toes, reaching his arms up over his head as far as they would go, twisting and flexing. A few of the moves Colin himself had taught him, modified yoga moves that augmented his stretching exercises. Colin had tried before to join him in the full yoga experience, including breathing and meditation, but Bradley had fallen asleep the first time he’d tried it, and they’d agreed that he’d just stick with the basics.

In one way or another, Colin was a part of so much of his life.

He heard a few low pops as joints and muscles aligned properly, and felt his usual early morning stiffness dissipating. It felt so good to do this, so freeing. He loved being physical in every aspect of his life. He checked his watch, adjusting the alarm to go off in thirty minutes, and then slipped out the door and started off at a warming-up jogger’s pace, not hurrying at all, letting himself acclimate as he would to the crispness of the air and the activity. The streets were deserted at this hour, the street lamps still powered on, and only a few early morning breakfast and tea shops beginning to greet another day.

Bradley wasn’t all that familiar with Colin’s neighbourhood, and he’d never wandered there without Colin, so he took his time and stuck to the more well-lit streets and business areas. He didn’t feel intimidated; it wasn’t a rough place at all, but he’d learned (after several warnings from Anthony, Richard, his mum, and others more mature and cautious than himself) to stay alert and aware of his surroundings. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t indulge in wool gathering a little, and indulge he did. He had a lot to do in the next few days. He was becoming very remiss in responding to his phone messages and they were piling up, and he’d have to deal with that, maybe a little today on the train in if he could swing it. He’d taken a look at his mobile briefly that morning before heading out, and then just shook his head and put it back in his bag. Twenty eight messages….gah. How was he supposed to deal with twenty eight messages, rehearse a play, and discover the joys of gay sex all at the same time? He needed a personal secretary. Maybe Colin would be willing? For a moment, an image of Colin in a short skirt and high heels came unbidden to mind, a sexy secretary/librarian type, and Bradley stumbled and almost fell. Really, James? He could just imagine Colin’s reaction to the idea….not that Bradley would be sharing it with him any time soon.

Colin…good lord, circumstances with that man had certainly taken an unexpected turn. Bradley was simply amazed by Colin’s lack of inhibition in all of this. It seemed to Bradley that when he wasn’t rehearsing the play or engaged in sex with Colin, he was marvelling at this new layer to to his relationship with
Colin, the sexual component. He never would have dreamed…well.

Okay, maybe that wasn’t quite so. Maybe he had dreamed, quite a bit, not that he would have ever told anyone or even admitted to it, ever, if Colin hadn’t made the first move. Bradley had to be eternally grateful to him for that, for opening these new possibilities, leading him to a new and exciting path.

More than anything else, though, Bradley was shocked at his own intensity of emotion towards his awakening and towards the man who had been brave enough to help him towards it. Bradley was still feeling the after effects of how he’d felt when falling asleep the night before, the overwhelming fondness towards Colin, the giddiness of the newness of it all, the insatiability of his own sex drive. Intense didn’t even begin to touch upon his feelings, though he might have expected a bit more of a freak-out from himself over the whole having-sex-with-another-man thing. That he hadn’t surprised and pleased him.

He didn’t want to label his current feelings as being in love, certainly not yet, anyway. “Love” was such a strong and dangerous word, usually reserved for teenaged infatuations and pension-aged couples, and he had no idea how Colin felt about any of it. Colin could be so hard to read when it came to his personal feelings. So animated and expressive as an actor, but absolutely inscrutable when it came to his personal feelings about anything, that was Morgan. For all Bradley knew, maybe Colin just saw all of this as experimentation, a method of gaining experience for future roles and assuaging curiosity with a mate he trusted. A “friends with benefits” type of thing, perhaps. Who knew what went on in Colin’s head? He hoped that wasn’t it, but… No, Bradley was determined not to push him, not to be too needy or clingy. They were having a lot of fun right now, and things between them were grand. Bradley couldn’t remember ever being more content and happy. He didn’t want to do anything to bollocks this up. He would follow Colin’s lead, and when the time felt right, he’d tell Colin how he felt and ask him what he thought about, well, about everything.

Not for a while, though. Things were still in the embryonic stage between them, after all…

Pleased with himself for being so grown up and mature and level headed, Bradley put his head down and poured on a burst of speed, sprinting the last fifty yards until he was back under the same street lamp he’d started his run from. He also suddenly realized he’d been running only within a block or so of Colin’s building the entire time, simply circuiting the same area over and over…maybe six times now. He bent over, resting his hands on his knees, regulating his breathing. Lack of exercise, even for the few days he’d been sloughing off to experience a whole new kind of physical activity, had apparently messed with his stamina and breathing. He was going to have to do something about that soon.

His watch chirped, signalling that it was time to return to the apartment and to Colin, hop in the shower for a quick rinse, and start the day at the theatre.

Bradley found Colin in the kitchen, futzing at the stove over what Bradley suspected were egg-substitute something. Damn, but the man’s eating habits were abysmal. Bradley’s affection for Colin won out over his distaste over his food choices, though, and he crossed the room quickly to plant kisses on the back of Colin’s long neck, his floppy ears, and finally, his lush mouth.

Colin chuckled appreciatively, making low, happy noises, leaning against him and nuzzling his neck, and then whispering, in what Bradley was sure Colin thought of as a seductive manner, “You stink, Sweaty Betty”.

“Well, thanks for that, that’s what happens when a man exercises beyond reading a book. For your part, you bloody Irishman, you smell like a fresh green meadow after a rain. Just out of the shower, are you?”
“Mm-hm.” Bradley felt the vibration of Colin’s response. “I woke up when you stopped cupping my arse. You were keeping it warm.”

Hmph. Bradley was always glad to be useful, and if that meant being Colin’s bum-warmer, he was quite fine with that. And my, wasn’t Colin feeling kittenish today. Too bad they really had to get going soon; Bradley would love to roll around with him on the floor.

“Well, if your arse had any meat on it at all, it wouldn’t need my big warm hand on it.” Bradley snagged a piece of toast warming on the stove, the only edible thing he could see, and accepted the mug of tea Colin had ready for him. “Cheers”. He began making his way to the bathroom, but Colin was quick and managed to swat his backside with the egg spatula before Bradley could make his getaway.

“Hey, I thought you liked my arse. Are you saying you don’t want to keep it warm any longer?” Colin’s teasing voice called after him.

Cheeky bloke and his cheeky smile and his cheeky arse cheeks…

On the train in, Colin showed him his own phone: thirty-one messages.

Oh my word. Apparently Colin was feeling the crunch of time management demands too. For the first time while on their mutual early morning commute, they didn’t speak much, instead tending to messages as best they could with IMs and quick emails. Bradley had another message from Stella regarding the magazine interview with the gay magazine, and Bradley messaged her back, saying that he’d decided to decline, to not pursue it at this time. He hadn’t talked about it with Colin or Richard, but decided against, mostly to avoid questions he would probably insert his foot into his mouth over. He’d just entered into a sexual relationship with a man, after being most assuredly straight his whole life. He was pretty sure they weren’t looking to out him, they probably just wanted his take on the upcoming play, but Bradley was determined to keep things as simple as he could right now. After the play opened, he’d have more free time and he could revisit these kinds of requests, and discuss it with Colin, if those offers came up again.

Proud of himself again for arriving at this chary and conservative decision, and for his own mental gymnastics, Bradley scurried through the rest of his messages quickly. Most of them were from neglected friends—Remy, a footie mate he’d meant to get in touch with when he was in Devon over the holidays and hadn’t been able to sync schedules with, and Scott, another mate in Wales who told him he was getting married soon and how was Bradley doing these days? There was also another voice mail from Georgia, who said she had a day off soon and would be in London—would he care to get together after rehearsals, grab a quick nosh and catch up? Oh…awkward. He sent her message to his saved box; he’d figure out what to say later to her, and quickly replied to most of the other “Hey, how are you, haven’t heard from you, let’s get together sometime” types of messages from pals with quick rundowns of the play and how rehearsals were taking all his time. They would understand, he knew.

Then there some from his Merlin cast mates. There was one from Angel along those lines, saying she and Katie had gotten drunk over a bottle of wine and laughed themselves silly over the thought of him and Colin, nude and gay onstage, and when could they come to see the show? Bradley shook his head, sent back “You and Rupert coming together?” and deleted her message, but not before sharing it with Colin, who rolled his eyes and told him he had several very similar messages from their Merlin colleagues.

There were two messages from Eoin Macken—he and Hopper were probably his favourites among the cast. Macken and he had even shared a flat in Wales last series, and the arrangement had worked out awesomely. Eoin was funny and easy going and unassuming, and as mad as a hatter. They’d
found themselves very compatible kindred spirits. The BBC didn’t exactly provide luxury hotel accommodations, and that was fine, he was no la-di-da snob—but there was also a lack of privacy when they all lived together while filming. Everyone knew everyone else’s comings and goings. And usually, that was okay too, Bradley had nothing to hide, but the fans…well. He had a love/hate relationship with Merlin fans nowadays. Bradley had learned that not only did he not enjoy living alone; he also was finding the need for privacy while working more and more prevalent.

Bradley and Macken had talked at the end of the fourth series about setting up the same abode together for fifth series, but now—well, everything was so up in the air. Bradley wanted to talk Colin into living with him somewhere away from the hotel, and maybe Eoin could take another bedroom, or take a flat elsewhere with his girlfriend.

Everything was so undefined, though. While Bradley didn’t like living solitary, Colin was just fine with it. Bradley suspected Colin was just far more secure with himself and his own company than Bradley ever would be, and in his heart of hearts, Colin was a loner. And—Bradley still didn’t know what Colin wanted in all of this. He knew a serious discussion was imminent, but had no idea how kick off such a talk. The thought of being shut down so early into this thing made his heart thump painfully, and he wasn’t one for anxiety attacks, usually. It wasn’t time for such things yet. He had his thumbs flying over his phone in a quick “Will get back to you, see you during the play” message to his buddy Eoin and then typed another quick note to himself in the memo section of his iPhone to remind himself to get tickets to Macken, Hopper, Angel, and Rupert. That would leave just enough for his mum, dad, Tony, and Tony’s “partner”, Sarah. Colin would just have to take care of Katie himself, big-gobbled brat that she was. She was probably going to bring Joe along too, if he had the time. It’d be nice to see Dempsie again, even if the prat did barrack for the wrong footie team. Oh, well, his mother had taught him never to make fun of the mentally challenged…Bradley smirked to himself and clicked to the next message.

Two from his dad. This was…it was a surprise. He hadn’t heard from his father this much in ages. No, that wasn’t so. He’d never heard from his dad this much, ever. When Bradley and other members of the Merlin cast, and some of the show runners, had made the exhausting trek to San Diego, California in the states last July, to attend ComicCon and do PR for Merlin, Bradley’s father was still living and working in California. He had been planning to move the business back to Florida in the coming months, yet he still hadn’t been able to make the time to see his only son but for one day, and that had only been for a three hour dinner. And he’d spent most of the time on his cell phone while Bradley sat and ate in silence. And now Bradley’s dad was sending him messages almost every day about how he was so looking forward to seeing him, and he couldn’t wait to see the play.

What the hell was all this about, anyway?

He thumbed out an answering message “I’ll call you today Dad”—and then turned to Colin. “Hey, I think I’ve figured out why the time difference between here and Florida had me so flummoxed.”

“Erm?” Colin answered. His expression suggested Colin thought he was a bit mentally defective. Either that or he was distracted with his own embarrassment of riches in the message department. Or both.

“My dad was still in California when we went out there last July. Remember?” Colin had met his dad before, briefly, and now Colin nodded, glancing down at the Blackberry in his hands.

“Well, they’re eight hours behind us. But dad moved the the company back to Florida in September. Florida’s five hours behind us. At least that’s what Google says, and Google’s not often wrong, are they.”
“I think Florida’s in the same time zone as Boston, where Neil was.” Colin offered. Neil was Col’s older brother.

Off Bradley’s blank stare, Colin smiled indulgently, patted Bradley’s shoulder, and returned his attention to his Blackberry.

Well, Bradley had just had to share.

As irony would have it, the last two messages were both from Anthony Head, his *other* father. The one that paid attention to him, and praised him, and laughed with him, (and yeah, sometimes at him), and

He nudged Colin a little harder than he meant to in his excitement, and Colin dropped his phone. “Did you get a message from Anthony? He wants us to go to dinner tonight. Richard, too, if he’ll come.” He was speaking to the back of Colin’s head as he bent to retrieve his Blackberry.

“I did get several messages from him, yeah.” Colin said. He still wasn’t looking at Bradley, checking his phone again. “He’s happy for us, and he’ll be there opening night. You know Anthony, such a great supporter.”

“Yeah.” Bradley grinned back happily at Colin. “So, you’ll come?” Off Colin’s obvious reluctance, he hastened to add, “We know you don’t drink when you’re working. You don’t have to imbibe, you can have coffee or juice or whatever. Just come with us. We haven’t even talked about what they have planned for us on the show next series, and I’m sure Anthony has plenty of stories of working on his projects in the States, and we’ll all laugh a lot, and...c’mon, it’ll be fun.”

Colin had been shaking his head through Bradley’s pleadings. “No, I’m going to have to pass, as much as I’d love to meet up with our friend too.”

Bradley knew his disappointment showed. “Come on, Colin…” He felt his shoulders slump. Why didn’t Colin want to go with them?

“I really have a lot of messages that I have to take some time to go through and answer properly, business meetings and the like. I have scripts piling up that I haven’t read. I have so much to do, I just can’t spare it. You understand, don’t you? I’ll be there when you’re done with dinner.”

And yes, Bradley did understand. And he remembered what Colin had said when his heat had gone out, before any of this began, about how he needed his space, and that the intensity of the play they were doing would mean they might need a break from each other now and again.

And that was Colin, who had always needed more alone time than he did, and was always so practical and business-minded and focused on the work.

Bradley wished he would be so focused on him and their budding whatever-this-was, but he was trying hard not to pout, to be fair, to not show how badly he wanted Colin with him in this simple social setting with a friend they both loved.

On the other hand, Anthony was very perceptive...as was Richard.

Anthony would probably have an inkling of a change in the air after an evening with them together. Could that be the real reason? Maybe Colin just didn’t want to be seen with him, for fear that they’d be outed? Was this really an issue?

Was he paranoid, or was Colin? Or were both of them?
He was staring at Colin, and Colin must have seen something in his face... he was so bad at hiding his feelings. Colin pursed his lips, leaned closer to Bradley.

“Don’t read anything into this, Bradley. It’s just a couple of hours where I need to catch up on some work.” Colin rubbed his arm solicitously.

After a moment, Colin said, “All right?”

"Anthony's very perceptive. I'm guessing he'd probably suspect something, you know. About us. If he saw us together..." Bradley trailed off, feeling lame. He was just trying to fill the air with conversation.

Colin smiled slightly, took his hand away from Bradley’s arm. “Probably. I think Richard already does, too.”

“Picked up on that, did you?” Colin nodded, and Bradley felt a little braver. “How do you feel about that?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, do you think we should say anything? Confirm or deny rumours, or such?”

Colin pressed his lips together thoughtfully for a moment, an expression Bradley recognized as contemplative. He didn’t look away from Bradley, though. After a moment, Colin answered, “I don’t think I’m ready for that. We don’t know what might happen, do we. Maybe we should just wait and see for now.”

Well, that was Colin to a T. Polite and mannerly, but also always guarded and prudent.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell, you mean.”

Colin smiled again. “Yeah, like that. Are you okay with keeping it low profile?”

“It” being “Us”, was what Colin meant.

Bradley nodded, deliberately turning his complete attentions back to his iPhone, not looking up even when he sensed Colin was still watching him. He thumbed a message back to Anthony:

See u 2nite, looking 4ward 2 it.

It was easier for Bradley, once they’d made it to the theatre and past the shrieking throngs of fans—and yes, the crowds really were becoming larger by the day—to forget his funk and put aside his sulk and just concentrate on what needed to be done. In fairness, Colin had tried to talk to him before they’d disembarked the train, trying once again to say that it didn’t mean anything, he just needed some time to get things done, and Bradley had pretended to go along with it all with a curt “Fine”.

But the truth was, it wasn’t fine for Bradley, as much as Bradley was trying to be easy going and accepting and allow things to take their course. He was also realizing something else: He was the girl in this pairing.

It wasn’t a role he was comfortable in.

He was just glad that opening night was approaching so quickly and Richard kept them all strictly on task. Once at work, he didn’t have time to wonder about the motives and nuances of Colin’s wanting to be alone. He didn’t have the luxury in maintaining his bad mood, either, at least not if he wanted
to get the work done as it needed to be done. And so, he surprised himself by putting everything he was holding onto aside, and immersing himself once more in the character of Carr.

They completed a full run through before the midday meal break; one Richard was very pleased with overall, which made him feel a bit better. Maybe he was a bad judge of character and a bad boyfriend, but at least he was good at his job.

The excitement over the play was ever-building as they approached opening night, and it was almost palpable. It felt wonderful, reminding him once again why he became an actor and why he enjoyed his profession so.

He was cordial with Colin, but after Colin tried small-talk with him a couple of times and kept getting one-word responses, Colin gave up and struck up a conversation with Richard and some of the others. Bradley didn’t miss the look of disappointment that even the ever-masterful poker face of Colin Morgan hadn’t been able to hide. There was something deep and dark within Bradley that took a tiny amount of pleasure in that.

As soon as he could, Bradley excused himself to find a quiet corner and called his father.

He actually laughed when the call went straight to voice mail. One more person that didn’t have time for him.

“Hi Dads, your favourite son here, trying to call you back. I’ve been getting your messages, but we keep missing each other. Let me know which dates are best for you for the play. I can’t tell you how great it will be to see you again. We didn’t have much time together in the States earlier this year. Let me know if anything else is going on—email me or leave a message so I’ll know. Okay, that’s about it. I gotta go. See you soon.” And Bradley ended the call.

Today was also the day of final fittings for costumes—this theatre had a wonderful wardrobe department, and there were a couple of hours taken with everyone modelling their eighties-style fashions. Bradley had to admit, he loved what they had got him to wear: the tailored three piece suit, the Levi jeans and banded collar white shirt, plus the two pairs of leather trousers that were form fitting but not stifling. He had four costume changes in all, or five if he counted getting out of everything onstage.

The black, traditional leathers went with a silk aubergine shirt with a wide collar that felt heavenly on. (He hadn’t known what the colour “aubergine” was before today, but decided he liked the sound better than “eggplant” or purple. He told the wardrobe gal he’d be using “aubergine” in everyday conversation from this point forward.) There was also a pair of doeskin collared breeches paired with a form fitting sweater that showed his nipples. Everyone whistled and catcalled at him when he emerged from behind the screen in that outfit, and Colin actually blushed and raised his eyebrows at him. Richard smiled wryly at him, looking like he was trying not to laugh. Was he really laughable looking? He checked the mirror again. No, he thought he looked pretty good, but the leather trousers they kept referring to as “doeskin breeches”… it reminded him of a poem called The Highwayman he’d had to memorize when he was in drama school, written by Alfred Noyes:

*He’d a French cocked hat on his forehead, and a bunch of lace at his chin;*

*He'd a coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of fine doe-skin.*

*They fitted with never a wrinkle; his boots were up to his thigh!*

*And he rode with a jewelled twinkle--*
His rapier hilt a-twinkle--

His pistol butts a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky.

Well, he didn’t have a velvet coat or a pistol (though he’d certainly been known to carry a rapier, a time or two), and damned if he’d be wearing any lace, but the poem seemed to fit anyway.

Colin honestly looked positively bohemian in his wardrobe pieces —his were more casual, more working class than his own, as befit his character. They were also quite form-fitting, and Bradley wondered, not for the first time, why the Merlin wardrobe people continued to insist in dressing him in baggy, drooping pants and a neckerchief that hid his neck. These clothes for the play showed off Colin’s broad shoulders and chest hair, displayed and flattered his neck and throat, and hugged his bottom and his thighs. They were provocative without being sleazy. He managed to catch Colin’s eye and nodded once, trying to tell him without saying anything just how good he looked.

Apparently Colin did get the message and understood, because he smiled back at Bradley slightly, ducking his head and lowering his lashes in typical demure Colin fashion. Bradley was almost certain, however, that Colin was well aware just how lethal that little gesture of his was.

Everyone else looked great in their performance attire too—the seamstresses had all done their work very well, and there were very few alterations to be done. Everyone oohed and ahhed over themselves and each other, and when the atmosphere started to feel more like a party than work, Richard finally called a halt and asked everyone to prepare for another run-through in ten minutes.

And then he called Bradley and Colin over for a private chat. He wanted the two of them to consider shaving themselves…and he didn’t mean their faces.
Stunned, Bradley just stared. He was speechless. Apparently Colin was too.

Richard stopped talking for a moment—he’d been explaining that being hairless, that was, shaving one’s pubic area, was the trend among gay men, particularly at that time, the eighties—and just looked back at them. Bradley wondered idly if he and Colin looked like open-mouthed trout.

“You both look scandalized. You all right, there?” Richard asked gently.


“I certainly haven’t either. Umm…won’t it itch?”

Richard laughed silently. “Not if you maintain it.” And then off their looks, “Yes, I partook in the activity for quite some time. Not anymore though.” Richard just shrugged.

Bradley thought about informing him that that was more than enough information, thanks very much, but then thought better of it.

“Oh, it’s not a requirement. You don’t need to if you are so uncomfortable with the idea, which apparently you both are. It’s something to think about, that’s all. We’re going for as realistic as we can in this story. But, it’s up to you both, as individuals.”

Richard paused again, giving them the chance to speak or ask questions if they wanted to. Nothing came to mind for Bradley. Really, this hadn’t ever occurred to him. This hadn’t been in the contract.

“Very well, then. I shan’t mention it again. Let us resume rehearsals.”

Richard turned from them, apparently dismissing them for now, and began calling directions to the lighting crew. The subject of intimate depilatorizing was closed, it would seem.

Bradley swivelled his head to look at Colin, who hadn’t moved at all, still seemed to be frozen in place. He was smirking slightly.

"Is he joshing, do you think?"

“No, I think he’s one hundred percent serious. He never fails to bring the surprise.” And with that observation, Colin chuckled and then moved off to his place onstage.

After a moment, Bradley followed, scowling and not wholly convinced the two of them weren’t in cahoots, playing a naughty prank on him. How droll.

Richard released them all for home an hour earlier than usual, and it wasn’t until Bradley looked out into the theatre, allowing the mantle of his character to slip away and himself back to fore, that he realized that Anthony was there. He was sitting beside Richard and smiling like a proud father. How had he slipped in without Bradley even noticing? He really was losing all track of time these days.

It was awhile more before they finally managed to make their way out of the theatre, he and Tony—there were bear hugs to exchange all around, after all (Colin nearly disappeared in the big, robust
man’s embrace), and quite a bit of trying to convince both Colin and Richard to come with them, again unsuccessfully. And there were a lot of the show’s actors and others attached with the play that recognized Anthony and came over to say hello. Anthony greeted them all with warm, friendly ease.

Bradley had always admired the way that, whatever Anthony happened to be doing, he always looked like there was nothing else he’d rather be doing.

Finally, by eight o’clock, Tony must have heard Bradley’s stomach rumble like a thundercloud, and managed to extricate himself and Bradley and make it out the door (fortunately, the crowd had been moved back to the other side of the walk again, or they would have been there all night. Anthony tended to be very responsive to fans.)

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Of course, dinner was wonderful. As usual, Tony managed to make him laugh to the degree that Bradley’s sides hurt. And Anthony’s giggle was infamous for being infectious…and Anthony found humour in almost everything. So—they laughed together a lot.

Bradley’s surrogate father had found some out of the way restaurant that had a great steak for him, and vegetarian food for himself, but the food was secondary to the whole experience. Anthony wasn’t just silly; he was also very talented, experienced, insightful and smart. He had a way of looking at Bradley with that slight smile of his, his miss-matched eyes twinkling (a condition Anthony had once informed Bradley was called heterochromia), usually before he told Bradley to cut the bullshit and tell him what was really on his mind.

And Bradley wanted to. He would have loved to be able to talk about Colin and all his insecurities, that he’d turned a new chapter in his life, that things were very, very different from the last time they’d talked. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t talk to anyone about it. Colin had made it plain he didn’t want him to.

So instead they talked about Bradley’s father coming from the states to see him in the play, and how he was puzzled by that, and maybe a bit worried, about all the sudden attention. He told Anthony all about the play, how he was loving it and how challenging it was, and about the nudity and the gay aspects of it and how it was different than anything he’d ever done. He went on about how great everyone in it was, and how he was able to take the risks he needed to because he trusted Colin, trusted Richard, and how Richard always knew exactly what he wanted done on stage, and could convey it so clearly. And he told him about Georgia and how that had fizzled out. They had been serious for a while, and Anthony had known that.

And through it all, Anthony listened intently, and asked interested questions, said all the right things, and made Bradley laugh some more. And he’d sympathized with it all, and encouraged, as always. And…he’d commented on how doing a play like this with Colin would no doubt add new layers to their relationship, and mused out loud how it was going to affect their being Merlin and Arthur.

Hmm.

Anthony told him what he’d been up to, too, all his many creative projects, his charities, his and his partner Sarah’s work with animals, and their grown children’s activities. It was so easy to be with him. And so easy to lose track of time again.

It was half past midnight when they got back into Anthony’s car, Anthony telling him he’d bring him home himself. Bradley had had two beers and was only faintly buzzed, but Anthony had only strong tea. Bradley couldn’t think of a way to tell him he was actually due at Colin’s tonight. That would be more than a little awkward, wouldn’t it. Well, he’d figure something out, maybe hail a taxi to Colin’s once Anthony dropped him off.
They were almost there when he asked Anthony if he thought it was a bad idea for two people who worked together to become lovers.

“Are you and Angel contemplating seeing each other again?” Anthony asked wryly. Heavens, but that had been short lived and hadn’t exactly ended well. Anthony tended to remind him of that in odd moments.

“No, I think she and Rupert are pretty well ensconced, but thank you again for reminding me. I’m just speaking hypothetically here. Can it work, do you think?”

“Allison asked me that when she and Alexis started being attracted to each other, you know.” Anthony referred to his former Buffy co-stars. “I told her no, absolutely not.”

He stopped at a red light, glanced over at his passenger. Bradley mustered every actor’s trick he knew to keep his face neutral, not show how crestfallen he felt by this.

“And then I went back the next day and I told her that Sarah had said, Hell yeah, she and Alexis should go for it. Smart woman, my girlfriend of thirty years. You know that Allison and Alexis have been married several years now, have a little baby.”

Bradley just grinned at him. Yes, he did know. Anthony had introduced them all while they’d been filming in France the year before and Allison and her family had come to visit Anthony. Leave it to Anthony to give him hope without even knowing it.

He’d raced up the steps to his flat as soon as Anthony had driven away, determined to just grab a few things and call a cab to Colin’s. He dialled Colin’s number from his cell as he moved about the place, sorting through his mail and picking up an extra hoodie and socks.

Colin didn’t answer until the fourth ring, and Bradley knew immediately he’d woke him up.

“’Lo?”

“Colin, listen mate, I’m sorry, I know it’s late. Anthony and I got to talking, and you know how that is. I’m coming now, should be there within a half hour or so, okay?”

“Erhm. What? Bradley, it’s almost one in the morning…”

“I know, but—“

“Stay there. I’ll see you in the morning. I’m sleeping, and you should be too.”

“But I wanted to shag.” He knew he was whinging, didn’t care. Maybe he was more buzzed than he thought?

Colin huffed a little laugh. “Tomorrow night, I promise. I’ll make it up to you.”

Bradley whimpered.

“Good night, Bradley.”

He was standing in his kitchen, the dead phone in one hand and a pile of clothes and odds and ends in the other.

Dammit.

He couldn’t get to sleep for a long time after, not even after a spectacularly unsatisfying wank. He
was terribly embarrassed and sheepish about it all the next morning, as he prepared to leave for the theatre. Not the wank, no, not that. But the rest of it. He viciously imitated himself on the phone to Colin, “But I want to shag”…

God, he was pathetic. And so, so stupid.

Here he’d just been promising himself that he wouldn’t cling to Colin or be too needy, and the next moment he was begging the guy for sex. Any minute now, he supposed he was going to start growing lady- parts too.

He was actually dreading facing Colin. He wouldn’t be at all surprised if Colin realized fully now what a tit and a tool Bradley was, realized he didn’t need the aggravation, and broke it off.

He was wrong.

Colin sought him out the minute he entered the stage door, smiling that shy smile, running a hand down his back. He found Colin standing close to him whenever he could.

At lunchtime he even dragged him into the ultimate cliché, the broom closet, for a make out session, the likes of which Bradley hadn’t taken part in since finishing school days. If anyone noticed their absence, or their tousled hair and swollen lips and dishevelled clothes when they emerged, they didn’t comment.

On the train home, Colin reminded him of the promise he’d made the night before, and then just added cryptically, “I keep my promises.”

Colin led him into the bedroom, and had Bradley stand by the bed.

“Not more peanut butter, I hope…”

“Not exactly.”

Colin reached into the drawer in the bedside table and extracted something, dropping it on the bed. Then he moved out of the way so Bradley could see what he’d dropped.

Condoms. And a tube of lube.

Bradley felt the grin spread on his face along with slowly growing realization.

“Penetration?”

Colin nodded once, smiled at him, and did that slow blink of his eyelashes that Bradley always found so hot and so flirtatious.

“Are you sure? Are we ready for this, do you think?”

“I want to try everything. I admit, I’m a bit apprehensive. It can hurt, I’m told. But if we don’t like it, we can always try something else.”

Bradley actually heard himself audibly gulp. Holy fuckin’ hot sex, Batman…

“You want me to…” He couldn’t quite finish the sentence, didn’t want to embarrass himself any further after last night.

Colin bailed him out. “…fuck me, yes. In my arse.”
Oh good lord…

He was pretty sure he hadn’t said that out loud, but Colin was looking at with an almost teasing smile.

“Okay. Okay. Yeah, let’s give that a go then.” Bradley pulled his own shirt off, kicked off his trainers, and started working on his fly.

“Erhm. Bradley?”

“Yes?”

“I have another surprise for you. Not sure what you’ll think about this.”

“Oh.” What could it be? A threesome?

Oh hell, he had not just thought that…

Colin quickly took off all his own clothes.

“Oh my word, you didn’t!”

Colin had. His arse was actually shiny. He’d removed all his pubic hair, even from his balls. Everything between his legs. His arse cheek hair. Even the hair between his arse cheeks. Bradley’s eyes watered a little in sympathy.

“How did you do that?”

“The wet-dry shaver and lots of shaving cream. In the shower.”

Oh. Bradley relaxed a little. The wet-dry was battery operated, and couldn’t cut skin. At least he hadn’t waxed.

He just continued staring for a moment. Damn, but Morgan was one dedicated to the art of acting. He’d all but starved himself for a role as drug addict the year before, and he’d always been underweight to begin with. He’d shown up to the set of Merlin that year, just skin and bones. And now he’d done this, for an onstage role…

As if reading his thoughts, Colin said, “I didn’t do this for the role. I did it for you.”

Oh, my.

Okay, then. If Colin could do all this for him, the least he could do was add something of his own to the experience. He remembered a gay porn movie he’d caught a glimpse of once, online.

Bradley quickly slipped out of his jeans and pants, releasing his already straining cock. For now, though, the condom could wait. He gave himself two or three quick tugs before turning back to Colin. He had Colin lie on his back on the bed, and put every available pillow he could find under his hips. It lifted his pelvis to an unusual angle.

Bradley hooked Colin’s long legs over his arms, at the elbow, and eased his legs back until Colin was almost bent in half. Colin’s long, lanky frame was lithe and limber as a dancer’s—and Bradley almost slapped himself, trying to rid himself of the unbidden image of Colin dressed in a sparkly tutu.

Okay, this position looked like it could work.
He eased Colin’s legs back down, and then just knelt over Colin on all fours, licking and kissing and nibbling all of him, all the parts that took his fancy, for long moments. When he came up for air, Colin’s face was flushed bright pink, and he was now fully hard, languidly stroking himself.

Bradley actually groaned out loud at the sight.

He quickly grabbed up the condoms and lube. Colin helped him roll it on and slick himself up, eyes bright and hugely dilated.

He eased Colin’s legs back, bending them at the knee, until they were nearly touching Colin’s chest, and then told him to stay that way, hands hooked behind his own knees. Bradley squirted a generous amount of the lube onto his fingers, and then very carefully touched it to Colin’s pink, hairless hole.

You couldn’t get more intimate than this. He was pretty sure that Colin, like himself, had never been touched in that area since he was a baby…

Colin’s face was open and trusting, concentrating on the sensations and on Bradley’s face. Very tentatively, Bradley eased his index finger in. It slipped in surprisingly easy, and Bradley was able to go in all the way to the third knuckle, Colin showing no sign at all of discomfort.

He could actually feel Colin’s inner muscles pulsing around his finger, trying to push out this foreign object, his finger.

“Colin, clench around me, I want to feel it…”

Colin did. Hard. And then relaxed.

He was pretty sure that if Colin did that around his cock, he could die with a smile on his face.

He moved his finger just the slightest, tiniest bit, felt an odd-shaped ridge at the tip. And at the same time, Colin jumped and gasped.

“Oh god, I’m sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you…”

“No, no.” Colin shook his head, tried to arch up into Bradley’s hand. “I think you found my prostate, the favourite gland of all same sexers. Do that again.”

And Bradley did, actually massaging the little nub deep within Colin, until he had Colin writhing before him and trying to beat himself off. His own cock, neglected and covered in its latex sheath, twitched forlornly.

It was time for the next step in this little porn movie re-enactment.

Gently, he eased his finger out of Colin, hushed him when he whined in protest. He squirted more lube on his condomed pecker, more directly on Colin’s entrance.

Well, here goes…

He had Colin hold his legs wide for him again, position himself so that his knees were nearly touching Colin’s smooth, upturned arse cheeks.

“Bare down, Cols…”

It would seem that Colin had watched some porn of his own, because he knew what that meant. Bradley saw Colin’s opening flare wide, and eased only the very head of himself inside, very carefully, panting with the effort to move slowly.
He also saw Colin wince and grimace as he breached him.

He stilled, only the very tip of himself pressed against his lover. “Do you want me to stop? I can’t hurt you. You have to tell me if it’s too much.”

Colin was panting like he’d just ran a marathon, but his eyes were still open and trusting. “No, don’t stop…just need a minute…to adjust…”

So Bradley waited for him, watching his face carefully, stroking his arms, his chest, and bending himself to kiss him, stroking his belly, fisting Colin’s cock.

After a time, Colin reached for Bradley’s hips, pulling him towards himself gently, and Bradley continued the slow, slow journey inside until he was finally fully sheathed. He watched Colin’s face closely for any sign of discomfort, checked to be sure he was alright.

The sensation for Bradley was like nothing he’d ever felt before. No woman’s vagina was this tight, this hot. The feeling of being squeezed, pulsed, from everywhere at once was so intense, so sensual, that his eyes were all but rolling back in his head. It was the most incredible feeling he’d ever experienced, and he hadn’t even started to move within Colin.

“You all right? Can I move?” At Colin’s nod, he began just as slowly pulling back out.

When just the tip of himself was all that remained inside Colin, he grabbed up the lube again, squirting more on himself and directly on Colin, and then eased back in again. When he felt his balls against Colin’s arse again, he paused, shifting just ever so slightly on his knees. He took Colin’s right hand and had him hold his own cock up straight, so that it pointed towards the ceiling. And then he tried something he had thought was impossible, until he’d seen it in the movie that was inspiring this.

Still completely inside Cols, he bent carefully at the waist until he was able to grasp the head of Colin’s cock with his mouth, and sucked on it hard. Then he wriggled his own hips, just a little. Colin actually shouted his surprise.

The thing was, Bradley’s cock wasn’t that long, but it was thick. He didn’t know how much of this Colin could take, especially for his first time, but he’d offered himself to Bradley in complete trust, and Bradley wanted to make it as good for him as he possibly could.

He let Colin’s cock slip out of his mouth with an audible pop and grinned down at him. “You like?” Colin nodded his head vigorously. “It’s like the best kind of sensory overload. Keep going.”

So Bradley did, rocking himself in the gentlest way he possibly could inside Colin, while at the same time sucking the head of Colin’s cock. It didn’t take long before Colin was coming, spurting several milky threads onto his own stomach.

Bradley grinned at him, and Colin returned the smile blearily.

Bradley pulled out just as carefully, the act making a filthy slithering sound.

Colin had been staring dazedly at the ceiling, blinking owlishly. He now raised his head to look at Bradley, who was pulling off the used condom and tying it.

“You didn’t finish, did you?” Colin asked, puzzled.

“No, but I was thinking maybe you could help me with that.” Bradley had been watching Colin carefully the entire time he’d been inside him, could see he wasn’t that crazy-mad for penetration. It
had been uncomfortable for him.

He bent to check, to make sure he hadn’t torn him. He was puffy and pink and swollen, but not bleeding. Nothing a warm bath and a little TLC wouldn’t fix.

And Colin watched him, his face very fond.

Colin reached down, gathered Bradley to him. “Thank you, dear Bradley, for taking such good care of me, for being so gentle and careful. I could do that again, I think. Because you are so considerate.” And he kissed Bradley’s mouth, his neck, his chest.

Bradley purred contentedly and then louder when Colin began fisting Bradley’s cock to completion.

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Bradley awoke in darkness to the sensation of Colin squirming and lightly pushing against his chest. He had no idea what that was about.

Maybe Colin was dreaming? He tried to gather Colin closer to his chest, to shield him and give his reassurance.

“Bradley”. Colin’s voice was low but insistent. “Bradley, ease up.”

There was something about Colin’s tone that made Bradley lift his head and squint at Colin.

“Hunh?”

“C’mon, James, you’ve gotta let go a bit, here. I can barely breathe.” And Colin pushed again, slightly harder.

And suddenly Bradley was wide awake and realizing two things very quickly: He had his arms and his legs wound around Colin in a vise-grip, and…

He was a complete, total, unmitigated, absurd, dim-witted boob whose own subconscious betrayed him in his sleep. Mortified, he abruptly released Colin and slid as close to the opposite edge of the bed as he could without falling off.

“God, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know… I’m so very sorry. I didn’t mean… are you all right? Did I hurt you? I’m sorry…” He scrubbed his face with one hand, pulled at his hair.

He probably would have kept babbling like that for several more minutes, working himself into a true lather, if Colin hadn’t intervened.

“Shh, Bradley. Take it easy, will you? Geez… no, I’m not so dainty that you wrapping yourself around me like a python will damage me. I’m fine. Just — oxygen was becoming an issue, and I knew you didn’t even know you were gripping me, okay? Just…hush. Here, stop that.” Colin took the hand that Bradley was nervously worrying his hair with, laced his own fingers through his. “It’s okay… you don’t have to lie all the way over there. Come here.”

Bradley just shook his head miserably. “Sorry”, he mumbled again.

Colin moved himself closer to Bradley, and Bradley couldn’t move away without getting out of the bed completely. Their bodies weren’t touching, but Colin’s hand stroked his back, rubbed at his nape in soothing motions. Bradley said nothing, just continued to stare at Colin, feeling totally an imbecile.
“It’s okay, luv. I’m here. I’m right here. No need to hold so tight.”

Something like a sob escaped Bradley. He was losing it. He really was, he was going over the edge right here, in Colin Morgan's flat, after nearly crushing him in his sleep.

And Colin took Bradley's hand, placed it on his own rear. "Here...I'm starting to grow cold. Warm me, will you?"

Predictably, Bradley couldn’t get back to sleep after that, even long after he heard the return of steady, even breathing from Colin. He lay stiff and unmoving, staring at the ceiling in the darkness, tense and upset and confused.

He could see the glowing amber numerals of Colin’s small alarm clock on the bedside table, watched in weary sleeplessness as the numbers crept past three, and then four. At half past four, he slipped as soundlessly as he could out of the bed and had himself in sweats and trainers in a few short moments. Colin slept on, oblivious, snoring softly.

He paused in the dimly-lit kitchen, grabbed up a paper napkin from the small table and wrote a note to Colin:

Running. Sorry for last night.

He contemplated that for a moment, then balled up the thin paper and tossed it in the bin. He’d apologized several times last night. Colin was already starkly aware of what an overall sorry bloke he was. How much more pathetic could he get?

He grabbed another napkin and wrote:

Exercising my demons. Running like the devil’s on my tail.

Bradley huffed a little laugh. That note, too, wound up in the trash.

Okay, maybe the third time was the charm. (Bradley wasn’t at all aware of whom “they” might be, but they were no doubt a lot smarter than him, judging on how often they were quoted.)

He took up another napkin and jotted:

Roses are red,
violets are blue,
I’m out running,
see you in a few.

This time, a high-pitched giggle escaped him. Pretty bad...

He shredded that, was reaching for another napkin…maybe he'd just draw Colin a picture.

“Bradders? Kind of early in the day to be practicing your penmanship, don’t you think? Besides, you already write like a maiden.”

Colin was standing in the doorway, all sleep-wrinkled and stubbly, lightly scratching at his stomach. He was smiling slightly, an expression of mildly bemused curiosity on his face.

He didn’t appear much the worse for wear for having shared his bed with a dumb-arsed, oxygen-stealing octopus the night before.
“Hey.” Bradley answered quietly. He didn’t quite look him in the eye.

“You okay? Didn’t mean to wake you, was just going to let you know I was going running.”

“You didn’t wake me. I was thirsty, was just going to get some juice. The napkins, there, what’s that all about?”

Colin shuffled about the kitchen, turning on the overhead light, getting himself a glass from the cupboard, fetching the pitcher of orange juice from the fridge.

“Writing you a note.”

Colin raised a puzzled eyebrow at him, but didn’t say anything.

“Okay, well, I’ll just…” Bradley gestured over his shoulder. “…go now.”

He turned and made it out the door, barely catching Colin’s “…good run.”

He’d hightailed it out of the flat and out onto the street without stretching or warming up at all, so he started off at a slower than normal pace for himself. He was exhausted, and sore and achey, having hardly slept at all the night before, and his body was not happy with the forced exercise now. On the other hand, running often did more for Bradley than just shedding some of his energy. He often used it to mull over problems and work out decisions and clear his mind. Exercising his mind while pushing his legs and arms and lungs. On this day, his mind needed purging and resetting far more than his energy level. He was still feeling completely deflated and dopy about waking up and finding himself near-suffocating his mate. Might as well brand a great big L on his forehead, because he was feeling every inch the Loser. He wasn’t used to feeling like this—he knew without conceit or vanity (okay, maybe there was some conceit and vanity involved) that many people, women and men, thought he was attractive and funny and desirable and good to be around, (although lately, facing the recognition that being on an international show had brought him, it wasn’t always attention from people he wanted attention from.) He’d never lacked for dates or companionship or sex whenever he wanted it. He’d had his heart broken more than once, but he’d never dwelled for long, figuring that if someone didn’t want to be with him, than he certainly didn’t want to be with someone that didn’t want him. He’d always been secure and confident enough in himself to know that another someone would come along and they’d go through the same dance again.

Until now. He didn’t want to dance with anyone else, and he would even be content to be lead if Colin would just bloody well tell him what the dance was. Morgan was throwing so many mixed signals his way that Bradley found himself tripping up and stepping on his own and Colin’s feet constantly. He just wasn’t used to having two left feet and being so needy.

And, Bradley thought, that was just about enough of the dance metaphor.

He felt so off-kilter about everything having to do with Colin these days. One minute he was sure Colin liked him, the next, he had no idea what went on in his grey matter. The sex was the only thing they seemed to connect on, that and the fact that they were both enjoying acting in this play together.

Still, to be fair to himself—melancholy and self-flagellation wasn’t something he was usually prone to, at least not for long—Colin seemed to be over last night’s incident completely. He’d been so sweet, so gentle with him, comforting Bradley when it had been Colin himself that had been the injured party. Bradley almost stumbled and fell when he remembered what Colin had called him: “Luv.” That was unexpected, certainly. Bradley didn’t know what to make of that, a pet name when the two of them had never really had nicknames for each other. He decided he rather liked the idea of Colin calling him “luv”. He liked it a lot.
He slowed his running, now, focused himself on his physical activity— he’d been caught up in his musings so completely that he hadn’t realized he’d run far enough that he couldn’t even see Colin’s building any longer. Okay, not smart, James. His lungs were burning, and he glanced at his watch. He was going to have to sprint if he was going to make it back in time to shower and catch the train. His internal clock truly had abandoned him these days…

Bradley’s problems weren’t solved, not by a long shot, but working through them in his mind, giving words to feelings (if only to him) somehow quieted the tumult a bit. His legs were feeling rubbery, but he was also more ready to face another day of work and Colin. Colin had tea and toast ready for him when he returned, and Bradley managed to rinse off the perspiration and gather his things in time for the two of them to leave without rushing. By apparently mutual but unspoken accord, neither he nor Colin brought up the night before again. They rode the train to the theatre mostly in silence, following the routine that they had settled into—checking their messages, responding to those they could and sending those they couldn’t (or didn’t want to) to either their saved or deleted boxes.

Truth be told, Bradley also kind of fancied the idea that the two of them had a morning routine.

Yes, he was becoming such a sap.

Colin had shown him his own invitation to be interviewed for the gay magazine—as it turned out, it was the same magazine that some of the knights had been interviewed for the autumn before, and the resulting hilarious spread had been the talk and the entertainment of the entire crew for weeks. The sexual innuendo had been off the scale, Hopper had played innocent, (Ha!) Rupert had been a scoundrel, and Eoin, of course, had done a lot of hair flipping.

Bradley hadn’t even made the connection. This was the same magazine?

He’d already sent Stella his declination, but maybe if Colin was interested in doing it? He should have talked with Colin about it before now…

“I’m not sure…I mean, unless you are?”

“I don’t know…it could be fun. I’ve seen you model before, Morgan. Besides, I think our friends kind of threw down a gauntlet, don’t you?”

Colin grinned and chuckled in response, and in the end they decided that maybe it might just be a hoot to do it. That surprised him. Bradley wasn’t quite sure what they were getting into, but Colin as usual was utterly fearless.

Just before the train reached their stop, Colin turned to him again and asked, “Do you want to go to your own flat tonight?”

Bradley just froze, feeling all the blood drain from his face. Oh god. Ohgodohgodohgod…

“What do you mean? You need more alone time?” He tried to keep his voice steady.

“No, I meant. Well, I mean, not unless you do? Maybe you want to…”

“Dammit, Colin!” And yes, he’d raised his voice, too loud, and people were looking. Colin looked around, a little wildly, obviously trying to signal to him to please, please, not draw attention to them in public. They’d ridden the train in mostly anonymous, unmolested peace to this point…

“I just meant”, Colin all but whispered, “Maybe we can both stay at yours tonight, if you want me
to? I mean, if you'll have me? So you can run in the morning without getting up so early…”

Bradley just nodded, staring at Colin’s face. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s okay, as long as you’re comfortable enough there.”

“I’m fine with whatever you want to do.”

And there it was again, that “whatever you want” personality trait of Colin’s that made Bradley always feel like he didn’t have a buggering clue what Colin wanted and was just going with the flow, trying to please everyone around him.

Bradley had known for a long time that Colin’s quiet reserve was never gormlessness, but more of a desire to get along with everyone. This was just peachy…but also maddeningly veiling of Colin’s true feelings and opinions. And Colin was as strong person who could be stubborn when he wanted to be. Eoin was fond of saying that no one made Colin Morgan do anything he didn't want to do.

Still, it might be kind of a good thing for the both of them if Colin would actually tell Bradley what he wanted.

Sighing, and feeling like he’d lost some sort of argument, Bradley stood with Colin as their train pulled in to their stop and they made their way to street level and a cab.

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Tribbles. The throngs of fans waiting at the theatre were multiplying like tribbles, Bradley was certain of it. If the hue and cry for himself and Colin as they were escorted to the theatre entrance was anything like this on opening night, (Five days! They had only five days before opening night!), they might as well camp there the night before—otherwise, they might not ever make it in on time. Even with the assistance of the security people having herded the mass over to the other side of the street, there were still wails and cries and frantic waving and overexcited hopping.

Of course, Colin being Colin, he took the time to acknowledge them, stopping to wave and smile that smile of his. Bradley just hurried to the door, head down. He knew the fans were probably already twittering and messaging about what a grouchy, ungrateful-of-the-fans tosser he was, but there was nothing to be done for it. (And if Bradley were to be totally honest with himself, the criticisms and accusations did sting.)

This was the way he worked, particularly when the work called for extreme emotion. He had to sort things out in his head, get himself in the correct mind set, and the transition from being Bradley to being whomever the character he was playing was, began when he left home each morning.

Some actors, like Colin, could turn on and off like a switch, but he wasn’t so lucky.

He wondered, too, how many of these same fans were talking about how he and Colin were arriving together for work every day. He had no doubt they’d noticed; they noticed everything. It didn’t make Bradley happy. In fact, coupled with his present mood, it was all rather deleterious. He was just glad to be able to get in and get to work.

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And work they did. They were so close now, so close to seeing all their hard work come together to fruition, that it was like sprinting at the end of running a marathon. Bradley put on his mental blinders, tried to forget about last night and this morning…

It almost worked. Almost. In the morning run through, things were going quite swimmingly, and Bradley felt confident and in control and properly focused. He could feel Colin’s positive energy and
the other actors, and he fed off it, tried to give back his own, and it was working, all was just as it should be...until the death scene. Richard actually stopped the production to correct him:

“Bradley, why are you holding Colin like a sack of rutabagas? What’s that about? Hold him a bit more securely, snug against you if you please, as you have been doing all along. Carr is clinging desperately to the man he loves as Nigel slips away, and your body language must broadcast this along with your facial expression and voice. Now is not the time to start changing your stance and grip…”

Bradley felt his face heat up. He always felt so woefully embarrassed when he had to be chastised like this, in full view and hearing of everyone else involved in the production. He knew his character and his motivation, and it felt patronizing for Richard to launch into another explanation of what he should be thinking about, how he should be reacting. He wasn’t annoyed with Richard, but with himself, not only for allowing himself to bring what was going on in his personal life to work and letting it negatively affect the performance, but for the fact that Richard had had to do that.

He knew exactly why he wasn’t holding Colin so tightly.

He glanced down at the man in his arms, saw Colin quirk his mouth at him, showing that dimple below his lip. Okay, so Colin knew precisely why too.

Colin subtly shifted himself closer to Bradley, slotting himself tight against his chest, squeezed his arm briefly, and nodded at him, projecting silent encouragement and acceptance of their position.

After a moment, Richard called for them to continue. “And...begin again.”

Other than that one misstep, however, rehearsals were going overall very well, and when Richard released them all at the end of the day, his kewpie-doll countenance was smiling widely. Bradley couldn’t help himself; he dropped a quick, affectionate peck to the older man’s bald head before leaving for the night. It wasn’t the first time; Richard was old enough to be his grandfather, after all, and Bradley was unabashed about showing him affection. So were Colin and the rest of their Merlin associates.

Richard just laughed, told him “Off you go.”
He and Colin were almost at his flat, walking the dark street in a light, London-style drizzle, when Bradley suddenly stopped dead. Oh fucking God…he didn't have any supplies. They were all back at Colin’s place, and he doubted they could find a chemist’s open at this hour that wasn’t a bloody odyssey from here. He groaned out loud in frustration, scrubbing his face with his hand. Fuck, why was he so fucking forgetful. He’d been looking forward to shagging Colin all day…now he was never going to be able to get to sleep.

Bradley knew he was healthy, he was certain of that—he was always safe with all his partners, and had been poked and prodded from stem to stern to satisfy the insurance requirements of Merlin just last spring, and given a thoroughly clean bill of health. And Bradley knew Colin had too. But Bradley would never, ever, be so irresponsible as to expect any partner to take him on faith. Using protection during sex was so ingrained upon his entire generation, after all. (In this instance, at least, Bradley thought with his big brain, not the one currently straining in his briefs.) But he hadn’t re-stocked after his last liaison with Georgia at his flat, and he hadn’t been with anyone else since then, and, and…oh, bloody steaming hell…

Bradley was standing there, in the middle of the sidewalk, having stopped so abruptly that Colin actually kept walking without him for a couple of paces before seeming to notice he was suddenly solo.

“Bradley? What’re you doing?”

“Apparently, I have no idea what the hell I’m doing.”

“That makes two of us. What’s the matter?”

“I’m trying to figure out where I can get some stuff that we need for tonight before you fall asleep without me. It’s late and everything’s closed around here, maybe Tesco’s would have something, I don’t know.”

He was babbling senselessly, he knew, and Colin’s brow was furrowed. ‘Yes, Colin, it’s true, you’re sleeping with someone who has daily wigouts’, he thought acerbically.

Bradley turned in a circle, as if scouting for a suitable place that sold condoms and lube within sight. Maybe he had some forgotten rubbers stashed in a drawer somewhere at home…?

“Sorry, you’ve lost me. What are we talking about?”

“I don’t have any protection.”

Realization dawned. “Oh, why didn’t you just say so?” Colin slipped his backpack off, reached in, and showed him a packet of condoms and a small tube of lube. “We’re ready.” He grinned at Bradley goofily.

Maybe Bradley wasn’t the only one who’d been anticipating a shag?

Bradley could just imagine the wide grin that he knew was spreading across his face, and how ridiculous he must look. He hadn’t noticed Colin slipping that into his bag at all this morning. “Aww, Cols! You are a regular boy scout, seriously. I love you, man.” And before he could think too much about that last statement, he draped an arm around Colin’s neck and hurried the two of them home.
It didn’t take long to strip and get into position on the bed. Bradley was quickly on elbows and knees and feeling Colin’s hands massaging, stroking, caressing his arse with palms and then fingertips, parting his cheeks and spreading lube at his cleft. He looked over his shoulder, watching Colin roll the latex sheath over his cock and ready himself with plenty of lube. Bradley’s cock responded with happy twitches and dribbles of pre-cum.

He wouldn’t think of what he must look like to Colin, with his arse, his hairy and unshaven arse, thank you very much, high in the air and spread for him. He probably looked thoroughly debauched, but Colin didn’t seem to be complaining. It so tickled Bradley that Morgan was so tactile in the sack, for Bradley, when the rest of the time he seemed to have an invisible but impenetrable shield around himself and his personal space. (Though even before the recent drastic change in their relationship, Colin had tended to allow Bradley into that space where he wouldn’t many others.) The things one learned about a guy when they were nude and just a massive ball of coital pleasure, after all…

Colin was taking his time, his hands everywhere on Bradley, kissing his buttocks, his inner thighs, leaning over his back to lick and nuzzle and nip at his neck, his shoulders. Bradley heard himself making needful, heady sounds of pleasure, twisting his head around, owl-like, to meet his mouth in a deep, probing kiss. He could feel Colin’s sheathed erection against his thigh, his arse.

Panting, he pleaded, “Colin. Please. I’m ready”, and wiggled his hips, just a little, just in case Colin didn’t get the hint.

Colin chuckled. “Patience, luv”, he murmured, and slid back down so that he was kneeling directly behind him again. “Have to get you ready.”

He’d called Bradley “luv” again…

“I’m ready now”, Bradley told him, feeling a little on edge. He balanced on one elbow, reached to stroke himself, but Colin’s hand shot out, grabbed and held it.

“No, not yet you’re not. Wait for me.”

Bradley fought not to scream, could feel himself trembling. Morgan, that cocktease…

He felt Colin part him again, and then trace his entrance with his forefinger lightly with more lube before applying just enough pressure to push in.

“All right?” he checked quietly.

In response, Bradley nodded, clenched every anal muscle as hard as he could and then released. “More”, he ordered hoarsely.

So Colin pushed in a second finger, just to the first knuckle for a moment, until Bradley felt his own muscles actually try to suction the digit in further. He heard Colin give a surprised huff of laughter, mutter “So greedy”.

It didn’t hurt, not at all, but Colin hadn’t found his prostate yet.

Carefully, Bradley moved himself back just a bit, taking all of Colin’s fingers as far as they would go, and told him, “See if you can…”

And then almost leaped to the ceiling as sparks seemed to go off inside him.

Colin laughed again. “Found it, did I?”
Bradley just groaned as Colin milked the tiny nub deep inside him, rocking with the sensation. Sweat dripped into his eyes, and he tried again to touch his own dick, only to have Colin bat his hand away again.

“I’m going to tie your hands behind you if you try that again.”

Bradley twisted to smirk at him, and Colin rolled his eyes. “On second thought, you’d enjoy that too much…”

“Touch me, let me come!” Bradley all but shouted.

“I said, not yet. We want to make this last.” And Colin, the little bastard, actually lightly slapped his arse. Bradley heard the near-hysterical giggle bubbling from his own throat as if from afar. Where the hell was Colin getting all this from, anyway? He wasn’t any more experienced than Bradley was, at least not with another man. That’s what Colin had told him, anyway. And yet he took complete control like this. For Bradley, it was not only vastly exciting, but also more than a little disconcerting to realize that he, Bradley, so enjoyed being a bottom.

Colin Morgan’s bedroom persona was absolutely, positively, exactly opposite to every sweet and innocent impression held by every single person in the universe. Except Bradley, of course, who knew that while Colin might still get away with being called sweet, he was so far away from innocent that it was comical.

Bradley was going to get a tee shirt made up with that on it.

He felt Colin ease his fingers out, glanced over his shoulder to see him wipe them on a ready towel. And then he knelt close behind him, pouring more lube on Bradley’s cleft and spreading it, and on himself. Colin positioned his prick between Bradley’s cheeks, rubbing the length of himself all along Bradley’s opening, the condomed tip catching on Bradley’s hole with each pass. Colin then aligned himself, and Bradley felt the spongy tip of Colin’s cock against him. He groaned aloud, loudly, just from the anticipation and pressed down on his inner muscles to open himself.

Colin had his hands on Bradley’s hips, holding Bradley steady, and eased himself forward with ever-increasing pressure until just the head had breached Bradley. He could hear Colin’s laboured, heavy breathing matching his own loud pants. The whole room seemed overly warm and humid and close.

“Okay?” Colin asked hoarsely.

Bradley nodded, and Colin continued forward in tiny increments. Bradley could feel himself stretching to accommodate him. There was a dull burn, but no pain. It felt incredibly, intensely… weird. He could think of no other adjective for the feeling (though, under other circumstances, he could probably ask Professor Morgan for help with vocabulary, he was pretty sure.) Not unpleasant, not even uncomfortable, just completely foreign. He’d never had anything in his arse before, after all, not even during a medical exam, as he was deemed still too young for prostate trouble…

How ADD was he, with his mind tripping all over the place while he made embarrassing gurgling, keening noises and Colin Morgan rode him?

When he felt Colin’s tight balls against his upturned arse, Colin stopped, still making those harsh, gasping, breathing sounds, and Bradley waggled his hips a bit, impatient.

When he did that, he felt Colin’s tip touch his prostate again.

“Goddamn it, move”
So Colin did, carefully and gently easing backwards, and then in again, the generous lube making marvellously dirty squelching sounds. After the third pass, Bradley decided enough was enough. A bottom he may be, but if he didn’t come soon, he was going to die, he knew it. Colin was being careful for his sake, but apparently Bradley was one of those very rare birds who felt no pain on his first time. He began snapping his hips back to meet Colin’s thrusts, heard Colin cry out in surprise. But Colin was a fast learner, angling himself to hit Bradley’s prostate on every pass.

The sound of skin slapping skin just excited Bradley further, and he could feel his climax approaching fast, tingling at the base of his spine and in his belly…

Colin seemed to sense it too, reached beneath him to stroke his cock hard, twisting his wrist at the head. It didn’t take long. Six strokes later, he was coming all over Colin’s hand and the sheets. He made no sound, just tried not to swallow his own tongue, felt himself flying gloriously apart…

Somewhere behind him, Colin slowed, stilled, shuddered, moaned low, and he knew Colin had attained his release too.

He let himself collapse onto his front, Colin still inside him. Bradley was shaking all over. Colin’s weight pressed against his back for a moment before he felt Colin withdraw and roll to the side. Bradley closed his eyes, knowing Colin was tending to the used condom. He hummed a little.

“Bradley, you all right?” He felt Colin gently ease his arse cheeks apart, checking to be sure the skin wasn’t broken or bleeding. Bradley was tender and a bit sore, but he knew also without confirmation that he was fine.

“I am so far beyond all right, Morgan. That was…something else.”

Bradley opened his eyes; saw Colin looking at him with concern. “I mean it. You okay, too? Did you like it?” He rolled to his side, held his arms out for Colin to lie against him.

“You’re the one who’s something else. And yes, I liked it very much. You sure you’ve never done this before?” Colin easily slid beside him, laying his head on Bradley’s chest.

“I was wondering the same about you.”

“I just…read a lot. Did my research.”

“You mean you watched porn.”

Colin smiled, shrugged, totally unrepentant. “That, too.”

“Well I am shocked at you, Colin Morgan. Shocked and appalled, I say. Who would have guessed that such a sweet, sensitive thing as you would be such a sex machine?”

Colin lightly swatted his shoulder. “What about you? It had to smart a bit, didn’t it? You took to this like a duck to water.”

“I can tell you honestly that I felt stretched further than I thought possible, and stuffed full to the gills, and a bit of a burn, but no pain at all. Just lovely slippery pleasure. Obviously, my physical prowess extends beyond the football pitch and swinging a sword around.”

“Obviously”, Colin agreed dryly. “Your modesty, too.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, Bradley stroking Colin’s damp, sweaty hair. He could feel Colin beginning to drift off to sleep.
He looked down at his companion, and a feeling of such overwhelming affection swept through him. He could stay like this forever, content and happy with Colin in his arms. Right now, though, they both needed a shower badly. He was sticky with lube and sweat, and so was Colin.

Colin snuffled, his nose twitching. He snuggled closer to Bradley.

“Oh, Colin, you’re so pretty”, he spoke to his drowsy companion. Sappy and girly, it was true, but he meant it sincerely.

Colin opened his eyes, laughed a little, shook his head. He didn’t look at Bradley.

“You are.” Bradley said again.

Colin turned his head so that Bradley couldn’t see his face. “Thanks”, he murmured.

There was something about the way Colin said the single word. Bradley raised his head a little. “Colin? You know I’m not making a mickey, right? I didn’t really mean pretty, I just meant, you know, good looking…” He trailed off, lamely, unsure.

Colin had turned his head back, was looking at him with one of his enigmatic, inscrutable little smiles.

“I appreciate that.”

“Well, you must know it already. The girls are all mad for you.”

“The girls all just want to feed me and take care of me”, Colin answered, his mouth twisting a bit. "And, you know, tell me how cute I am and my ears are sweet. Or something."

Bradley studied him a moment. He’d always thought of Colin as completely comfortable in his own skin. Confident. This was a surprise…

“Is this a sensitive subject for you? You don’t see yourself as attractive?”

Colin shrugged. “Kinda scrawny, pasty Irish boy, I am.” His accent was thicker than Bradley had heard it in a long time. “Neil used to call me Skinny Minnie when we were kids. And also Colon and Colleen, by the by. I was so sickly so often when I was young, I haven’t really ever shaken the image of being fragile and frail. My ears have always been the biggest part of me.”

Bradley stared at him, wide-eyed. This was the most personal thing he’d ever heard about Colin, in the more than four years he’d known him. That he would confide in him like this… It made him feel ridiculously, hugely proud and happy. Maybe it shouldn’t because it wasn’t a happy memory at all for Colin, but—

He cast quickly about for something suitable to say.

“You’re very attractive, even with that narrow, bony arse of yours, Morgan. Your thinness is just another part of your charm. Well, that and your cheekbones. And your mouth. And, you know, your ears. The camera just loves you.”

He didn’t add “And so do I”. Now wasn’t the time, and he didn’t want to send Colin screaming in panic from the bed…

He traced the outline of Colin’s sharp cheekbone with his thumb; saw Colin’s eyes tracking him. “And besides, did you know, my sisters Natalie and Stephanie called me Snagglepuss when we kids,
because of my crooked teeth. Still do, in fact.”

That brought a chuckle, as was intended. “Aww, how mean. Did that play a part in you having them straightened during the break? Because I thought your 'Snagglepuss' teeth were just fine.”

Bradley remembered Colin's rather unexpected reaction when Bradley had displayed the effects of the Invisalign he'd worn 24/7, whenever he wasn't working before the camera. He'd told him his newly straightened smile was "brilliant" but that his original teeth had been perfect too.

Bradley knew that Merlin was not a life long job and eventually he'd be auditioning, and any tiny edge, especially if he hoped one day to break into American television and film, could mean the difference between "Last round of auditions" and "Got the role".

He'd been so self-conscious about his teeth as a kid that he'd developed a nervous tic of hiding his mouth when he spoke. In drama school he had been taught to be aware of every movement and gesture he made while acting, but in filmed interviews, and whenever he met new people or felt nervous or unsure in situations, he often still fell back on the old habit. Not always his mouth, sometimes just resting his hand on his chin or his cheek, but the compulsion was still there, despite his new movie-star pearly whites.

So, when Colin talked about his ears and his thinness, despite being seen as beautiful and desirable by so many--Bradley got it. "Listen, Morgan. Whatever you do, don't ever change your ears. Don't pin them back. Don't cover them with your hair. They set you apart from all the cookie cutter pretty boys out there, yeah?"

Colin smirked a little. "That's probably the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"Well don't get used to it, I'm going back to insulting you in just a minute. I was going to say, are you still not happy with how thin you are? Because you can start working out with me, you know, just get some definition and strength, broaden a bit". As Bradley spoke, he traced Colin's shoulders and pectorals lightly.

"You want to sculpt me", Colin said, still smiling a little. So, he wasn't completely adverse to the idea.

"A little Irish work of art, that's what we'll make you into", Bradley teased, and Colin laughed, his insecure mood of just a moment ago passed. "What do you think?"

"I think--yeah. When rehearsals are done with and we've just got the shows and a bit more time, it might be a very healthy addition to my routine. Yeah". And Bradley could see Colin mull over the idea, already making plans.

"It'd be another way for us to bond, too", Bradley pointed out quietly. "Doesn't have to be anything fancy, and doesn't include me turning myself into a pretzel."

"I've actually been thinking about taking up some strengthening exercises before the new series starts", Colin told him, snuggling against his side. "Merlin won't last forever, and I don't want to look like a teenager my whole life. This could work."

Wasn't Bradley just thinking the same thing a moment ago?

"Yeah. We'll be a pair of gym rats, the two of us."

They both snickered, and got up to shower a few moments later.
Bradley didn’t have a wet/dry razor, so he helped Colin manscape (an American term he’d learned from his own pornographic research) with his electric shaver before they got in the shower. He did this with an incredulous sense of “I can’t believe I’m doing this”, but after Colin bent over the sink, presenting his narrow, bony arse to him, and giggling over what he called “tickling from the vibrator”, he thought maybe it wasn’t so bad, this hair-trimming business.

They both had smooth backs and shoulders. Like himself, Colin had next to no hair on his arse cheeks. But also like himself, Colin had an abundance of hair in his crack and in the front and on his balls...

That still didn't mean he was going to shave himself, of course.

They shampooed each other, and lathered each other’s backs, and were back in bed within a half-hour, clean and sweet smelling. “Quite delectable”, he told Colin, and mouthed and nibbled at an oversized ear. 

As usual, he lay awake long after Colin had drifted off, listening to the other man breathe beside him. Tonight, he wasn’t so nervous about squeezing Colin too tightly in their sleep. His thoughts instead revolved around how to make this feeling of warm content last.

They had plans. Plans for the future.

He slept less than five hours, up and awake and ready for a run long before dawn. He checked on Colin’s sleeping form, made his way to the kitchen quietly to grab some juice and start stretching. The cleaning lady had been in the during the day yesterday, which meant that not only was Bradley’s flat nicely no longer such a tip, but that his laundry had been done (including some of Colin’s clothes he’d left behind) and groceries re-stocked.

There were plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, pasta, canned goods, peanut butter, breads…Colin would have plenty available to him if he was feeling peckish. Maybe Bradley could even make that pasta dish for him that they’d discovered when they’d been in California last July. They’d been doing the touristy thing, going to Universal Studios in Los Angeles one day, and had found a place that served pasta with asparagus and tomatoes, in a basil vinaigrette. CPK offered it with both chicken and vegetarian styles, so they’d both sampled, and Colin had declared it “out of this world”. Since then, Bradley had managed to duplicate it. He’d made several failed attempts at his mother’s house over the holidays before hitting upon the right ingredients, with her help of course. The accomplishment made him feel massively chuffed. He really wasn’t a cook, except on very rare occasions in his mum’s kitchen, and when he was trying to woo a date.

Still feeling vastly pleased with himself for being able to offer this to Colin, Bradley turned towards his living room to start his warm-up…and stopped. That sound.

Oh, bollocks, it was raining cats and dogs outside.

Well, no matter. Bradley was home and had prepared for such contingencies. He had his exercise bike, after all.

Bradley also had a slightly sore and tender bottom from last night’s carryings on. He eyed the hard, narrow seat of the cycle dubiously, but decided to give it a go anyway. It was only very mild discomfort, after all. He’d be right fine.

He wasn’t. He gave up after about fifteen minutes, gingerly dismounting and rubbing at himself. He was going to have to either toughen up or get some padding on that seat, it seemed.
He was doing jumping jacks in the living room when he heard quiet, muffled chuckles behind him. He turned in place, still jumping, and saw a very sleepy-looking Colin laughing at him.

Colin managed to convince him to stop jigging long enough to pull down his track bottoms and briefs, and then engaged him another kind of physical activity. The sight of Colin on his knees before him, eyes closed, lovely lush mouth closed tight around Bradley’s thick cock as Bradley slowly pumped in and out of him…it set Bradley’s heart to racing like he’d been sprinting for a mile. And when Colin began to drool…well. Bradley considered it one of his top five workouts of all time.

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Riding the train in that morning, Bradley confided in Colin his trepidation about his upcoming meeting with his father. Colin was familiar enough with Bradley’s relationship with his father, how he wished it could be better, closer. He’d used Colin as a sounding board on the matter before, counting on Colin’s willingness to listen and nonjudgmental nature to understand.

Bradley just knew that this theatre-date-and-dinner-meeting wasn’t just for father-son bonding. As always, Colin said little, just listened intently, and quietly told Bradley to be prepared for whatever might come. “He’s getting older. Maybe, by some miracle, he’s had an epiphany, realized what he’s been missing out on with not knowing his son as well as he could. As well as he should.”

He liked that idea, but then, his father also had two daughters he’d been an absent father with. He’d checked with Natalie and Stephanie, he knew they were getting together with him one evening as well—but he hadn’t been emailing them every day like he had Bradley. He wondered why.

Colin had just said to think positive, and then there was no more thinking to be done, it was time for work.

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Bradley was grateful that the play’s rehearsals were in the final week—the whirlwind of activity involved in getting ready didn’t give him much time to fret. They had their last costume fittings, and posed for photos for the theatre programme. They ran through the entire play twice, sometimes three times each day. Richard was saying very little now, offering only quiet corrections when someone really stuffed things up, but that wasn’t very often—their cast were professionals and as focused as Bradley and Colin. But rehearsals were also for the tech crew, the stagehands, lighting guys, electricians, prop department, carpenters, wardrobe, the scores of other folks without which the production could never happen. More than once, the actor’s work came to a halt while adjustments were made. Richard was a perfectionist, bless him.

He and Colin rode to each others’ flat on the tube each night and once there, rutted like rabbits.

Thursday, the night before opening night, was to be the “undress rehearsal”, where Colin and Bradley would actually be entirely unclothed and exposed before a group of about sixty people. (Sixty people, as opposed to the close to a thousand that would be present for each actual performance.) Colin had told him that when he’d done A Prayer For My Daughter, no one, not the cast or director or even the wardrobe department, not the publicity department, no one had actually spoken about it at all, apparently thinking they were respecting Colin by doing so, not embarrassing him. Even very few interviews with him had mentioned it at all. It was a whole different animal with this show. The entire week leading up to their “reveal”, it was all the group would talk about during breaks and meal periods, teasing the two of them mercilessly. The girls especially would make “Woo woo!” sounds and pinching gestures towards their backsides, and ask them if they’d been making themselves “presentable” for their audience.

Bradley thought it was all hilarious, enjoying the attention as he always did and giving back as good
as he was getting. It was all in good-natured ribbing, after all, and Bradley had come to terms with the nudity long ago. Rather than being daunting, it was now a topic of entertainment for the lot of them.

Colin, of course, was a bit more bashful about it all, a bit quieter. Bradley had asked him if the joking bothered him, and Colin had told him that it didn’t, that he recognized it for what it was: Their mates finding a way of letting off some steam as the pressure built. He said he was fine with it, even repeated back some of the more clever remarks he’d heard to Bradley for his pleasure.

Bradley and Colin took part in a print interview and a recorded audio interview as PR for the play, asked questions about what had made them decide to accept the parts, how they had gotten the parts, and a little about each of their roles. (He knew that Richard was interviewed as well.) Bradley talked about the important social statement of the story, and how times had changed, but sadly, not yet nearly enough. And yes, there were a few questions about the nudity, and how he felt about it, and how hard it was to do. Bradley had responded with just a light “I’ll let you know after opening night!” There were also quite a few questions about the chemistry shared between Colin and himself, and how it must be quite a departure from their roles as Merlin and Arthur.

Colin surprised him by answering “‘We’ve always had this chemistry, of course. Some fans have seen sexual connotations even in the relationship of Merlin and Arthur. Something must be there, below the surface…so we’ve both been drawing on that, in different terms and intensity of course, for these roles as well.”

The interviewer, obviously somewhat familiar with slash fandom and Merlin fans in general, had been quite pleased and intrigued with Colin’s comment, but Colin had followed up with, “It’s all about perspective, of course, and different for every audience member, and this play will be no different.”

Bradley thought that was a great answer, diplomatic and intriguing without giving anything away, and inwardly cheered for him, simply adding that their characters, Carr and Nigel, were nowhere near as bombastic in their relationship as Arthur and Merlin.

What had happened to the Colin who had barely been able to answer in complete sentences when they’d first been assigned the interview circuit, back when Merlin was in its first series? Bradley remembered how those first few PR moments had been almost painful, with Colin barely speaking unless directly prompted or Bradley passed questions to him. Bradley was an extrovert; his first inclination was always to say whatever he thought. Colin’s instinct was to carefully mull over and ponder each question asked of him, to the point that the interviewer would lose interest and all but ignore him. Colin wasn’t spontaneous in interviews, and Bradley had always gladly looked out for him.

Colin had gotten a lot better as the show went on and he became more experienced. The press always tended to ask the same types of questions anyway. But Colin still had a tendency, especially when nervous or taken off guard, to explain the obvious in minute detail. Yet everyone loved Colin and found him incredibly endearing anyway. These interviews were no exception. And he didn’t need Bradley’s help or minding when answering any of the questions posed to him about Exposed.

The night before the undress rehearsal, Bradley reluctantly had Colin shave him, amidst his own general grumblings and Colin’s triumphant chortling.

Well, Bradley supposed, if Colin was going to do it, it made sense that he did too, all in the name of stage symmetry, right? Sigh…

There’s a saying in show business, right up there with “Break a leg”, that went “Bad dress rehearsal,
good performance”. If that were true, they were going to have a truly terrible performance, because
dress rehearsal went almost perfectly. Each person, whether onstage or off, performed like a cog in a
well-oiled machine. Colin had whispered to Bradley before they left the train that morning, “It’s only
us on that stage, just the two of us.” And Bradley had known, without having to discuss it, just what
Colin meant: Focus on each other. They’d been with each other, were comfortable and familiar with
each other on an emotionally and physically intimate level. All they needed to do was put themselves
in the moment, and there would be no stage, no actors, no audience, just the two of them. And the
two of them weren’t self-conscious or bashful or modest with each other.

Bradley simply made himself unaware of Richard and the assistant directors watching from the
audience, the stage hands all around them, and the other actors backstage. He and Colin helped each
other out of their clothes, (and yes, it was rather cool in the theatre, he realized as soon as the cool air
hit his goolies), eased each other to the bed, and enacted copulation.

It wasn’t until the scene was completed—it had played out without a hitch—and the two of them
were moving backstage, to prepare for the next scene, that it hit Bradley: He. Was. Starkers. And the
other actors were all moving past himself and Colin to take their place onstage for the next scene.

And he was starkers. Amidst quite a few people, a few of whom caught his eye and smirked at him.

Oh, lord…

He decided to just ignore it all. Trying to cover himself at this point would just be stupid. He
supposed he should just be thankful no one grabbed his buttocks and made the woo-woo sound.

‘An actor’s life for me’, he hummed in his mind resignedly, and began preparing for his next scene.

At curtain time, the cast took their bows just as they would during the performance, with Richard and
everyone not onstage applauding enthusiastically. Bradley had been taught, and knew Colin had
been too, that curtain calls were serious things, never to be taken lightly. They were still performing,
essentially. So, they practiced the routine, each performer taking their bows in order of their status in
the production, with Colin and himself the last to do so. By decree of Richard, they were co-leads in
the play.

It was the daydream of every actor worth his salt: that moment when they stood alongside all their
cast mates, and then took those three deliberate steps forward and bowed. And they might wave, too.

Oh, the adrenaline rush. Even with just a few people clapping, Bradley felt like he did after being
instrumental in the winning goal on the football pitch. He couldn’t stop himself from grinning
widely, and glancing at his companion, he saw Colin doing the same. He knew he’d spent four years
in drama school for something. And the real show didn’t start until tomorrow night.

Before they left for the night, the night before opening night (It kept repeating in his head like a
needle stuck in a record groove, “Opening night, opening night, opening night, tomorrow night”, and
he didn’t mind it at all), Richard took the two of them aside. He put a hand on each of their shoulders
and leaned in, despite the fact that they have a semblance of privacy, tucked in this small alcove.

“You were both lovely. I don’t think you realize just how extraordinary certain key scenes are to
behold”, Richard told them without preamble, and then went on to use words like “sensual” and
“heart breaking” and “otherworldly”.

Bradley didn’t really hear it all, because the voice-over in his head was now replaced with “Richard
Wilson called us extraordinary, Richard Wilson called us extraordinary…”
He could feel Colin’s body heat beside him, swore he could sense his pulse too if not feel it. Maybe Colin was blushing a little with the pleasure of it all, causing a rise in body heat. He heard Colin thanking Richard for the opportunity, telling him how grateful he was for Richard’s faith in him, his guidance. Bradley echoed the words, shaking himself a bit mentally; he really should have thought of a thank you before now. Forgetting his manners like this wouldn’t please his mum at all, and she’d be there for the show very soon.

He leaned in, kissed Richard on the temple. It was all a bit surreal, as if this was their last night in the old country and the wizened, wise old mentor was sending them off to make their way in the world.

“Just one more thing, lads, before you go.” Richard had lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and was smiling at them wryly. There was a hint of his usual, naughty, impish self back in his expression, a complete change from that of a moment ago. “Just wanted you to know, there was a bit of a murmur backstage. No complaints, mind you, but you drew attention. There’ll be light robes waiting for you at the end of scene six. I should have arranged them before now, of course….”

Richard stopped as Colin began to chortle. Bradley’s own high-pitched giggle joined him a second later.

“Rather thought it a bit trite if we happened to rediscover decency at that point”. Colin shrugged his shoulders, as if that statement explained everything. And maybe it did, too.

Richard was laughing silently. “I’m telling you, the two of you, if I were fifty years younger…”

They said their goodnights, started gathering their hoodies, parkas and backpacks. Security was waiting to escort them to the waiting taxi.

“Sorry, gents, but the crowd seems to be whipped to a lather tonight and growing all the time. Lots of red capes with gold dragons on them.”

Bradley just shook his head, shrugged, and looked at Colin. Colin looked back at him. “You want to go now, or wait awhile? Maybe they’ll thin out after a bit.”

“Nah.” Bradley swung his bag over his shoulder, slung the other arm lightly around Colin’s back. “There’s nothing anyone could do tonight that could ruin my fine cheer. And you want to know why? I’ll tell you why: Richard Wilson thinks we’re extraordinary, that’s why. Onward, my good man!”

And onward they went.

Security hadn't been kidding, there were droves of fans, and when they saw who stepped out of the stage door…oh God. Bradley had decided to not sweep past as he usually did, to at least pause and let them take photos if they wanted. Sometimes he had to be reminded that the fans liking him was the reason he was able to work in this profession (even though he occasionally wondered too just how much he should be expected to owe those same fans, many of whom felt very entitled to a piece of him.) Tonight he was feeling so good, so very grateful to be doing what he doing, he was going to run the gauntlet, if quickly.

The only glitch in that plan was that once he posed for one photo, there were two hundred more waiting. He did the best he could, moving up and down the lines quickly. There were people shouting to him, everything from wanting an autograph or a kiss to asking him to please get naked for them too… (Oh fecking hell). He interacted with those who seemed most calm and sane, asking them if they were coming to the show or where they were from or if they’d made their crown and cape themselves.
Colin was near him the whole time, working the crowd masterfully, and after about fifteen minutes of this, he noticed someone in the throng, just behind the rope line, someone he recognized. He nudged Colin.

“Hey, Cols, isn’t that your groupie?”

It was, actually. There was a very sweet, middle-aged lady who had fixated on Colin from first series, and always seemed to show up at all of his professional appearances. She was always well-behaved, unobtrusive, polite, never delving into their private lives or crossing any boundaries, rather charming, really. She was also apparently extremely well informed and connected, because she always seemed to be in the right place at the right time for another meeting with her boy Morgan. She also seemed to have a special fondness for Richard as well as Rupert, they’d both reported, especially in in the past year or so. After that, Bradley had done a little research on the computer, and found out she had a website, posting lovely pictures of various medieval sites online that might be associated with Merlin or Arthurian legend. She was probably the best source of early free publicity the show Merlin had had.

They both went over to greet her and she positively glowed at the attention, excitedly telling them she’d be at the matinee showing on Sunday and how fandom was all abuzz. She also asked Colin how he was, how nice it was to see him again, and how every fan was so looking forward to the fifth series of Merlin.

It was all so typical. Morgan got the nice, motherly, lady fans who sent him American peanut butter and hand knitted jumpers in colours to match his eyes, while Bradley got the bag of hammer fans that just wanted to jump his bones or were irritated with him for not liking Arthur and Gwen together.

Fine, then. That was just fine. Bradley didn't mind. After all, Richard had said he was extraordinary.

He signalled to security, and made his apologies, explaining that the following night was opening night and he had a long day before him, and he hoped they could all attend, and thank you, good night. And was finally extricated, along with Colin, to their waiting ride.

He glanced at his watch as the door was slammed shut. Colin had been talking with Nice Fan for the past ten minutes. He teased Colin about it all the way to the tube station, and even after Colin pretended to be asleep on the train.

They were both tired when they got home, and even more so after their usual enthusiastic fucking the light fantastic and showering off the sweat and spit and lube and come, but slumber wouldn’t arrive for them. Not even Colin, who usually fell asleep after being sated and washed and cuddled. (“I feed you, I change you, I burp you, I wash you, I fuck you, and I put you to bed. What more do you want from me?” Bradley had teased. Colin had only hummed and answered vaguely, “Let me get back to you…”) They were both just glad they didn’t need to be at the theatre until late afternoon, and would only need to make a lighting and sound check before the performance.

There was something to be said for insomnia on nights like this, laying with Colin’s head on his chest and tracing idle patterns through his scalp, his still damp hair. The two of them talked quietly about the show, what they expected, who was coming, how they’d divvyed their comp tickets to family and friends.

After a few moments of silence:

“Hey Cols. I like the way you move. I just want you to know that. Sometimes I watch you, when I’m not in the same scene as you. On the stage, or walking across the courtyard in France, or just when we’re out and about. You’re all lanky and lopey. The way you walk always makes it seem like
you’re happy. It makes me smile.”

Colin huffed a laugh, raised his head a little to look at Bradley in the dark. “Have you been sniffing the hair remover lotion again? That’s just…a little mad.” And after a moment he amended, “In a nice way.”

“What? I happen to like knees and elbows, okay?”

Colin lightly slapped his arm. “Oh, hush you.” And after another moment of silence he said, “Here’s another Neil story for you. He calls me Herky-Jerky because of that walk. Always said I looked like a piece of me was about to fly off because of all my many moving parts.”

Bradley tried to laugh silently, but Colin, lying on his chest, could no doubt tell what he’d thought of that. He started massaging Colin’s head with both hands.

“I had no idea your brother was so awful to you. I swear, next time I see that bleeder, I am going to go all John Woo on his arse.”

Colin laughed again, tightened his grip around Bradley a little. “That’s very good of you, but no. Go easy on him. We’re pretty tight now, but it couldn’t have been easy, being big brother to me when we were kids.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, me being sick all the time, my allergies, y’ know. All that attention and focus from Ma and Da. I can’t blame him for resenting me a little, being such an interloper. I would have, too.”

And that was Colin, always accepting of another’s viewpoint, despite its rather negative effect on him. Bradley felt his heart swell in affection, not only for the poignancy of Colin’s understanding, but for the fact that again, Colin had confided in him.

He asked quietly, “Were you happy? As a lad, I mean?”

“Oh, yeah.” Colin’s response was immediate, unhesitant. “Great Mam and Da. We didn’t have much money, but they gave us all they had and more. They supported my very unconventional declaration at the age of three that I was going to become an actor, arranged with Santa Claus to have a puppet show delivered…they were and are just fantastic parents.”

“Yeah”, Bradley agreed. He’d met Mr. and Mrs. Morgan several times during filming. Unsurprisingly, they were truly lovely, down to earth people, and they so obviously adored their younger son, doted on him, in fact. And Colin returned the sentiment. Theirs seemed to be such a traditional, if reserved family.

Bradley kind of envied them.

“I’m surprised they didn’t try to guide you away from acting as a profession though. That had to seem pretty out there to them.”

“I know. I kept being told that acting was a hobby, not a job. I guess they just saw what it meant to me, how hard I was willing to work for it, and just decided to support me. Or maybe they thought I’d try my hand at it, not be able to make a living and get it out of my system. But they just hoped and prayed the whole time for me to get accepted into the academy I got into and then for the parts I auditioned for, and…yeah. Last time I was home, I was able to pay for some renovations on the house that had been needed for a while. Proudest moment of my life, that I was able to give a little back.”
Bradley suddenly realized he’d been holding his breath while Colin spoke. And how cool was this? Colin was actually telling him about his family, another topic he always kept close to the vest. Colin was always so good at keeping himself to himself. But in the bed they were sharing, Colin had confided in him two nights in a row.

He didn’t dare speak himself, lest Colin sense the depth of how much this touched him.

More quiet for a few moments, while Bradley continued to stroke Colin’s hair, and then Colin asked him, “What about you? Were you happy?”

“Pretty much. There was the divorce, of course, but my mum has always been my hero. She was mum, dad, and cheerleader for all three of us. I was outnumbered, all those girls in the house, and me, so I guess she made an extra effort to help me channel all my hyperkinetic energy into competitive sports. What the Americans would call a soccer mom, I think. And my sisters are daft but I love ‘em, and I’ve got a great extended family too. I was never lonely as a kid, had plenty of cousins to kick a ball around with. I’d say growing up was pretty normal. I played ball, I did okay in school without trying too hard, I chased girls. I had a pretty big support group of friends I ran around with. Well, still do, when I have the time. Got my thumb ring from them. ” Bradley knew his own story was a bit more shallow than Colin’s.

“Did you blame yourself for the divorce?”

“I guess that’s kind of a cliché, isn’t it, that every child of divorce does that. I don’t think I did, though. I just let them think I did, to hear their reassurances.”

Colin huffed a little laugh, snuggled closer to him. “Of course you did. What did they think about you wanting to be an actor?”

“I didn’t, not until I had exhausted every possibility of becoming a pro footballer.”

God, now that period in his life had been the most painful. He’d been devastated when he hadn’t made professional rounds. It had been all he’d ever wanted to do with his life, from the time he was big enough to stand and kick.

“And then you met a girl who introduced you to acting.”

“Mm.” Pretty much everyone, every Merlin fan, knew this part of his story, how a girl he’d been dating had convinced him to take a drama class with her, and he’d gotten bitten by the acting bug.

“My mum beseeched, entreated and implored me, and then finally threatened me to start taking a few courses, you know. I didn’t have any direction at all after losing out on being a footballer. Every profession I could think of just seemed like it would bore me out my tree. Then I was dating Suzanne, and she suggested a drama course just on a lark. Just for grins, you know. I’d been in a few productions during school, but not many, and it was just for fun, not anything serious. And I liked it, so I took another course along with English, and then another, and then somehow, I don’t know how, I made it into London Drama School.”

The truth was he’d been shocked by that, the fact that he’d been chosen as one of only fifteen men that were accepted each year into the four year program. That had astounded him, still did.

“I just remember telling my dad about that, and him saying, 'well done', but you know, it’s four years of your life that you can’t apply to the real world, and how was I going to support myself after I graduated. I think he thought it was just some silly phase I was going through and he was going to wind up supporting me financially until I was old enough for pension. "
“Ohh.” Colin’s voice was sympathetic. “I’m sure he had to be concerned for you, like mine were.”

“I’m sure.” Somehow, Bradley doubted that his own father’s concern had been anything like Colin’s family’s. "I think too that he looked at it as just completely foreign and from out of nowhere. Everyone in my family is so sporty, such athletes. That includes my mum, my sisters, my aunts, cousins...they've all competed in one sport or another. They're all strong. He was bewildered by it all, wondering where this little actor came from. He may have thought it all a bit fey".

"You're sporty." Colin pointed out, squeezing him for a moment. "You're a very competitive athlete, and talented. Not everyone could handle the physicality of Arthur. You know that, right?"

Bradley shrugged, hummed. He did know that. He was proud of his athleticism. He just didn't know if his father realized that being an actor didn't mean he couldn't be sporty too. He was quiet for a few moments.

“And your mum? What did she think?” Colin prompted.

“Likely one of the few times they were in agreement, at least about the aspect of me supporting myself financially, but she had a much more loving way of showing it. She was encouraging and supportive, but she also set a limit of two years. If I hadn’t been able to have a decent income from acting in two years, I had to get a real job. That seemed fair enough to me. She’s very practical, my mum. And she cheered me on with each new role I won, and then was about over the moon when I told her I’d won the part of Arthur.”

“Peculiar, how things work out, isn’t it.” Colin murmured rhetorically against Bradley’s chest. “You seem born to act, but it was a long and winding road to get you here.”

“I guess.” The truth was, though, in his heart of hearts, and if he had his druthers…acting was always his second choice. He’d come to terms with it all, enjoyed the work and particularly the variety it offered, felt that he was successful at it and could be proud of his final product.

But there were other times, when watching an exciting match at a stadium or even on telly, when his heart would be pumping and his breath would be staggering and he’d long, almost ache, to be out on that pitch with those blokes. The closest thing he got to that feeling nowadays was going bare-arsed onstage. And there had been a few times while filming Merlin too…the Round Table scene with his knights at the end of third series, for instance, or the swordfight he and Anthony had done back in series two, and a few other Merlin moments.

Bradley didn’t say this out loud to Colin, though.

Colin just lay silently, occasionally tracing patterns on his chest. After a long time, Bradley heard his breathing even out, knew he’d drifted off.

Bradley listened to him breathing for a long time, alone in the dark, feeling loving and grateful, and just a tad melancholy.
They hadn’t set the alarm for the day, the day of opening night; they didn’t need to be anywhere until afternoon, after all. It was the first lie-in available to both of them since rehearsals had started three weeks ago. (Three weeks ago! It seemed like several lifetimes ago, so much had happened.) Even so, Bradley was awake early enough, with sunshine— rare enough at this time of the year in London--streaming into his window. He was sure the atypical sunniness was another good omen for their show that night.

He was bone-weary, but unsurprisingly he couldn’t go back to sleep. Bradley felt as he had that morning before rehearsals had begun, that everything in his life was about to change again. His whole existence had been turned on its ear and off its axis these past three weeks, to the point of nearly blowing his mind.

Bradley did manage to contain himself from yelling “Father Christmas came!” as he’d also been tempted to do the morning that rehearsals had begun. He doubted waking Colin that way would be appreciated or deemed humorous.

Bradley prepared for his run, stretching quietly in the living room before grabbing up his key and heading out the door. An hour’s time should be enough to burn off his spasmodic vigour, and then, if Colin wasn’t up yet, he’d crawl back in bed with him and suck him off. A little morning quickie for the two of them. That should perk them both right up, instill some verve and élan, in more ways than one.

Smiling broadly, Bradley took off.

Colin was at the table when he returned, his simple breakfast of toast, coffee and a banana already half-consumed. He had his laptop in front of him too; the first time Bradley had seen him use it since they’d begun sharing a bed and bodies. It was another reminder that the two of them had had time for little else but rehearsals and fucking since preparation for the show had begun.

Not that Bradley was complaining…

Colin seemed to have gotten a lot done while Bradley had been out exercising. He had obviously already showered, judging by his damp hair and sweet smell, was dressed. He’d even made breakfast for Bradley too, toast and eggs warming on the stove and fruit along with his tea, just the way he liked it. Bradley wanted to tell him that Colin would make a great house-husband, but managed to restrain himself. He didn’t want any kind of tension or pressure, not on a day as important as today, so he settled on a simple “Cheers, mate” instead. He was happy to share the light meal alone with Colin, something they really hadn’t had a chance for either, not alone together, in too long.

Except that he wasn’t alone with Colin. Colin was engrossed in whatever he was reading on the computer, and attempts to engage him in conversation were met with replies such as “Mm...What?” and “Uh huh...”

“What are you so interested in online, anyway?”

Colin had the grace to look somewhat guilty. “Sorry.” He put the laptop aside, though he didn’t close it, Bradley noted. “I was just trying to catch up with all the e-mails and such I’ve missed of late. I
can’t believe I’m so far behind.”

“Yeah…did you see anything about the show tonight? I can just imagine what’s going on in the world of fandom.”

“I haven’t looked. You know I try to avoid anything like that, it makes me so uncomfortable.” Colin just gave him a a mock-horrified look.

Bradley smirked back at him. ‘Oh, Colin, you little vixen’, he thought. Still with that beguiling, demure act. No one ever believed him when he claimed Colin had one of the darkest senses of humour of anyone he’d ever met. Well, except those who actually knew him.

“Listen”, Bradley said, changing the subject. “Remember when we were in California last July, and we had that pasta dish with asparagus and tomatoes you liked so well? I learned how to make it. I thought I’d make it for you today, before we leave for the theatre. You up for that?”

Colin raised his eyebrows, looking both surprised and delighted. “You found the recipe, seriously? And here you claim you’re not a cook.”

“My mum helped me”, Bradley muttered.

Colin laughed a little. “That sounds like heaven, but…can I take a rain check? I can’t work on a full stomach, not with these opening night nerves, especially with something as heavy as pasta. I’ll ralph all over the stage. Let’s make it later this week, yeah?”

Bradley just nodded, accepting, but still a little disappointed. He’d been planning this for a while now.

Colin seemed to sense what he was thinking, leaned forward a little. “It’s so good of you to think of me like that, to go to all that trouble. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s no trouble”, Bradley said, and let it go.

After that, Bradley couldn’t think of much more to say, so he finished his breakfast quickly and headed off to shower. Colin was already back at the computer when he left the room.

Nothing had changed when he emerged from the loo. Colin was still right where he’d left him, fixated on his monitor, so Bradley began clearing their dishes away. Colin moved to help him, but Bradley told him he had it, and to continue working.

At some point, Colin went and sat down in the living room, bringing his computer with him. Bradley joined him, feeling a little bored and neglected. He didn’t want to bother him, so he turned on the telly; started scanning for any daytime shows that might catch his eye.

“Hey, Cols, remember that show we saw when were in the states? The one that featured ancient weapons, and had those blokey guys testing them on dead hogs and melons? Wasn’t that fucking ridiculous”, he couldn’t help laughing again, remembering some of the nuttier stunts.

“Aces”, Colin murmured.

Americans and their cable television, all two hundred and fifty channels of it. Bradley had found that show so fascinating and so absurdly funny. He’d told everyone about it when they’d returned to Wales, made a pact with several of the knights and crew that they’d do some of their own “experiments”. 
Colin said nothing else.

After a while, Bradley pulled out his own laptop, started checking his own messages. He had more than a hundred and fifty…it was overwhelming.

Rather than typing responses, he started calling people, catching up, accepting their good wishes for the play tonight, and telling them all about it.

Colin took his laptop and retreated into the bedroom.

Some of his friends were such complete gits, and the conversations were often pretty boisterous. He was up and pacing around the flat as he often did when he talked on the phone for any length, throwing his head back and braying with loud laughter at their tomfoolery, the mad wankers…

Colin quietly shut the door to the bedroom.

After that, Bradley went back to typing his responses on the computer. He was tempted to knock on the door and tell Colin he’d be good now, but resisted the urge.

They were so very different, he and Colin, in almost everything—personality, interests, background, how they approached their work...

Well, they said that opposites attracted. (And there was that mysterious, obsequious “they” again.)

When he was finished with his emails, he got on his exercise bike, and fished around further for something to watch on telly. There was nothing, so he began to rummage through his DVD collection.

Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore. He knocked on the door, poked his head in. Colin was sitting propped on the bed, typing like a demon.

“I remember when you use to look at me like that.”

Colin raised an eyebrow, looked down at his computer and then back at Bradley. “I’m almost done, just fifteen more minutes…”

“Want to watch Labyrinth with me?”

“No, but I’m nearly finished here.”

“Want to fuck?”

Colin closed his eyes briefly, huffed out a little laugh. “I think that might be a good thing for both of us. Do you have ants in your pants?”

After twenty minutes of sucking Colin’s lovely long cock with no release, Bradley’s jaw ached and he wasn’t even able to make spit any longer. He knew Colin was mightily distracted and concentrating on everything but him, but…still. He resorted to a seldom-used technique he used only as a last resort: while sucking, he pressed lightly just behind Colin's balls. It had the desired effect. Colin actually shouted with his release.

Colin looked at him for a moment, bleary-eyed, and then stripped Bradley's cock quickly to completion too. When Bradley came, Colin kissed him on the mouth...

And then Colin went back to his computer.
After the orgasm near-fail (a fuck fiasco, that was what it was, despite the happy ending, Bradley decided) Bradley was bound and determined to give Colin all the peace and quiet he was obviously after. He thought about playing some computer games with his earphones in, but he was beginning to feel more tingly energy as their departure time approached, and knew he wouldn’t be able to sit still. In the end Bradley just went for another run, not even bothering to change from his jeans and high top Converse trainers into track bottoms and running shoes. He didn’t want to go back into the bedroom where his clothes were, and disturb Colin again. Bradley waited until he was outside to begin stretching, and then pushed himself as hard as he could, as long as he could, running only within a three-block radius of his apartment building.

Unlike many times when he ran, he tried to keep his mind clear, not cogitate too much on Colin's rather steel-coated, disinterested behavior or the excitement and anticipation of what he would be doing in a few hours’ time. Instead, he did his best to concentrate completely on just exercising. He would count to fifty while sprinting as hard and fast as he could, or set his sights on an object—a letter box or hydrant—and then push himself to his limit until he reached it, only slowing again to a jog when he passed.

Bradley was more than a little relieved that there weren’t many other people out and about on the street today, to witness what was probably starting to look like a demented man in street clothes running from invisible pursuers.

So, by the time his watch signalled that it was time to return and begin prep to catch the tube to the theatre, he was nearly foamed with sweat. The weather had deteriorated into another drizzle again that all but promised to be a downpour soon enough. But hey, at least he’d allowed Colin the space he needed to take care of things, and worked off some more of his “ants in his pants.”

Bradley smiled wryly. Quaint phrase. He wondered where Colin had picked it up. Under other circumstances, Bradley might have informed him, “No, not ants, romance” or some other equally cornball comeback.

Feeling a whole lot better, he re-entered the apartment. Colin was back on the couch, still thoroughly engrossed in his laptop, but quickly put it aside when Bradley came in.

“Hey, I just kind of looked around and you were gone”, Colin said. He moved forward quickly, just touched Bradley’s arm. “We gotta go.”

“Had to work if off, give you your space to do your shite”, Bradley answered. He didn’t bother trying to nick a kiss, dripping wet the way he was. “Give me ten minutes,” and he made his way quickly to the loo and shower.

They chatted a bit during the commute, mostly about which guests they were expecting to various performances. Bradley’s mum and sisters would be in from Devon and Stoke a week from Sunday, and Colin’s mam and da a week from tonight, next Friday. They had other various Merlin friends coming in the next two weeks, including Rupert and Angel, Katie and Joe, Tom and Eoin, a couple mates from the crew, some of Colin’s friends from drama school. His brother couldn’t make it, back in the states on another computer project for his software firm. Bradley’s dad would be in London on Tuesday of next week—only four days away, now, and would see that show, although Bradley confided in Colin that he hoped the jetlag wouldn’t have him snoring during the performance.

And then there was Anthony, the coolest of them all, who had insisted on coming to tonight’s first performance with Sarah, to support them and cheer them all on. Bradley had tried to persuade him to commit to going to dinner after, but Anthony had had to decline. He’d explained that he had early morning obligations on Saturday but would be sure to make time for at least lunch with himself and Colin, as well as Richard, later in the week if they could all swing it.
Bradley had grinned like a buffoon when Anthony had confirmed that he’d be there for them on opening night. Colin, too, had reacted with utter delight.

Now, Bradley and Colin’s nervousness was welcome, excitement and anticipation and the heady feel of adrenaline. For Bradley, it felt like a hundred fireflies abuzz, and oddly, it wasn’t a disagreeable sensation. It made him feel like every one of his senses was sharpened. Bradley was already in game-on mode, and Colin was becoming more and more blinkered. It was opening night, what they’d been working so hard toward for nearly a month. They’d come so far, both professionally and personally.

As the train pulled into their stop, Colin squeezed Bradley’s wrist briefly and they looked at each other for a moment.

“Good show”, was all Colin said, very quietly, and Bradley smiled, feeling almost an electric current in the light skin to skin contact. “Likewise”, was all he said, and smiled, just a little.

They arrived nearly four hours before the start of the show, passing quickly through a ridiculously huge crowd at the stage door and another queue already lining up at the main entrance. Bradley didn’t do his usual head-down-walk-as-quickly-as-possible-don’t-look-at-anyone, but like Colin, paused to wave and smile, though they didn’t stop to sign or speak to anyone. Colin moved nearly as fast as Bradley to get in and get to work.

They needed to go through one last sound check and lighting test. Damn good thing, too, because Bradley’s mic pack was rubbish, and the second one they gave him to try wasn’t much better. And both pieces of equipment had been working perfectly up to this point. While the stage manager and sound guys scrambled, Bradley tried to stay calm and focused, practicing the breathing techniques of his drama school days. He could see Richard conferring with this one and that one, remaining absolutely serene and deliberate, even though he had a million and one problems, big and small, to deal with.

Colin was having similar problems with his lighting, and there was even some talk—not for long, thanks heavens—about moving his marks. That would so not be good; throwing off all the conditioning of countless rehearsals, but somehow, Richard, the stage manager and the lighting men came up with solutions. (Steggie, Bradley thought the stage manager’s name was, and then just thrust all concern over the guy’s name out of his head for the time being).

It wouldn’t be long now, they’d all have to clear the stage and the theatre was going to open the doors and start letting in ticket holders. Even just the thought of it made Bradley’s heart leap a little. ‘Almost time, almost time, almost time’ he chanted silently to himself.

He continued to test his mic pack, walking around to various points on the stage he knew he’d be during scenes in the show. They’d gone through this endlessly during the dress rehearsal, as well as lighting to make sure nothing reflected or washed out their costumes. (It was, after all, rather a challenge to hide a mic pack when one was not wearing anything.)

Colin, more so than Bradley, was more of a “Practice makes perfect” kind of actor—he was known to stay in his trailer during lunch periods on the Merlin set, practicing a specific facial expression. Bradley, on the other hand, believed that once the lines were memorized and the action was locked, that a performance could become stale with too much repetition. Just one more way he and Colin differed.

Finally, finally Richard clapped his hands together and called them all into their costumes and make-up, and Bradley looked at his watch: less than ninety minutes to go.

The theatre manager, the one that Bradley thought resembled a naval officer from olden days, came
and spoke briefly with Richard. Once everyone was off the stage, and the curtain was securely down and concealing the sets, Richard nodded once to the man. And Bradley knew it would be only a matter of moments now before audience members would start filtering in, finding their seats, talking with each other. He vowed to himself he would peek through the curtain, just a little, before the show.

Maybe most of the audience had left their armour and neckerchiefs at home? One could hope…

Bradley made his way to the area designated for hair and sat patiently while his stylist lightly brushed through and moused his hair. He saw the reflection of Colin in the mirror behind him, smiling as one of the hairdressers moused his hair and blow-dried it, fluffing it up. Just as on the stage, it was organized chaos here too. Because of the dryers, this was a noisy place, so there wasn’t much conversation, but there were a lot of smiles. There wasn’t much tension, but what there was the positive kind, the kind that said, “I want to do this, I want to do this now…”

Bradley moved to makeup, had light pancake applied to his hands and face just to ensure that he wouldn’t wash out in the stark lights. There had been lengthy debates over whether himself and Colin would require body makeup during their nude scene—didn’t want to blind the audience with all that bright white skin, after all—but it had been decided that since the lights were dimmed somewhat for it, none would be needed. Bradley was happy enough with that conclusion. He didn’t think he would ever get used to the feel of this on his skin, despite the fact that he had to wear it every day, eight months out of the year, for filming. It felt so heavy and sticky on his face, and he didn’t want to know what it might be like on his bum and balls…

He suppressed his own laugh, checked himself in the mirror one more time before getting out of the chair. His makeup girl—and for the life of him, he couldn’t remember anyone’s name tonight—pronounced him “Lovely” and quickly moved on to the next cast member.

He murmured his thanks, and before he left, he checked the clock on the counter: twenty eight minutes until show time.

He went back to the tiny cubicle he’d been assigned as a dressing room —there weren’t many private ones at this theatre, most of their coworkers dressed in rooms they shared with three or four other actors. But, because of their top billing, Colin and he had landed these small private areas, and Bradley was glad of it now. He’d need a minute for himself. His heart was thudding in his chest.

He did a few quick stretches just to limber up, and then changed quickly into his first costume of the night, his favourite, the doeskin breeches with the form-fitting sweater. Bradley then did the brrrrrr noises that helped him to warm up his voice and loosen his lips and tongue, and recited a couple of tongue twisters to himself quietly, and then went over in his mind, one more time, a few of the lines he found difficult in the play.

“Fifteen minutes!” called the stage manager, knocking on Bradley’s door.

“I’m ready!” he called back immediately.

Bradley could hear Steggie make the call again a moment later, rounding up the performers to their places.

Bradley closed his eyes briefly, took two deep, centering breaths, and went out to take his place on stage.

But before he went to his place, he peeked out at the audience, as several of his colleagues had done already. The place was full, and the audience members seemed to be cognizant that they had very
little time left before the show started. He saw many clutching programmes in their hands, being shown to their seats by theatre ushers, or hurrying on their own to find their rows. And they seemed…excited. It was an almost palpable thing now, building for so long. And now Bradley, Colin and all the others were finally going to have the chance to release their gift and hope it was well received.

He watched these people, these hundreds of strangers he was about to become intimately familiar with in just a few moments. They seemed nice, normal enough, and… Oh bloody hell. There was one. Someone with a red neckerchief and bright blue shirt.

“Places, everyone!” Steggie called. It was a cliché, but it was true: Stage managers really did say that.

Sighing, Bradley retreated from the curtain, took his place. Colin turned to look at him, just met his eye for a moment, nodded and smiled a little. Bradley thought he must have seen too.

Bradley nodded back, acknowledging, and then began bouncing in place, pogo-style. He wasn’t looking at Colin, but he knew he was hopping in preparation too, both in nervousness and in an effort to maintain his current energy.

He looked to his right, saw Richard offstage, watching from the wings. Richard gave him a thumbs up.

Bradley turned back--and saw that Colin had turned his head slightly to look at him again, and then--

Colin winked at him.

Oh, Colin...

The house lights dimmed. The audience reacted with “Ooh”s and applause.

“Thirty seconds!” Steggie called quietly, doing a quick pass from one side of the stage to the other and inspecting it, the performers, everything.

Bradley bobbed his head at Colin once, and Colin turned back towards the stage, immersed in his own character.

Bradley closed his eyes again, took one more cleansing breath. He’d found his zone.


_Curtain Up._

It was the most petrifying, most exhilarating, most mind-boggling two hours Bradley had ever lived. He revelled in the adrenaline dump, the prickling sensation in his fingertips and toes and lips and scalp, the heightened awareness of everything and everyone around him while at the same time being most acutely aware of being inside the mind and body of his character, Carr.

When he had the time to reflect upon it later, he might think that this must be what it was like to be on speed and crack and cocaine all at once, thinking he was invincible…the only difference being, in these moments, he really was.

Bradley argued and shouted, feeling himself hot with the anger of the moment, cords in his neck and his face bulging, shoved into the door by his female co-star. He heard the slight collective intake of breath from the audience, startelement at the violence and a sympathetic gasp…
Bradley kissed and held and caressed Colin, nude as he was, as they both were, his own cock at full mast, probably more from his adrenaline and stage fright than any sexual stimulus. He smelled coconut from the mousse that had been used on Colin’s hair, and the musk of Col’s nervous sweat and his own. And he heard a different kind of gasp then too, and then some odd, subtle sounds from the audience that he didn’t recognize at first, but when he had a chance to catalogue them between scenes, realized that a few members of the audience must have been weeping.

Completely engaged in the moment, he’d felt no discomfiture or discomposure at all during the love-making scene, or before, when the two of them had exposed themselves fully to a live audience. Bradley had no time to wonder about that now, or what had driven anyone to be lachrymose over the scene, only the sense that he had accomplished his objective.

With that scene over, the two of them moved quickly to their exit and were hurriedly wrapped in their robes as their co-actors moved past them to their places. He and Colin still didn’t speak, still absorbed entirely with preparations for the next scene. They were sharing a dressing screen set aside in a corner of the backstage area, and they had a scant ninety seconds to change into their next costumes.

As Carr, he held a beaten and brutalized Colin—Nigel—in his arms, and wept for this man, this love, this gross injustice done upon him and them. He sensed rather than heard the audience’s immersion in the moment, felt their connection, their appellation, their heartbreak when Nigel slipped away and the curtain closed as he sobbed his heart out.

Bradley had never known that his profession could be like this, that he could feel like this…

When it came time to take their bows, he accepted the wholehearted applause and cheers of the audience, feeling like his face was about to cleave with the width of his smile. Then, and only then, did he allow himself the luxury again of looking out into the crowd, of really seeing who had been his voyeurs for the past two hours. The applause was prolonged, and he saw people jumping up and down, even, as if at a sporting match. He spotted a few more in costume, too…as if at a convention.

Bradley reckoned he couldn’t resent them for their keenness and gusto.

He spotted Tony and his partner Sarah and waved, and nudged Colin, who saw them a moment later too and beamed happily. Anthony and Sarah waved to them, blew kisses and gave them thumbs up. Anthony’s broad smile lit his whole face.

Bradley thought that this must be what it felt like to win the World Cup.

Backstage was bedlam, with people hugging each other madly, hooting and laughing as they came down from their adrenaline highs. Bradley made sure that he got to Colin first, embraced him in a desperate, tight hold and whispered, “Wasn’t that brilliant, I can’t believe it…”

Colin hugged him back just as closely, murmured back, “You were magnificent, superb. That was something else…”

“You’re something else”, Bradley countered. And then Bradley kissed Colin, right there in front of all their theatre co-stars, and all the techs and stagehands and creatives and Richard too, and whatever outsiders might be filtering in. Just a quick bus, but unmistakable and right on the chops.

He pulled away immediately, thinking, “What have I done?!?” it had been in the passion of the moment, and was immediately starting into an apology before Colin laughed, his eyes shining.

“I didn’t mind”, he said, and kissed him back.
No one even noticed.

Or if they did, no one said anything. Everyone was milling about, laughing and talking and celebrating and generally decompressing. Colin and Bradley stood amidst it all, their own island. They rested their foreheads against each other and just clung.

After a while Richard came over to them, smiling widely—that seemed to be the official expression of the night, no one could stop smiling. Richard had been doing this a long time, after all, and he knew when a show had gone well or not, or when it had exceeded expectations and soared.

“How do you feel, lads?”

They answered, talking over each other, chuckling and telling Richard how amazing it had been, how their characters had come alive for them, that they’d felt the audience’s being along with them for the entire ride.

Bradley actually felt tears sting his eyes a bit, with the intensity of it all.

That more than anything told him that his adrenaline was finally beginning to dissipate and he would be feeling utterly spent before long.

Richard hugged them tightly, murmuring ‘congratulations’ and ‘well dones’, thanking them for being part of it all and allowing him to captain this extraordinary experience and to guide them to the levels of excellence they had achieved.

Colin and Bradley welcomed Richard into another three-way hug. Bradley managed somehow to refrain from saying something about a threesome.

They were still in costume, making the rounds of their fellows, congratulating and accepting congratulations, when Anthony and Sarah made their way to them. Thus began another round of ebullient bear-hugs, laughter, well-dones, thank-yous and “You were both quite remarkable” types of comments. Anthony’s famous, infectious giggle ran out frequently, which of course set off everyone else around them to laughing, too. And Sarah had to be one of the most delightful, sweetest people Bradley knew. It wasn’t hard to understand why Anthony fancied her so.

Richard came over to greet Anthony and Sarah, with the greeting, “Our lads have done us proud tonight.”

They stood in a semi-circle, talking about the play. Bradley remarked that he knew there had been some nuances that needed to be tightened, which brought a slight frown from Anthony—“I didn’t notice anything amiss”. Colin just nodded thoughtfully, and Richard answered, “Very, very subtle differences to our agreed upon lines were made, I noted, but these things are not valid to any audience member, only to us. They will occur whenever humans are involved. We will go over these tomorrow, young Bradley.”

Anthony remarked that they had been sitting near several ladies who had become emotional during the very beginning of their disrobing, murmuring “So beautiful” and actually crying.

“So that’s what that was”, Colin said, “I wondered”.

Bradley looked at him. So Colin had noticed it too, even in his own world during the performance. He wasn’t sure how he felt about people crying when he took his clothes off, though. Maybe a bit nonplussed?

Sarah went on to say with a little laugh that there were also several people around them that were in
Merlin costumes, and Bradley just rolled his eyes. Honestly…

“So, Anthony, did they speak to you, then? The Merlin fans get King Uther’s autograph?” Colin asked.

“I came in just as the house lights were being lowered. I know the chap that manages this establishment, was talking with him beforehand.”

“He was recognized as Giles outside, though”, Sarah interjected, and they all laughed.

Eventually, Anthony and Sarah thanked them again for the superb theatre experience, and bid them goodnight, despite Bradley’s attempts at persuading them to go for a late dinner together. Anthony did promise he would be about later in the week and they would have a meal together, and looked pointedly at Colin and Richard, “Hopefully with our fine colleagues in tow.” And Anthony giggled again.

Being around Anthony always made Bradley feel warm and favoured.

After Anthony left, he caught Colin’s eye, and they both headed for their respective dressing cubicles to change into street clothes. They still had the fan gauntlet to run. Bradley supposed he’d be seen as unforgivably rude if he seemed to blow off the fans tonight.

It was well past midnight when they finally made it home. They worked the rope lines for over an hour, moving quickly from one fan to another, posing for pics and signing, so that no one became too possessive or proprietary. There were far more people here than had been in the audience, and many more wearing Merlin-inspired costumes.

At various intervals, Bradley would give a quick glance over at Colin, just to see how he was, making sure he was able to move along. Bradley saw Colin chatting with two more familiar-looking fans, and recognized them as people who often showed up on set locations, both in Cardiff and at Pierrefonds. They were excellent photographers, he remembered—they’d been among the first to leak Morgana’s new costume at the beginning of last year. (Katie had told him so; Bradley wasn’t one to trawl fan sites these days.)

It was at times like this that Bradley was again reminded of the dichotomy of being grateful for the fans, and having it backfire upon him, as had happened with the stalker. He still wasn’t quite comfortable among crowds. Had all fans been as respectful and non-intrusive as these few they’d been recognizing recently, it wouldn’t be an issue at all, but…well. There were always a few bad apples in every barrel, spoiling the whole bunch.

Colin, of course, rode the wave naturally, further perpetuating his “It Costs Nothing to Smile” motto.

Bradley was just glad for the beefed up security they’d been granted. He was even more grateful when they finally made it to their waiting cab and were on their way home. As they pulled away from the curb, with the crowd surging toward them and their names still being called, Colin leaned near him and asked, sotto voice, “How many fans do you think are clinging to the outside of this cab right now, like leeches?”

Bradley just stared at him a moment, and then threw back his head and guffawed. That was Colin and that dark sense of humour of his. No fan would ever believe that most of Colin’s jokes went along that line…either that, or usually contained mention of a toilet.

Colin just got that pleased little look he got whenever he managed to make Bradley laugh, and then was silent the rest of the way to the Tube.
He surprised Bradley again when they finally made it to Bradley’s flat by announcing that he was feeling peckish, and setting about heating up some vegetable soup…and sending Bradley off to take a shower. In all the time he’d known Colin, he’d never said that he was hungry. Bradley knew that ridiculous, of course Colin got hungry, but he always seemed to eat just because it was an expected thing to do. Colin had found some crisps to go with the soup, and by the time Bradley emerged, towelling his hair dry, everything was ready. The meal was light but satisfying, with Colin sipping ginger ale and Bradley having his Earl Grey. Bradley then took care of the dishes while Colin took his turn in the shower.

There was no way in hell Bradley would be able to sleep now, probably not for hours yet, so he waited in the living room, texting his mum about the show and that he felt positively brill about it, and couldn’t wait to see her next week. He also opened an e-mail from Anthony, apparently sent right after he and Sarah had left the theatre. Tony had attached a photo of the theatre marquee, with Bradley and Colin’s names as top billing and the simple message, “Great show, well done!”

Bradley couldn’t help but grin, messaged him back, “Cheers!” and forwarded the picture to his mum.

He heard the water shut off, and Colin emerged a moment later, his hair damp and obviously just towel-tousled. Colin wasn’t wearing a stitch.

“I think that should be your official costume, forever. Fits you perfectly.”

“You would think that.”

“Well, what can I say, with you wagging around as such? Were you intending to do something with that junk, or just goad and taunt me?”

Not long after that exchange, Bradley was in a similar state of undress, on hands and knees on his bed. He’d passed back the lube and condoms to Cols, but Colin had set the supplies aside, muttering something Bradley couldn’t quite catch.

“What was that?”

“Just…just a sec.”

He felt Colin part him with his thumbs, resting his palms on Bradley’s arse cheeks, and then there was a pause.

Bradley actually screamed when Colin put his tongue in Bradley’s arse.

It wasn’t a girly scream, it wasn’t. He was just startled, so not expecting that.

Okay, maybe it was a girly scream. But feeling Colin’s stubble against his upturned arse, hearing the sounds he made, slurping and sucking at his entrance, and the feel of soft, wet tongue inside him…it was so incredible and so unlike anything before, he didn’t think the exclamation unwarranted. Jesus, but Colin didn’t have one ounce of squeamishness in the sack. He was utterly fearless. He was a marvel, a phenomenon. How very, very lucky for Bradley. And he now understood Colin’s insistence on bathing before either one of them got in bed tonight…

Colin laughed, and the vibration of it against his buttocks, and the feel of his lips mouthing there almost sent Bradley over the edge...

And then he was over the edge, coming without ever having touched his cock at all.
Colin gave one more long, slow lick, from balls to the base of his spine, kissed him, and then settled beside him, wiping his mouth. Bradley just stared, dazed.

“I want you to know, dear Bradley, that you have a very pert arse. One might even say perky.”

“I’m going to have a tee shirt made, just for you, to wear to bed, and it’s going to say ‘Colin Morgan has declared my arse perky.’”

Colin snickered, and Bradley just smirked at the craziness of it all.

“What do you want tonight? Anything you’d like.”

And when Colin moved inside him, gifting Bradley with his second capstone of the night, the third in twenty-four hours, and he succeeded in granting Colin his own peak as well, Bradley thought that maybe, just maybe, he might be the mostfortunate man of his time. And then fell asleep, to the sounds of Colin’s light snoring.

They had two shows to do on each weekend day, the matinee at two, and the evening performance at eight. Bradley had been warned by Richard and others that that could be a challenge, keeping that energy up for an entire day. They had all failed, of course, to take into account his natural level of energy. If anything, Bradley was even more ready to go after the early show.

None of his or Colin’s guests would be at these performances, but Bradley was thrilled when Richard introduced the two of them to one of his very closest friends. Sir Ian McKellen was someone neither himself nor Colin had ever had the chance to meet before, and Bradley almost had to put his arms behind his back to keep from behaving too “fannishly”. He and Colin had spent many hours during series one in particular, together rehashing every nuance of the Lord of the Rings movies, and taking special relish in bellowing “YOU SHALL NOT PASS!” during the climax of the first film.

Mr. McKellen had a rather unfortunate reputation as being curmudgeonly and grumpy with fans (something Bradley could relate to and sympathize with, whatever his reasons might be), and in some circles was labelled a crabby old queen. But he was polite and gracious to the cast members of Exposed, and shook Bradley and Colin’s hands, solemnly calling their performances “inspired”, and remarking that Richard had had many, many virtuous things to say about them.

Bradley thought it was quite possible his head would never, ever fit through a door frame again, after that praise.

After Bradley’s morning run on Sunday, he sat down and did something he had been taught never to do, both in his drama school days, and recently, by Richard, Anthony, and Colin: He checked the internet for reviews of Exposed. Normally, Bradley had little use for theatre critics, categorizing them all as pompous, thesaurus-dependent, self-important windbags and killjoys.

After all, in every single performance ever, there were those who both loved it and hated, and he found that he usually loved whatever the critics said was rubbish. What gave anyone the justification to say, “This is dreadful, don’t go see it. I have spoken.”? It was all just opinions. Not only that, but as a performer, he knew that there might be several positive write-ups, but it would be the few critical or negative ones that would stay with him and drive him mad. But he had to know. So there he was, breaking all the rules, reading the critics’ consensus.
He found five reviews—five, and the show had only had three public performances. Three were extremely positive, in particular singling out Colin’s performance and even his own as stellar, and Bradley thought his buttons may just burst. He gathered them all to his hard drive and saved them, planning on maybe sending them on to his mum at some point. Some even included comments about audience reaction and one described how two women sitting near the reviewer had put their heads together and just clutched each other, crying quietly as if having a religious experience when Colin and Bradley were unclothed and miming making love.

One review, while lukewarm in its praise of the show’s story, execution and production values, questioned the wisdom of casting both himself and Colin together, since they were so visibly associated with Merlin:

“Their chemistry together is proven and undeniable, but one wonders if casting was simply saving time and granting the actors a favour, as well as just going with the obvious”.

‘Huh?’ Bradley wondered, twisting his lips back in contempt. ‘What does that even mean?’

The reviewer wondered if their Merlin viewing audience, largely consisting of teenaged and young women and families, might be offended by the material of the play and “its’ conflicting values with the wholesome Merlin.”

Bradley shook his head in disgust and wondered if the writer was some relative of his agent, Stella. For feck’s sake, this was 2012…

And then Bradley found another review, and this one was far more concise and clear.

It was also downright vicious and rancorous and vitriolic. And it singled Bradley out in particular:

“While adequate as shallow, querulous action-man Arthur on BBC’s family fluff show Merlin, Bradley James’ presentation in the professional arena of live theatre was not up to those of his fellows nor to that of contemporary standards. His performance lacked the range of colour and conviction necessary to make it consistently interesting. He was at times both inappropriately and comically over the top, or wooden and mawkish. With a more convincing, experienced and nuanced actor, this production may have been able to rise above its’ clichéd and banal social message.”

There was more, but Bradley stopped reading after that. It cut him to the quick.

Bradley let out a huffing sigh, reminded himself that drama school had also taught him to accept and expect criticism. He supposed he should just be appreciative that the reviewer hadn’t also included some sort of splenetic description of his package.

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On the train in to work on Sunday, Bradley offered again to cook for Colin the next day. Monday would be their first day off in almost a month, and Bradley had to admit, despite loving the work, he was more than ready for some downtime with Cols.

“Oh!” Colin looked embarrassed, sheepish.” I forgot to tell you. I’m doing a voice over tomorrow for a timepiece company. I have to be at ADR by nine, and it’s an hour’s train ride.”

“You got a commercial?” Bradley was surprised that Colin would accept work while doing the play as well. “Well good on you, mate, but don’t you know all work and no play…”

“I’m already dull”, Colin said wryly. “But I had to take it. My agent sent me the offer on Friday, I had to make a decision right away, and I figured since I’d already done one spot for the same
company a few years back, it would be nice. You know me, what a workaholic I am.”

“Yeah, I do”, was all Bradley said. It was their day off. He’d been hoping to spend some time with Colin, completely away from work…

Colin looked at him, obviously sensing his disappointment. “I’m sorry, I should have told you but I completely forgot about it until you reminded me just now. Weren’t you going to play footie with the lads tomorrow?” It was true, Bradley had tentative plans to get together with some of the knights and a few other mates for a quick bit of footie in the late morning, but he’d been counting on the entire afternoon and evening with Colin.

He tried to think of an alternative. “I could go with you, to the ADR session, and we could spend some time in town, go to a late lunch when you’re done, whatever…”

Did he sound as whiney to Colin as he did to himself?

“Bradley.” Now Colin looked a little touched by his offer. “I would never take playing football away from you.”

“I don’t have to…” Bradley began.

“You live for football. You need to play. Besides that…” And here, Colin’s voice trailed off a little, as if he were silently putting together an itinerary in his head. “I have some mates at that part of town I haven’t seen in forever. They’ve got a band that’s been catching some attention, and they’ve been after me to check them out, and I said I would. I made the promise quite awhile ago. You should get together with your mates, go to the pub.”

Bradley fought to keep his voice and face neutral, open, and not angry.

“My mates are also some of yours too, Colin. Can’t you try to meet up with us after? No clubs, I promise, I know how you hate them, and you don’t need to drink, they have plenty of alternatives….”

It really was a pity, this personal rule Colin had set for himself, of never drinking while he was working, because when he was drunk he was side-splittingly funny, very giggly and silly. Bradley could personally attest to this, having witnessed his transformation from sober to pissed at wrap parties. But Colin had told him that because he was such a lightweight—the “barmaid’s apron” line on Merlin had been written just for him—he had a hard time recovering the next day, and couldn’t work hung over.

Still no acquiescence from Colin on joining him for a bit of socializing though, despite the fact that fruit juice and water were available. Bradley decided to try to appeal to Colin’s sense of guilt.

“They’re all starting to think you don’t like them, because you never come round.”

Okay, that last bit might have been a little white lie…

“They know I like them well enough.” Colin looked back at him with a coy, teasing expression. “You’re taking the piss, I know you are.”

Actually, Bradley knew the likelihood of Colin joining himself and the lads for camarade and drinks was akin to snow in July. He’d made his mind up, and no one made Colin Morgan do anything he didn’t want to do.

Bradley just wondered why he didn’t want to. When they did all get together, they all had a
smashing time.

Bradley shrugged, didn’t say anything more. He just stared straight ahead, clenched his jaw slightly.

“Bradley”. Colin’s hand brushed his shoulder. “You’re not angry, are you? It’s just one day, it was something I agreed to quite awhile ago…”

Bradley was angry, actually, angry and hurt. But he also reminded himself to be fair, and to remember again how private Colin was, how he always needed more alone time than himself.

Still, something niggled at the back of Bradley’s mind. Maybe it wasn’t really about being alone for Colin, so much as being away from Bradley.

He sighed, determined not to be paranoid or churlish, not to let his insecurities take over, and to make this work. “It’s fine”, he said. “You’re right, it’s just one day, and I’ve missed playing ball.”

And that was that.

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After the evening show, Bradley worked the crowd again, though he’d managed to whittle down the time to just little more than forty-five minutes a night now. He chose people from the crowd carefully, those who seemed the most mannerly and in control, not too aggressive or desperately screaming. He didn’t know if Colin had a system, but this worked for him, didn’t make him feel quite so cornered. And he always made sure that security was within shouting distance.

More than halfway down the line, he spotted two middle-aged looking women, one with a pleasant face and grey hair with purple streaks in it. That was unusual enough to have him stop. The two women seemed speechless for a moment, then murmured thanks to him and that they’d enjoyed the show immensely. The woman with Purple Streaks added that it had been a dream come true for them.

“Where are you from?” Bradley asked, noting their accents. He quickly signed the programmes and pictures they handed over. Both photos had himself in it, one with Colin, the other with the knights.

“Canada”, Purple Streaks answered, and the lady with her—she had glasses and short hair—answered, “The States. California, actually.”

“You were on holiday here, decided to see the play?”

“No, we came to Britain just to see the play”, California Lady answered. “We couldn’t miss it.”

“It was worth it. It so exceeded our expectations, in every way.” Purple Streaks added.

Bradley just stared. “You came all the way from Canada and America for this? Really?”

They nodded, a little self-consciously. After a moment, Bradley said sincerely, “I don’t even know what to say, but thank you.”

Well, the theatre manager had said the show attracted people from far off…

They both thanked him, and he handed back the last of their signed pictures, and posed for one picture each for them before moving on. He chanced a glance back at them a moment later. They were still clutching their cameras and pictures, and holding on to each other’s arms, just staring at
each other, looking gobsmacked.

Colin and Bradley spoke no further regarding their plans for their day off. After the show, they went back to Bradley’s apartment and made love. After that, Bradley lay facing Col, idly moving and playing with Colin’s foreskin. He thought the little hood was a very good thing for a man to have, and judging by the pleased little humming sounds Colin was making every now and again, he kind of thought Colin thought so too. He regretted that his own helmet had been removed at birth. Colin returned the pleasure by licking, sucking and gently tweaking Bradley’s very sensitive and responsive nipples.

When the alarm went off at six thirty the next morning, it roused Bradley from a deep sleep. Colin shushed him, kissed the top of his head, and moved out of the bed. Bradley lay awake for a long time, listening to the quiet sounds of Colin preparing for the day, and then the soft open and shut of the door when he left.

Of course, he couldn’t go back to sleep, so he got up and exercised on his cycle while watching the early news. When that bored him, he went for a run for an hour, stopping for tea and banana bread at the bakery nearby before returning to his empty flat.

At ten, he met his mates at a pitch twenty minutes from his place, and from that moment on, he didn’t stop laughing.

Eoin and Tom were such daft goofs, the both of them, and of course they wanted to know all about the play and “getting nekkid”, as Hopper put it.

“Has Little James gotten billing yet?”

“My biggest worry is that I might poke someone’s eye out in the first row with my junk. I’m thinking of taping it down.”

As intended, that brought a deluge of hoots, catcalls, jeers and horseplay, not only from the knights, but the other blokes they’d rounded up for a game.

Then there was the arrival of the equipment, with someone dumping a bunch of footballs onto the field and Bradley grabbed a couple up, holding them tightly to his chest.

“Preciousssss”, he hissed, in a pretty good imitation of Gollum. “Preciousssss! Oh how I’ve missed The Precious! I’ll never leave you again!”

Macken grabbed a chortling Hopper’s arm, his expression mock-alarmed.

“Hold on, there, James is hugging his balls…”

That set the tone for the day.

“Hey, Macken, your hair’s out of place. I think you’re going to need counselling.” (And then cracked up when Tom muttered “As will all of us…”)

“Okay, mate, you’re playing like my granny, and she’s in a wheelchair…”

“Run! Run, goddammit…oh, wait, no, the goal’s the other way…”

“Come and get me, nyah nyah nyah…!”
He ran, he kicked, he bounced, he shrieked, he cackled until his sides ached and his throat hurt, and he was happier than he’d been in…well. Maybe two or three days, even.

They played for nearly four hours, until the light drizzle they’d been ignoring turned into full-fledged rain and they were all covered, head to toe, in mud.

By half past three, they were washed and dried and out of their football kits, back in street clothes. Four others from their pick-up team joined them for a meal. (Bradley had steak and a baked potato). He checked his phone for messages, texted Colin regarding the pub they’d be frequenting shortly, got a text quickly back:

*Go on a head, will be @ concert. C u 2morrow.*

Bradley squeezed his phone tightly, shut his eyes. And then he put it away, and piled into a car with the lads.

After six that evening, big, burly Rupert arrived—not much of a footballer, that one, but damn if he couldn’t make Bradley laugh more than anyone. If possible, their group became even more animated, more gregarious. They drank and laughed and caught up.

There was music in this pub they’d wound up in, some good stuff…when they played Irish tunes, of course he thought of Colin, fingered his phone for a moment…but no. Colin wanted to do his thing. Bradley was going to let him.

He and his mates all started singing along at some point, though Bradley wasn’t wholly convinced they were all singing the same song. Well, no matter. He ordered another round.

Just before midnight, Bradley was cut off by the bartender. Their group all started to thin, finding cabs or calling whomever to come get them. Bradley was poured into a cab, his home address given. He waved out the window to his friends long after he could still see them.

He made it to his front door okay, but it took three or four tries to get his key in the lock. Bradley frowned, a bit irritated by that—why would the landlord change the position of the lock like that? That was just dumb.

Then he thought maybe it wasn’t the lock, but the key. Then he thought he should probably stop thinking, because it gave him a bit of a pain between his eyes.

Inside, he drank two bottles of water, made it to the loo to empty his bladder, and then staggered to his bed. He couldn’t remember if he’d zipped, because his "Little James" seemed to be out where it shouldn’t be. Maybe it thought it was due out for another performance? Bradley started laughing at that, thinking that it had gotten used to being out in the open and didn’t want to be confined anymore.

He started taking off his clothes, but only made it to one shoe off and a sleeve of either one of his jumpers or his jacket, before he became so, so tired and just laid down on his belly on the bed. He’d just rest here for a few minutes, and then get up and get undressed the rest of the way.

He was awakened by his phone ringing, which was still in his pocket. Underneath him. In the jeans he was still wearing, more or less. His arms were kind of tangled in layers of clothes, but he managed to locate one of his arms and use it get to his phone. He didn’t get to it in time, though—the call went to voice mail.
Bradley roused himself further and then realized that it was morning—light was streaming into his room from the window. How about that. Morning had broken. He glanced at his bedside clock. It read ten minutes past ten. In the morning.

He never slept this late, but he guessed with all that exercise he’d done yesterday, of course he was very tired. Also, his brain seemed to be working in slow motion. Underwater. With maybe a couple of missing parts.

Oh, that’s right. He had drank a lot too.

He lay there for a minute, trying to remember what had woken him up, and then remembered: His phone had rung. He grabbed it up, looked at the calls. Colin had called him.

He hit the speed dial to get him back immediately, heard Colin’s cheerful voice. “’Lo!”

Really, did Colin have to bellow like that? With a megaphone?

“Um. Hi. Top o’ the morning to ya, mate.” His voice sounded kind of scratchy to his own ears.

“You too!” And seriously, if Colin didn’t stop screaming at him like that…

There was a moment of silence, which Bradley thought seemed rather considering and assessing, and then Colin asked, “Have a good time last night? Bit hung over, are we?”

“Don’t yell.” Bradley said. He was having trouble holding his head up; let it drop again to his pillow.

“I’m not. I think that’s your hangover. Thank you for reminding me why I don’t indulge when I’m working.”

“Shut up”, Bradley mumbled.

A sound something like a laugh came over the phone. “Do you think you can sufficiently rouse yourself enough to have brunch with me? I found this brilliant place not far from my flat that serves vegan waffles. There’s all kinds of stuff you like too. Maybe in an hour or so?”

Bradley thought that the idea of moving was just cruel, but agreed to meet with Colin anyway. He changed the time to meet to two hours, though. It might take that long to untangle himself from his clothes.

He felt almost human again after he’d showered and dressed in clean attire. He was more tired than anything else, at least not nauseous or anything. Christ, the things he’d do for Colin...

He found the place—Colin had texted him directions once off the tube— and found Colin already seated at a table. He was wearing one of his band shirts that Bradley liked under his hoodie, the black one with the picture of a red bird and a splotch of blood-like red on it. Bradley couldn’t remember the name of the band, though.

Colin smiled happily at him, greeted him warmly. Or at least as warmly as being out in public allowed.

Just the way Colin said “Hello, Bradley”, did something to him. Was it kind of warm in here?

“So tell me about your day off, how’d everything go?”

“Oh, it was brill, everything went even better than I’d hoped. “ And Colin launched into a detailed description of the band he’d seen, and how he’d been utterly bewitched by their music.
Bradley smiled and nodded, but knew he couldn’t add much to this. Cols and his Indie bands…the bands always were so flat, so dull to Bradley.

Colin was still talking though, describing his friends’ reactions to them as well. They’d all pretty much decided that the band was the greatest thing since sliced bread.

Colin stopped talking (finally) when it came time to order, and handed over his menu to the waitress. After she left, he looked at Bradley again, smiling a little.

“You know, I had such a fabulous time last night, and I kept thinking that I wish you were there. And then I kept thinking, ‘No, his eyes would glaze over…”’

Bradley raised his eyebrows. “I kept thinking the same thing about you. The lads all asked after you, by the way, wish you good luck with the play.”

“Yeah”, Colin answered, and then an awkward silence fell.

“Well, anyway, how are you feeling? Must have been some party.” Colin said.

“I’m okay now. Didn’t really have that much and I’m not sick.”

“That’s good.”

“Mm.”

More silence. Neither one could think of anything to say.

After another while, Colin remarked, “We really don’t have much in common, do we.”

Bradley looked at him. “Really, Colin? Maybe not, outside of acting, and our same ridiculous sense of humor, and theatre, but we usually find things to talk about for the last four years. We don’t have to like the same things. You know what they say, opposites attract.”

Oh, yes, Bradley had spent a great deal of time thinking about this.

“No…”Colin said slowly. “Though a few things would be nice. It helps to have something to talk about at the table.”

Bradley said after a moment, “You were going to join me in the gym or running, remember?”

Colin nodded. “Yes, we’ll have to work something out, there. That will be a good thing.”

More silence. What the hell had happened, in one day apart?

Bradley tried, “My dad’s coming in from London today. Should land about four, our time.”

“That’s right! Any ideas on what he wants?”

“Time will tell soon enough.”

“Yeah, you’re going out to dinner after the show, right?”

“That’s the plan right now.”

The waitress came with their food, and the two of them started to eat, though Bradley really wasn’t all that hungry. He pushed his food around, just taking small nibbles here and there. He didn’t know
why, but he felt jittery and nervous, and not in the good adrenaline-before-a-show kind of way.

“Bradley?” Colin said tentatively, rather carefully. “I don’t mean to annoy you, but can you think of anything we have in common? Besides the fact that we’re both actors? And we’re going to start a fitness routine together soon?”

Bradley sighed, put down his fork. He thought for just a moment. Yes, he was getting annoyed…

“We both like films”, Bradley said.

Colin gave him a kind of “Come on” expression. “The last movie we saw at cinema was almost three years ago—that Johnny Depp Alice in Wonderland thing. You loved it, and it gave me vertigo.”

“You said you liked it!”

“I liked the cinematography, but it was so chaotic…it looked like a bad acid trip.”

Oh. Bradley hadn’t known.

He plunged on. “Well, we both like to travel.”

Colin quirked his mouth at him. “But not for long. You were ready to chew your own arm off after ten hours on that flight to California.”

Well, that was true, but the plane had been delayed, and Katie wouldn’t stop prattling on, and Colin had fallen asleep two hours into take-off…

“We both love amusement parks!” Bradley said, triumphantly. There was one Colin couldn’t argue with.

“We do.” Colin agreed. “Too bad we didn’t get to go to Magic Mountain, while we were in Los Angeles…”

Yeah. That trip to Los Angeles and San Diego, when they’d been at Comic Con. Once over his disappointing meeting with his dad, Bradley had had a blast there, clubbing with Santiago, taking a surfing lesson at Malibu, hanging out with Anthony (he’d introduced him to his Buffy idol, Joss Whedon!) He and Colin had had tentative plans to rest at his father’s cabin on the lake at Tahoe, but he’d been so caught up in everything, and he’d been visiting with Georgia who was also in town at the time, that that hadn’t happened.

But himself and Colin had visited Universal Studios together, had spent one day laughing their arses off at the kitchiness of it all, but also fascinated by the sets they’d toured,( many of which they’d recognized from films), and the film-and-television linked attractions the park had to offer.

They’d also had planned on going to Six Flags Magic Mountain together one day, an amusement park boasting some of the coolest and most extreme rides ever, but Bradley had cancelled on Colin. Bradley had gotten the opportunity at the last moment to attend a Los Angeles Galaxy game, and to meet their star, David Beckham. He couldn’t pass that up, and had trusted that Colin would understand…

Bradley didn’t even know how Colin had passed his time while they were there. He realized now that he’d never actually asked him about it. Colin’s interests, museums, books, Indie bands and films, all seemed torturously dreary and humdrum to Bradley…

“Can you think of anything else?” Colin asked quietly.
“What are you getting at, Col?” Bradley snapped. He had a pretty good idea, but…

“Nothing! I’ve just been thinking about this. Remember what you said first attracted you to Georgia? That you had so much in common, she was from the same town as you, you both liked the same foods and music and films, she was a footie fan, and she made you laugh…”

“Yeah, well, see how that turned out…” Bradley muttered. And then, “You make me laugh. We’ve always laughed whenever we’re together.”

Well, that wasn’t quite true. Initially, Bradley had been bewildered by Colin’s sense of humour, particularly when always-polite Colin had come out with some of his darker amusements. He couldn’t understand his accent, and Colin so often said such off the wall things that honestly made no sense to him…

By the look on Colin’s face, he was remembering this too, so Bradley said, “We spend all our time together on set and off, when we’re filming, and we laugh the whole time.”

“We did that the first two series, yeah.” Colin said quietly, almost gently. “That’s true. Johnny and the Julians had told us both they expected us to bond, remember? And there really weren’t any other guys for you to hang around with. But once that changed…well. I wasn’t your first choice, was I?”

Bradley felt his face begin to heat, a sick feeling of dread beginning to grow. His anger was growing along with it. What was Colin trying to prove?

“You can’t deny we watched a ton of vids, played pranks, made You’re the Voice…”

“We did that, yeah. But that was only because there was no one else around for you. I don’t think we’d ever have become friends under any other circumstances.”

“Well, we did become friends, didn’t we?”

“But not mates…” Colin almost whispered. “Like you and the knights.”

Ohhhh…Bradley groaned. Was that what this was about?

“It’s not any of the knights I’m sharing a bed with, Cols”, Bradley said, in what he’d hoped was a reassuring manner. “It’s you. I trusted you, and when you came to my bed that first night, you said you trusted me, too.”

“I did and I do”, Colin answered. “This isn’t about trust. I trusted you to be discreet, to treat me well.”

When Bradley nodded, Colin continued, “You know how, when the lads came onboard at the end of series three, and we both cooked up your ‘Now I have mates on set’ response to all the questions we knew were going to be asked? .”

"I remember", Bradley said. "I also remember it was your idea. You said it would stop people asking about the homerotica between Merlin and Arthur. Don’t tell me you’re starting to believe it now? Because I have to tell you, Cols, that’s really dumb."

"I know, I know it was my idea, it's just that, when I see how you interact with them...I'm not really one of the "mates", am I?"

Bradley was beginning to think that maybe he, himself, wasn't the girl in this relationship...
“You could be!” Bradley knew his voice was rising with the frustration of trying to counter Colin’s points while also wondering what he was getting at. They should have had this talk in private… “Even on set, half the time you wander off by yourself, you want to be alone. At least that’s what I thought. You never said differently. You’re always invited when we go out, you know that. You always decline.”

“And you’ve stopped asking.”

“I asked you again yesterday! What is it you want, just tell me!” And Bradley realized he’d yelled that last. People were looking, and Colin’s eyes were wide.

He tried for calm again. “Look, you don’t need an engraved invitation to come with us. You should know that you’re welcome. I just didn’t think you were interested, like you weren’t last night. I did ask you…”

“I know you did. But neither one of us would have enjoyed it so much if I’d been there. I’m glad you have these new friends, people so suited to you and that you have so much fun with. It just… leaves me wondering where I fit in.”

“Grr…Colin, what are you doing, re-enacting a storyline from Merlin?” Bradley tugged at his own hair. “I had no idea you felt this way…A lot of mixed signals here.”

He tried to think about what Colin did on set while he and the knights were playing footie or larking about. Old soul that he was, he probably hung out with Richard most of the time. He took a lot of naps. He played Scrabble and word games, impressing the crew with his ability to find puns. He read a lot.

And…Bradley couldn’t think of anything else. Colin didn’t take part in their table tennis tournaments, he didn’t tweet, and he certainly didn’t play or follow sports. At least that Bradley knew of. Colin worked tirelessly for the show too. He attended almost every convention to represent the show, despite his quietness. He was always smiling, always polite.

Colin leaned forward across the table, almost whispering. “I think you and the knights will probably remain friends long after the show ends, because you would have been friends in most situations. I also think… after the show ends, you’ll want a break from me.”

Bradley had actually said that once, in an audio video, when asked if he’d like to go on another aired road trip with Colin. But that had been before any of this. He didn’t want a break from him. He’d been daydreaming about living with Colin, settling down with him…

Just as quietly, Bradley told him, “I think you should stop being so presumptuous and let me decide what I want. And maybe if you actually told me what you wanted...”

Colin just leaned back in his seat. “I think…I think maybe you just got caught up in the intensity of the play, and that life imitated art a bit. But it’s…it might be different when its all over and we return to normal, or, you know, what’s normal for us.”

And Bradley felt his eyes start to sting with his shame, and the realization of it all…

Colin noticed, too, looked alarmed. “I’m not saying this to hurt you! Please don’t look so sad. I want you to be happy, I’m just…I’m telling you what I’ve been thinking about, worrying about…”

Something about the kindness in Colin’s voice made something in Bradley come undone, and the humiliation of being seen nearly in tears, and the knowing what Colin was really doing, that he was cutting him loose…
He felt anger surge in him, almost seeing red.

He stood up abruptly, pushing his chair back so hard that it crashed to the floor. Everyone was looking now, but he didn’t care. Time to cut his losses.

“You know what mate, I'm insecure as hell, but I do have some pride left. What has all this been, then, just sexual infatuation? Experimentation? I hope the research was fruitful for you.”

Colin made a clumsy grab for his wrist, but Bradley jerked his hand away. He didn’t want to be touched, didn’t want to talk anymore, and try to defend himself from...hell, he didn't even know what. He didn’t want to look at Colin.

Colin was standing himself, although much more quietly. He looked almost afraid. “Please, Bradley, please listen, you’ve got it all wrong. Please don’t leave…”

But Bradley did leave, as quickly as he could.

He was almost past the parking lot when his phone rang. Colin. He sent it straight to voice mail. It rang again a moment later. He shut off his phone before he was tempted to throw it, just to see it shatter.

He just walked. He didn’t really see where, didn’t care. His heart was racing so badly and his mouth was so dry and his eyes stung, so he just walked. And he went over and over the conversation he’d just had with Colin, the whole laundry list of why they shouldn’t be together and had nothing in common, and he walked some more. So, while Bradley had been blissed out, Colin had been tallying and counting every fault and flaw...

What a stupid, cosmic, fucking joke.

He honestly felt jerked around by Colin, duped, blindsided. They’d both known how different the other was going into this affair. And yet Bradley had somehow, somehow thought they could make it work. He’d been thinking long haul.

Bradley, obviously, was a dumb, football playing blond who couldn’t judge character to save his life.

He walked until he saw a tube station, caught a ride back to his flat. And then he just sat on the couch, picking at his cuticles, trying to think of what to do next.

Bradley knew he didn’t have to be alone, something he hated. There were plenty of people, women and men, who’d jump at the chance to be with him, whether they were carbon copies or not. He’d finish this play, go on to Cardiff. The affair with Colin never had to be mentioned again. It would go back to quid pro quo.

He’d find a girl. He reckoned he should probably stay away from guys as bed mates for the time being. It probably wasn’t a good thing for him. Maybe Georgia might be interested in getting back together. She’d called him recently, after all…

He realized he’d already begun the “detach with love” process, although he wasn’t feeling at all loving right now. He looked around the flat, to see if maybe Colin might have left something behind, a hoodie or a pair of socks or a book, but no. Colin was fastidious and thorough, the exact polar opposite of Bradley. He’d taken everything with him that Bradley could see, when he’d had his day of freedom from Bradley yesterday.

Hell, Colin had probably been planning his escape for a while now. A gentle, sweet "I think it would be best if..."
And that thought made his eyes sting further, and the humiliation of it all well up in him again, and then even more anger. Infatuation, that was all it had been. For Colin, no doubt, and most likely for himself, too.

He finally just lay down on the sofa; put a pillow behind his knees. He was utterly exhausted.

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When he woke up, he had a moment of panic—had he overslept, missed his own play? He never took naps during the day…

He checked his phone: three phone messages from Colin, which he deleted without listening to.

One from his dad, confirming that he’d landed and that he seem him at theatre that night.

There were five text messages from Colin:

PLEASE COME BACK!

Bradley, am so sorry, u misunderstood, please call me?

PLEASE CALL ME ASAP WE NEED TO TALK!

R U OK? Why wont u talk to me?

I am so sorry. Please call

Bradley roared and really did throw the phone after reading that last message. Fucking hell, what was he playing at now? Fuck him!

He left the phone in pieces on the floor, went into the kitchen. He figured he should probably eat something before he left, since he’d had almost nothing all day. He didn’t know what he felt like eating though, so he started rooting around in the fridge.

His eyes fell on the ingredients he’d had brought in to cook for Colin, and he almost teared up again. The tomatoes and asparagus weren’t fresh anymore; of course, they were on their way to spoiling.

God, but he was so fucking stupid. He wondered if Colin had seen how utterly pitiful he was, trying like a puppy to please him…

He tossed the vegetables into the trash, wondering idly what Colin’s Catholic sensibilities would think about wasting food like this. He couldn’t find anything he wanted to eat, so decided he would just grab something at the theatre when he got there. He wasn’t really hungry anyway.

When he got to the theatre, rather than socializing and chatting up everyone like he usually did, he headed straight for his dressing room and closed the door. He was actually running a bit late now, the tube had been delayed. He would need to hurry to get ready.

There was a knock on the door and the door opened before Bradley said anything. He knew who it would be of course: Colin.

He didn’t look at him.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m brill.”
“I kept trying to call you after you left, but you didn’t answer. I was worried.”

“I shut my phone off, obviously, because I didn’t want to talk to you.”

“We really have to talk.”

“We really don’t, Colin.” What was he doing, the death of a thousand cuts? “You made yourself crystal clear, and I don’t need a re-hash.”

“No! You got upset and ran out, I didn’t express myself effectively at all, and you misunderstood. We need to be able to talk this out, calmly.”

“I need to get ready for the show,” Bradley said dismissively. He got up from his chair and started gathering his things. The room was so small that he almost bumped into Colin.

“Look, mate, you’re in the way. You should go.”

“Can I wait for you at your flat after the show, after your dinner with your father?”

“Whatsoever for? You should go to your own flat, where you’re comfortable. My dad’s going to be in country, and I’m going to try to hang out with him while he’s here, so I won’t have much time to get together with you.”

And really, why was Colin acting like this? He couldn’t believe Colin would be deliberately cruel; he didn’t have it in him. He probably just wanted to soften the blow, give him some kind of patronizing “It’s not you, it’s me” thing, or worse yet, some “I really care about you…” spiel.

“I do care about you, a great deal, Bradley”, Colin said, and it was just too much, for fuck’s sake.

“Oh, fuck you, Morgan. Leave, will you, so I can get ready for the show.”

He saw Colin’s face then, crestfallen and near tears.

Good. How did he like it, how did it feel…

Somehow, it just wasn’t as satisfying as it should have been.

He heard Colin leave, and started dressing for the show.

Chapter End Notes

Do not fear, faithful readers, things do not stay this way for long. These boys need to learn how to communicate.!(Extra thanks to my beta on this tough chapter.)
Chapter 8

Bradley was absolutely committed to a professional performance tonight, no matter what the circumstances had become with himself and Colin. He could take on a character and leave himself behind. He had worked before when he was upset or unhappy or sick and been able to leave his own feelings at the stage door. He was an actor, and when he was on this stage, he was not Bradley—he was Carr.

And besides—his father was in the audience. Cocking up was not an option.

After the exchange with Colin in his dressing room, he didn’t have time for his usual breathing and stretching exercises—Steggie was already calling everyone to places. Once on stage, he closed his eyes briefly, taking deep gulps of air and holding them for a count of three. He opened his eyes to see Colin half-turned at his place, watching him as Steggie quietly counted down until curtain.

Bradley looked straight ahead, not meeting Colin’s eyes. If he had, he might have snapped, “I’m working, stop looking at me.”

Steggie was murmuring “Thirty seconds” as he walked quickly from one side of the stage to the other, and the curtain was being drawn up, the audience applauding. Show time…

It was going just fine, very smoothly, Bradley reflected, as he changed quickly into his next costume. They were almost finished with Act One. Over the weekend, they’d all worked out some of the little rough edges of the show, gone over whatever was giving anyone difficulties, and Bradley felt that they’d worked out their early-run wrinkles. So far, the performance, his own included, was going to be something he could be proud to present to his father. He waited for his cue, entered stage right.

This was the scene with Betty as his pseudo-girlfriend, where they argued and she wound up shoving him, hard. Anger wasn’t a subtle emotion, not hard to act convincingly. He was beginning to feel his usual jitters receding a bit. It was just another performance. He’d been doing very well...why shouldn’t that continue?

And so of course, that’s when it happened: Betty fell.

He didn’t see how it happened, completely immersed in his own character as he was. She might have been off balance over that last stage-shove, or caught a heel. But down she went, shockingly sudden, an producing an incredibly loud boom when she hit. The audience gasped, Bradley startled, and poor Betty immediately sprang back up to her feet, face red with mortification and set hard. It had to have hurt, because she’d landed completely on hip and elbow, but the entire cast continued as if that had been a normal, rehearsed action. The show must go on…

But things went to hell in a handbasket after that. Bradley was so startled, so taken out of his head and the moment by the accident, that he couldn’t find it again, that organic place he’d been working from, completely immersed in his character. He said the lines, he did the right actions, he treated Colin’s character as if he was as precious as gold to him—all the while all too aware that he was acting, but not feeling it, not living it. It was like the difference between a piece of music that could move someone to tears, and the same piece performed by another artist that made one say “Oh, that’s nice” and then walk away.

And it was killing him.

And it seemed to be contagious, too. Others in the cast began fumbling props, garbling lines. A light
malfuctioned. And while Bradley managed to hold up his role’s mechanics, at least, his sense of confidence dissolved.

This wasn’t fun anymore.

The next time he was backstage, he saw Betty, surrounded by several people from wardrobe and makeup, and a couple of the extras too, fussing over her and holding icepacks to the areas of impact. Betty was crying, more from embarrassment and shame than any real injury, Bradley was pretty sure. He thought he should go over to her, ask after her, something…he liked her as he did all the members of the cast. She’d rehearsed and performed flawlessly to this point, as serious and dedicated as anyone.

But he had nothing left to give anyone right now.

‘Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, and now this whole production’s come to a stall’, he thought darkly, humourlessly, and then shook his head at his own churlishness. ‘Sorry, luv’.

When it came time for Colin’s character to die in his arms, the tears wouldn’t come. Bradley felt only discouraged and disheartened, not the devastation and anguished misery he should have as his true love was torn away. He tried to arrange his face into the correct expressions, but imagined he probably looked, to the audience anyway, like he was constipated.

When the curtain closed, he was immediately squirming out from beneath Colin. He could actually feel Colin’s eyes tracking him as they exited the stage, preparing to take their bows.

Fuck. He just couldn’t wait for the reviews on tonight’s performance. This would be one for the scrapbooks.

Applause was enthusiastic enough, but maybe the audience just felt sorry for them. Bradley did his polite smile, waved here and there, and tried to spot his dad in the crowd. He’d left messages telling his dad where to go to come backstage after the performance so they could meet up, but they hadn’t been acknowledged. He just hoped his father had gotten them, that they hadn’t been missed….

He wasn’t going to obsess about this show though, he wasn’t. These things happened. They weren’t curing cancer here.

It didn’t stop him from feeling like he should apologize to his dad for making him sit through it. He waited by the stage door for what seemed like forever, while the subdued cast thinned out and there were only a handful left milling about. He didn’t take part in any conversations, didn’t want to. Mostly people were just ruefully shaking their heads.

He could have been to his dressing room and changed into his street clothes a half dozen times by now. Where was his dad?

Maybe he should have sent someone to escort him in. Or maybe his father hadn’t gotten the messages with his directions and was waiting for him somewhere? Maybe his father had never made it in, had decided to just rest after his long flight across the pond… Bradley almost hoped that last was true.

He saw Richard and Colin talking just off to the other side—Colin had already changed into his street clothes, obviously intended to head out soon. He saw Richard glance over, and he waved to him, quirked his mouth and shook his head slightly.

Richard nodded back, but didn’t say anything more, and didn’t come over to talk to him.
He wondered what Colin was saying. He’d better not be talking about him to Richard, the little shite…

And oh holy hell, what was wrong with him? He knew Colin wouldn’t do that…would he?

And on that thought, the door opened and in stepped his father. (He was a handsome man, his fahter, but Bradley was forever told that he favoured his mum in looks, of course.) He looked markedly older than that last time Bradley had seen him, less than a year ago. There were lines around his eyes and he was thinner. The grey at his temples was distinguished and rather dashing, but still added to the appearance of aging. The grey hadn’t been there before, had it? Not that much, anyway. Bradley was pretty sure about that.

He was probably just tired and jetlagged.

He clasped his father’s hand with both of his, far more formal than he’d ever be with most of his other family members or even his mates. While Bradley’s dad lived in America, his British reserve had yet to be touched.

“Dad! Glad you’re here, I was getting worried, afraid you hadn’t received my instructions.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to keep you waiting, but I thought you’d be occupied here for a little while. I needed a fag break.” His father’s hybrid accent, half Brit, half American.

“You…Dad! I thought you quit smoking!”

“I took it up again. Anyway, you just never mind about my smoking. How are you?”

“Just glad you’re here!”

“You mentioned that, yes. Well. Shall we get ourselves to our meal, then?”

No mention of the play at all, Bradley noticed. No well-dones, or You were brilliants, or remarks about the subject matter, or asking him interested questions. Why was he even surprised? What had he expected…

Maybe his father thought he was just being polite by not mentioning the show? It had been embarrassingly spotty, after all…

He excused himself to change his clothes, directing his father to a chair if he wanted to sit.

When he returned, nearly everyone had left, and his father was waiting for him while conversing with Colin.

Bradley stopped short. Colin never did this, imposed himself as he’d apparently done. What did he think he was doing?

When he neared, his father glanced at him, acknowledging him and standing up even as Colin’s quiet voice continued:

“It really is a professional and well executed production, sir, if a bit rocky tonight. I wish you could have seen opening night with us.”

“Yes, I did think there were legitimate enough moments. It just isn’t a subject matter I consider entertaining.”

Colin also stood. “Bradley has been outstanding in his role.”
‘Oh, Colin’, Bradley thought. ‘Don’t do that, it’s fine.’

His father glanced at Bradley again, smiling thinly. “Your friend from the Merlin show seems a bit of a fan of yours.”

“Oh yes, we’re thick as thieves”, Bradley said, and sensed rather than saw Colin stiffen at the sarcasm, though of course it would be lost on his father.

“I’m starving. Ready to go?”

“I am.”

They left without Bradley having glanced at Colin.

Bradley knew of a steakhouse within twenty minutes of the theatre, near enough to be convenient but yet far enough away that they were unlikely to run into any late theatre goers. His father was almost silent on the cab ride, and Bradley’s attempts at small talk—“How was your flight?” and “How is work now that you’ve relocated back to Florida?”—were met with one or two syllable answers. After a few futile attempts, Bradley gave up and left his father in peace, thinking that he was well and good becoming sick of being around Silent Bob types.

At the steakhouse, Bradley’s father paused outside to smoke again while Bradley arranged for a table. The smoking thing…that bugged Bradley more than he could say. Just who took up smoking again after quitting more than a decade ago, anyway? His father ordered a scotch and tonic, on the rocks, while Bradley just had tea. He’d drank enough the day before to last him for some time.

Bradley’s dad dug his reading glasses out of his coat pocket, and they perused the menu in silence. Finally, Bradley couldn’t take it any longer.

“Dad, I have to ask. Coming to Britain, seeing the show, sending me a lot of messages recently…are you alright? You’re not sick or anything, are you?”

“Oh, no, no, no. Is that what you…? No, I am quite fine, I assure you. I will probably outlive you.”

“You look stressed.”

“Just tired, is all, and under some strain from the business of late. I’ll tell you all about as we dine.”

“Okay, then.”

Another silence fell. Nearly a year since they’d seen each other last, very little contact in between, and he couldn’t think of anything to say to his father, and apparently his dad couldn’t come up with anything for him either.

“Umm…about the play. I’m sorry you had to see us that way, definitely not our best. In fact, it was rather dismal, I know.”

“It wasn’t that bad”, his father said mildly, still with his eyes on his menu.

Not quite what Bradley had hoped to hear, that.

His father glanced up, seemed to shake himself slightly. Or maybe just noticed that Bradley was telegraphing silent need.

“Oh. Well, I thought you were quite good in it, really. You are a talented actor. It’s not my subject matter, that’s all. And as your parent, I was not mad for the intimate scenes either, but I understand
that actors generally do that sort of thing to challenge themselves. Quite brave of you, I should think, baring one’s private parts in public.”

Bradley felt his face heat up, knew he had to be blushing redder than he’d ever been. He wished he could just crawl under the table.

He’d been thinking of this meeting since his father had first contacted him about him, how he’d tell him how he’d overcome the emotional obstacles of it, and the joy he’d found in doing it, how professional everyone was, how much he was learning, how proud he was of being part of a socially conscious production…

Bradley was almost certain a toilet had flushed nearby, and his plans had gone down the tubes. His father was less than impressed with the whole of it, didn’t want to hear it, and dammit, Bradley knew that. Why did he keep putting himself through this, getting his hopes up again and again only to be disappointed again?

His father looked up at him again. “I’m hopeful that you never have to go through anything like the story that unfolded, too. I mean, I know you’re not a bum boy, and am glad for that, it would be quite a bit harder in society even today, but I mean, to have love stolen from you that way… quite tragic. It is a classic story, despite its chutney ferret settings.”

Bradley just stared silently at him. Bum boy? Chutney ferret?

Had his father really just said that? He knew his father wasn’t a homophobe, but…

Apparently his father's tongue was loosening with the alcohol, and not in an endearing manner.

"That's rather offensive, Dad", he said.

His father just gave him a little quirky smile and shrugged one shoulder.

Sighing, Bradley dipped into the breadbasket. This was his father: posh and proper Chairman of the Board one moment, and the next, saying ugly words like "chutney ferret."

Thankfully, Bradley’s father had seemed to decide that he had said all he was going to say on the matter, and lapsed into silence again.

When their meal came, Dad ordered another scotch and Bradley more tea. He really was very hungry, the meat very good—it was the first food he’d had all day, and it was nearly midnight—he was content to just cut and chew for a few moments.

But the silence became too much.

“What did you want to talk with me about, then?”

His father grimaced, sighed. “Well, I’d hoped to delay this as long as possible. The truth is…there is no easy way to say this….”

His father looked away for a moment, then back at him. “It’s a terrible thing, to have to humble myself before my son like this. I have a business proposal for you.”

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Bradley didn’t realize until dinner was over that he’d been grasping the table edge in a white-knuckled death grip, to the point his hands actually hurt.
His father needed to borrow money—a lot of money. He’d suffered moderate losses in America’s stock crash, but the real blow had come when he’d come to work one day to find that his long-term business partner and CFO had embezzled nearly all of their funds and taken off for parts unknown. It had happened right before Christmas time, his father told him, and he’d thought about putting a gun to his own head. He’d had to lay off twenty percent of his workforce the week after Christmas, and the company was continuing to bleed from an artery.

Rather than declaring bankruptcy and closing the company, though, his father planned on re-investing the money he had gathered from every investor he could find. “I have found an almost-sure entity, son, but the payoff needed requires a huge initial down payment. With your help, I know I can do it. I expect to be able to return your investment, with interest, within five years.”

Bradley had sat, horrified and transfixed, through the entire telling of the tale. The thought of investing like this, in only one venue—it didn’t seem like an advisable thing to do. It seemed downright dangerous, even.

But Bradley’s father was the businessman. And he was Bradley’s father.

Before dessert, Bradley had promised to wire ninety percent of all his savings from working on Merlin for the past four years, the next day.

“Of course I’ll help you, Dad.”

And then Bradley’s father reached across the table and clasped Bradley’s shoulder briefly. “Good lad.”

Bradley’s eyes stung and he said nothing more.

After dinner, Dad ordered a third scotch while Bradley sipped his tea.

“How long are you staying in country? You’re welcome to stay with me, if you want.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I am afraid I have to return tomorrow in the late morning. There are so many details to prepare for a venture like this…”

“But you just got here…”

“I know. I wish I could stay longer…."

“But you were going to meet up with Nat and Steph too, weren’t you? They’re going to be so disappointed.”

“I know, I’m very regretful about that. I’ve already texted both of them, let them know that the business needs an extra close eye now. I know they’ll understand.”

“We always do”, Bradley muttered.

“What was that?”

“I said, I’m sure they will too.”

“Quite so.”

“Dad?” His father was now fiddling with his phone, texting messages. It was close to business hours in the states now.
“Hm?”

“How did you get here? I mean, I know you flew, but...you’re financially strapped, how did you pay for it?”

“Frequent flyer miles.”

“Oh.” And then, “And your hotel?”

Dad looked up, put down his phone. “I don’t know what you’re implying, but I’m not staying at a hotel. Do you remember Cal, our family friend?”

Bradley nodded. He didn’t really, but waited for his father to keep talking. “Well, I’m staying at his place, because it’s close to the airport.”

“Why don’t you want to stay with me?”

“Oh, Bradley, really. This is quite unseemly. My lodging arrangements are just a matter of convenience, that is all. Don’t be off-putting.”

Well, Bradley certainly didn’t want to be off-putting. Not when he’d just invested pretty much all of his life savings.

It was late, and the two of them closed the restaurant. The waiters were kind enough to arrange for a taxi for both of them, and Bradley saw his father off at Cal’s.

His dad was just a little bit drunk, Bradley thought.

When they parted, Dad thanked him again and said he would be in touch, would keep him abreast of how his money was working for them.

“Cheers”, Bradley said.

“Bradley”, his father said at the door. “Just want you to know that I’m aware you’ve done well for yourself. It is very gratifying indeed to know that my investment in sending you to drama school has paid off so well. I am sure that you will find another bit of work more suited to your talents after this play’s run. I have faith in your abilities.”

“Alright, then.”

His father slipped through the door of his old chum’s home, and Bradley told the driver of the cab to go on without him, he felt like walking for a bit. And ignored the driver’s incredulous, “You’ll never get another cab at this hour!”

It was what Bradley did when he was stressed or unhappy or bored: he exercised. He wasn’t inclined to run now, but he started off walking and just followed the sidewalk to where it took him.

Well, now he knew what his father had wanted.

Unbidden, Colin’s remarks about being so proud to be in a position to help his family financially came to mind, and Bradley almost sobbed. He wasn’t happy about giving his father the money. He felt like he’d just been shagged with his pants on. Dad couldn’t give Bradley the time of day, but he could travel from the states for his money.

Had it been anyone else in his family, he’d have been so proud to do it. He had tried before to give them money, his mum and sisters, and they wouldn’t accept it. But then...they were there for the day
to day things with him. It mattered to them if he was happy and healthy. They called him and sent him almost daily emails and texts, and pictures, and silly jokes and funny cards, and told him about what they were doing and all the cute things the kids were saying and doing, and sent him dvds of movies they thought he’d like especially when he was in France, so he didn’t have to listen to everyone not speaking in English. They could have all his money, if they wanted, and he’d be happy for it.

He had to wonder why his father hadn’t just phoned and asked, rather than going to all this trouble. The old man sure knew how to pull his strings. If Bradley wasn’t such a needy cur, craving approval, he would have told the sperm donor what he could do with his loan request. But no…”Of course I’ll help you, Dad.”

Bradley started to chuckle with the irony of it all, and of how so incredibly stupid he, Bradley, was. His father had just used him. He wasn’t interested in his work or his theatre show, hadn’t asked if he was healthy or happy or who he might be seeing, if he was playing ball or traveling. Hadn’t really asked him anything, except for the money.

And having him there at the show…what a stupid idea. He’d thought it utter rubbish. Bradley felt kicked in the kidneys.

So Bradley just walked. And walked. And walked some more.

He actually wasn’t quite sure where he was anymore, but that was okay. He had no place to go, and no one to go to once he got there, so he would just keep walking until he was tired. It was all such a perfect ending to a perfect day. Colin’s betrayal, the disastrous performance, and his father’s manipulation.

Bradley stopped, raised his arms above his head. “ANYBODY ELSE WANT TO FUCK ME OVER TOO?” he bellowed.

Somewhere, a dog barked. Oops. He had forgotten how late—early, actually—it really was.

So he kept walking. After a while, it started to mist. And then drizzle. And then rain. And then really pour. And he didn’t have a brolly.

Well, that was fine too. He was already wet. He was a big drip, after all, who people used and then ignored.

He started laughing again. ‘I should send out invitations to this pity party’, he thought.

He wasn’t crying, though. That was something, anyway. No, there was no reason to cry. He was a grown man, he’d made his choices. He could have said no. And his father had said it himself; this was payback for his dad’s investment in his education. Silly Bradley, prancing about on a stage, naked. He’d paid his father back the money for drama school, that’s what he’d done. It was fair. He could accept that, stop these rambling thoughts now.

After a long while more, he realized he was shivering. His teeth were chattering too. He was freezing. He probably should go home now, stop walking, take a long hot shower, and have a cuppa.

He reached for his phone, to call a cab. And realized then he didn’t have it—it was still lying in pieces on the floor of his flat, where he’d thrown it. He’d forgotten it when he left for the theatre…

He started to feel a little alarmed. Phone boxes weren’t common these days. Everyone assumed everyone had a mobile phone.
Bradley started looking for a phone. All the businesses around were closed up. He looked at his watch—it was almost three in the morning. Just like the cabbie had said, who was he going to call, even if he did find a phone? There was no one in service at this hour. Even the Tube wouldn’t be running, even if he could find a station.

Oh…this wasn’t good. He was stranded, he was freezing, and he had no phone. And then Bradley realized something else: He also had no way to call anyone even if he did find a public phone. All of his contact numbers were on his mobile. He didn’t think he had anyone’s phone number memorized.

He started walking with purpose now, ducking under awnings and overhangs whenever he could, for respite from the rain. There was no one out and about at this hour—the sane people were all tucked in their beds, warm and dry. Just the brainless were out walking in the rain, lost and shivering and with no brolly and phoneless. He truly was a lame brained dumb blond.

He was surprised when he spotted a phone five minutes later. He contemplated it for a few minutes, wondering if he should just call Directory Enquiries, have them connect him to someone…

No, he knew who to call. And he remembered the long string of repeating numbers too.

It took a couple tries to get the coins in the slot—he was shivering so badly now that his fingers were numb, and he kept dropping the coins, having to crawl on the ground to find them again. But finally, finally he heard the phone start to ring and prayed for a pick up…

“H’lo? Whos ’is?

“Anthony?”

“Yeah, who—Bradley?” Bradley heard slight rustling sounds coming from Tony’s end of the line. He was probably checking his phone’s caller I.D, and not recognizing the number.

“It’s me, yeah, I just…”

“Bradders! It’s the middle of the night!” Anthony sounded a little annoyed now, and Bradley cringed slightly. “Are you drunk? What are you doing?!”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I know it’s late, well, early, actually, and I’m sorry I woke you. I haven’t been drinking at all, not even one drink; I just got stranded because I started walking after letting my dad off. The cabbie told me I wouldn’t be able to find another one but I didn’t really believe him, I just wanted to walk because the show was really awful tonight but my dad didn’t care, he just wanted my money, and then it started pouring and I don’t have my brolly with me and I didn’t bring my phone because I broke it when I threw it this afternoon and forgot it, and I only remembered your phone number because it’s almost all the same number, and I’m sorry to bother you but could you maybe find a cab company still open and have them pick me up? I can’t really feel my fingers and toes anymore, they’re like ice, and…”

“Bradley”. Anthony’s tone was sharp now, but it wasn’t angry. “Bradley, are you hurt? Are you alright?”

Bradley took a deep breath. He’d probably still be talking, rambling on in meandering sentences, if Anthony hadn’t stopped him.

“I’m fine. I just got caught in the rain, I’m really cold and saturated…”

“Are you certain?”

“Yeah, I’m not hurt, I just got turned around and it started raining and…”
Anthony made a small sound, and somehow, Bradley got the distinct impression that Anthony still wasn’t convinced.

“Just a minute…”

Bradley heard a brief, muffled conversation between Anthony and Sarah. He couldn’t make out the words, but Anthony was back on the line with him in a moment.

“Alright, just tell me where you are, I’ll come get you.”

“Oh…I don’t know where I am.” Bradley felt horribly embarrassed. Now Anthony was going to see how truly pathetic he was too.

Anthony’s patient voice came back, “Look about, see if you can spot any street signs or landmarks.”

Bradley craned his neck, eventually spotted some signs. “I’m seeing Sargent and Vance”, he reported, and as he said that, the phone beeped, warning him he was almost out of time. “Anthony, I don’t have any more change…” Was he whining terribly? Or was that wavering just because he couldn’t hold his jaw still anymore; his teeth were so violently clacking together with his shivers…

“Quickly then, any stores? What are you standing in front of?”

“Hannah’s Tea, right across the street, but…not much else, some empty, out-of-business shops…”

“I’ll find you.” Bradley could hear the click of keys on a keyboard. Tony must be looking up the street names on the internet. “Just stay put…are you out of the rain?”

But the line had gone dead before Bradley could answer. He sighed, hung up the phone. “I am now”, he almost whispered. He’d banked on Anthony’s paternal instincts to pick up the phone at this hour, from a number he wouldn’t recognize. He had a pretty good idea that Anthony had done so only on the off chance that it might be one of his daughters, needing help. Well, Bradley wasn’t his daughter or his son, but right now he was feeling like the biggest Nancy-girl around. He was just incredibly grateful for a friend like Anthony who would respond like this, picking up a wayward friend in the wee hours of the morning in a rainstorm. Who else would do that for him…certainly not his own father, in similar circumstances.

He had been so stoic up to this point, and now it was this thought that had him silently sobbing, had some tears escaping before Bradley managed to dash them away. He blamed it on the rain in his eyes, and tried to huddle deeper into his sodden jacket. He was so tired, he really wanted to sit down, but he couldn’t just plop down on the street like an indigent person. He’d get piles.

And that thought had him giggling, somewhat hysterically he knew, at himself and the mess he’d gotten himself into and what a woeful sod he was.

He saw Anthony’s car approaching about thirty minutes later, moving slowly and carefully as Anthony obviously searched for him. He stepped out from the alcove he’d found, back into the rain which hadn’t let up a bit, waving frantically to him. Anthony saw him at the same time, moved quickly to the curb to collect him.

Anthony’s hair was dishevelled, his face was stubbled, and he had the obvious look of someone pulled out of a sound sleep unexpectedly, but nonetheless greeted Bradley with a grin and a cheery “Aren’t you a sight.” And then he pulled out his mobile and was talking to Sarah.

“I’ve got him…yes, he appears well enough, though rather drowned-rattish. I’ll see you shortly, darling”.

Business-like, Anthony put his phone away, remarking to Bradley, “You’re about to be massively fussed over by my girlfriend. Best resign yourself”.

Bradley thought the idea of being looked after by a kind lady was probably not the worst thing to happen to him today.

Tony reached behind him, began pulling fleece jogging pants and sweatshirts, blankets, and a towel from the back seat.

“Here, before you get hypothermia. Your lips are blue.” He reached around again, produced a small thermos. “Some hot tea, too, with a bit of brandy for medicinal purposes.”

It was a tad difficult manoeuvring in the front seat of the car, and Bradley’s limbs were so stiff with cold that they were uncooperative at first. But the heater in the car was cranked high, and he only poked Tony twice before he was dressed in dry clothes and wrapped in two fleece blankets. Anthony had even remembered socks, so his toes were starting to thaw too.

He was sipping the tea, his hands cupped around the container, revelling in the warmth, when Tony asked him what had happened tonight. “Remember to breathe between sentences, if you please”, he reminded him.

So Bradley told him the whole sordid story, leaving out only the parts about Colin and their falling out. It was frustrating for Bradley, to not be able to talk about himself and Colin, but…he couldn’t out himself yet, not even to this trusted friend. Not when it had ended so quickly and so badly. Doing so would only advertise another lapse in judgment on his part, and there were already enough of those. And…even if they never were the same, Bradley needed to maintain the integrity of his friendship with Colin, on whatever level they’d now be at.

Sigh. It was all just so damn complicated.

He told Anthony about the bad performance, how his concentration had left him after the accident and he couldn’t get it back, and everyone else had followed suit. And Anthony remarked only that these things happened to every live performer, had certainly happened to himself onstage more than once. He told Bradley that the gaffes were probably far less glaring and awful than Bradley perceived them to be, to stop beating himself up over it, and that tonight was another night in which to get it right.

And then Bradley told him about his father, his less than enthusiastic impression of the play, of the homophobic and condescending remarks he’d made at dinner, his disinterest in anything to do with Bradley’s life. Anthony only shook his head, muttered something that sounded a lot like “miserable jerk” under his breath, and said that the man was a fool.

When Bradley told Anthony about his request for money for a “business venture” as they were pulling into the garage of the home Anthony and Sarah shared. They kept it for occasions when either were working in the city, where a commute from their ranch every day wouldn’t be practical. Anthony had turned to stare at him incredulously. Bradley stopped talking at the look.

“Let’s go inside. Sarah’s waiting, and you can tell us the details after a hot bath. But I’m telling you, Bradley, this business venture of his smells completely fishy.”

They were greeted by Cammie, Anthony’s golden retriever, whom Bradley had met before and adored and who always seemed to remember him. Bradley and others associated with Merlin strongly suspected that Anthony had named the dog Camelot and just didn’t want to admit it.
As predicted, Sarah was a maternal force of nature that fluttered about him and cooed and then hustled him off to an already drawn, hot bath.

‘They have an incredible bathtub’, Bradley reflected, submerged in sweet-smelling liquid heat. The tub was sunken and the water actually covered his shoulders when he scooched down in it. It felt heavenly. And he recognized the scent of the oils Sarah had prepared the bath with: sandalwood, lavender, and tea tree oil, the same subtle fragrance he detected on Anthony when they had early-morning calls on-set.

He emerged in fresh sweats and a robe, to find Anthony reading in the living room. He removed his glasses, gestured to the small side table beside him set with more hot tea (with Echinacea, Tony informed him), and hot, sweet scones with preserves that Sarah had made that afternoon.

Tony and Sarah’s home was very indicative of the people who occupied it: unpretentious, comfortable, warm. It was neat but not stifling, small but not cramped. There were bookcases with a great collection of books, and art, and a woman’s obvious touches here and there, a fresh vase of flowers, fluffy pillows, eclectic knick-knacks, candles. Most prominent, though, was the abundance of framed pictures of their daughters, their animals, and the two of them in various stages of their careers.

It felt homey.

As soon as Bradley sat down, Cammie came over and lay down on his feet. He gently rubbed her ears, calling her “Good girl”. Her feathery tail thumped happily against his shins.

“I sent Sarah off to bed, she has to be at a meeting at ten tomorrow, and I’m going to go in a minute too. I just wanted to ask, are you sure you want to proceed with this venture? Did he give you any more details?”

“No, I don’t know anything about it,” Bradley admitted, taking up a scone. He was actually feeling overwhelmed now, realizing the blunder he’d made. “I just agreed to it…because it was what he wanted.”

Tony shook his head slightly. “You’re an intelligent person, usually levelheaded. Why would you want to throw away your life savings without knowing what you’re risking?”

Bradley said nothing. How could he explain it? Anthony already knew about his absent father, had seen how depressed and disappointed Bradley became after attempted conversations with him via phone.

After a moment, Anthony said very gently, “I know why.. “That was a rhetorical question. And I’m not so presumptuous that I’d lecture you on either your financial decisions or your relationships with your family. But I see what it all did to you tonight. I just want you to be very careful, and to realize, what your father manipulated you into sounds like a Ponzi-scheme.”

“He sounded pretty desperate”, Bradley told him. “And…he brought up the fact that he paid for my education. I have an obligation for that, anyway.”

“Oh, give the man a medal, he provided for his family”, Anthony said, his voice dripping sarcasm. “I’m of the opinion that it is a parent’s obligation to provide for their children’s education, as much as they are financially able to do so. And the offspring, in turn, should not feel guilty to be on the receiving end.”

Bradley said nothing, sipped at his tea, nibbled a bit at his scone. In the near-dawn hours of this new
day, and with Anthony’s quiet, calming voice saying the words, it all made so much more sense now.

“You know, Bradley, you’re a good man. Any father would be proud to have you as a son.”

That did it. Bradley bent down quickly to pat the dog, shielding his face from Anthony so that he couldn’t see his eyes tearing up.

“Can I ask, what do you get out of this?”

“Well, he said he expected the return within five years…”

“I didn’t mean the money. I’ve seen you trying so hard to be a part of your father’s life, ever since I’ve known you. And I don’t see him trying very hard, although admittedly, that’s just my perspective. So…what do you gain from all of this?”

Bradley was silent for a moment, trying to think of something, could only mutter, “He’s my father.”

“I know. And you’re his son. And shame on him for not trying as hard as you do to have some sort of father-son relationship and breaking your heart so often.”

“I think…I think you’re saying it’s time to stop trying quite so hard, aren’t you.”

“It might be time for you to wait for him to make some effort. Wanting most of your life savings would not be considered an effort.”

Bradley sat quietly, and sipped his tea.

After a time, Anthony stood up, told him he was going to bed and that Bradley knew where the guest room was. “There are some extra quilts in the closet if you’re cold, and there’s a telly if you don’t feel like sleeping yet.”

“Thank you, thanks so much Anthony. I’m very beholden to you and Sarah.”

“Any time. And Bradley? I’ll be your father”. Anthony said that last with a little shrug, simply but sincerely, with an air of ‘Well, that’s settled, then.’

Bradley was just very glad that Anthony was turning away, couldn’t see his face again.

“Thank you”, he whispered after him, and Tony just waved his hand, not turning back around.

He didn’t think he could go to sleep right away, not after everything that had happened this day, but somewhere between looking for the telly remote and lying down, he was fast asleep.

He’d left the door to the guest room open, just a bit, and sometime during the night, Cammie came in and lay down on the floor beside the bed. He was aware of her, for a moment, hearing her quiet breathing, and was somehow comforted by it, before he went back to sleep again.

Bradley became aware again of small sounds in the house when he woke next. He looked at his watch, saw that it was almost ten, and thought about getting up. He could hear Anthony quietly singing at some point, and he loved it when Anthony sang. He listened to Anthony’s quiet humming, not always hearing the words, before he dozed off again, lying on his stomach with one hand hanging off the bed.

Cammie nuzzled and licked his hand, and he woke up giggling a little at the tickle. She wagged her tail and smiled a doggy-style smile at him just because he’d opened his eyes.
“Come, Cammie”, Anthony called to the dog in his soft voice, and Bradley rolled over to see him standing in the doorway of the bedroom, petting the dog.

“Aww, look who decided to join the land of the living again”, Anthony teased, and Bradley thought about giving him a finger or two.

“Good morning to you, too.”

Anthony’s wry grin suggested he might have read his mind, though.

“Hey, I’m making breakfast. Come join me when you’re ready.” And he and the dog were gone.

When Bradley shuffled into the kitchen area a few moments later, the house smelled of cinnamon, and Tony was singing quietly again. Anthony had made cinnamon-raison French toast for him, with fruit compote, his favourite.

As Anthony served him, he told him, “You had a phone call while you were asleep. Colin called.”

Bradley looked up. What the hell…

“Colin called you?” He did his best to keep his face and voice open, trying not to display his surprise.

“Apparently, he’s been trying to call you, you’re not answering your phone, so he went to your flat this morning and you weren’t there. He started calling your friends. I, it appears, am one of your friends.” Anthony gave him one of his silly faces.

“Poor you”, Bradley countered, and then said carefully, “What else did Colin say?”

“Very little actually. This is Colin we’re talking about, after all.”

Bradley couldn’t help but giggle a little at that. “No kidding.”

“He just wanted to make sure you were okay. Had me repeat it several times, in fact. I just told him you’d had a bit of a difficult time with your dinner, and we were close by, so you crashed here. I didn’t give any details. That’s up to you of course. And then he asked me again if you were all right.”

“I’ll call him when I get home”, Bradley muttered. Oh, Colin…

Anthony said nothing, just looked at him with his head cocked slightly, wearing that ‘Cut the crap, Bradley, and tell me what’s on your mind’ look he got when he wanted to know what was going on but wouldn’t ask.

‘Oh, fuck, he knows’, Bradley thought. ‘He suspects something. I wonder if he and Richard have been talking...’

When he looked at Tony again, he was still watching him, wearing a calculating, thoughtful expression, as if gauging his reactions. Waiting for him to say something.

‘Colin, I swear to god, I’m going to wring your scrawny neck for this’, Bradley thought a little desperately.

“Um…Sarah gone to her meeting already?” Bradley asked, more to have Tony stop looking at him like that than anything.
Tony smirked a little at him, did that unique little quirk of his where he kind of looked over his shoulder, trying not to laugh. And then he just answered, “Yep, not too long ago. Left a tin of scones on the counter to take home with you.”

“Very kind of her”, Bradley said.

Anthony was still watching him.

“Can I ask you something? You and Sarah…you have a lot in common, don’t you?”

Tony gave that half laugh of his again. “I don’t know if I’d say that. We have a lot of things we pursue separately. We’re apart a lot, which for us just makes the time when we’re together that much grander. We disagree on a lot of things, but that makes our conversations more interesting. Not quite sure what people who agree on everything talk about. Do they just speak about the people who disagree with them and how stupid they are?”

Bradley couldn’t help but laughing at that. “I guess so. But you both love animals…”

“Well, honestly, when I met Sarah thirty years ago, I didn’t even know what animal psychology was”, Anthony said, referring to Sarah’s profession. “And in my ignorance then, I may have scoffed at it, laughed it off. I’ve learned a great deal from her. She wasn’t that into performing arts either, but she came to some of my performances just to see me, and seems to have acquired a taste for theatre and music since.”

Okay, now, this little attempt of Bradley’s to change subject was getting interesting…

“So you think that two people who have little in common can be compatible…”

“If they want to make it work, it will work, yeah. We didn't start out interested, but we became so. We were both open, still are. There’s some things I know I’m never going to join her in, like embroidery, and we both think that’s fine.”

Bradley started giggling again, and Anthony joined him.

“Sarah and I have a working relationship, Bradley. It works for us. Everyone’s different, though. Believe me, we haven’t always had an easy time. We’ve had some rows for the history books, and there’ve been times she didn’t want to let me back in the house. I guess it just comes down to the fact that the good always outweighs the bad. We enjoy our time together. We laugh a lot. We’ve learned, over the past thirty years, through trial and error, that if we broke up, we’d be more miserable than we are together. And sometimes...sometimes, we’re just having a bad day, or we’re tired, or hungover, or moody, and we can’t hold that against the other person. If we started keeping score, well…”

Anthony just let the sentence trail off.

Bradley just nodded. It all made sense.

Anthony was looking at him again, smiling that too-knowing smile of his. “All of this…it’s no secret. I’m sure you can find all of this written down in those self-help books if you wanted to. It’s applying this to the real world, when the person you’re committed to isn’t listening or is driving you crazy or has said or done something hurtful.”

“It’s all so romantic, isn’t it”, Bradley said facetiously.

“Terribly”, Anthony agreed dryly. “Like when the kids are sick, the mortgage is overdue, the car just
broke down, and the two of you haven’t had a proper shag in a near month because you can’t get a bloody minute alone and when you do you wind up arguing about something. That kind of romantic.”

“So how do you get through all that non-romance?”

“Biggest cliché in the book: communication. Nobody reads minds. Don’t ever assume anything. Listen. Say what you mean. Say what you want and expect. All that jazz. Been with this woman for thirty years, have no interest in any other, and there’s still days when we can’t get it right to save our lives.”

“But most days you do.”

“Yes, I can say, we do, most days. And we keep trying when we don’t, because its’ worth it. She’s worth it.” Tony shrugged, gave him another of his exaggerated goofy faces. “Have I answered all your questions, kiddo?”

“Have you thought about becoming a couples counsellor? I mean, just on those faces you pull alone…”

Anthony threw a stray bit of toast at him. “Shut it, you. I already have a second job, taxi service to soggy, rained on wanderers that call in the middle of the night. Now eat your breakfast so I can get you home. You have a show to prepare for tonight.”

“That’s not all…” Bradley thought, but tucked into his food obediently.

When they were finished with the meal, Anthony began clearing away the dishes and Bradley headed back to the guest room to change his clothes. At some point, Sarah had ran the clothes he’d been wearing last night through the washer and dryer, so they were dry and clean again, even his trainers. Bradley made the bed, folded the sweats and robe he’d been loaned neatly, and then looked around to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything.

He was going to send Anthony and Sarah a nice, fine bottle of Cabernet when he got home, and maybe an arrangement of flowers. What they’d done for him, and all with an approach of “No big deal, our pleasure.” It just made him feel humbled and indebted to a point he could never repay. Just how could he thank people who treated him more like family than some of his own blood relatives did…

Bradley felt like he’d taken up enough of Anthony’s time, had tried to tell him that there was no need to take him all the way back to his place, and if Anthony could just drop him off at the nearest tube station…? Anthony had responded by calling him “ridiculous” and telling him that of course he’d take him back to his flat.

In the car on the ride back to his place, he laughed and joked easily with Anthony, telling him of the night at the pub with the knights and other mates he’d had just two days ago, and all their absurdity. He listened interestedly when Tony told him of a couple of offers he’d gotten recently, and a few funny stories of his own. It seemed like no time at all had passed when Anthony pulled up in front of his building.

“Thank you again, Dads.”

“No problem, kiddo, take it easy. Call us any time if you ever need us, being lost and drenched is optional. Let me know how it goes with the…” Tony faked a cough to cover the word, “arsehole”.

Bradley raised his eyebrows, smirked a little. “I will, thanks. And I’ll hold you to that promise of
lunch later this month.”

“You’d better.” Bradley shut the door and was about to give a final wave when Anthony stopped him. “Bradley.”

Bradley stopped, crouched to peer back into the car through the open window.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t forget to call Colin.”

Bradley shut his eyes momentarily, nodded. “Yeah.”

Tony looked at him for a long moment, put the car back in gear, and waved to him once more before pulling away.

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The first thing that Bradley saw when he entered his darkened flat was his phone, re-assembled and charging on the kitchen table. The second thing he saw was the sheet of school-style loose leaf paper that the phone had been placed on, along with a roll of chocolate Rolos, one of his favourite sweet indulgences.

He snapped on the light to read the note, knowing who it would be from before he even started reading.

Bradley,

Please call me. I am very worried about you. I know you were at Anthony’s but I also know things didn’t go well with your father.

I cannot tell you how much I regret upsetting you yesterday through my own stupidity and inability to make myself understood. I never meant to hurt you, and I certainly never wanted to stop seeing you.

Please call me. I need to hear from you that you’re okay. If nothing else, I don’t think either one of us can work properly the way we’re both feeling right now.

Your friend,

Colin

Bradley read and re-read the note two or three times. Just when he thought he’d started to resign himself to his loss, his eyes were stinging again. He had no idea what Colin meant in the second paragraph of his note…had he changed his mind? Maybe he felt sorry for him…maybe, judging by the third paragraph, he’d realized that it was going to be more difficult to pretend to be lovers if they weren’t…

No, somehow he knew that wasn’t it. Colin wasn’t conniving, and he knew, judging by his frantic calls to his friends and the fact that he’d been searching for him high and low, even coming into his apartment with the spare key Bradley had given him, that he had been genuinely concerned for Bradley’s well-being.

Well, Bradley had two phone calls he needed to make today before he left for the theatre, and they were both going to be difficult. Colin’s was actually going to be easier.

The truth was Bradley wasn’t even sure what they’d argued about any more.
Maybe they could just take the pressure off, just work on being friends again for now. As Colin had said, they needed to have a working relationship, after all, because they were going to be together for at least the next nine months or so....

It would kill Bradley to go back to being "mates". After the intense sex they'd shared and the emotional intimacy they'd found, well, at least Bradley had thought they'd found...it would be absolute torture to just hang out with Colin again as one of the lads. It would be like cutting out a part of himself. He didn't want to be with someone who didn't want to be with him.

Fuck. If Bradley were honest with himself, the real truth was that Bradley was so besotted with Colin he'd take him on any terms and damn his own pride. He hated to admit that to himself, but...there it was, like an unsightly splotch on the ceiling. He adored Colin. He just didn't think Colin felt anywhere near the same way.

He didn't know. He really needed to find out what Colin wanted, what he wanted to offer him. Test the waters, so to speak...

He grabbed his landline phone in one hand and his charging mobile in the other, scrolled through his contacts to Colin’s number. He took a deep breath, reminding himself to stay cool.

Colin answered his phone in the middle of the first ring.

“Bradley!” Colin said his name like an exclamation. “Oh, feck, I’m so glad you called me back. Are you alright, then?”

“I’m fine, Colin, I’m fine. No disasters or anything. I forgot my phone here yesterday, as I see you noticed. Thanks for putting it back together for me, and thanks for the Rolos.”

“I know they’re some of your favourites. And...I thought their long-ago advertising was rather fitting, now.”

“Um..what?” What was Colin on about, with the chocolate’s advertising...?

Colin took a deep breath. “I’ll tell you later. I was just really worried…how did it go with your dad?”

Bradley gave him a brief outline of what transpired at the dinner with his father, hitting only the highlights. He didn’t mention his dad’s “bum boy” remarks or how he’d happened to wind up at Anthony’s for the night.

Nevertheless, Colin still sounded appalled over the request for money.

“What are you going to do? I think Anthony is right, I think you could be setting yourself up for a fall…”

“In the light of day now, and having slept on it, I tend to agree with you. Anthony said the same thing that you have. I’m afraid I’m going to rescind my promise to him. I haven’t told him yet, though—I’m going to call as soon as I’m off the phone with you.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Bradley took another deep breath. “I feel…like I’m finally taking control.”

“Yeah.” And that one word of Colin’s packed a lot of approval. “That’s as it should be…”

“Thank you. Well, alright then.” Bradley prepared to say goodbye to Colin.
“Erhm, Bradley?” And now Colin’s tone had changed completely, from pleased and approving to tentative and almost scared.

“Listen…can we talk? About us, I mean. I’m afraid I really cocked up the conversation completely the other day.”

Amazing, how Colin’s accent could go from completely clear to so thick that it was almost incomprehensible to Bradley.

Bradley felt himself stiffen. “It’s okay, Colin. I’m sorry I got so upset with you. I understand that you need space…”

“No, you don’t understand! I want to be with you…shite, I am just so pants at this, and I’m rubbish at talking about anything personal! This is why I prefer having words on a script to say…”

Wait, what? Colin had just said he wanted to be with him?

Bradley waited, almost holding his breath as Colin went on:

“I guess…we probably shouldn’t do this over the phone. Can I come over, speak with you face to face?”

Bradley thought about it a moment. He was starting to have doubts about a lot of things, suddenly. He had thought that the intimate relationship he’d entered into with Colin had been real for both of them, and yet, had been so insecure about it, that when it had shattered suddenly it had just seemed like validation of his fears like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“Colin…we should talk, you’re right. I am suddenly remembering a conversation I had recently about the importance of communication. But…I can’t do it now. I have to call my father, and I don’t expect that conversation to go well at all. And I need to be in an emotional state tonight where I can concentrate on the show. I don’t need a repeat of last night’s performance.”

If it was possible for disappointment to radiate through a phone line, that was what was happening now. Colin’s silence was speaking volumes.

When Colin spoke again, his accent was as thick as it had ever been. “I understand.”

‘No, I don’t think you do, mate’, Bradley thought, ‘Not yet, anyway’ and then offered, “We can meet here after the show tonight, if you want.”

“I want to, yes”, Colin’s answer was immediate. “Thank you, Bradley.” His name sounded like “Bredley” in Colin’s brogue.

“I didn’t do anything, Colin. And I’m sorry, truly sorry, that I worried you last night. It wasn’t intentional. Sometimes, I just need to be reminded what my priorities are.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“See you later, at the theatre.”

“See you then.”

Bradley had to sit down after he’d hung up.

Well, that conversation had certainly been…hopeful, if a bit confusing. He thought, again, what a master at mixed signals Colin could be at times. He thought that maybe Colin wanted to start anew…
although Bradley was pretty sure he didn’t mean friends with benefits, and Bradley still had his doubts that Colin could be truly happy with someone like him, so…what?

On the other hand, he’d emphasized opening the lines of communication again…so maybe he just meant being mates again, so that they could work together well and draw upon that chemistry the fans kept rabbling on about.

He didn’t doubt that Colin wanted peace for both himself and Bradley, and that he did care for him. He’d spent the night frantic over him, after all. To what degree of caring, though…

Bradley honestly didn’t know, and trying to figure it out was making his head spin, giving him a slight headache. He decided that the best thing to do, before he was driven mad, was let Colin say his piece tonight, do his best to listen, and then go on from there.

Anthony would be so proud.

That reminded him. Before he made the call he was truly dreading, he had one other call to make. He got out his laptop, did a quick Google search and found what he was looking for. He then ordered the biggest and most lovely fruit-and-flower basket he could find on the internet, along with a fine bottle of wine, and arranged to have them sent to Anthony and Sarah.

The card he sent along with it said only, “Thanks for being there for me. Bradley.”

While he was on the computer, he Googled Rolo + advertising, still puzzled a bit over Colin’s odd turn of phrase.

It seemed that the caramel-chocolate had been advertised for many years with the slogan “Do you love anyone enough to give them your last Rolo?”

Hmm…

Bradley then paced about his apartment for a few moments, trying to formulate a game plan, rehearsing in his mind just what he’d say to his dad and his anticipated responses. The truth was, Bradley was feeling like a right twat about his decision to deny his father, and more than a little guilty about breaking the promise he’d made. Even if he had made it under emotional duress and blatant manipulation. His father wasn’t going to be happy, of course. Knowing his dad, though, he probably wouldn’t even raise his voice. That wasn’t his style at all. No, he knew Bradley well. He would remind him of the promise he made and play on his guilt and his neediness for approval. He’d call him a disappointment.

Well, nothing Bradley hadn’t heard before, hadn’t called himself at one time or another. He could handle that.

He made one more circuit around his flat, and then stopped at his kitchen counter, where he’d deposited the tin of sweet scones Sarah had sent along with him. Absently—and fully aware that he wasn’t really craving anything at the moment, (he’d already finished off the Rolos, after all), but just stalling—he peeled the lid off with the intent of taking a small bite.

Sarah had put a little card inside, on top of the wrapped pastries. It had a picture of Cammie smiling her forever-happy doggy smile for the camera, and a little note from Sarah in her feminine, graceful scrawl:
Bradley,
Sweets for the sweet!
Love, S & A

He fingered the card for a long moment, and then took it into the living room, tucked it into his desk where he wouldn’t lose it.

Okay. He was ready now. Calm. Business-like. Adult. Professional. He took a couple of deep breaths, like he did before a match or a performance, consulted his mobile for the number, and began dialling his landline.

Maybe his father wouldn’t answer…maybe it would go to voice mail, like it usually did when Bradley called.

“Hello?”

“Hi, um, Dad. It’s me.”

“Yes.”

“Uh. You’re still on the plane, then?”

“Yes I am, I’m afraid. It’s been delayed. I do loathe international travel, as you well know.” His father sounded faintly accusatory.

Bradley didn’t know, but didn’t mention that.

There was a slight pause while Bradley tried to think of the best way to ease into the conversation. His father took care of that for him.

“I trust this call is to confirm that you have wired the funds, as we discussed.” It wasn’t a question, Bradley noted.

“Well…no. I’m afraid I have some bad news.” Bradley took another deep breath, intending to just take the plunge, blurt it out.

His father’s quiet, even voice said, “What is the nature of the delay? I believe I made it quite clear at our meeting that time is of the essence.”

Bradley felt the first stirrings of annoyance. He was so sure of himself, his father was, so arrogant. He might as well have been saying, “Where’s my money? You promised!”

“I have spoken to people with more of a business mind than myself since our dinner, Dad,” Bradley said, very evenly and carefully. “I’ve been advised that this investment may not be a wise one. I’m going to hold off until I know more about it. If you could please send me more information, including a business plan, of your intended…”

Bradley’s father didn’t give him the opportunity to finish. In fact, Bradley’s father went against the playbook, very early into the conversation.

“Bradley!” His father all but roared, and Bradley actually jumped, nearly dropped the phone. He didn’t think he’d ever heard his father bellow like that in his entire life.

Granted, he hadn’t spent much time around his father…

It was as if all the air had been yanked from Bradley’s lungs. He clutched at his phone, waiting for
his father to say something more.

But the outburst was over with, with just that one word.

Bradley’s father was a powerful man.

“You listen to me”, his father said, in a tight, controlled near-whisper. “And I mean you had better listen. You gave your word to me. You cannot rescind it. There is a great deal riding on these funds arriving very quickly so that plans can be carried out. Do you understand?”

Again, it wasn’t a question.

Bradley said only, “I won’t be sending any money to you until I know why.”

“That is not acceptable! You know nothing about business. I have vetted this project, researched it thoroughly and properly. My good name is standing on the line. I am not going to lose my reputation in business as well as this opportunity just because you’ve decided to make a power play, to suddenly pretend like you even have an inkling of what goes on in the world of business and finance. You just stick to what you know, keep playing with your horsies and swords and taking your clothes off in public, and let me worry about how to invest.”

“Dad, are you fucking drunk? Or just way over-buzzed?” Bradley could feel his face heating with both anger and humiliation, but still managed to keep his voice level. “Because I really don’t think insulting your cash cow investor is the way to go here…”

“Don’t you talk to me like that.” And now his father’s voice was flat again, the anger gone. He sounded sure of himself. Bradley imagined that this must be what he sounded like when he spoke in Board meetings. “You owe me. I put you through that insipid school of yours. You have an obligation here.”

Well, Bradley had dialled the phone with the intent to be fair and to try to give his father something back, if not all that he wanted. Maybe this was the best compromise they could reach.

In spite of himself, he really didn’t want to estrange himself fully from his father.

“That’s fine, then. That’s reasonable enough. I’ll have my accountant calculate my tuition fees, minus the portions that Mum and Gran contributed, and have it sent to you by the end of the week.”

Anthony would disapprove, but…

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” his father said, and hung up on him.

Bradley stood for a long moment with the dead phone in his hand, before returning it to its base.

‘My, that went well’, he said to himself.

Bradley had expected to feel wrung out or angry or even sad after this call, but he felt none of those things. Instead, he felt resigned, a kind of ‘Well, that’s that’ apathy. Maybe because his father had been such a complete and utterly absurd wanker to him, believing himself so entitled. Maybe he expected Bradley to pay him back for his nappies and his bicycle and doctor and dentist bills too, his school clothes and toys and the food he’d eaten while growing up?

Bradley tapped out a quick memo on his mobile to consult his accountant later in the week, and decided to truly put this behind him.
Truly put his father behind him.

Sometimes the better part of valour was retreat, and all that shite.

Bradley grabbed up his trainers and sweats and started preparing for a run. He’d have time for about forty five minutes of exercise before he needed to leave. He wanted to be at the theatre early, and there was a text message from Richard requesting all cast and crew members arrive a bit earlier than usual for a meeting. It was obvious that the same message had gone out to all members of the production. He’d be there, and he’d be ready.
Chapter 9

On the train to the theatre, Bradley checked his messages: two each from his sisters. Both of them complained, long and loudly, about the most recent cancellation of their father, asked him how his dinner had gone, (and Natalie had said playfully “What’d you do, Bradley, to chase him off again so quickly?”), and both said they were looking forward to seeing him in his play next weekend. He forwarded all the messages to his saved box for later; he really didn’t feel like talking about his father right now, even with his sisters. He’d had more than enough of the man in the last twenty four hours, but he could also tell they’d been hurt too, once again.

Damn, but his father was a prick.

He had one text from Macken, asking if he’d want to join the team for another game tomorrow late morning, and Bradley texted him back with a “Try and keep me away” and a picture of a goofy face with its tongue sticking out, almost able to see Eoin opening that and rolling his eyes.

He memo’ed himself the appointment and continued to scroll. There was a confirmation of his interview for the gay magazine with Colin in a week, some prattle from his agent, and one from Tony—just sending him a pic of Cammie, with the quip, “Have a ruuuffff day?”

Despite its being dreadfully corny, Bradley giggled uncontrollably. He thought about Colin for a moment, how much he enjoyed horrendous puns too, and then, in a moment of optimism, moved the message to his save box to show to him later.

Bradley would start with hoping for being casual mates again with Colin, and anything beyond that would be gravy.

At the backstage gathering, Bradley made a point of sitting next to Colin. He saw Colin’s surprised-but pleased look when he sat down, and suddenly felt embarrassed and self-conscious. Colin just mouthed “Hi” at him, and Bradley smiled back wanly.

It was progress.

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Bradley was actually a little disappointed with the meeting.

He’d thought Richard might have a few pearls of wisdom to toss about, but he’d merely repeated more of the same that Anthony had said about live performing and to always expect slight glitches, not to let them devour a performance or an evening.

Betty was there too, of course, still very quiet and reserved, and looking contrite—poor bird, she’d been the first domino to fall, literally, and everyone and everything else had followed. It had to suck to be her, seriously. Bless Richard though, he never singled her out, never said her name or settled his gaze on her overly long. She was but one performer in an ensemble. They were all responsible for the success or failure of it. Tonight was another night.

When Richard dismissed everyone with his customary “Good show”, and everyone had begun to disperse, Richard called Bradley and Colin over to speak to them privately.

He’d known Richard more than four years now, liked and respected him, trusted his directorial
guidance and instincts implicitly, and yet, when he looked at Bradley like this….

….he felt kind of like he had as a kid, when he’d been caught doing something naughty and was sent to the headmaster’s office.

“How are you feeling tonight, both of you, lads?”

“In good form”, Bradley answered. There, that was positive and yet said nothing at all.

“Indeed”, Richard intoned dryly.

Colin said, “Quite well, ready to put yesterday behind me.”

‘I’ll bet’, Bradley thought humourlessly.

“How are you, Richard?’ Bradley tried.

Colin made a slightly choked sound that he turned into a cough. Bradley suspected he might have just stifled a chuckle.

Richard just gave them both a wry, slightly amused “I know what you’re up to” look and didn’t answer Bradley.

‘Sometimes, with the three of us together like this, it’s kind of like an old vaudeville show’, Bradley thought and fought desperately to keep himself from smirking a bit at that thought.

Sometimes he embarrassed himself with the randomness of his thoughts….

Richard eventually let them off with one of his intense looks and a simple reminder that they were the leads of the show, and therefore set the tone. The words were both a reminder and a caution. Bradley understood that it was not a reprimand or castigation.

There was still a bit of time before the show—and really, now Bradley was beginning to question somewhat-- why had Richard called this meeting, when it had only lasted less than ten minutes?

He walked with Colin back to his dressing area, both of them quiet and a bit awkward. Bradley felt nervous and almost shy now, so he did what he always did when he felt that way: he found something that made him laugh and showed it Colin. The first thing he could think of was the silly picture and pun from Anthony.

Colin chuckled appreciatively, and asked Bradley if Anthony had still been mourning his dead goldfish, eliciting a chuckle from Bradley, too. He’d almost forgotten about that. The year before, Tony had come onset one day and announced sadly that he had mournful news: a death in the family. Everyone had immediately been very concerned, but it turned out Anthony had been speaking of a supposed twenty-six year old goldfish that had suddenly shuffled (swam?) off this mortal coil. “And we got the fish around the same time Sarah and I took up—I’m half expecting her to tell me to pack me bags”, he’d bemoaned, straight-faced. He’d even brought it up on talk shows and print interviews.

Of course, that had entertained cast and crew endlessly, particularly Bradley, who’d chided Anthony mercilessly, especially over the fact that he was pretty sure that no goldfish had that kind of life expectancy, and had they flushed the fish corpse? (“You mock my pain”, was Anthony’s melodramatic lament.)

It was just one more example of what nuttery a very large, diverse group of people would get up to
when thrust together for eight months out of a year.

Colin’s response to Bradley’s silly phone-message from Anthony was to show him a vid on his own phone his brother had sent him: a clip that must have been very old, from the original Muppet Show. Paul Simon was singing Scarborough Fair, all dead-pan and straight faced, while Muppets who were apparently going to the fair, baskets over their felt arms, moved about in the background. When Simon reached the chorus, “Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme”, the Muppets inexplicably threw herbs from their baskets into the air. At some points they even hit the erstwhile Mr. Simon in the head with the stuff. He, of course, never cracked a smile.

It was the silliest, most ridiculous thing Bradley had ever seen, and he threw his head back, near-apoplectic in his giggles.

Colin just smiled that pleased little smile of his, enigmatic as always.

After a while, Colin asked Bradley tentatively, “I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that your conversation with your father went well? You seem in pretty fair spirits.”

Bradley snorted without humour. “I don’t think he thinks so. And just for the record, he thinks I’m vapid, and he doesn’t want me to worry my pretty little head about business matters.”

He relayed what his father had said about Bradley playing with horsies and going around with nothing on in public, and Colin looked affronted and outraged for him.

“Oh, bollocks, that is just…I’m sorry, Bradley, I know he’s your father, but…”

Words seemed to have failed Colin, and he shook his head in mute sympathy.

“Yeah.” Bradley agreed.

And then there really wasn’t much else to say, because Steggie was calling thirty minutes until curtain, and Colin left to dress and prepare for the show.

The night before, during the painful unravelling of Bradley’s and everyone else’s focus during the show, Bradley had reached for what he called his “zone”, that place where he no longer had to think about his character’s reactions, because he became the character. During most of his performances, he reached, and that natural, concentrated place either met him halfway, or sometimes needed to be wrestled fully into submission.

Tonight, it was the former. He was fully blanketed in his character Carr, comfortable and at ease. He felt it settle over him in the moments before Curtain Up, when he was hopping in place, trying to contain his energy. The tingle of stage fright and adrenaline was still there, but harnessed properly, and all he had to do was steer.

And Colin seemed to be on the same page. They were able to feed off each other, give and take in that way unique to them.

They were both on.

If anything, Bradley’s performance intensified during Colin’s character’s death scene. Somehow, his character’s anguish and his own fear of loss and recent disappointments commingled and combined. Bradley’s sobs continued unabated for several moments after the close of curtain. This was the time the two of them would usually scramble to their feet and prepared, along with the rest of the cast, for curtain call and bows.
Instead, Colin did something he’d never done before: he very briefly cupped Bradley’s chin, whether in comfort, reassurance, appreciation for the performance, or simply a reminder to come back to them all from his character’s place.

They’d both had a very good night, performance-wise.

When they were done, though, Bradley wanted to go home, and he didn’t want to socialize or deal with the fans. Not tonight. He asked security to please let fans know that he wouldn’t be able to stop tonight. “Tell them I’ve got family in town, or…something.” he’d pleaded to the guard, and kept his head down when he walked quickly through the fan gaggle.

Security found them a more private exit, bless them, though Bradley had to wonder why they hadn’t introduce them to it before.

He and Colin had plans for tonight, to talk and try to hash things out and reach an understanding of sorts…

Frankly, Bradley reflected, seated beside Colin on the train and finally on the way back to his flat, he was regretting having agreed to “talking about things”. The thought just made him nervous; what if they couldn’t reach some sort of solution? As it stood right now, they had a tentative truce in place. They were talking without arguing. Things were going along swimmingly enough.

So many of the things Colin had said at breakfast the other day confused and worried Bradley, and he just didn’t know how to fix them. How bad was this going to be?

Colin was silent and contemplative beside him on the train, and Bradley decided he didn’t like the silence. “Um. What were you and Richard talking about, just before we left?”

Bradley had seen Colin and Richard whispering together backstage, and when they’d seen Bradley, Richard had quickly cupped Colin’s nape fondly and sent him off. He’d nodded and smiled to Bradley, too, but still…

The fears about Colin talking with Richard about him resurfaced.

“Just that the play had gotten back on track amazingly well. And I also told him I was leaving with you, shortly.”

Bradley said nothing, waiting.

After a moment, Colin seemed to notice the pregnant silence, turned to look at Bradley full-on. “I didn’t say anything to Richard about us, you should know that. But even so…I think he knows, without either of us saying anything.”

Bradley just nodded. Yes. Just like he was pretty sure Anthony did too.

But now Colin was looking a bit guilty, like he was trying to find words to say something. more.

“Colin?” Bradley prompted.

“Yeah.” Colin answered. He looked sheepish. “I…I stayed at Richard’s place last night, with him. He invited me to hang out with him after last night’s show. He seemed to think I looked kind of…stricken.”

Of course Colin had been stricken. Bradley hadn’t been the only one to have a shite night, after all. And Bradley had played a big part in why Colin felt that way too.
He wasn’t going to tell Colin just how truly horrible his own night had turned out, getting lost in the rain and having to be rescued by their friend.

He was suddenly very grateful to Richard, just as he had been for Anthony.

Bradley ducked his head. “I’m sorry, Colin.” Bradley said, very quietly. “I’m glad you weren’t alone.”

“Yeah.” Colin said. “I’m sorry too.” And then after another moment, “We played chess. He beat me, all four times.”

“That, and table tennis”, Bradley muttered.

It wasn’t until they’d gotten off at their stop, and were walking from the Tube station to Bradley’s flat, that Bradley thought to check his phone.

And then he stopped walking.

Eight messages. Two from Stephanie, two from Natalie, three from his mother, and one from his father.


It was late, but he started returning calls anyway, starting with his mother. He had a terrible feeling about all this.

His father had been calling the whole family, trying to get them to talk to Bradley, “to make him see sense”, his mother reported. His sisters were furious, there had been yelling and crying and running about, a flurry of more international phone calls that included name calling and threats.

During the conversation with his mum, Bradley may have raised his voice in anger, not at her, but in venting his indignation and outrage about his father to her. She only wanted Bradley to remain civil and calm, and not to antagonize his father, but she also warned him very sternly not to give the man his money if he didn’t feel that it was right.

No one really knew the whole story, things were apparently getting twisted as if they were playing a game of telephone tag, and Bradley highly suspected that his father was distorting things, if not outright telling untruths.

What a fucking mess.

During that conversation, his phone beeped with another incoming call, his sister Natalie.

By this time, they were at his flat, and Bradley was pacing about, agitated and heavy-footed. He apologized to Colin, who merely nodded his understanding and pulled his laptop from his backpack, settling into Bradley’s wingback chair in the living room.

After calming Nat and commiserating with her, he called his mother back… who was in tears. Crying! His mother never cried. She was a strong, tough, practical, stiff-upper-lip British sort, and the times he’d seen her cry in his lifetime could be counted on one hand. But apparently, his father had called her again, now implying that he was in trouble with unsavoury types and if he didn’t receive the money that Bradley had promised but then recanted on, anything that befell him would now be on all their heads because they hadn’t made Bradley see reason…

Bradley finally just saw red. His mother may be tough and capable, but Bradley still had an only-
son’s protective instinct. Was this fucking for real? When had his life become one of those American soap operas…he’d never expected his father to be this wholly irrational.

His pacing had now expanded to include his entire flat, and he was apologizing to Colin on every pass through the living room. Colin had put away the laptop, taken out a book from his backpack. His face was concerned for Bradley, but unobtrusive.

Bradley finally called his father, and lo and behold, his father actually picked up the phone. Bradley greeted him with, “You leave my mother alone, do you hear me? You fucking selfish, greedy, sperm donor bastard…”

Colin looked up from his book at that.

The conversation was brief, ugly, and loud, but Bradley believed he’d pretty much gotten his point across by the time he disconnected. He threw himself down on the couch, trembling with rage, his phone still gripped in his hand.

After a moment, Colin came over, eased the phone from his fingers and put it on the table.

“I’m proud that this didn’t take another hit tonight… do you want me to turn it off?”

Bradley nodded silently, and Colin pressed the correct sequence of buttons to turn off the device.

“I’m so sorry, Cols—sorry you had to be a part of this family drama. That he would do that to my mother, involve everyone… I can’t believe it…”

“S’okay”, Colin returned. “Hey, I get it. Irish Catholic boy here—first cardinal rule, if you’ll forgive the pun: No one messes with the mothers, not ever. Ever!”

Bradley felt his mouth twist, just a little, in something resembling a tiny smile.

He sat for a long time, not saying anything, just trying to get his breathing under control, clenching and unclenching his fists. What a miserable series of events…

Colin lay down, putting his head in Bradley’s lap.

The gesture kind of startled Bradley from his reverie. This was unusual, not something Colin had done before with him, but Bradley found it somehow poignant and comforting. After all their recent difficulties, Colin still trusted him enough to be this close to him, and still wanted to offer his support and closeness like this.

Bradley just started stroking Colin’s soft hair, not looking at Colin’s face.

“I’m really sorry for all of this, Cols”, he repeated the apology for perhaps the sixth time tonight.

“It’s all right, really. I think your father’s gone off the deep end, hasn’t he…”

“I’m telling you, it’s a damn good thing there’s an ocean between us right now. I reckon if I didn’t need to fly to the States to get him, I’d have ripped his pernicious willy off and shoved it down his gullet by now.”

Colin shook his head slightly against Bradley’s thighs. “Well, he should be grateful for the pond, then.”

“Yeah. I know you and I were supposed to talk tonight, we had plans, but…”
“You’re in no state, I know. Well…there’s always tomorrow.”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“Okay.” There was a long silence, and then Colin said, “I suppose this rules out the possibility of make-up sex for tonight, then.”

It hit Bradley in the gut, the fact that Colin had been sitting there patiently, through the entire family meltdown, waiting for his shag. It seemed that this more than anything confirmed what Colin really wanted: To be fuck buddies. Friends with benefits...that must have been what Colin had been trying to tell him at breakfast.

A moment ago, Bradley had believed he couldn't feel any more gutted. Now, though...

Bradley chanced to look down for a moment, and Colin looked back at him, batted his eyes, thrust his lower lip out in an exaggerated pout.

Bradley felt the corner of his mouth twitch, thought of some worn out old cliche like Half a loaf is better than none, and reminded himself of his promise to simply accept what Colin could give him. He continued to look down at Colin, feeling utterly drained and devastated and exhausted. What a night. What a fucking horrible last couple of days.

His worsened mood must have reached Colin somehow, because he half-sat up. "Hey, Bradley. I was just kidding, about the sex. You know that, right? It's no big deal.

Bradley just put on his happy face. He was an actor, after all. “Well, not tonight, you mad randy git. I'll make it up to you tomorrow, I promise.”

“It's okay, honestly. Don't worry about it.” Colin's voice didn't sound disappointed, only quietly concerned. Bradley looked away from Colin's gaze.

"Bradley?" Colin's quiet voice called to him, and he turned again, keeping his face carefully neutral. "Would you do something for me, in the meantime?

“Yeah? How?” Bradley thought maybe Colin would suggest some kinky sort of sex…

“Are you playing footie tomorrow?”

Actually, Bradley had made plans to meet up with the lads tomorrow, but...

“I don’t have to; I can change the plans…”

“No, no, I want you to play football. Playing footie is something you need to do, it makes you happy. And I need to go out in the morning to shop for something for my mam. It’s her birthday next week. I was just going to ask if, well…”

Bradley looked down again at the face in his lap. Colin had faltered and stopped talking. He looked a bit embarrassed.

“What? You can ask.”

“Well, if you’d be willing to make that pasta dish for me tomorrow. If you don’t mind and it’s not too much trouble…”

Bradley laughed a little. They’d come full circle.
“I can do that, definitely. I’ll be happy to. I’ll need some new ingredients, though. If you want I’ll make you a list and you can pick them up on the way back from your shopping.”

So they agreed that they’d have their home-cooked midday meal together, and maybe talk a bit then about serious things, before they headed out for the theatre.

Despite his trepidation about the scheduled discussion, Bradley started to feel a bit better about several things.

“Would you do something for me too, tomorrow, then?” he asked, in his most innocent voice.

“Sure, if I can”.

‘Oh, Colin, you are too trusting. You really don’t know me, after all this time? To agree to something without knowing what it is…

“I think…” Bradley said, very seriously, pretending to mull things over, “I think…I should like it very much if you do not wear any clothes tomorrow.”

From his place in Bradley’s lap, Colin raised his eyebrows. “What? How can I, I’m going out tomorrow.”

“I don’t mean outside, of course. I mean here, while you’re inside the flat. I’ll be sure to turn the heat up.”

Colin shook his head, rolled his eyes, seeing now that he’d been had. “That’s very kind of you. What about you, are you also not going to be wearing anything?”

“Well of course I have to wear clothes. I am cooking, after all.”

“Oh, that makes perfect sense, James”, Colin said very dryly, and Bradley just smirked at him. “So, are we in agreement? I’ll cook and you’ll go starkers?”

“Why not”, Colin muttered.

“Brilliant”, Bradley said, and took up stroking Colin’s soft hair again. He was like a very long cat.

After a while, Colin nearly dozed off in his lap, and Bradley sent him off to bed.

After Colin had left the living room, Bradley looked at his watch and sighed. He wondered if he could get away with running more wind sprints outside his apartment building right now.

He chose not to go out running, in the end. Bradley stayed in his living room for a long time, feet propped up on the coffee table, and let his mind wander as it may. Colin had helped his anger over his father go.

Now his rage was replaced with a shroud of sadness.

That was it, then. This really was the end of any hope of anything nearing a normal father and son relationship between himself and his dad. He hadn’t realized until this moment, but he’d always held out hope. His father hadn’t always been this ghastly, after all—distant and unknowable, sure, but there had been times, like when Bradley had won the part of Arthur and the show was picked up by a major network in the United States, that his father seemed genuinely caring and happy for him. When Merlin had been cancelled by that network and bought up by one of the cable stations there, Bradley remembered his father saying something about improper advertising for the show, and that this new station was a far better venue for it. Bradley had not had any real understanding of the difference between network versus cable in the States, he’d just been pleased that his father had
taken an interest enough in his work to make the comment—it had seemed conciliatory at the time.

Now, of course, with dear old dad’s every motive under suspicion, and Bradley’s own knowledge of how things worked in the industry having grown, even that slight incidence of paternal bonding was tainted. Bradley just wondered what had ever happened to his father to become so jaded, so uncaring for his own family. Hell, he had grandchildren that didn’t even recognize him, and wonderful kids they were too. How could anyone not care about their own family?

Bradley’s father had always been a workaholic, which was at least a concept Bradley could understand—he was currently in a relationship with a man of the same ilk, after all. Bradley also remembered being small, when he’d been living in the States for a time while his parents made yet another attempt at reconciliation, and he’d asked his father why he worked so much and why he couldn’t be home with him more often. His father had fixed him with a disapproving look, and told him he worked so that Bradley could go to soccer camp (that word that Americans used for football), and have nice things, and go to a good private school, and that Bradley should be grateful for it and not complain. It had made his small self feel ashamed, and he hadn’t asked him again, made to think it was his fault for keeping his father away from the family.

Bradley shook his head at the memory. It had taken this bloody blow-up tonight for him to realize that no, none of this had been anyone else’s fault but his father’s. He needn’t feel guilty anymore for any of it. His dad had made his choices, and his priorities, and that had brought them all to where they were now.

It was time for Bradley to actually take Anthony’s advice, and stop trying. Unfortunately, in all Anthony’s sage and dulcet advice, he hadn’t given him the magic words to say “Father, be gone!” and have a son’s lifetime of hoping no longer be an issue. Tonight was the first step, though. Bradley just hoped he could follow Anthony’s good advice on the other matter at hand. Colin had been so sweet and flirty with him tonight, using humour to gently ease him back into calmness and acceptance. Very few people in Bradley’s life could do that for him, but Colin seemed to have a knack for it. And now, thinking about it, he remembered another recent occurrence when Colin had done that for him, very subtletly and quietly, all sneaky dimples and waggling eyebrows. The four young people of the main cast of Merlin, himself, Angel, Katie, and Colin, were sent to do PR at a con in France, just as they were beginning the start of filming of series four. Bradley had had plans to rendezvous with Georgia, (which as usual had fallen apart at the last minute), the convention had been stupidly conceived and mismanaged and grossly disorganized, and the questions asked of them were the same as always, banal and simplistic to the point of embarrassment. Bradley was in a horrid mood by the time they’d all been sat down on one small couch together, squished together like sardines.

Of course, they had to ask the question he always hated, about the Gwen-Arthur kisses. He’d let Angel take it, leaning away from her, hand over his mouth in his defensive mode, staring off into space and wishing himself anywhere but there.

And then Colin, on the far end of the couch, had caught his eye, made a face at him, wiggled his eyebrows, undulated the mike in his hand suggestively. It had been like there was no one else in the room. No words at all, but for some reason, he couldn’t help smiling back at him, raising his own eyebrows, and then the two of them had started laughing when an oblivious, chattering Katie had grabbed the waving mike out of Colin’s hand. The moment had lasted less than ten seconds, but it had managed to dredge Bradley from his strop and put him in a state of mind more proper for meeting fans. It had just been another moment in their pair-of-weirdoes kinship. The two of them hadn’t even spoken of it.

Maybe there was hope for himself and Colin as a couple, Bradley thought now. Aside from their
working relationship, they still had that ability to look at each other in a crowd and just smile, and know what the other one was thinking. And Colin had certainly been wonderful support to him tonight, even witnessing Bradley’s dysfunctional family drama unfolding. Bradley couldn’t have blamed the chap if he’d headed out for his own flat at some point, but he’d stayed and talked Bradley down and even made him laugh a little. And that was what buddies did for each other, whether they were fucking or not.

He’d fully intended to get up and join Colin in bed, but at some point he dozed off on the couch, thinking hopeful thoughts of Colin and doing his best not to think of this night with his father as an exorcism.

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Bradley awoke not because his body had decided he’d rested enough, or because of any noise in the flat, or because of sunlight streaming in—he woke up because the crick in his neck made him feel he was being tortured. Gah, why had he allowed himself to fall asleep like that? It was going to take extra stretches just to be able to stand upright. What a dolt he was…

Bradley looked at his watch: seven twelve. Okay, not too bad. He spent fifteen minutes doing light stretches in his living room, and then tiptoed into his bedroom and managed not to disturb the still snoring Colin while he gathered up track gear and trainers. He was out and running just after seven thirty.

It was overcast and grey, promising rain again before the morning was out. He and the lads would be lucky to get an hour’s worth of pitch time before they were wallowing in mud like hogs, but that was fine. They were all hearty sorts. Bradley knew that when he himself played football, everything else disappeared for him, including inclement weather, and he was all alone with the pitch, the ball, his team, and trying to score goals.

He was back to his flat by eight thirty, his muscles no longer so cramped and protesting their night on the couch, and was surprised to find Colin still sound asleep. Well, Bradley would let him sleep for now. He turned the heat up a dozen degrees before hitting the shower.

When he emerged and went back to his room for fresh clothes, Colin was awake and staring at the ceiling.

“Morning, Sunshine!”

“Shut it”, Colin muttered.

“My, we’re a bit of a grumpy pants today, aren’t we. Well, no matter, since there’s no need for your pants today.”

Bradley giggled when Colin stuck his tongue out at him.

“I remember, you arse”, Colin answered.

“Nope, yours. Your uncovered, on display for my pleasure, arse! And a fine one it is indeed. Come join me for breakfast, Cols, up and at ‘em.”

“I’m going to go pee”, Colin informed him, and shuffled past him into the loo.

Bradley laughed all the way to the kitchen.

He was eating Cheerio’s and one of Sarah’s scones when Colin appeared in the doorway. True to
last night’s promise, he was nude.

Colin stretched, yawning, arms over his head, and if that wasn’t the finest sight Bradley had ever seen in some time…

Colin walked over to the fridge, his morning erection bobbing a bit before him. In the interest of not swallowing his spoon, Bradley stopped eating to watch him.

Colin removed juice from the refrigerator, retrieved a glass as well as a plate for a scone from a cupboard. He poured himself a cup of coffee. He ignored Bradley the entire time.

Bradley surreptitiously tossed a Cheerio on the floor.

“Hey, Cols, I dropped that, would you mind getting that for me?” Bradley had spent four years in drama school and was a working actor. He could do innocent. He took a spoonful of cereal to hide his grin.

Colin must have still been half asleep, for he obligingly started to bend to retrieve the cereal piece. Bradley started laughing so hard he snorted milk out his nose.

Realizing that he was providing Bradley with a view that was a wet dream, Colin seemed to decide to have fun with it. He waggled his narrow arse a few times.

Oh, this was just too much. Bradley leaped out of his chair and slapped Colin soundly on his wiggling arse before Colin had a chance to straighten up. Colin’s squawk and flailing had Bradley in near-hysterics, though he was a little concerned with the likelihood of Colin putting an eye out with one of his own elbows.

“You are such a tease, you are, beckoning and winking at me with your pretty, pretty parts”, he purred to Colin. He glanced at the blooming pink mark on Colin’s arse cheek, starting rubbing it gently to ease the sting.

Colin just shook his head, huffed a little laugh. “You really are something else.” And then, “Here’s your damn Cheerio, Horn Dog.”

Bradley just leered at him, continued his massage of Colin’s bottom. Maybe he’d cancel today’s footie game…

Predictably, though, Colin insisted that he needed to go out and get his mother’s birthday gift, and chased Bradley out so that he could get decent. Bradley found himself grinning all the way to the tube station, and on the entire train trip to the pitch.

He met Eoin coming in the opposite direction, just getting off a train himself. “Hey, mate!” he called, and the two of them walked in step and caught up.

After the usual exchanged pleasantries and insults, Eoin told him, “Ai, I almost forgot—got a call from Colin the other morning, wanting to know if you were with me. He sounded a bit frantic. I told him to call me in a half hour if he hadn’t hooked up with you and I’d help him look for you. When he didn’t, I assumed you two managed to connect. Everything all right, there? He didn’t really provide any details on what was going on.”

Oh, lord…he’d almost forgotten about that. Poor Colin, who’d probably gone through half his contact list searching for him…
“Yeah, just a breakdown in communication. You know how that goes.”

Bradley didn’t know what else to say. He couldn’t very well provide any details himself. “We had a bit of a row and I wound up wandering around in the dark and the rain after my father tried to bilk me, until Tony came and rescued me”, would probably have men in white coats carting him off to the funny farm quickly enough.

He was frustrated again that he couldn’t talk about his present situation with Colin with this friend, too. Bradley knew that it would be a problem, for while his footie friends could be pretty wild and crazy, they weren’t ignorant and they certainly weren’t homophobic. And their Merlin associates would just love it—hell, Katie would probably wet herself or pop a blood vessel in her ecstatic “I knew it!” carryings on. And he strongly suspected that most of the older ones wouldn’t be surprised in the least.

But coming out wasn’t a decision he could make alone, or lightly. Colin would have to agree to it too, and knowing Colin as he did, he thought Colin would probably be very reluctant to do so. Not because he didn’t think it would be accepted, but more a privacy issue. Colin was steadfast and stubbornly good at keeping himself to himself.

And—he needed to keep reminding himself of this, because this was key: Friends with benefits rarely, if ever, "came out".

Bradley shook himself a little, not allowing that black cloud to descend any further. He and Colin...It was what it was...whatever it was.

Eoin was still looking at him, waiting for some sort of explanation, or something, and so Bradley just covered by running up to the already practicing mates on the field and greeting them loudly and enthusiastically. Tom was there too, unmistakable by his height, and jogged over to greet him.

“Hey”, he clapped Bradley on the back, nearly knocking Bradley over in his enthusiasm, and grinned his wide smile “How goes the battle? Ready to beat these guys into the ground?” He indicated the opposing team they were scheduled against.

“Always!” Bradley replied enthusiastically and was about to start his warm ups when Hopper stopped him with a hand.

“I got a call from Colin the other day…” he began, and Bradley had to stifle a groan.

He just gave Tom the same song and dance as he’d given Macken, and bless them both, they let it go, reassured that Colin was fine and that the two of them had met up. Colin had been very busy on the phone, it looked like…

Bradley and the lads had been playing less than an hour before the threatening clouds opened up and drenched them all, and they were sliding around on the pitch despite their cleats. Bradley managed to procure a rather unattractive, roughened patch on his arm which would probably earn him a glare from makeup tonight, as it would have to be covered with body makeup. The pitfalls of taking one’s clothes off onstage every night was that makeup was the only way to hide one’s little scrapes and bruises.

They gave up when deep puddles started appearing in the field, retreated to the locker room, hot showers and dry clothes. Bradley’s friends invited him for drinks, but he begged off, reminding them that he was working that night and couldn’t, and letting them know he was also meeting a friend for lunch shortly.
He didn’t mention who the friend was, or who was cooking, and his mates didn’t ask.

They didn’t let him off the hook entirely, though. Before he left, Tom and Eoin told him they were looking forward to seeing himself and Colin in the play soon. They had their tickets for the show in just a few days.

“You two just better behave yourselves”, Bradley told them, mock-stern, and then added, “Why do I have this vision of Statler and Waldorf at the show…”

Well, that of course sent everyone off into raucous laughter and jeers, but he did get promises of best behaviour from the two of them. He knew they’d be supportive and respectful, at least in public. Of course, afterward, in private, they’d have plenty to say, mostly slurs on his junk, he knew…

“Say hi to Colin for us”, was the last thing he heard before he left for the tube, a borrowed brolly shielding him from a second soaking.

The rain had stopped by the time he reached his flat. The first thing Bradley did when he got in was turn the heat up even higher in the apartment. It was cold and damp outside, even without the rain, and Colin was due back any moment.

He washed his hands, set the pasta to boil on the stove, and pulled out his mobile to call Colin.

“Hey! Where are you mate?”

“I’m…I’m not late, am I?” Colin’s voice sounded suddenly worried. “Did I mess up the time…?”

“No, no, I’m back a bit early, just checking to make sure you didn’t get swept away in the downpour.”

“No, I’m fine, I stopped for coffee but I’m on the train now. I’ve got everything we need, plus I picked up some dessert too.”

Bradley would have been fine with Colin as dessert, but held the thought.

“How soon can I expect you?”

“About fifteen minutes.”

“Perfect timing. Bring your appetite.”

Colin’s estimate was almost perfect, and when he stumbled in a bit later, laden down with shopping bags, Bradley hurried to help him unload. In addition to the list of grocery supplies Bradley had provided him, Colin had bought his mother a new sewing basket, which Bradley declared “Tender”.

“Hey, you didn’t see the one she had last time I was home, pretty grotty. She’ll like this, it’s what she wanted.”

Colin had also purchased three books, one for himself and two for his mother, to complete the birthday package, plus shipping supplies.

“And…I also brought you a little gift, and got one of these for myself.” Colin held out a small package for Bradley.

Inside the bag was a pair of glasses. Pink glasses.

“Um. Colin? “
Colin grinned at him. “Read the side of it.”

On the side of these pink glasses were the words ‘*Onion Goggles*’

He looked a question at Colin.

“I’ve read about these online and thought this would be a perfect time to try them out. They keep your eyes from tearing when you’re chopping onions.”

“Well, that’s brilliant, Bradley said dryly. “I don’t know how I’ve survived without these onion goggles before now.” Bradley looked at them again. “And they’re pink.”

Colin was nothing but thorough. And thoughtful. And organized. And forward thinking.

The real problem with Colin, Bradley thought with an inner eye roll, as Colin took his purchases (except the onion goggles) into the bedroom to prepare later, was that Colin was just too damned perfect.

Colin returned to the kitchen a moment later as Bradley began sorting through the various vegetables. “Need any help?”

Without looking up, Bradley replied, “Colin. I think there’s something wrong, here.”

“Really?” Colin’s voice was a bit worried as well as puzzled now. “I thought I got everything on the list…”

“I didn’t mean on the list”. Bradley looked up, and then looked up and down Colin’s body pointedly. He just raised an eyebrow at Colin, waiting. Colin just rolled his eyes and groaned, and started pulling his shirts off over his head.

“Good boy”, Bradley approved, grinning, and went back to sorting the veggies.

He assigned Colin to rinsing and cutting of the asparagus and tomatoes while he assembled the spices and other ingredients for mixing. He even had his new onion goggles ready just in case his eyes started to tear.

However, he started running into problems right away. Naked Colin was deliberately taunting him, wagging his unencumbered parts at him or touching himself whenever Bradley looked his way.

Considering the show that was being put on just for him, Bradley couldn’t help look his way, a lot.

Bradley knocked over the bottle of olive oil, dropped the salt container.

Colin walked by him on the way to retrieve a dish towel, (and yes, he was wearing the pink onion goggles) and deliberately shook his hips. His cock waved at Bradley merrily.

Bradley spilled half the pasta on the floor.

“Um, Colin….”

Bradley was being reminded once again of what a hell of an actor Colin was. Colin didn’t crack a smile, or show any outward sign that he was doing anything out of the ordinary, anything that might possibly be causing Bradley to be on the verge of doubling over with laughter as he was now.

Completely straight faced, Colin looked up at Bradley and asked him innocently, “Oh, am I distracting you? Here, let’s see what we can do to remedy that...”
Colin made a show of appearing to concentrate hard, thinking deeply about what he could possibly do to help Bradley overcome his sudden butterfingers.

“Oh. I think I’ve an idea.” Colin said. Very deliberately, with his eyes not leaving Bradley’s face, he tucked his cock and balls between his legs and held his knees together. “Better, now?” Deadpan, Colin walked by him again, standing on his toes, knock-kneed and with no genitalia showing.

Then he walked back, and Bradley was treated to the sight of the tip of his dick, seemingly between Colin’s own arse cheeks.

Bradley exploded with laughter for five minutes.

In spite of all the clowning beforehand, lunch was a resounding success, and Colin thanked and congratulated him, and even asked for seconds.

The pasta really was as delicious as they remembered it. Bradley declined dessert for now—the apple tartlets that Colin had picked up, another favourite—and said he’d have it later with his tea before they left for the theatre.

And then, there really was nothing more for them to do but move into the living room for The Talk.

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to remind everyone: Bradley's father in this is a completely fictional character. As far as I know, RL Bradley gets along just fine with both his father and stepfather. It's fiction, folks!
Chapter 10

As Bradley sat down, he noticed the two foil-wrapped condoms, tube of lube, and small hand towel neatly arranged on the coffee table. That hadn’t been there before, of course—Colin must have placed it there on his pass back in from the bedroom, after he’d put his mother’s gifts away.

It was just another tick in the “Fuck-Buddies Only” column as far as Bradley was concerned. It was true, with most new relationships, there was always a wild, sexually insatiable period at the beginning, and Bradley’s appetite for shagging was a sizeable one. He loved fucking and being fucked by Colin.

More than that, though, he loved Colin. He had for some time, if he were honest with himself. And he wanted to be loved back by him, but...he didn’t think that’s where Colin was at. And Bradley didn’t know if, feeling the way he did, he was going to manage that.

He quirked an eyebrow at Colin, giving him a half-smile. *Let’s see what’s on offer.*

Colin just shrugged. “I’m an optimistic sort”, he told Bradley, and sat down in the winged-back chair across from where Bradley sat on the couch.

“That makes one of us”, Bradley thought, but didn’t say it out loud. He was already feeling his anxiety level climb, just thinking about talking about their problems. Why not just let sleeping dogs lie? They’d been having such a good day today, having so much fun, not arguing…

He just looked at Colin, waiting. Tried to keep his face as open as he knew how.

“Well, here we are, just two blokes, sitting around, hanging out, talking about our feelings”, Bradley tried.

“I guess… I guess you want me to start, then.” Colin suddenly looked as nervous as he felt.

“Yeah, you should go ahead, and I’ll do my best to listen.”

Colin took a deep breath. “Okay, then. Okay. Well. I...well; the first thing I want you to know is that I like you. A lot. I don’t know how much plainer I can make it than that.”

“I like you too. I have for quite awhile now.”

“Good. We’re agreed on that, then.” Colin smiled slightly, awkwardly. His hands made a few awkward gestures on the arms of the chair, and then he lapsed into silence.

The silence continued.

Bradley couldn’t take it anymore. He took a deep breath through his nose. “You...you said I misunderstood you the other day, at breakfast. Maybe you can start by telling me what you meant.”

“Yeah, you’re right. You misunderstood me because I am so lousy at saying how I feel about personal things, which is why I like having pages of script to memorize when I talk.”

Bradley shook his head slightly. “Oh, Cols, stop saying that. You express yourself just fine. You were getting at something, obviously. We were talking about all the things we disagree on, how we have... pretty much have nothing in common...” Bradley felt himself become a little more disheartened, now that he’d voiced it again.
“But that wasn’t my point”, Colin said quickly. “I went into the conversation with the intent of pointing out that isn’t it great, despite everything, we get along so well, and we find so much common ground even though on the surface, we’re the odd couple. On paper we don’t have anything in common, but we really do…”

“Okay…”

Colin took another breath. “I know we are very different. I guess…I guess it kind of snowballed away from me when we started talking about it. I think I wanted you to just reassure me that what we don’t have in common isn’t as important as how much we do, and that…we find things to do and stuff to talk about…”

Colin’s voice trailed off. Bradley just looked at him, waiting.

Colin seemed to be groping for something more to say, to explain himself further.

This really wasn’t going all that well.

Bradley waited a minute, and then said, “I thought you were making the point that it was going to be very difficult to maintain a real relationship, a close one, and have anything to talk about, with us being this way.”

“That wasn’t what I started out saying, but…I kind of realized it, while talking to you…”

“Yeah.” Bradley said. He couldn’t think of anything else to say. This hadn’t been what he was expecting at all, and Colin seemed stuck on this one aspect of it all. It was all a lot more complicated, at least from Bradley’s lights.

“I just worry that I’m too boring for you, that you’ll get tired of me very quickly. I mean, look at us. You love being around people, you’re an extrovert.”

*What is he trying to tell me?,* Bradley wondered, *Have we now actually reached the ‘It’s not you, it’s me’ stage.* He fought to stifle his groan.

“‘You’re not boring--that’s ridiculous. Everyone loves you, what are you even talking about?’”

“....I’m an introvert. I do best not talking, alone with my books, or when I have a script to read from.”

“Colin.” Bradley spoke very quietly. “You also do very well in small groups. The mates on set all adore you. Macken would shag you in a heartbeat.” This earned a chuff of a laugh from Colin, who rolled his eyes and muttered “Paddy Power”. “Now granted, he’d sleep with anyone, but Richard also adores you, Alice wants to adopt you, Marcel thinks you’re awesome, Andreas would give up his cup and sword for you and every damn fan you cross paths with drops like a plum at your feet. I’m having a hard time understanding what you’re trying to say here. I think you mean you’re feeling insecure, but…”

“I’m honestly scared shitless”, Colin blurted, looking Bradley straight in the eyes.

Bradley felt those same eyes almost bug out of his head. Was Colin fucking screwing with him???

“What--why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”
“Not to me I’m afraid.”

Haltingly, as if he were thinking of each sentence and proof reading it in his own mind, Colin told him, “What we’ve started....since we’ve taken up together and started doing the show...it’s so intense. It’s just...perfect, almost. And I’ve never been in a relationship like this...putting aside the fact you’re the same gender as me, I mean. Just--one where, you know, who I was with seemed to feel the same way... as fiercely as I do. One where...I could see myself being for a while. I don’t know. I’m so rubbish at it all. It’s just...awesome and exciting and exhilarating and petrifying, to the point sometimes I want to scream and blow chunks with the worry of it all, and since I’m a coward with no experience in the ways of the heart, my first instinct is to run the other way, fast and far. Before...what I fear happens, happens.”

Bradley sighed.

“I’m hearing you, I am, but I have to say...I’m not getting it. I mean...to me, it’s seemed you’ve been so distant and so...ambivalent, almost. You go off on your first day off, and...”

“I’m sorry about that!”, Colin’s voice rose. “In hindsight I realize I made a mistake. I didn’t realize until after how badly it seemed. I just...I thought it was what you wanted. I didn’t want to cling to you like a vine, I know you love to be around people, the sporty types, you need to play football and cricket and tennis...”

“I wanted to be with you, I told you that!”

“I know, but I ...I thought it was what you wanted. You like traveling in a pack...”

“You could come with me! We’ve already had this conversation.”

“I honestly thought you’d want time with your friends.”

“I wanted to be with you. I told you that, I don’t know how else I can convince you.” What a surprising turn of the tables this conversation was. And here Bradley had thought he was the unsure, insecure one in their pairing. “And I perceived you as being just totally in your own head, completely in charge of things, not really caring if I came or went. You don’t think you seemed removed, cool about us, ambiguous, on the fence? I thought you were in it for the fucking, for Gods sake.” And now Bradley felt sudden anger at Colin. How dare he play the victim here? He heard his own voice become louder. “You behaved like you were sexually infatuated, or experimenting for the first time with a same sex partner, or just wanted a fuck buddy! It’s the only part of all of this that’s been hunky dory.!”

“No! I thought the same of you!”

“How can you say that? You came to me first!”

“I was terrified too! I worried I had boxed you in, you felt obligated...”

“You’re fucking crazy!”

Bradley only realized he’d bellowed that when Colin lowered his head to stare at his bare lap and said nothing else.

It just made no sense to Bradley. Colin was claiming he’d been afraid of the same things Bradley had been, in complete contrast to his actions.

Or at least, that was how Bradley saw it.
What a spectacular mess. No, Anthony was wrong about this whole talking business. It seemed hopeless, where they were and what they needed to work through, laid out and verbalized like this. This was why he hadn’t wanted to talk about it...because he hadn’t thought talking about it would reap the results he wanted.

After a long time of sitting in silence and trying to get his racing heart under control, Bradley took a very deep breath and said very quietly, “What are we going to do?”

Colin looked up at that, shoulders hunched. “I am so pants at this...”

“Colin...” Bradley sighed, shook his head. It was time to back off, he could see that. Browbeating Colin was certainly not going to help them at all. He still felt like blaming Colin for the mess they found themselves in, but--

“Let me ask you this. What do you want?”

“I want...” Colin said. “I guess...I want to be able to change enough--”

“I don’t want you to change. I really don’t. I want you to always be you, and fuck it, mate, I’m sure I must drive you mad at times.” Bradley suddenly felt exhausted and depressed, and they’d only begun conversing a few moments ago. “I know I talk too much, and laugh too much, and move too much for you...”

“Sometimes”, Colin said, very gently and fondly, and now there was a ghost of a smile at his mouth. “Most of the time, though, you just seem...joyful. It’s why I fell for you, initially. All that bounding about, laughing and hugging and pranking. I’ve wished before I could be more like you.”

“No...” Bradley started to say, but Colin wasn’t finished.

“And you’re not just energy and japes. You’re also smart and articulate, and kind and generous and gracious.”

Bradley said nothing, just enjoyed the flattered warmth he felt from that.

“And...I like being with you.” Colin continued. “And...I know I feel like you used to get that I like being with you too, and when I wasn’t, that it wasn’t a rejection of you. It was just...me being me.”

Well, that was true enough. Colin often needed to be alone at work in particular and Bradley had come to understand that very quickly...well, except for the times when he didn’t realize Colin was in his Zen-work mode and was all ’Oh, play with Colin!’

Colin wasn’t done yet though:

“...and I’m not sure ‘me’ is going to be able to make you happy.”

“We both are what we are”, Bradley agreed quietly. “Very different. This is all foreign territory to us, and our honeymoon period lasted about, what, nine hours?. I’m so frustrated though...there’s times I wonder...I mean...you remember the other night, when I practically crushed you in your sleep?”

Colin snorted. “I remember, and it wasn’t that bad, honestly. You’re exaggerating.”

Bradley stopped for a moment. “Maybe I am. I’ve been accused of being a drama queen before, but--I don’t think it takes a genius or a shrink to guess why my subconscious had me doing that, do you? That I’m as petrified as you are, maybe more so because you’re the reserved and together one”, and here Bradley ignored Colin’s louder, derisive snort. He asked Colin, “What were you thinking, other
than that you were oxygen-deprived?"

Colin answered after a moment, “I felt...flattered. Wanted. And..maybe I did know, a little bit, that you were insecure. But that feeling disappeared in the light of day. I see your ease with people, especially the knights, and I think you’re going to tire of me very quickly.”

“And you wanted to dump me, before I dumped you, you said. I don’t know, Colin, I hear the words but I just don’t know where they come from...”

They were talking in circles, right back where they started. Bradley thought of Anthony again and told Colin, “Someone very wise has told me recently that communication is key, and never to assume anyone’s a mind reader and will just know what I want. I used to be able to speak “Colin”, but ever since we took up together...I’m afraid the dialect has become all garbled.”

They both contemplated their navels for long minutes in silence.

“Is there a way to solve this?”, Colin finally spoke, and Bradley hoped to hell it was a rhetorical question because he certainly didn’t know.

“We could start over”, Bradley said after a long time, because he truly had nothing else for either of them. “Try harder? Fight it out? Say what we mean? All that stuff they say on daytime telly..”

Colin, while looking dubious, said, “Yes, we could do that. We can try.” And then after another moment of stillness, “Bradley.”

Bradley raised his head to look at Colin.

“The sex. I’ll say exactly what I mean here: I love it, I could shag you stupid three ways from Sunday, but we don’t have to do that. It’s up to you. I don’t want you to think I only wanted you to be my boy toy or anything. I--I think we’re more than fuck buddies, aren’t we? I hope?”

Bradley had been worried about just that for too long. That was exactly what he wanted;- to have more than grand, fabulous booty calls with this man.

“I could shag you four and a half ways, boy-o”, Bradley muttered. “I want the sex too. I just don’t want it to be all you want from me.” And then he started to laugh his high-pitched giggle.

“What--?” Colin said.

“I’m the girl in this relationship who doesn’t want to be used for sex”, Bradley giggled. Oh, the irony.

Colin’s smile was wry, but he was suddenly standing and bringing his naked self to sit beside Bradley on the couch, kissing Bradley on the top of his head before sitting down. “Ha, ha. You’ve still more body hair than any girl I’ve laid.”

And then Colin surprised Bradley--again. He draped one arm around Bradley’s hunched shoulders and rested his forehead against Bradley’s head. Bradley took comfort in the simple gesture and hoped Colin did too. “Listen...I’ve been thinking a lot about something. My parents have been married for thirty years, going on, and they don’t have much in common and are very different but they have a good, solid, working partnership. They got married out of mutual love and respect for each other...well, that and they were expecting my brother Neil at the time.”

They both snickered. “I suppose that’s one worry we won’t ever have to deal with”, Bradley pointed out.
“We do have more in common than we thought, you know.”

Bradley smiled slightly. Back to this, were we...

“Enlighten me, then, go on.”

“Well for starters, I’m going to cook for you on our next day off.”

“Ookay”, Bradley said dubiously. “But I don’t really think lawn cuttings and tofu are going to help get us back on track.”

Colin swatted him lightly. “You have a lot to learn about the positive effects of healthy eating, Bradley James.”

’Bredley Jims’, Bradley thought fondly.

“I’ll give you that one, then. I’ll trust you not to make me sick with your weird health food. What else?”

“I’m going to start working out with you, starting tomorrow, like we’ve talked about. Get rid of my scrawny self and get a new, improved...self.”

Bradley chuckled a little at that. “We’ll start you off slow. Don’t want you running too much, you’ll lose weight very quickly. We should have you run no more than three times a week, and on the weights every day for awhile...”

“And you can work on yoga a bit more with me”, Colin interjected firmly.

Hunh. Bradley hadn’t seen that one coming at all, but he could see what Colin was doing. Quite skillfully, even.

Come to think of it, Bradley hadn’t seen Colin doing any of his usual yoga routines since they’d taken to sharing a bed. He wondered why that was.

“Anything else...?” He asked curiously.

Colin nodded. “We should go to theater sometime soon. We both enjoy live shows, even those we’re not in.”

“Yes we do”. Bradley smiled, but then told Colin, “But I’m still not taking up with your Indie music.”

“Fine, have it your way”, Colin mock-huffed, settled back to just leaning against Bradley.

Bradley closed his eyes a moment, just concentrated on Colin’s warmth against him.

He felt melancholy and worn out. Had they really accomplished anything here, other than both finally confessing they were dainty daffodils and scared out of their minds, the two of them?

Well, they had at least come to the conclusion that they wanted to keep trying. That was something, wasn’t it?

Well, wasn’t it?

He raised his head again. “I just thought of something else.”
“Yeah?” Colin straightened too.

“The knights thing—”

Colin was already looking a bit wary, so Bradley hurried on. “Last year we had the whole “Now I have mates” thing for interviews. Your idea, I remind you.” He mock-glared at Colin.

“I know”, Colin said cautiously. Bradley noticed he was biting his lower lip.

“This year, you should have something ready, to let people know we’re just...you know...”

“That we get along”, Colin smirked.

“That’s right”, Bradley said. Colin had caught on to his meaning right away. “You should just say that, whenever you’re asked by anyone about the two of us and working together and the relationship”. Bradley made silly air-quotes with his fingers and Colin snickered.

“Right, ‘Bradley and myself always get on well’,” Colin recited, trying it out.

“Yeah, mm...” Bradley thought a moment. “No, not ‘myself’. How about...let’s see.” He groped about for a moment and then thought of it. “Whenever they ask you about me, you should say “All the cast and crew get on very well.” “

Colin started chuckling. “It will drive everyone mad! So vague and wishy-washy!”

“That’s the idea”, Bradley beamed.

Colin settled again against Bradley. “That’s what I’m going to say. And every time I do, and you read about it or hear it, you’ll know I’m thinking of you, as we are right now.”

Yeah. Bradley liked that. “I like it when you talk all dirty to me.”

Colin snickered again, settled once more.

They stayed that way for long moments. Bradley could feel the rise and fall of Colin’s chest.

Sighing, Bradley suddenly reached around and pulled Colin closer to him. Colin lifted his head, blinked at him. “Alright?”

Bradley just shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

After a moment, Bradley heard Colin murmur, right against his ear, “We’ll find our balance. We will. It will work out.” The vibration and Colin’s breath tickled somewhat.

He looked at Colin from the corner of his eye.

“Do you believe me?” Colin said.

“I want to try”, Bradley said. “I have no idea how it’s going to pan out. It could be I’ll have you only for another month or a year or ten years. I have to tell you, this is the first time I’ve ever wanted to try, to stay in any relationship that wasn’t easy. But...I want to make the effort. I’ll regret it forever if I don’t.”

Colin just nodded solemnly against him.

After a long time in which Bradley almost fell asleep, he straightened up, which meant Colin had to
as well.

Bradley leaned just slightly enough to kiss Colin sweetly on the cheek. “You’re naked.”

Colin rolled his eyes. “No shit.”

Bradley pulled Colin into his lap, arranging Colin with his legs splayed on either side of his own. He squeezed his arse lightly, and then slapped it, earning a low grunt from Colin.

“Fancy a shag now, do you”, Colin murmured.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to carry on a serious discussion with you, when you’re sitting there with your knob *winking* at me the whole bloody time?”

Colin shrugged, settled himself more comfortably in Bradley’s lap. “As I recall, it wasn’t my idea to go bare-arsed today.”

Bradley managed to keep a straight face when he said, “It’s not my fault you have the most fetching little bottom in...well, four continents.” For good measure, he slapped the opposite side, so that Colin would now have matching pink marks.

Colin made a girly sound, laughed a little. “Four continents?”

“Yes, I haven’t had the chance yet to check out Antarctica and their arses. I have my doubts, though, that anyone’s could measure up to yours.”

Colin laughed and called him “mental”, and then wriggled said pert part against Bradley’s burgeoning erection.

Bradley giggled. Colin had his knees bent and raised high, and the visual, coupled with Colin’s wiggling, was rather like a chicken about to lay an egg.

Colin, of course, had no idea what was so funny, but he leaned forward and abruptly caught Bradley’s mouth in a proper snog. The kiss deepened, went on for long moments until Bradley reached between Colin’s legs, tugged lightly on his balls. Colin’s cock twitched against Bradley and his answering moan in his mouth went straight to Bradley’s prick. They ended the kiss only to come up for air, and Colin’s breathless, “Why are you still wearing clothes?” as he scrabbled at Bradley’s shirts.

“Mm...Bradley said, mouthing at Colin’s throat, his neck, his shoulders.

“Here”, Colin said, twisting around to reach for the supplies on the table, brandishing the bottle of lube. “Prepare me, would you?” He spread his long legs a bit wider.

That brought Bradley back to reality. “What?” He said dumbly.

“Didn’t we say something about a shag, Mr. James?” Colin’s voice was coquettish, coy.

“Oh, no, no, I meant, you to me, Cols, you know. I can’t hurt you…”

Colin leaned back a bit in Bradley’s lap to look at him fully. “You didn’t hurt me. That one time, that was the first time and I was tight, of course, but it didn’t hurt me. I want to try it again, and I trust you. I know you’ll stop if I just ask, if it’s too much. But I know it won’t be.”

Bradley just stared at him a long moment, feeling his heart swell even more for Colin. And God but he looked striking right now, his face gone paler than usual with lust, with two bright red spots high
on those famous cheekbones. His eyes were very bright and very blue, his lips kiss-swollen and parted, his hair tousled. And the look of trust and affection and reassurance he was giving Bradley now…

‘It’s about trust, not lust’…Richard’s words flooded back to Bradley.

He glanced down doubtfully at the narrow couch. “Maybe…to bed, then?”

He arranged Colin’s arms around his neck, and stood up, hands supporting Colin under his rear. Colin wrapped his legs around his waist, and Bradley carried him into the bedroom, a bit awkwardly, as it were, for Colin was slightly taller than him, if nothing near his own weight.

Once in the bedroom, Colin quickly and impatiently got him out of his clothes, tossing each article in the air as he removed it. They resumed their positions on the bed now, Bradley sitting up with his legs before him, and Colin straddling him.

Colin had carried the tube of lube with him back into the bedroom, had dropped it on the bed before stripping Bradley. He located it again, handed it to Bradley without a word. In response, Bradley stretched one arm to the nightstand, located another foiled packet and handed it to Colin. Bradley was still nervous about this, probably more than he should be, he knew. He’d realized, after the first time he’d bottomed with Colin, and then done a quick bit of Googling, that he was an anomaly in not feeling any real pain or discomfort during anal sex. For some it could be very uncomfortable indeed…and he couldn’t do that to Colin. Not when they were both feeling guilty and vulnerable and insecure. They didn’t have to do that.

But Colin was impatient, ready. He quickly rolled the condom on Bradley and spread lube thickly over it, eliciting a soft sigh from Bradley. Then he leaned forward a little, arms resting around Bradley’s shoulders, spreading his legs wide on either side of Bradley for Bradley to slick him up.

Bradley spread Colin’s cheeks with thumb and forefinger, applied the greasy concoction liberally, some if it winding up on Colin’s thighs. He inserted one finger and then two, very carefully, very slowly, all the while murmuring soft “Okay? Not hurting?” inquiries.

Colin’s response was merely to shake his head, rub his chest and belly against Bradley’s, mouth or pinch at a nipple. Bradley’s own cock and balls jiggled as if dancing in response.

Bradley left two slicked fingers inside Colin for a moment, not moving, and spread his other hand at the nape of Colin’s neck, bringing him in for another long, deep kiss. He could actually feel Colin pulse and contract around his fingers as his internal muscles worked to both accommodate him and push him out.

Finally, Colin pulled away a bit, declared himself ready. Bradley pulled his fingers out slowly, and when Bradley reiterated once again, “You’re sure?” Colin merely took Bradley’s rod in hand and positioned himself to impale himself on it.

In this position, Colin had more control over angle and depth. Bradley’s cockhead broke through surprisingly easy, and Colin continued to ease himself down very slowly, in tiny increments, sometimes kneeling up a bit to adjust the angle. Bradley didn’t move, letting Colin lead. He kept his hands supporting Colin’s rear, his big hands encompassing the small globes completely.

He could feel Colin opening to him again, tight, tight, tight, but expanding to allow him in. Bradley just watched Colin’s face closely, waiting for any signal, subtle or not, that Colin needed to stop.
Colin was such a sight. Bradley had thought him beguiling before, after their make out session, but now…now his eyes were heavy lidded, his head tipped back slightly, exposing that long, sinewed line of pale throat and neck. He looked like a Gauguin statue from one of those museums in Paris Colin liked to frequent so much…

At that thought, Bradley silently declared himself a giant doily and vowed to never think of ancient nudie art during sex ever again, no matter how sensual, provocative or famous.

When Colin was fully seated, Bradley again asked him if he was all right. Colin nodded, panting a bit, and then carefully unfolded one gangly leg, and then the other, and wrapped them around Bradley’s waist, so that Bradley was now supporting his weight fully in his lap.

Colin began to rock with Bradley inside him, very gently, and Bradley found his rhythm and matched him.

It was such slow, exquisite build up, so very different to the usual fast, frenzied fucking they most often enjoyed. At times they would both just stop to rest, to kiss and nuzzle. Bradley ran his hands along Colin’s prominent ribs, down each vertebrae of his back. He languidly stroked his cock, rubbed his balls. Colin nibbled at his chin, his shoulders, his neck, nipped his collarbone, laved at his nipples. He kept his hands on Bradley’s shoulders to balance himself.

Colin’s inner muscles rippling around Bradley’s cock had to be the most erotic thing he’d ever felt.

When Colin’s release finally came, it was long and drawn out, spattering thin, almost-clear threads of come on Bradley’s stomach. His low moan seemed to come from some place deep within him, until now untouched. Bradley followed a moment later, unable to hold off any longer when he felt Colin tighten around him.

For all their lack of movement, Bradley had never felt so contentedly exhausted and sated.

With the same degree of measured deliberateness he’d used to get into position, Colin unfolded his legs from around Bradley’s waist, knelt up again, and eased himself off Bradley. He watched with heavy lidded eyes as Bradley removed the condom and tossed it towards the bin in the corner.

Bradley wrapped both arms around Colin, lowered himself and Colin so they were both laying down, Colin’s head and shoulders on his chest.

“Thank you”, he almost-whispered, planting a kiss on Colin’s cheek.

Colin smiled, fond and tired, at Bradley, rubbed his own nose against Bradley’s.

“Dork”, he said affectionately. “That was no shag. That was lovemaking.”

Bradley managed to hook the duvet at the end of the bed with his foot, pulled it up over the both of them. Colin was already dozing on top of him, as boneless as a sleeping cat. He loved these post-coital moments with Colin, when he was dozy and cuddly.

He felt that familiar love-like feeling again, sighed a little.

“Erhm?” Colin asked against his chest. He must have felt his little exhalation of air.

“Nothing, Cols. Sleep. We have a couple of hours before the train.”

But Colin lifted his head a little. “’em I too heavy?” he mumbled, moving as if to roll off him. Bradley tightened his arms around Colin’s back.
“No, Cols. You’re perfect.”

“Mm.” Colin smiled hazily, lay his head back down. Bradley couldn’t help smile at the crown of his head.

Clumsily, Bradley set the alarm on his watch to wake them in ninety minutes, and let himself doze off too.

They showered before they left—Bradley’s third shower of the day, but who was counting?—and shaved each other again for the show. Bradley grumbling the whole time, which for some reason Colin found remarkably funny. Bent over with his hands on his knees, the shower stream pelting his head, while some weird object buzzed around his cleft and between his legs, was not something Bradley could ever have envisioned for himself, even in drama school, where he knew experimentation wasn’t all that out of the ordinary. Really, how much hair could he have back there?

When he shared his thoughts with Colin, though, Colin just shrugged and told him, “Well, there’ve been tweaks as long as there’ve been bears, especially in the gay community.”

“But I’m not gay”, Bradley said.

Colin looked at him, and down then at himself, and then back at Bradley. In the close proximity of the shower, their cocks were almost touching.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Bradley rolled his eyes. “I’m playing one in a play. And I’m gay for you, and you alone. Nobody else. Seriously Colin-sexual, look it up.”

Colin just looked at him for another long moment, shrugged, and told him he appreciated that very much, and he didn’t put much stock in labels himself. And then he handed the buzzing razor to Bradley and said, “Okay, you’re taken care of. Do me, now?” and presented his backside for Bradley to manscape.

Bradley was remembering what Richard had told the two of them before the play had even started, about labels being an inefficient and inaccurate way to identify oneself. It was all a matter of convenience, labels were, and usually not for the person being labelled. Still, if Bradley were to dwell too long on the whole sexual-orientation thing, he was bound to get a migraine. It was all so complicated…he’d spent his whole life secure in his heterosexuality, but now. Well, now he wasn’t, was he.

Add that to the list of things he was insecure about.

Bradley took his time depilatorizing to re-check Colin’s entrance again, make sure he hadn’t been torn or bruised during their earlier activities —he still wasn’t over his trepidation about somehow harming Colin, truly. Thankfully, though, he was barely pink, with no swelling at all.

Bradley filed this information away for the next time Colin wanted to bottom. They’d rock themselves to sleep while fucking if that was what it took to leave Colin unhurt.

Not surprisingly, it was still raining as they donned their outerwear to get to the tube: Colin in jumper, hoodie and rainproof jacket, his newest knit beanie pulled down over his ears, while Bradley donned a sweatshirt with an American football team logo, hoodie, and anorak. He had plenty of extra brollies for himself and Colin too, but juggling that and the apple tartlet he’d wanted to bring along—he was already feeling a bit peckish again—wasn’t going to work.
Hey Cols, how’d you know I like apple tartlets, anyway?” he asked while they picked their way around puddles and struggled as the wind tried to snatch their brollies from their hands.

He wrapped the precious pastry in a napkin and hoped it would survive the trip more or less intact. On days like this, even the short walk to the tube was disagreeable, and made Bradley wish he kept a car in London.

“I’ve seen you eat them onset”, Colin said casually.

“Yeah. They really are so good. The perfect combo of tart and sweet. Much like you and me, actually.”

Colin rolled his eyes a little, but then pursed his lips and remarked. “Aye. Proof positive that opposites can live in perfect harmony and be grand together.”

‘Well, that wasn’t subtle at all, was it’, Bradley thought, but said no more about it.

And then another thought struck:

“Cols? Did you notice what I eat onset a lot?” Bradley really didn’t know what Colin liked, other than peanut butter. He knew he was a vegetarian, and that he was allergic to about one hundred and three things, but he hadn’t even known he was lactose intolerant until very recently…and had found out in a very embarrassing and public forum.

“Nah, why would I? You just eat all the time.” Colin answered. He grinned cheekily at Bradley.

Still, Bradley really would have liked to know how Colin had known about his apple tartlet favouritism, but they were at the train station, they were in a public place with people all around, and Bradley felt his guard snap up like an electric gate. The conversation would have to wait for another time.

The train was unusually crowded, and for the first few stops, the two of them had to stand, hanging on to handholds above them. There must have been some sort of school event happening, based on the number of what appeared to be uni-aged people on board.

Bradley could feel himself tensing up. He hated crowds like this. He hadn’t always, he was an extrovert at heart, but last year’s encounters with a mad stalker still had him wary and feeling trapped in any situation like this.

Eventually, the crowd did thin out a bit, and he and Colin managed to find an empty seat where they could sit side by side, shoulders, hips and thighs touching.

He felt a lot better when the uni crew seemed to all disembark at the same stop, and he and Colin were nearly alone on the train. They were only about five minutes from the theatre now. His nervousness was unfounded, really.

Colin leaned closer to him, so close their heads were almost touching, and asked Bradley very quietly, “You haven’t been bored since the play opened, have you?”

“What? What do you mean? I told you, you are so opposite boring…”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Colin smiled at him, amused. “I meant, with the play, and now all this free time to yourself, not doing anything.”

“Oh! To me, this is heaven. If I thought I could make a decent living as a stage actor, I’d do this full
Colin chuckled a little at that, nodded.

Bradley continued, “No, I’m loving this. The play hits all my actors’ g-spots” and Colin huffed another little laugh at the term, “And I’m loving the free time. Who doesn’t like free time? I’m playing football, I’m cooking, I’m having sleep overs, and”—Bradley lowered his voice almost to a whisper—“I’m fucking you. I’m living a charmed life.”


“You’re right”, Bradley mouthed back.

They looked at each other. Bradley felt himself start to grin.

CLICK….went the unmistakable sound of a digital camera, very close to them, along with the brightness of a flash, and then a female voice shrieking,

“OH MY GOD, IT’S REALLY YOU! I CAN’T BELIEVE IT! ARTHUR AND MERLIN!”

“Erhm.” Colin said. And then, “Hi”.

Bradley said nothing, just stared at the woman, a bit gobsmacked—mid-thirties, definitely not a uni student, and the term “Old enough to know better” came to mind— and without so much as a “May I?” or “By your leave”, raised her camera—it was pink—and snapped them again. No doubt it would be on Facebook, twitter and every other social media site in existence within an hour.

Bradley wasn’t sure, but from his peripheral vision it seemed to him that Colin had actually smiled for her.

The woman was trembling slightly.

What if she’d heard what they’d been talking about? Bradley suddenly felt his entire body become cold with sweat.

“I just can’t believe it’s really you! I’m just so excited!” she said, and snapped a third picture.

And then, “Merlin, would you mind taking your hat off? My word, but you’re both so beautiful.”

Bradley opened his mouth to tell the fan that she was talking to Colin, not Merlin, but she was still talking.

“You must be going to your play! And you’re going in together, that is just so brill! You must really be good friends, then! That’s our dream, you know, that the two of you really are BFFs, with a real bromance, just like on the show.”

Bradley wasn’t sure who the “we” was she was referring to, but he could almost see all her exclamation marks.

“I’ve tried to catch you both outside the theatre because I couldn’t get tickets, it was sold out from the first day and I was so disappointed I just about died. I’ve been waiting every night at the stage door but you rush off every night. So I thought I’d try to spot you on the train and I’ve been trying to figure out which train you must take and it worked, here you are. It’s taken me almost two weeks! Oh, how I would love to see you both naked together on stage together. Is it true you kiss? “Would
you kiss for me right now, so I could take a photo? It must be out of this world, that’s what it must be like. I’ve had dreams about it, ever since I heard about it. Would you stand up for me, so I can take another picture? Would you mind taking off your coats, please? Just one more picture. And then I have some pictures, if you could please sign?”

“Erhm…” Colin said again, and looked at Bradley. “Sure.”

Bradley felt his teeth ache from clamping his jaw, but he forced a smile and murmured, “Yeah, of course, but no kissing today, I’m afraid.”

The woman didn’t even seem to hear either one of them.

“Oh, god, Phyllis is just not going to believe this! Phyllis and I are online buddies, she’s in Australia. We’ve never met, but we talk every day and are best friends. By the way, I’m Candice!”

“Hello, Candice.” Colin said. He nudged Bradley with his knee.

Bradley roused slightly out of his stupor. This woman really was bizarrely fascinating. “Hi”. Bradley said.

Rather than taking more pictures, the woman was now rummaging through her oversized handbag, her camera dangling by its cord at her wrist.

Bradley stood up as the train neared another stop—not their stop, but it didn’t matter. He pulled as discreetly as he could on Colin’s elbow until Colin stood up too.

“I’m really sorry, but we have to go. We’re meeting a friend before the play. I wish we had more time, but we have to go.” He hoped he sounded polite. The woman was probably harmless, but she made him jittery.

The woman looked up from her bag, startled. She suddenly looked as if she was about to cry.

“Oh please, just one autograph! Please!” She shoved some papery object in their direction. “Wait, I think I have a pen here somewhere…”

“I’ve got one”, Colin said quietly, and produced one from his backpack. He quickly signed his name on the paper, handed it over to Bradley.

Bradley glanced down.

It looked like a grocery list.

He scribbled his name as quickly as he could, handed it back. She beamed at them both, held the paper to her heart. “Thank you both so, so much! I will treasure this always. Thank you!”

Colin said, “You’re welcome.”

Bradley smiled at her. “Cheers.”

She followed them, literally, trailing in their wake like a duckling, all the way up the stairs of the tube station and out onto the street, until they were almost into their cab, and then threw her arms around Colin.

“You are just adorable! You’ve changed my life forever. Don’t ever change! Love each other.”

And then she made a move to hug Bradley, and he found himself wrapped up in a very large,
sweaty, overly-excited embrace. What could he do.

Over her shoulder, Colin smirked at him.

Neither one of them spoke for long moments after their cab pulled away from the curb.
Finally, Colin turned and glanced out the back window of the cab, and then turned to Bradley. “Oh God, she’s still blowing kisses!” He sounded like he was torn half way between amusement and horror.

“Don’t look back at her!” Bradley leaned forward a bit, massaged the space between his eyes. He could feel a headache coming on.

“You alright there?” Colin didn’t sound amused any longer. “Bradley?”

Bradley just shook his head slightly.

Colin seemed to be trying to convince Bradley of something. “She didn’t mean any harm. She just got excited and…I think she was just generally lacking social skills.”

“Yeah. A bit over-zealous.” Bradley agreed. ”But she’s been looking for us on the train every day since the play started. Sounds like another fucking stalker.”

“I don’t think...” Colin started to say, and then stopped. He looked at Bradley for a moment, and then rubbed his arm soothingly. “I won’t say anything, I haven’t had your bad experience with the stalker. But let’s not go looking for trouble until it finds us.”

“Yeah”, Bradley said, non-committal. Colin was right, no sense getting worked up over an enthusiastic fan. They met them all the time and almost all of them had good intentions.

After a moment, he commiserated with Colin, “Did you hear her, she wanted us to start taking off articles of clothing!”

“Just our coats and my beanie...she wanted us to kiss!”

“She wanted to see us naked on stage!”

“Missed her chance, didn’t she.”

And despite all of it, Bradley found himself giggling with Colin over the absurdity of it all, earning them more glances in the rear view mirror from their driver.

After a moment, in a quiet voice, Colin asked, “Do you want to start to take taxis to work instead of the tube? Beef up the security at the theater? I’m not blase about this at all, just so you know.”

Bradley sighed. “I dunno. Taxis are so expensive and having a driver feels so pretentious.”

“Very Hollywood. We’ll have to learn to strike a pose.” Colin said, making Bradley smirk again.

Bradley thought about it a moment and then answered, “Maybe the cab might be a good idea, I don't know. I really don’t want to move to another flat because another fangirl found me and plastered the
address all over Facebook.” Well, that was only a small exaggeration. “And I don’t know what she saw or heard of us on the train. You do remember what we were talking about when we were interrupted, don’t you?”

Colin scowled. Yes, obviously he did remember.

“We can’t worry about it”, Colin said, “It’s open to interpretation for those who don’t know us”.

They both looked at each other. Colin smirked again, and then did the one gesture, the most ultimate bit of flirting that Bradley found utterly lethal: He lowered his lashes at Bradley. “You know what I mean, James.”

“We should talk further about it after the performance”, Bradley said, and Colin nodded in agreement and bumped Bradley’s shoulder with his own.

They didn’t do much more speaking on the way to the theater, despite it taking a sizeable amount of time longer than the train would have. Traffic in this part of town at this time of early evening was brutal. They both nibbled on their tarts (tough pastries, they’d somehow survived Candice’s tight embrace relatively intact), and readied themselves for the upcoming show.

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It was an especially intense performance.

Bradley could feel the electricity from the stage this night. The air fairly crackled with it. He felt particularly attuned and in synch with his character, and as often happened, Colin picked up on it and the two of them matched rhythm and tempo in spot-on point and counterpoint. In that regard, it wasn’t too terribly unlike their love-making of that afternoon.

Bradley always knew before the first act was over whether he was “on”, whether the performance was going to be a success. This time, he knew before the first scene change.

They were on fire.

The two of them were home just a little after eleven—a minor miracle, that, on any road, though easily achievable on the train.

Bradley had checked his phone text messages, found a rather cryptic and typically shrill one from Katie:

_Call me 2night no matter how late asap right away._

He showed it to Colin, who shook his head slightly and frowned, showing him his own phone.

Katie had left Colin the same message.

“I hope everything’s okay with her.” Colin said. “Haven’t heard much from her, but then, I usually don’t during hiatus from the show.”

“Oh, it’s probably nothing”, Bradley told him. “She’s probably just wanting to make plans or something when she comes to see the show next week. You know how she is, a bit of a hysteric, our McGrath.”

“Exciteable”, Colin said.

“Ebullient”, Bradley agreed.
“Effervescent”, Colin added.

“Exuberant”, Bradley countered.

“Effusive”, Colin started to giggle.

“Um”, Bradley said and then threw out “Effulgent!” which earned him a belly laugh from Colin.

“She does thrive on drama, that one.”

Nevertheless, it was the first call Bradley made when they reached the flat.

“What is so urgent that you’d have your two favourite gentlemen disturb you from your beauty sleep? Which, by the way, in your case should be called ‘Why bother?’ sleep.”

Colin put a hand over his mouth to stifle his snickering.

“Oh God, James, you’re so quippy. You must lie awake at night thinking about witty things to say”, Katie returned, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Sounds more like something you’d do, Harpy. When I’m in bed, I have better things to do.”

Colin nodded his head in agreement.

Katie made a gagging sound.

Truth be told, they could have continued on like that for some time, but Katie did have something to tell him…

“Listen, you need to check out the web address I’m sending you right now.”

Bradley glanced at his display. “Youtube? Why?”

“Because you’re on Youtube, fool, you and the wombat.” Wombat was Katie’s name for Colin, since he’d been the youngest of their original four young cast. Tom Hopper now held that distinction, though.

“What are you talking about?” Bradley felt that too-familiar feeling of coldness settle over him, as if a polar wind had suddenly taken up in his living room.

As if sensing the sudden change in emotion and mind set, Colin looked up from the laptop he was taking from his bag.

“The two of you are on Youtube, is what I’m talking about. Some resourceful fan recorded you during a performance, and posted the bootleg online.”

Bradley heard himself make a groaning sound. It just never stopped, did it…

Colin got up and sat beside him, mouthed “What?”

Katie seemed to twig on what was going on with Bradley suddenly. “I just wanted to give you the heads up, so you can go about having it removed. It’s just been there two days, and already has over thirty thousand hits. That has to be some sort of record.”

Bradley groaned again. Colin put his hand on Bradley’s shoulder.
But Katie wasn’t done yet. “I must say, neither one of you have anything to be embarrassed about…rawrr.”

Bradley cut the conversation short there, thanking her for the info and reassuring her he’d take the necessary steps to have the illegal clip pulled. (And Jesus hell, how had the fan managed to record them…) It wasn’t until after he’d hung up that he thought about whether or not she’d suspected that Colin was with him at his flat this late at night.

She probably did, come to think of it, but right now he had bigger fish to fry.

He called up the video on Colin’s computer, and they watched it in shock for a few moments.

*Unbelievable.* There he was, and Colin too, naked as jaybirds, making out and miming sex. Onstage. And available for millions to see online.

He’d counted on the controlled environment of the stage to maintain some semblance of dignity, but…

He let out a long, slow breath and shut his eyes, feeling the familiar feeling of another tension headache start to build again.

Colin said, deadpan, “Well. That is certainly a powerful zoom lens.”

Bradley opened his eyes, looked at Colin in outrage. How could he…

Colin quirked an eyebrow at him, shrugged one shoulder. “They got our best sides.”

Bradley started to laugh. That was Colin and his dark sense of humour again. Bradley knew he wasn’t making light of it—he was as exploited in this video as Bradley himself. Colin had simply taken the stance of “Better to laugh than cry.”

They watched the stupid video together twice more before researching how to have it excised, “like a bunion”, Colin had commented.

Unsurprisingly, Bradley didn’t feel anything like relieved or appeased once the vid had been removed. Sure, it wasn’t on Youtube any longer, but he wasn’t naive, he knew how the land of the internet worked. The vid had no doubt already been downloaded to countless personal computers all over the world, and would be floating around in cyberspace forever.

It was one more line crossed by fans, and this time, the line hadn’t been blurred or grey, it had been highlighted in neon lights with bells and whistles, clear as could be.

“You know Colin, I don’t think I ever want to see another fan ever again.”

Colin huffed a bit of air, turned to look at him. He’d been uncharacteristically silent since making the zoom lens crack. He had been as invaded as Bradley in this, after all, and Colin was a far more private person than Bradley.

“You don’t mean that,” Colin said, after a long moment. “We don’t know if this was even done by a fan.”

“Who else could it be? It was someone at the show, recording illegally. There are notices in the lobby and in the programme about doing that. Everyone knows that! And there have been about a jillion hits on it in less than forty-eight hours, so apparently the fan network for birthdaysuited Merlin and Arthur is alive and well.” Bradley couldn’t keep the bitterness from his voice, “They didn’t have
Colin looked at Bradley wearily. “Understand that I’m not arguing with you about the wrongness of this. It’s unethical and cheap and just feckin’ rude. We’ve been violated. All I’m saying is…I can understand, at least a little bit, where they’re coming from. Would you look, if one of your favourite actresses was on there, undressed, and you knew you wouldn’t be caught or penalized for looking, here in the privacy of your own flat, on your own laptop?”

And that just pissed off Bradley even further, because he wanted to snap back at Colin, of course he wouldn’t, especially now knowing what it felt like to be stalked and observed like an animal in a zoo, having people take his picture at Pierrefonds and Puzzlewood and Cardiff, whatever he did, every time he picked his nose or scratched his arse, jumping out in front of him, startling the shite out of him and making him lose his focus…

Not all of them. Most fans weren’t that way; he knew that, but the few who were…

And to be brutally honest, there were certain celebs he might have taken a peak at in similar circumstances. He’d always been a bit starstruck, particularly when it came to footie players he admired. He wouldn’t have recorded them illegally, but he might have looked at the purloined product. He might have felt a tad guilty about it…but he’d still have looked. Probably.

“Oh, shut it, Col”, he sighed, conceding the point. It didn’t make him feel any better to admit this to himself.

“I’m sorry”, Colin said quickly. “It’s just all a riddle to me that I can’t figure out, if some fans even realize the lines they’re crossing, like that fan we met on the Tube today. I know she kind of concerned you, but I still don’t think she meant any harm or realized how her actions could be perceived. She saw us, and the fact that we were riding the same tube train as her made her so happy, she just about cried.”

“It wasn’t just a chance meeting, she’d been hunting us!” Bradley interjected.

“I know, I know.” Colin took Bradley’s hand, held it between both of his own in an obvious attempt to keep him calm, placate him. “I haven’t figured out yet what it is fans think we owe them, how much of us they think we should give them, even when we’re off the clock, we’re with our families, we’re drunk, or…remember the wrap party pictures?”

“Oh, God, how could I forget…somehow, though, even that didn’t surprise me…”

“Yeah…” Colin shook his head, fell silent again, no doubt remembering all the kerfuffle their private photo booth pics from their end of series party had caused among fans and crew. What harm had it done to look, was the argument. They hadn’t been taking drugs or, like tonight, naked. (Well, Macken had been, a little, but not overly so.)

But—it was their wrap party, the end of a very tough and gruelling and something-to-be-proud of shoot. It was a private party, which turned out to be crashed by thousands of uninvited guests. Bradley still hadn’t found out the whole story on how those photos had leaked.

Colin was still making his point. “We’re not even that well-known as far as public figures are concerned, and look what goes on. Just imagine what poor Justin Beebee must go through…”

Bradley couldn’t help it, he started to chuckle. Leave it to Colin. “I think you mean ‘Bieber’, mate, not Beebee. And just by the by, it’s John Farnham, not Farmer.”

“Oh, shut it”, Colin responded in kind, though he was snickering as well.
Colin didn’t say anymore, apparently now mulling over their conversation, trying to make sense out the senseless. As much as it pained him, Bradley had to admit, he had some valid points. Most people didn’t mean harm, but the few who did, or who didn’t and just didn’t have much common sense, really put a damper on being in their current profession.

Bradley imagined it had to hit Colin where he lived too. All Colin wanted to do was act. He’d never wanted fame and probably didn’t care a whit about money as long as he had enough for a roof overhead and to buy his vegetables...

Bradley didn’t think he’d respond well to knowing something was out there about someone in the public eye he was interested in, and being told, “Don’t look! The celeb/politician/athlete doesn’t want you to!”

Yeah. That would really work.

And there was another angle in all this, too. He kept thinking and saying that he wanted to be left in peace when he was out in public and not onstage, and yet…

What if there came a day when no one was interested in what he did or what he had to say or, fuck it all, how he looked? What if he wasn’t recognized any longer, even by the polite people who just caught his eye, recognized him, and then just looked away or smiled, but didn’t intrude? What if he could no longer get work as an actor and was no longer considered a “celebrity”?

He’d gotten a bit accustomed to this, in four years on Merlin.

There were times when he rather liked his current status, too, and the perks that went with it. The extrovert in him had to admit that most of the time, he craved the attention, the approval, the applause. (His father, the old goat, had called him a show-off on more than one occasion, and so had Katie and Angel.)

He’d gotten thousands of good wishes on his twitter account for his twenty-eighth birthday last October, and had been unabashedly chuffed by it.

Yeah, he was almost thirty years old now and still wanted to be the most popular kid in school, thanks very much. It was official. He really was going to drive himself mad, and probably drag Colin along with him for the ride.

There were other issues of privacy, both public and private; the two of them were going to have to deal with very soon, too. Bradley’s family was due in that very weekend to see the play and would probably stay at his flat with him, and Colin’s was due in next weekend. As of yet, the two of them had not told anyone of their present circumstances—that they were now lovers. Not even their families, or their closest friends, though Bradley was almost certain Richard and Tony already knew without being told.

And how in the hell were he and Colin going to handle their families, anyway?

Bradley sighed and rubbed at his eyes with his hands. Well, none of this had to be deciphered and decided upon tonight. The two of them had the interview with Gay Times tomorrow in the early afternoon, and they needed to get some semblance of sleep before then.

He was exhausted, and yet he knew he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep in his present state. In fact, he could think of only one way he might have any chance of falling asleep.

“Cols”, he said quietly, and Colin, who had leaned his head back and shut his eyes, raised his head. “You up for a quickie?”
“I’m definitely up”, Colin said and did that evil smirk that was becoming so familiar. “Wanna see?” And he moved to unfasten his own trousers.

Bradley had to giggle. It was so awful, how the two of them were endlessly horny. He wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Colin stopped unbuckling and caught his eye again. “I’m even up for longy”, he told Bradley, and Bradley groaned at the butchering of the English language. He got up and pulled Colin up with him. When Colin stood, his trousers fell and pooled at his knees.

“That’s a good look for you”, Bradley remarked. “Come on, let’s shag.”

Afterward, they were both pleasantly tired and sore, and helped each other clean up in the loo. Neither were ready to sleep yet, so Bradley brought out some of the dvds his family had given him for Christmas.

“I’ve got Game of Thrones, Weeds, Misfits,and...”, Bradley rolled his eyes, “Camelot”.

Colin immediately voted for GoT, a decision Bradley endorsed wholeheartedly, so they settled under the duvet and watched Bradley’s smaller telly tell the tale of the Starks and Winterfell. Colin enthusiastically informed him whenever the show deviated from the George R.R. Martin books, they commented back and forth on locations they recognized and the production values of the show (“They had me at the opening credits of series one, and now it’s new and improved”, Bradley told Colin), and wondered aloud what it might be like to work on a show with such critical acclaim and a huge budget.

After 3 episodes, Colin dozed off snuggled up tightly against Bradley’s side. Bradley lasted until the end of the first disc, thinking more about how he could happily get used to this kind of warm, comfortable domesticity than the adventures unfolding before him, before sleep claimed him too.

The next morning, Colin went against all tradition and was awake and up long before Bradley. It was a bit disconcerting, not to have Colin drooling on his shoulder or on his cheek when he opened his eyes. And then, Bradley thought, it was more disconcerting to realize that there were certain things he’d come to expect from Colin now, like being there when he woke up.

Before he could let that thought settle in and fester, he got up and took care of things in the toilet before wandering out into the living area. Colin was on the couch, still in his pyjamas, watching the news on the telly with the sound at its lowest possible setting. He had the quilt Bradley’s mother had made for him (for no occasion at all), draped around his shoulders, and a cup of coffee on the table. And, he was eating a banana.

“Hey”, Colin said around the mush in his mouth. “‘Mornin’”

“Yeah, back at ya, Monkey Boy.”

Colin stuck his jaw out, curled his lips back, and made convincing primate sounds. With his legs drawn up and the added enhancement of Colin scratching his armpit for Bradley’s viewing pleasure, Bradley couldn’t help but laugh.

“Disturbing. My mate has now turned into Zippy the Chimp, overnight.”
Colin mimed throwing his own poop at Bradley.

Well that was enough of that. A grope and tickle fest broke out, with Bradley eventually managing to pin Colin to the couch while lying on top of him. He was panting by the time he accomplished subduing him; Colin was thin, it was true, but squirmy and slippery as an eel.

And the banana was squished underneath the both of them.

When they’d managed to stop giggling and wrestling long enough to catch their breath, Bradley licked a long, slow stripe up Colin’s long neck. Colin just watched, a little smile playing about his mouth.

“Hey.” Bradley whispered against Colin’s ear, and then nibbled delicately at it. “What are you doing up so early, anyway?”

“I dunno, couldn’t sleep, and you remember that this is supposed to be day one of my new physical fitness routine? I was waiting for you.”

“Well I’m awake now. Shall we prepare for a run?”

Colin nodded but made no move to get up.

“I dreamt last night that I was a bride in Game of Thrones and that someone came and crashed the wedding party with a digital camera and shared it with rival tribesmen.”

Bradley just raised his eyebrows at him, trying to think of a comeback. No one else but Colin could render him speechless so successfully.

Even so, it seemed like Colin’s subconscious had run amok during his dreamtime.

“You’ve a charming turn of mind, don’t you, Morgan. I’ll bet you tried to keep telling them that that wasn’t the way it happened in the book.”

“You should read it, it’s fabulous. Hopper read it during last series. Macken too.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that”, Bradley said dryly. He planted a kiss on Colin’s lush lips—and yes, he still tasted of banana-- and the two of them set about cleaning up most of the squashed banana from the sofa cushions with one of Colin’s napkins.

Being who they were, that became a competition, with the both of them trying to shoulder the other out of the way. Bradley got in a few gooses to Colin’s bottom while he was at, before finally declaring Colin “Feisty. You definitely need to work out some of this energy of yours. What say we have a quick run, a fuck and then lunch before the Times interview?”

“Sounds good to me. Here, come and stretch with me. Yoga is the best for preparing for cardio exercise, you know it is. You swear by the Half Lord of the Fishes position for your back.” Colin was already settling himself on the floor, readying himself by breathing deeply through his nose.

With only half an eye-roll, Bradley joined him. All things were negotiable, after all. If Colin was going to join him exercising, he supposed it was only fair he joined Colin in the yoga he was so enthusiastic about. He couldn’t deny the benefits of it, he just didn’t like the silly, pretentious names for the various poses, or asanas.

“No pretzel twists this morning, if you don’t mind, mate”, he muttered, arranging himself in the seated twist position of the aforementioned pose. This was the one he found himself most often
remembering and practicing before footie matches.

“Bradley”, Colin chided. “It’s the basic poses, not the super fancy contortions that are the most beneficial.”

“Guide me through, then”, Bradley invited. “I’ll be all supple and pliant for you later.”

So Colin lead him through the various basic stretches, starting with the Cat-Cow pose (Bradley actually did remember that one, but had Colin demonstrate first anyway. And if Colin’s bum was high in the air and nicely taut...well, it was Colin’s idea to do this, after all.) From there they both eased into the Downward Facing Dog, with Colin quietly reminding Bradley to remember his breathing. They straightened up into the first Warrior position (“No, Bradley, this isn’t the superhero one”), and into the second Warrior “(“It’s not Elvis either”).

Bradley concentrated on what he was doing, focused on Colin’s soft voice. He was an excellent instructor. Colin was right about one thing, this really was an outstanding way to prepare for more strenuous exercise.

Colin directed him through the more challenging positions, the Boat and the Plank, and remarked that they would skip the Camel and the Bridge today. He had Bradley stand back to back with him, backsides touching, and directed him into the Half-Bound Lotus, both of them bending at the waist, arms hanging down loosely, Colin again murmuring for Bradley to keep focused on his breathing.

“Colin, I’m starting to get light-headed.”

They finished with the Tree position, though both put their arms above their heads rather than the traditional chest-level prayer-like position.

It was a balance-maintaining exercise, meant to be done to focus the mind and to concentrate on one’s breathing. Bradley had closed his eyes and willed himself to relax for these last moments, but now he peeked a look at Colin. He was completely still, not teetering for a moment on one leg, lips parted slightly and the most serene expression on his face.

“Colin”, Bradley half-whispered.

Colin opened his eyes, looked a question at him. Bradley said nothing, just continued to stare.  

“How do you feel now?” Colin asked.

Bradley just made a goofy face at him.

Colin started to laugh, and thus ended their yoga session. But not before Colin had wrangled his revenge for the naked cooking day: “Tomorrow, I want you to be naked during our workout.”

They jogged together for forty five minutes, with Colin’s long legs and loping stride having no problems keeping up with him. Bradley noticed, not for the first time, that Colin ran with his hands open, as many Olympiads tended to. He made a mental note to ask him about that later. Bradley found it more comfortable to run with his hands in loose fists.

During their cool down, they talked about what might be best for Colin’s weight lifting regimen and what might work for what Colin wanted to achieve. Bradley hated weightlifting because he found it so boring, depending upon his cardio activity and general energy to maintain his fitness and a healthy weight. Colin had apparently been researching it all, and Bradley worried that he might be over-thinking it a bit. Bradley did have light weights in the back of his closet somewhere that he never used; he would give them to Colin and start him off, but after that, well. Who knew.
Later, after they’d lifted weights together for another part of an hour, and worked out a basic plan (Colin even grabbed up paper and pen and outlined a schedule, with long and short term goals), and then shagged and showered, they decided on an Indian restaurant they’d both sampled before. It was only a fifteen minute ride by taxi from Bradley’s flat.

It wasn’t quite noon yet, and the lunch crowd was just filtering in when they found seats and began perusing the menu. Bradley loved the chutney at this place, and there were plenty of vegetarian offerings for Colin. They also had some of the best chai around.

They were recognized by two people while they were eating, a university-aged girl who passed their table and just said “Hello, love your show!”, and a red-headed boy of about seven or eight who waved to them and just beamed from the table he was sharing with his parents. Neither one of them minded in the least little particular.

Bradley was contemplating the dessert menu when Colin said casually, “So, I’ll just leave the flat early, day after tomorrow, after we exercise, and head on up to mine so that you can meet your family. That should work, yeah? Remind me to set the alarm tomorrow night…”

“What are you talking about? There’s no need for you to leave, they’re not staying with me. There’s no room for all three of them. They’ve booked a hotel a couple blocks away from the theatre, a suite. You can stay put. In fact, why don’t you come with us to dinner? You’ve met them before. They’re female, so of course they all adore you.”

Colin shook his head slightly, smiled a little at his jibe. “I’d love to, but I don’t think that would be a good idea. It would no doubt look rather odd indeed, me hanging around you all the time, and then going back to your flat with you.”

“That is what couples do.” Bradley said, very quietly. “That’s what we are, isn’t it?”

Colin answered, equally subdued, “You haven’t told your family, about us I mean, have you?”

“I haven’t told anybody, but I think this would be an opportune time. They already like you, and I know they would accept you and the status change.” And then, more to himself than to Colin, he added, “Although they will no doubt be quite surprised.”

“Yeah” Colin said. He looked very serious, pursed his lips for a moment. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Why?” He felt the familiar paranoia start to grow in his chest, and remembered his thoughts on the day he and Colin had had their blow-up: They hadn’t told anyone, so they could both pretend the affair had never happened.

Maybe that was what Colin was doing, hedging his bets and allowing himself a trap door. After all, they couldn’t deny that their relationship was very new and still very careful at best.

“It’s just an issue of privacy,”, Colin was saying. “We’ve just had all this trouble with it, and this is just…well, it’s between us, and it should stay there, at least for now.”

“But they’re my family”, Bradley said. Yes, he was whinging, he knew he was…

“I know”, Colin said, and his eyes and tone were apologetic and regretful. “But the more people who know, the more chance of us winding up on the front page of the Sun.”

“We’re not famous enough to be on the Sun”, Bradley muttered. Colin just smirked a little before the
very grave expression returned to his countenance.

“You know, you’re right, they are your family, and I can’t tell you not to tell them. I wouldn’t presume to, it’s your decision. But my hope is that you won’t, at least not yet. It’s just…it’s private.”

“Are you going to tell your family when they come in next week?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Would they disapprove, being Catholic and all?”

“I don’t know how they’ll feel about the religious aspect of it all, but I know they’ll still accept me. They’re pretty forward in their thinking, but I, I’m…I’m pretty sure things would change.”

“Badly?”

“Just…different. A kind of ‘Hate the sin, love the sinner’ thing.”

“Oh.” That sounded ominous.

“They’ll still love me.” Colin smiled a bit at him. “No need to worry.”

Bradley wasn’t worried, not about Colin’s family or his own not accepting himself and Colin as lovers, but he was terribly disappointed. He’d hoped to be able to tell them, though it would no doubt be a somewhat stressful situation for all. It was maddening at times for Bradley, not being able to talk about being with Colin, the good and the bad. There were times he wanted to shout in the streets how happy Colin made him, and other times, he almost wanted to explode from the need to speak with someone (like Anthony) on how to handle the uncertainty of it all.

On the other hand, he also had a new, hard-won appreciation for the need for privacy and caution.

He couldn’t help let his disappointment show though, he couldn’t, and Colin saw.

“If you decide to tell them anyway, I’ll understand.”

They continued discussing it in hoarse whispers all the way through paying the bill for the meal and waiting for the hired car to take them to their interview. In the end, as Bradley had just known it would be, Colin had convinced Bradley that Bradley needed to be alone with his family, to talk about family things like what had transpired between Bradley and his father, and didn’t need Colin around for that.

“Please, please Bradley, don’t read too much into this…I’m not rejecting you” was Colin’s final whispered plea before their car arrived; a shiny black town car that looked like it belonged on Fleet Street. Bradley just shrugged. It was all so frustrating at times…

And yet, yeah. He could also kind of see Colin’s perspective. Colin was far more private than he himself had been, at least in the earlier years of his career. He still didn’t know much about Colin, even after working with the man for four years, although the past two months had him learning more all the time. Colin had the rare talent and ability to make everyone feel close to him while at the same time keeping everyone at arm’s length. And he’d said he was feeling just as incredulous and surprised and insecure to this same-sex attraction as Bradley himself. Maybe more so, though Bradley couldn’t see how.

Bradley wanted to be fair. Colin was with him, and he didn’t have to be, so he must be getting something out of the relationship for himself. Even if not being able to tell anyone about the two of
them felt like, to Bradley, a watered-down version of, “I want to be with you, just don’t tell anybody.” Like dating the overweight misfit in finishing school.

Bradley sighed, stretched his legs out in the posh appointments of the back seat of their limo. Trying to figure this out now was going to drive him mad. He sighed, loudly.

He saw Colin looking at him, a concerned, worried expression on his face, and just shook his head minutely at him. And then struck up an animated conversation with the driver when he saw the small World Cup emblem on one of the front seat visors. They chatted the rest of the way to the Gay Times offices.

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The interview surprised Bradley. It was far more relaxed and intimate than any type of scheduled, formal interview he’d ever done. The questions were very thoughtful and provocative without ever treading into their personal lives. They weren’t asked if they were seeing anyone, or what their orientations were, but they were asked pretty much everything else.

The two of them sat at a polished oak table, across from their interviewer, a forties-something aged lady named Eugenie who somehow reminded Bradley of Sarah, Tony’s life mate. She looked nothing like her, but her warmth and earthiness immediately set him at ease, and just judging by Colin’s body language, he was picking up on the same vibe. Eugenie turned on her phone’s recording feature, and started off by telling them she was herself a fan of their show Merlin, as was her son and daughter…and her two granddaughters, aged seven and nine. They talked a little about the ageless appeal of Merlin, all standard stuff they’d talked about before, though Bradley had to admit, he was very proud of the broad audience of the show, and knew Colin was as well.

“I understand this year will be the last series, but that there’s talk of a film, perhaps? Please say it is so…”

Colin answered, “We don’t know yet if this series is the last, we haven’t talked at length about it yet. Maybe, maybe not. …A film might be very interesting.”

“Would you be open to another series or two?”

The truth of the matter was, everyone involved with Merlin had been talking about this topic at great length since mid-series four. Bradley knew which direction he was leaning towards. It was all about variety and challenging himself. With this play, he’d gotten a new taste of tackling new territory, and was finding it exhilarating.

But no concrete decision had been made, and his loyalty to the show and the showrunners and the fans and all involved with it was enough to convince him to keep an open mind. Never say never, after all.

Bradley answered Eugenie’s question with, “It would depend on what they had in mind. I’ve always said I want the show to go out on a high note. We’ll see.” Colin nodded his head in agreement, but they both played it straight, not making eye contact.

“You’ve had quite a year, this past year. The stories were quite intense and very friendship-heavy, what some would call bromancey. How do you feel about that?”

Colin answered, “ I think I can answer for both of us when I say we enjoy playing those scenes, whether they’re silly or bantering and bickering or serious and intense.”
“How much of it is acting, and how much of it is your own friendship, coming through? Some of those scenes…well, I’ve seen all the episodes, and I should think that some really call for a lot of trust between the two of you.”

‘Oh…’ Bradley thought. ‘This one’s no dope.’ He just nodded slightly for Colin to answer.

“It’s true, all of the cast and crew get on very well”, Colin recited.

Somehow, Bradley kept his poker face in place. But the poor lady looked kind of disappointed and unsure, so Bradley added,

“Sure, we’ve had more than four years now to develop this trust. I don’t know if I could do some of the scenes that we do, in the way that we do them, if we didn’t know each other well and have this understanding together. There are many times, especially in the comedic scenes, where the director hasn’t told us what to do, we just sort it out, ourselves, playing off each other’s timing and reactions. And we also have days when we’re making each other laugh so much, just by looking at each other.”

“Is that a working relationship, or just your own friendship?”

Bradley answered, “Some days, many days, we can just look at each other and know what the other is thinking….and sometimes that has us both giggling to the point we have to wait a minute to get ourselves under control. But this trust we have, this emotional intimacy, it’s something that develops over time, if two performers are lucky. And it’s a huge reason why I accepted the role in the play Exposed that we’re doing, this trust and this ability to act intuitively together.”

There, that might shift the topic of conversation to their present project, and away from Merlin, just a bit…

Thankfully, it did. “Yes, let us talk about the play. It’s quite a raw and powerful show. I’ve had the pleasure of seeing it, on opening night, actually. I must say, the two of you are very brave to do that, to bare yourselves not only physically but so emotionally….”

Bradley felt his face heating up. ‘She’s seen us naked…’ Irrational, he knew, it was a public play after all, but still.

Aloud he murmured only his thanks for the compliment, as did Colin.

“The show is called Exposed, and the title refers not only to the physical but to the emotional. It takes place in the eighties and has a lot to do with the loss of privacy as well as the mores of that time, of having to keep sexual orientation secret and under wraps…tell me a little about your feelings about that, if you would.”

Colin began, “It really is all about living in a time, not that long ago, where being gay could cost someone their family, their career, their life. It’s about privacy issues too, of being able to have one’s private life, private…something myself, and many actors I’m sure, have been dealing with on many different levels, lately.”

Colin and Bradley told Eugenie of how that nude scene from the show had been illegally uploaded to Youtube.

“Tell your readers not to bother trying to look, though, it’s already been removed and a flag placed on the subject matter”, Bradley concluded wryly.

“Do you have your own issues with the fans, now? I noticed the screaming masses outside the
theatre on opening night.”

“Most of them are really sweet, but there’s always going to be a few who go too far, and we’ve both had some issues with that.” Bradley chose not to relate the story of his stalker.

“My Dad has always told me, be nice to everyone, because you don’t know who they are or what their story may be. You don’t know if someone is depressed and meeting you might make their whole day.” Colin paused, smiled a little, almost bashfully as Bradley looked at him. “I hope that doesn’t sound too conceited of me. I just think that most fans want to tell you that they like your work, and it costs nothing to smile for them. I just appreciate their interest and their support…that’s not hard to do, after all. Of course, there are a few who might be inappropriate, like those who uploaded the vid on Youtube, but they are few and far between. And there’s times when I might be running late, or not feeling well, or trying to concentrate on some upcoming scene, and can’t respond to fans the way they hope and they’re disappointed…it’s all a balancing act.”

Bradley didn’t look at Colin, kept his face as neutral as possible. Of course, the interviewer all but cooed at Colin for his sweetness.

When Eugenie glanced down at her notes, Bradley pinched Colin on the hip, hard.

Hell of an actor, his mate. Colin managed not to shriek, but he did jump violently, banging his knees on the underside of the table.

Bradley didn’t even try for innocent, just did his most perplexed “You okay, there?” expression at him. Colin stared back, his eyes wide, discreetly rubbing at his hip.

Eugenie snickered.

After a moment, Bradley turned back to their interviewer with what he hoped was a kind of “I don’t know what’s wrong with him”, apologetic look.

“Anyway”, Bradley said. “The play takes place in the eighties, but so much of what is explored in it still holds true today, very sadly and unfortunately. We’ve come a long way, but really, not very far. Orientation still has to be hidden, and people still insist on labelling. And I don’t think their motivations in that are neatness or convenience.”

Regarding the play, Eugenie did of course ask them both about the nude scene. “How hard was that to play? Colin, I know you’ve done a similar scene onstage before, in A Prayer For My Daughter…”

“No, I was unclothed, it’s true, but it was nothing like this. This is a scene of intimacy and great love, while that was forced and perverse. Of course, as an actor, they’re very different to play, but I can’t say either was easier than the other. It all goes back to just those same elements of trust, and putting yourself in the moment, forgetting about the audience and just becoming your character.”

“How did you prepare yourselves for that?”

“We have a fantastic director in Richard Wilson”, Bradley responded, and Colin again nodded his agreement. “He knew exactly what he wanted and conveyed it to us so clearly, and his assurance gave us the confidence we needed. We spent a lot of time on that one scene building to it gradually, taking off one clothing article at a time…”

“Right”, Colin chuckled. “The first day, Bradley took off his thumb ring and I took off my wristlet…like a slow game of strip poker.”

“Everyone was wondering why we were in so many layers, when it was warm in the theatre…”
Bradley joked. “But really, we went into it knowing it was so outside our comfort zones, and that in itself, that scariness, held appeal, at least for me. For you, too, I think though, wasn’t it, Colin?”

“It was”, Colin nodded. “Richard has given us all the tools we needed, but it doesn’t take away that rush every night when we’re down to it and that burst of cool air hits your bare skin where it doesn’t usually and you hear the audience murmur in reaction…that’s being exposed. In every way possible.”

Eugenie nodded. “There have been audience members who have wept at the beauty of it.”

Colin huffed a little laugh. “I don’t know what that’s about…”

Bradley said, “I don’t even know how to respond to that, either. The nudity and the sex scene is a challenge and it was uncharted territory for me, true. But it’s not the hardest part of the play for me. The hardest thing was and still is the final scene, where Nigel, Colin’s character, dies in my arms.”

“That’s the most difficult acting challenge, I’ve heard, to produce tears”, Eugenie remarked.

“Well, again, I’m not even worrying at that point about the process, about producing tears. Most nights the tears and reaction comes, sometimes not. But for me, personally…it breaks my heart. It just kills me, every performance, the thought of it, to have the person you’ve found and you love, ripped from you in such a way, stolen so violently, and under those circumstances, by ignorant, hateful thugs. We all search for our soul mates our whole lives and it’s the rare few of us who find them. I wouldn’t be able to bear it, seriously.”

Under the table, Colin discreetly patted Bradley’s thigh.

“You’re something of a romantic”, Eugenie said, her eyes sparkling.

“Why is it you have such a reputation for being against the whole Arthur and Guinevere romance on Merlin?”

“Ohhh…” Bradley groaned. “It’s not that I’m against it at all. I know many people who love it. And Angel is a great mate. I thought there should have been more lead up to it, more background and.. it’s just, if you know anything about the legends, theirs wasn’t anything like a romance. And I know I’m going to get in more trouble for even saying anything about this, it’s like being the writer in Misery sometimes. You can’t disagree with some fans, or say you don’t like the ship that they ship, or that what they swear they see isn’t really there, without them accusing you of squashing their squee…I don’t write the scripts or the legends, folks.”

Colin burst out laughing, and Eugenie said soothingly, “Don’t worry; I won’t include anything about the romance fans in this.” She made a notation in her notes.

“I understand that there’s a lot of fans who see gay elements in Arthur and Merlin, too”, Eugenie said, but before she’d finished her sentence, Bradley and Colin were both snickering, and Colin had put his head down on his arms on the table.

“We didn’t know! Seriously, when this show started…” Colin chortled.

“We really didn’t”, Bradley said. “We first found out about this, this phenomenon, or whatever you want to call it…”

“…at a con!” Bradley and Colin both laughed.
“Leave it to the fans to tell us what we are”, Bradley sighed.

“So you really don’t mean any subtext, then? You believe it’s just the viewers, and what they want to see?” Eugenie sounded amused, too.

“I take it you can see something, yeah?” Bradley giggled. He didn’t think he’d ever had this much fun being interviewed before.

Eugenie giggled too, shrugged. “Sometimes. You do know that the show is considered a gay icon by some…”

“It all the knights’ fault”, Bradley started to laugh again, and Colin too. “All that testosterone, and there are still no women in Camelot…”

“I think anyone can see a any element in anything, if they want to”, Colin got himself under control first. “I’ve heard of some who think that there was a romance between Merlin and Morgana, or Morgana and Gwen, or that the characters in Toy Story are gay, or the purple dinosaur show, Barney. I can’t see it, but if that’s what the fans want to see, well, have a ball. But I think there’s really no serious intent to present the characters as lovers. Arthur and Merlin, as presented on the show, are both virgins. Well, Arthur isn’t now, he’s married, but, you know, before. When we started the show, four years ago—or seven years ago, in the timeline of the show itself—our characters were little more than overgrown children. They were in their late teens, I think, though it was never really said. They’re fictional characters who don’t exist outside the show, and we haven’t seen them engaging, so… That’s how I play Merlin, anyway.”

“This past year, in particular, we’ve both wondered more than a little bit if the writers aren’t playing to those fans, just a little.” Bradley knew he was smirking again. “I think it’s the slash dragon’s fault, personally.”

Bradley had heard the term in America, at the convention they’d attended in San Diego last summer, and of course, Katie was a wealth of info on the subject. “I wouldn’t be opposed to playing King Arthur as mad for Merlin, though. That would definitely put a new spin on things… just don’t make him old Merlin. All that hair and beard makes me sneeze.”

What else could they do but make jokes, really? Both himself and Colin knew the writers deliberately played to the slash fans on more than one occasion—how many straight men wrestled pantsless together on the floor, or dragged the other out of bed, or shared so many heartfelt eyefucks? Denial was really all they had to work with.

Thankfully, Eugenie moved the conversation away from the slash dragon line of thinking before the three of them started choking on their own laughter.

“How do you see the present state of gay rights?”

“Strides have been made, but we still have so far to go. I believe it shouldn’t be treated or set apart any differently than a het relationship”, Colin answered.

“The fact that it still has to be kept secret in so many situations, still swept under the rug, and a cause for discomfort for many…” Bradley added.

Colin said nothing more.

“Do you have gay friends you hang out with?”

“Yes”, they both answered. Richard, for one…
“We both went to drama school”, Bradley pointed out.

“What do you see as the biggest hardship facing gays today?”

“Living in fear of being outed against an individual’s will”, Colin said “Being set apart, looked upon as different or somehow ‘not normal’”, Bradley added.

“Have you known of instances of homophobia by people close to you?”

“I wouldn’t say close to me, but I have seen it demonstrated in professional settings”, Bradley said, thinking of Stella, his agent.

These were good, introspective questions they were being asked, and were more like a conversation with a friend than an interview. Again, Eugenie never delved into their private lives too deeply, but kept more in line with the goals and agenda of the publication she represented.

They moved from the interview to the photo shoot portion of the article. They had both been hoping not to be asked to go shirtless, as the knights had done when they’d participated in a far less serious article earlier in the year. (Their photos had been hot and rather odd, with bits of armour and what appeared to be suits strapped to them here and there, and lots of emphasis on their hair.)

Again, the magazine didn’t disappoint. They were given tuxedos to wear, and placed in a Goth-like setting of an old English manor, with red velvet couches and an antique grandfather clock. There was a spiral staircase as part of the setting too…that apparently lead nowhere. Gradually, the buttons of their shirts were undone, their ties untied, their hair ruffled and artfully mussed. They posed provocatively, and silly, and seriously, and sometimes back to back. Colin lay on the couch while Bradley sat atop the back of the same couch. They scowled, they smiled, they made goofy faces, they did their best “Come hither, you sexy thing” poses. They took each other’s jackets off while the cameras whirred and clicked.

Finally, they were thanked and told that that was a wrap, and invited to look at the pictures that had been taken on the monitor. Bradley liked what he saw, and in particular, he liked the pics of Colin. He looked himself in them. Colin had done another photo shoot shortly before the start of series four, in character of course, wearing a buttondown shirt and sweater like a school boy, but he’d been so painfully thin.. That photo session had yielded photos of Colin emphasizing his cheekbones, but Colin had modelled in tight-lipped poses, seeming almost tortured in his seriousness. No, Bradley hadn’t liked the end result of that photo shoot at all.

But now, looking at what they’d come up with from their work this afternoon…these were good. Really good. The photographer had still zoned in on Colin’s cheekbones (who could blame him?), but Colin was far more filled out now, looking happier and healthier all around. He didn’t just look hot and sexy. He looked…horny. And good enough to eat.

Bradley thought that Colin was something of a chameleon as far as his looks went. He managed to transform his appearance for almost every role he did. What’s more, he seemed (to Bradley) to become more and more attractive and intriguing looking as he grew older and his face matured. And the camera loved him, all of Colin’s sharp planes and angles and contrasting colouring.

Bradley’s photos were okay too, he decided. And Colin expressed his own approval and appreciation for the photo shoot.

They were graciously thanked again by both the photographer and by Eugenie before they left, and both Colin and he expressed their surprise by the efficiency and professionalism of the entire affair.
Back in the limo, on the way to the theatre, Bradley looked at his watch. They’d been at the offices nearly six hours.

Time sure flew when one was having fun…

He asked Colin what he had thought about it. In response, Colin reached over and pinched Bradley, hard, on his hip.

Bradley was unable to contain his loud yelp. And he hadn’t even seen that coming…

“You’re a prat, Bradley James”, Colin laughed. And then he told Bradley he thought that the photo shoot and interview was one of the more interesting he’d ever taken part in, and he was looking forward to the finished product.

“Let’s just hope they don’t mess it up.”

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At the theatre, they found Richard and told him both about the interview they’d just taken part in—Richard told him he was very pleased for both of them—and then told him about the purloined video of the production, featuring themselves, that had made it to Youtube. Richard was aghast.

“Good lord, what a vulgar injustice against the whole production, and the two of you in particular. I am so very sorry, lads. I will speak to the theatre manager at once. Anyone caught with a recording device will be prosecuted, for this isn’t just an issue of integrity and ethics…” And Richard was off, presumably to find Sir Christopher Nealand-Roach, the theatre manager, and have the issue of bootlegging cracked down upon, on their behalf.

They had less than an hour before show time, so Bradley made his way to his dressing room, and was a bit startled to find Colin still behind him when he went to shut his door. Usually at this time Colin would be off preparing his mental state for the performance, and the two of them wouldn’t speak again until after the show.

“Bradley, I just wanted to speak with you for a moment, if I could…”

Oh, man…usually that didn’t mean anything good. Bradley could start to feel himself tense up again.

“I’m listening…I didn’t offend you with anything I said at the interview, did I? Please don’t hold it against me…”

“I’m not, no, that’s not it. I’m not offended.” Colin cut him off before Bradley could get too launched. “Actually, I just wanted to apologize…for being such a shite boyfriend, again.”

Bradley frowned. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I just…well, actually, something you said at the interview did strike me, and I realized…I’m really not being fair to you at all, am I. The whole privacy issue…there’s two of us in this relationship, not just me. I’m so sorry…about trying to tell you who to speak to about us and where we’re at these days.” Colin smiled a bit shakily at Bradley, adding “Now you see why I’m such a workaholic. Acting’s the only thing I’m really good at.”

“I’m sorry? I’m afraid I’m not following…”

“I just mean…if you want to tell your family about us, you have my blessing. That’s your prerogative of course.” And then, almost to himself, Colin muttered, “I should have recognized that
earlier…”

Bradley just stared at him. “Seriously? What changed your mind?”

“Your common sense. Reminding me that the play we’re doing is all about having to hide who we are and keep secrets and bloody hell, this is about not having to hide who we are and keep secrets and feck it, this isn’t the eighties anymore. And they’re you’re family.”

‘Oh, Colin’, Bradley thought. That oh-so-familiar rush of affection unfurled in his chest again.

Bradley got up and wrapped Colin in a bear hug. Colin returned the embrace tightly.

“Just so you know”, Bradley said in Colin’s ear. “You are a wonderful boyfriend. I wouldn’t have any other.” He felt Colin’s chuckle at the irony rumble against his own chest, and heard Colin’s murmured, “Not really, but I’m working on it.”

Bradley countered with, “I don’t know if I’m going to tell my family or not, but it means the world to me that you are all right with it. Thank you, my love”. And he kissed Colin very sweetly on the cheek.

And then Steggie called the thirty minute warning, and they both were scrambling for wardrobe and hair and makeup, and Bradley didn’t have the time to compare Colin’s privacy issues and his own insecurities.

That night, as Colin and Bradley took their places on stage, just before the lights dimmed, an announcement was made:

“This is a reminder to turn off all recording devices during the performance. No photos or audio/visual recordings are permitted. Be aware that anyone breaking this law will be removed from the theatre and criminally prosecuted.”

Bradley and Colin looked at each other. As always, Richard was true to his word. He’d also told them that special inserts would be printed up with the same warning, and included in every programme, starting with tomorrow’s matinee. They would be looked after, with a little help from their friends.

They were back at Bradley’s flat by a little past eleven, and made love again, this time with Colin laying atop Bradley, tip to toe, while they both sucked each other off. There was something about looking up, seeing Colin’s swaying balls just above him while he sucked Colin’s long cock, that had him excited even more quickly, and when Colin inserted a pinkie into his opening, he boiled over. Colin followed soon after.

And then Colin granted him another unexpected gift, just as they lay together in sated drowsiness. He asked Bradley if he wanted to talk to Richard and Anthony about the two of them.

It took Bradley a moment to find his voice enough to answer. “Are you sure? Are you certain you’re all right with this?”

“I really am…and mostly because I’m pretty sure that they both know already, without either of them actually saying anything.”

“Yeah…I have to tell you something. About Tony…”

“You didn’t tell him, did you? We’d just had our dust-up, I recall…”
“No, I didn’t. But…” And he told Colin how he’d come to stay at Anthony and Sarah’s that night, after getting lost and soaked.

Colin was appalled. “You could have been mugged! Oh my God, Bradley, what could have happened to you…”

“It didn’t, though. It’s not a good idea to dwell on what could have happened, is it. I had a guardian angel come rescue me. And then, after seeing the state I was in, and you called him…I’m pretty sure he has an inkling, anyway.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess. And we know Richard has suspected from the start.”

“Then you’re really okay with this? You want me to call them, ask them to have lunch with us next week?”

Colin had answered that yes, they were both people they trusted, and he too suddenly had an almost urgent need to share their status with someone, to make it that more real for the two of them, something private but not a secret.

“What changed, so much? You were so adamantly against this… It couldn’t have been just the interview.”

“I think I realized that my privacy issues are about as bad as your insecurity issues. As long as we confine it to people we know and trust, it will still be private.”

Bradley had no response to that, so he stroked Colin’s hair and his back until Colin fell asleep, and stayed awake long after, pondering how he had ever managed to win the favour of this odd, enigmatic, remarkable man.
Chapter 12

Colin did manage to turn the tables on him the next morning by having him strip before they began their pre-cardio yoga workout. Bradley’s half-hearted protests were met with a very steely, unmoving expression from Colin.

If Bradley were frank with himself, he would admit that Colin’s calm stubbornness and the hold he had over Bradley, the effortless domination he was able to exert, was a huge part of what he found so exciting in their intimacy.

The “discussion” ended when Bradley dragged off his own track bottoms and tee shirt and stood nude, ready for the Cat-Cow pose. “Talk me through it” he ordered Colin, and Colin did.

Of course, he’d suspected all along what was going to happen, and it did.

Bradley was in the midst of the Downward Facing Dog (Colin had unhelpfully re-named it “Blond Man’s Gorgeous Golden Arse High In the Air), when he felt Colin’s hands at his waist.

“That’s right”, Colin said quietly from behind him. “Remember, breathe slowly, in through your nose...”

Bradley felt his heart rate speed up, and his focus immediately shifted from what was going in his nose to what was about to go in his arse.

Colin’s hands began to massage his lower back and buttocks. “Hold that position. You’re doing very well. Steady, even breathing...focus.”

Oh, Bradley was focused alright, but he remained silent.

Bradley felt Colin’s thumbs begin making circular movements on both arse cheeks, and then dig in even further. It felt so heavenly, to maintain this challenging position while Colin massaged his glutes.

“You’re breathing is beginning to be a bit shaky. Remember to focus.”

Oh, yeah, his breathing had picked up, and Colin knew damn well why.

It picked up even further when, from his peripheral vision, Bradley saw Colin reach for the lube on the nearby table, and squirted a generous amount on Bradley’s arse and cleft.

“Do you want to ease down, Bradley...” Slowly, with Colin’s now-slick hands steadying him, Bradley eased to his knees, then leaned forward on his arms and rested his forehead on them. Colin guided his legs apart further, and then eased one and two fingers into his opening.

“If you could see yourself right now...your hole is actually opening to me, your glorious arse so firm and spread for me ....so beautiful, so beautiful, presented to me like this.”

Bradley had to squeeze his eyes shut and swallow. The things Colin was saying to him, the rumbling timbre of his voice. He knew he was panting loudly, all semblance of practicing yoga long forgotten. He’d never imagined himself having a kink for Colin’s dirty talk. Not until he’d actually heard him. Not until right now.

Colin took long moments preparing Bradley, talking to him in that same low, sultry, seductive tone,
until Bradley was almost whimpering with need and trying to push back on his fingers.

“Your breathing has gone to hell. Do you want me to stop so that you can re-center yourself?”

“You do and I’ll kill you”, Bradley choked out.

He heard Colin’s smugly amused chuckle and started to turn around, but Colin quickly corrected him.

“No, stay just as you are. Keep your eyes closed and maintain your position. Breathe.”

Colin really was a bossy fuck. Bradley sighed and closed his eyes again, trying not to tremble in anticipation. The tension was started to take its toll, and his legs began to quiver a bit.

“There, there”, Colin said, stroking the inside of his thighs with one hand, just lightly brushing Bradley’s balls. “It’s almost time.”

Bradley heard the foil wrapper being opened, a slight rustle as Colin readied himself, and a sloppy squirting as Colin lubed himself up.

And then Bradley was moaning, very loudly, as Colin slid inside, the burning almost-pain delicious in its friction. Colin too made a kind of humming sound and then stilled when his sac was flush against Bradley’s upturned arse.

Neither of them moved for a moment, and the only sounds were their twin pantings.

Colin leaned over him, almost draped himself over Bradley’s full body and whispered in the shell of his ear, “How does that feel?”

“Nggghhhh” was all Bradley could say. His eyes were rolling back in his head and his toes were curling and he thought that if Colin didn’t give him some relief soon, he’d become a cramped ball of wantonness. And then he would die, dramatically.

Colin responded to that profound response by circling his hips once, cock buried to the root inside Bradley.

A gurgle was all Bradley managed, his power of speech gone. But Colin seemed to understand Bradley’s sexual vocabulary. Colin finally stopped his teasing and began to move in and out of him with long, slow strokes. Bradley no longer even tried to articulate, just allowed himself to grunt with the sheer delight of it, and Colin wasn’t silent either, and the slapping of skin on skin, and oh, it was almost too much, too much, and just right.

When Colin’s rhythm began to stutter and become more desperate, he pleaded, “Touch me, touch me”, and Colin did, pulling Bradley upright onto his knees until they were chest to back and clumsily pumping Bradley’s swollen and weeping cock as he snapped his hips forward.

Bradley reached around to pull Colin’s buttocks towards himself, holding him almost-still as he felt himself begin the rush towards orgasm and release. He lost track of things for a few moments then; he knew he came, felt his own warm come on his hands and Colin’s as they pulled together on his cock, felt Colin’s bucking and strangled yell as he let go too.

Bradley fell forward then, flat on his belly with Colin still inside him and atop him, and he cared not one jot.

Once he’d managed to gather his mind back together again, he noted that Colin had lifted himself off
just enough to remove his condom and said used rubber was now laying on the carpet. All he could think was “I hope we don’t forget that there.”

And then he didn’t have any thoughts at all for a time, because Colin was nuzzling his hair, and Bradley opened his eyes to see Colin smiling at him, red faced and sweaty, his track bottoms still at his ankles and his pink cock slightly tumescent.

“Bradley”, Colin purred, but he didn’t say anything else, just continued to nuzzle him, laying on his back but half twisted towards him, stroking Bradley’s back and his aching bottom and placing odd kisses here and there on him, and just how was Colin managing to actually coordinate his movements like that, or even just a little bit, when Bradley’s own bones felt like they had melted away?

After an eternity, Bradley swallowed, licked his lips, and slowly turned his head to fully look at Colin. “Mate”, he croaked. “We need a yoga mat. I’ve got rug burns on my tassel.”

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After that cardio workout, Bradley felt no need to run or ride his exercise bike, so he lifted weights with Colin for an hour once they’d both finally managed to drag themselves off the floor. Bradley found the whole thing repetitious, but he did enjoy watching Colin and imagining what a more sculpted, defined Colin would look like. He’d always be willowy, but...

“What?” Colin suddenly asked. “You’re staring. Am I doing this wrong?”

“No, no, mate, I’m just...daydreaming. Keep doing what you’re doing, I’m going to--” And he gestured vaguely behind him.

He grabbed up a seldom-used sketch pad and charcoal pencil from his desk and began to draw. Usually this was something he only did when he was alone or bored or both, just to pass the time, but now he was on a mission.

“Hey, would you do me a favor? Take your shirt off, please.”

Colin stopped what he was doing and gave him a look, but did as he was asked. “Just...don’t draw me too ugly.”

So Colin continued his reps with the weights, with Bradley sitting and watching him, occasionally quietly correcting his form or position. He sketched his idea of what Colin might look like in a couple of months if he kept at what he was doing, or maybe even increased it a bit.

His childhood hobby didn’t fail him. Bradley was proud of his artistic ability, and by the time Colin had completed all of his sets, he had a rough drawing of Colin ready and showed it to him.

As usual, Colin surprised him.

Colin let out a breathy “Wow...” and took up the sheet, as if to study it more closely. And then he looked at Bradley and smiled at him in genuine pleasure. “This is brilliant. I only hope I can actually look like this. You’ve drawn me...mature.”

It was true. Bradley had made Colin’s ears slightly less prominent, his face and neck fuller. Colin had broad shoulders now, but Bradley had sketched them slightly more rounded, and the pectorals of his chest far more defined. He’d kept his belly flat, without a six pack, but had given his arms larger biceps, filled in his forearms.
Bradley shrugged, went to take the simple picture back, but Colin wasn’t done looking at it. “You know...this really is remarkable. You only worked on it for a few minutes and...did you study anatomy?”

Colin was serious, looking at him with a puzzled expression.

“Just yours, you know that. It’s only a sketch, you know, little more than a cartoon.”

Colin’s mouth quirked. “No, it’s more than that. It’s realistic. It’s actually something for me to aspire to. You are a very talented drawer, do you realize that? I’ve always envied anyone who could do this, I haven’t the ability at all.”

Well, Bradley did sort of know that, based on an unfortunately filmed attempt by Colin to paint one of the mythical creatures of the show....

“It’s nothing, really. Just...picturing you, a fine manly muscled man-beast. With hair. And sweat, you know, you’ll have to be sweaty if you’ve got muscles.”

“Right”, Colin chuckled. “Well, it’s very good, and I’m going to keep it.” He took Bradley’s pencil from him and in small printing, marked the date in a lower corner of the page. “Thank you.”

Bradley just nodded, trying to look nonchalant, but the truth was he felt equal parts chuffed and bashful.

The moment was broken when their phones rang at exactly the same time, and they found a handful of their colleagues from the theater inviting them to early lunch before the show. They decided, after a quick, quiet consult with each other, to go with the spontaneous invitation, since neither of them had plans for the afternoon.

They were showered and out the door a half hour later, Bradley’s “portrait” of “Muscles” Morgan now tucked away in one of Colin’s books in his backpack.

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Saturday meant that Bradley’s family would be arriving, and that meant Colin would be retreating to his own flat.

Bradley was not happy with Colin’s “bailing” on him, as he put it.

Colin snickered. “You’ll be with your mum and sisters. Think how good the sex will be after a couple of days of abstinence...” And he kissed Bradley, and reminded him to check for any stray black hairs or condoms that might be laying around the apartment.

Bradley did check. Yes, they had already disposed of the condom in the living room from the “yoga session” the morning before.

He rolled his eyes at Colin. “What am I, sixteen? I’m pretty sure my mum has cottoned on to the fact that I have sex...”

In reality, Bradley’s mother and sisters wouldn’t even be staying with him in his small flat. They’d rented a suite in a hotel near the theater, and would probably spend the time before and after Bradley’s shows shopping or...whatever it is women did together in the city. Bradley would join them at night while they were in London.

Bradley hired a car to take him to the train station to meet them. Predictably, the train was late, nearly forty-five minutes, which meant he was going to cut it close to make it to the theatre on time for the two o’clock show. It seemed to Bradley that he did a lot of rushing these days. He managed to get
everyone settled in at their hotel, and they agreed to meet at a downtown restaurant at four thirty, between shows. They’d meet him after the eight o’clock show.

It was a busy day. He had only the chance to wolf down a meal and listen to tales of his nephews’ antics before rushing back for the next performance, and he was feeling fatigued when he returned to the hotel after ten. But then they all sat around with tea and biscuits, happily talking late into the night. The kids had drawn pictures for him, and everyone had gifts for him as well, and they all vented about their father (but not too much—their mum became very tight-lipped when they started in on that. She’d always taught them respect if not deference.)

And they all asked after him, of course, how he was enjoying doing the play, if he was happy and healthy, ready for Merlin’s upcoming series, playing football, seeing anyone…?

The moment of truth had arrived.

“I am seeing someone, Mum, still in the early stages. That’s why I haven’t said anything about it all yet.”

“Someone special, then.”

“Very.”

“Serious?”

“Yes…”

“Oh? Someone from the play?”

“Yeah”

“What’s her name?”

Before he could correct his mother’s pronoun, Natalie spoke up. “Let him be, Mum. Can’t you see he doesn’t walk to talk about it? Sometimes new ones are like that; you just want to tread carefully with them.”

And just when had his sister become such a perceptive and accurate advocate for him? He was going to have to send Natalie a box of chocolates in thanks.

On the tail end of that thought, his sister smiled sweetly at him and said, “Isn’t that right, Snagglepuss?”

So, maybe he would send her a box of laxatives instead…

Mum said, “Well, I just asked her name, that’s all. I wasn’t offering to help pick out the china.”

“It’s just, we have to be discreet, and it needs to be kept private.”

“Well I’m certainly not going to call any newspapers.”

“It’s Colin.” He’d said it. He’d said it…

“Colleen? Which one is she?”

Both Natalie and Stephanie were looking at him. Very intense looking.

“I know you’re going to find this a bit confusing. I do, too. But…it’s not a she. It’s Colin, you know,
Colin Morgan, from Merlin. I’m seeing Colin.”

No one said anything for a long moment. Bradley could hear his blood pumping.

“You’re gay, now?” Stephanie asked.

“Oh…this is a joke. He’s having us all on. Good one, there, Bradders.” Natalie grabbed another biscuit, popped it into her mouth.

“It’s not a joke, and no, I’m not gay, although I seem to be for Colin. I’m seeing a man, Mum. I’m hoping you’re okay with that.”

“You mean, in the play?”

“For real”. Okay, this was going to be harder than he thought. No one seemed to be grasping it…

“You’re not gay, just for Colin, is that right? How does that work, exactly?” This from Natalie.

Bradley felt his annoyance begin to grow with his sisters. How could he label it for them, when he didn’t quite have a handle on it all himself…

Maybe Colin had been on to something, about not telling anyone.

Before he could answer though, his mum said, “Ladies, hush a moment. I need to understand this.”

Everyone shut up.

“Do you mean that you are bi-sexual? That the gender of the person, in this case Colin, doesn’t figure into the equation? That you are fond of the person and the gender is secondary?”

God, but he loved his mother…

“Something like that, yes, Mum. Thank you, by the way. I guess, the way I’m thinking of it…I’m straight, except for Colin. I’m…in love with Colin. If I wasn’t with him, I’d be with a woman.”

His sisters both just raised their eyebrows at him, in identical expressions, but at least they weren’t laughing or looking disgusted or… any number of other negative ways they might have reacted. They all just looked surprised and a bit confused, still.

After a long moment, Mum said, “Does Colin feel the same way?”

“It looks that way, yeah.”

“And you’re happy?”

“Yes.”

“Do you…expect it be long-term?”

“I’m hoping it will be.”

His Mum smiled then, if a bit wanly, obviously coming to a decision. “Well. Then, I’m done grilling you with my twenty questions. Why don’t you invite Colin to have breakfast with us all tomorrow, before the show? Would he be opposed to that, do you think?”

Oh, boy, he just couldn’t wait to make that phone call to Colin…
He stayed at the hotel with them that night, but sleep didn’t come easily, mostly because he was sleeping alone. At seven thirty, he was up and out, running the unfamiliar streets. He found a secluded spot, hit Colin’s number on the speed dial.

‘’Lo.‘’

“I told them.”

He could actually hear Colin’s intake of breath. “How did they take it?”

“Silence. Confusion. They wanted to know if I was happy. And then they told me to invite you to breakfast with us this morning.”

A pause, and then, “What time?”

“Now would be good.”

“I’ll see you in about thirty minutes.”

When they hung up, Bradley felt like he could breathe again for the first time in two days.

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Breakfast was a remarkably normal affair. Colin greeted his sisters and Mum with his usual old-fashioned manners, even bringing flowers for all of them and kissing his mum on the cheek. But Bradley’s eyes did sting a little when his mum murmured to Colin, “Welcome to our family, dear.”

Colin’s normal reserve didn’t prevent him for carrying on a conversation, and he knew enough from Bradley to be able to ask after the nephews as well as Stephanie and Natalie’s jobs. They in turn asked him about the upcoming last series of Merlin, and they talked about the play a bit. The conversation wasn’t lacking.

No one even brought up the fact that they were dating. They wouldn’t have if Colin had been a girl, certainly…

Colin stayed with them all, talking and socializing, until it was time for himself and Colin to leave for the show. Mum and the girls would be at this performance and would follow them in about an hour.

Bradley waited all through the cab ride, the walk through the gathered fans, and into the theatre.

And then he shoved Colin into his dressing room and snogged him silly.

They’d past a milestone, together, and come out the other side intact. Colin whispered only “You’ve a lovely family.”

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The performance given that afternoon was another that Bradley could be proud of, and when he met up with his family afterward, they’d congratulated him and used words like “fabulous” and “intense” and “seriously emotionally charged.” Natalie told him that he had to have a real pair of cajones to do what he and Colin did, show after show, in public, and she really was impressed.

Colin came over to greet them again, very briefly, and graciously accepted their words of praise, but then made his excuses, leaving Bradley alone to see them off and say their goodbyes. Bradley couldn’t blame him for the disappearing act—Colin had supported him far, far
more than he could ever even hoped for.

Even Richard came over to say hello and to further praise Bradley to them—and Bradley took note that he hadn’t done that when Bradley’s father had been in town, even though Richard was well aware he’d been there.

Finally, Bradley accomplished herding everyone off to the train station and saw them onto the train, amongst the usual kisses and hugs and chaos of luggage and new shopping bags. His mother, of course, was the last on, staying for one more hug and whispering that he was very brave and made her proud. “Call me”, was the last thing she said.

They waved to each other until the train was out of sight. Bradley had an hour to himself before he had to be back to the theatre. He thought about calling Colin, but then decided to leave the poor guy in peace for an hour. He’d been “on” since breakfast that morning.

He scrolled though his contacts until he found the one he needed.

“Bradders! How are you? Surely not lost again, I hope…”

“Hi, Anthony…my, you’re just so funny. Could you come and get me, please, I’m in the States and need a ride home….”

He succeeded in procuring a lunch date with his father figure for the coming Thursday before he hung up, and then made a memo to work on Richard next.

That night, after he and Colin had reunited at his flat, screwed each other’s brains out and lay in a damp and exhausted heap, he thought again about the ebb and flow of his life since taking this job, and how things had suddenly decided to fall so neatly and happily into place for him. Colin had admitted that he, Colin, didn’t adjust well to things changing and evolving, calling himself a turtle that resisted change. It had probably been part of the reason why he’d been so reluctant to out himself, even to Bradley’s family.

And they were finding things they had in common, things besides sex they could engage in together. That surprised Bradley, too. Colin told him he’d ran alone when Bradley had been with his family and had lifted weights (he’d apparently bought some for his own flat) on his own.

Bradley wanted to tell Colin now how he was feeling now, hopeful and confident, secure even, but just then, Colin let out a long, drawn out snore. Out like a light after sex, as usual.

God, he loved this man.

Bradley lay for a long time in the dark, cradling the head of his lover against his chest, smiling a bit at his snores, before finally adding his own.

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Monday meant their day off. Bradley would be playing footie with the lads in the morning, and Colin would be meeting some of his friends for some weird-sounding book-signing or something, (Bradley wasn’t really certain), but they’d agreed to all meet up at a pub later in the afternoon.

It was a gorgeous, nearly-spring day, not even threatening rain, almost balmy. Bradley was a bit
disappointed that Tom wasn’t playing today—he was off filming on something, a brief guest spot—but Eoin was there, and several of the other lads from their earlier pickups. Bradley was in such good spirits, and had so much energy…they played for nearly five hours, off and on, occasionally stopping for tea or just to rest and jest, as they called it, insulting and bantering. The biggest topic of conversation today was Macken’s hair, which was looking pretty scraggly. He’d cut it at the end of series four, and now, of course, the show runners had told him to grow it out in prep for the new series. It was at that in-between stage where he couldn’t tuck it or tie it…always in his face. He actually adopted a woman’s hair band on it, which of course invited endless harassment.

“You’ve lost your Pantene flip, mate!”

By five o’clock, everyone was washed and in street clothes again, and had agreed on a pub. Bradley texted Colin the address and got a reply back almost immediately: “C u in 30 min!”

He hoped no one would notice that he grinned like a maniac when he read it. He then texted Colin back “Hurry up, you sexy thing. Wear your pink thong.”

The pub was rapidly filling up, Macken had gotten confirmation from Hopper that he’d join them soon, it looked like Ade was in town too and would be stopping by, and then Rupert and Angel came in, too. It was turning into a real Merlin reunion.

He hadn’t seen Angel since the very end of filming series four, and hurried to greet her with a bear hug.

“Hey, Hussy, you’re looking foxy tonight.” She did, too, in her leggings, boots and top that accentuated all of her curvy assets. “And you smell good, too, for a change.”

“Top man”, Angel said wryly, and poked him, hard, in the solar plexus, enjoying his loud yelp.

They all found tables, with Angel alternately sitting in Bradley and Rupert’s laps, and started catching up. More and more of their Merlin friends were filtering in, including some of the crewmembers. Tables were being pushed together to make socializing easier for them, and alcohol was flowing freely.

Tom and his girlfriend came in, and Ade and Macken’s girlfriend, right around the time music started playing. Bradley was feeling more and more peckish, but wanted to wait for Colin so they could have their meal together. He ordered another beer, dug into the pretzel bowl.

Colin made it right around the time the Irish band started setting up, and everyone involved with Merlin let loose with a cheer.

They ate. They talked a lot. They drank even more. (Except Colin). As the night wore on, Bradley lost track of where Colin was every now and then.

At one point, the knights were picking Colin up and carrying him around, in what Bradley later found out (from tipsy inquiry) was a bet of sorts. Colin had been declared “light as a feather” by Tom (who did a lot of lifting and carrying, and therefore felt like he should know), and now everyone wanted proof.

Well, as long as Colin was laughing about it…they didn’t know it, but if Colin kept up the way he was going with his weight program, he may weigh more than a feather before too long.

When the singing started, Colin was again sitting next to Bradley (“Where you belong!” Bradley had shouted decisively, being quite pissed already), making everyone around them laugh. There was quite a lot of laughing going on around Bradley, he noted. Of course, with the room
actually going around like it was, who could tell….

Bradley swore it wasn’t that late, but when everyone started picking up and getting ready to leave, Colin procured a taxi for the two of them and helped fold Bradley into it. There were some other guys there too, he forgot their names now…but they were all having a cut-up time, he was sure of that.

It was so quiet in the cab, and he found that he was actually quite tired, now that he wasn’t surrounded by a lot of people and noise. Colin had pulled him against him (as Bradley was having a little trouble sitting upright), and Bradley studied the side of his head and his lovely ear in the near-dark for a moment before asking him, “Did you have fun tonight, luv?”

Colin just looked down and smiled slightly at him, nodded.

The cabbie said, “He’s not going to boot all over my cab, is he?”

Colin answered, “No, sir, I’ll look after him.”

“I’ll bet”, the cabbie muttered, and that was just rude, Bradley knew. “He’s a grouchy-pants”, he whispered to Colin, and laughed a little, but his lips might have gotten in the way somehow. He sprayed a bit of saliva on Colin, who wiped it off with a wry look at him.

“Know what?” he asked Colin. “You’re awesome”. He tried to point at Colin, to emphasize his point, but somehow wound up poking himself in the eye instead. That rather hurt, really.

Colin caught his hand, eased it down to where it couldn’t damage his eyes further. “You too”, Colin said. He seemed to find something a bit amusing. Bradley wasn’t sure what, but he looked so very pretty. Colin did, when he smiled, that it made Bradley all that more affectionate for him. He nibbled a bit at Colin’s ear, and then started unzipping Colin’s hoodie.

Colin caught his hand again, trapped it between his arm and side. “Easy there,” he said to Bradley. “We’re almost home.”

So Bradley hummed a little to himself and waited for them to be home so that he could make love to Colin some more. Colin was just so delectable.

And then Colin was helping him get out of the cab, and that was pretty funny really, because Bradley could certainly walk. He knew he was pissed, but his legs were still attached properly.

They were inside and Colin was directing him to the toilet before Bradley stopped. Colin had been propelling him forward and bumped into him when Bradley dug his heels in.

“Cols! You made a mistake, luv. This isn’t my flat. I thought I was the pissed one here.”

“You are the pissed one. It’s my flat, not yours. C’mon, c’mon, time to take a wee.”

Oh.

So Bradley complied, and then let Colin lead him to the bedroom. He became even happier when Colin started taking his clothes off—Bradley’s clothes, not his own. Then he helped Bradley to lie down, and told him he’d be right back.

“Come back, Colin, let’s shag!” Bradley called.

“Not tonight. I don’t shag anyone when they’re pissed.”
“Aww, darling, I’m not that pissed, see. Look, I’m up for it.” He pulled his cock from his briefs, and while he was only semi-hard, he knew he could stroke himself to full mast for his love.

“Just stay there, don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

“Will you shag with me?”
“Tomorrow, we’ll go at it like bunnies, I promise.”

“Ohh…” Bradley groaned in disappointment. This really was a setback.

He began to stroke himself anyway. Maybe if he showed Colin that he was ready. He pulled languidly at himself, not having the coordination to really get himself going.

Colin came back into the room, carrying two water bottles, aspirin, and what looked to be a small wastebasket.

He was so happy to see Colin again that he began to pull hard at himself, and he was more surprised than anyone when he spurted.

“Colin! I came!” he told him happily.

“So I see. Well, at least you’re a happy drunk.” Colin disappeared again, came back with a warm washcloth. He used it to clean Bradley up, and then guided him into a pair of track bottoms (some that his brother Neil had left behind, Colin told him). Bradley tried to help, but kept getting the wrong legs in the wrong holes.

Bradley giggled the whole time. After all, it wasn’t the first time he’d wrestled with Colin while wearing no trousers…

Finally, Colin got him into a shirt too, and then pulled the duvet up over him. Bradley thought that it was all so sweet, Colin taking care of him like this.

“You’re my little darling Irish dumpling, that’s what you are. You take such good care of me; it’s why I love you so.”

Colin smiled, walked around to the other side of the bed and started taking his clothes off, putting on his own pyjamas.

Bradley just watched, humming happily to himself again.

“Colin, you are so pretty.”

“You too, luv. Come here, let’s go to sleep.”

Colin snapped the bedside table light off, gathered Bradley closely to him. Bradley didn’t rest his head on his shoulder though, oh no. He was too heavy for Colin, he knew. But he did snuggle up close and hum happily while Colin stroked at his hair.

“Good night, Colin. I love you, even though you won’t have sex when I’m pissed.”

Colin kissed the side of his head, chuckled a little more. Bradley wasn’t sure why.

It was the last thought Bradley had before alcohol-induced sleep took him.

Bradley awoke some time during the night, feeling disoriented and so very dehydrated, like someone had shoved a sock in his mouth and scraped all the skin from the roof. He could hear Colin’s light snoring beside him, feel his body heat, and took comfort from that in the moments before he sorted
out where he was—not in his flat, obviously—and contemplated how much trouble it would be to get up and tend to his parched throat.

When he realized that he was at Colin’s flat, and he remembered that Colin had left bottles of water on the bedside table for him, he could have hugged his unconscious lover.

He lost the cap somewhere on the floor, probably not to be located until the cleaning lady’s next scheduled visit, and drank most of the water in one draught, sighing at the relief it brought. Water had never tasted so good. He’d even managed not to spill any on Colin’s bed.

Colin didn’t stir at all, even when he missed the night stand and dropped the emptied water bottle on the floor.

Finally, Bradley settled back down on his pillow, careful not to disturb Colin, though he did snuggle him. Colin stirred a little, smacked his lips, draped one arm over Bradley’s chest, and was dead to the world again.

Bradley thought fond thoughts and followed him back to sleep.
When he next awoke, Colin’s side of the bed was cold and empty, and Bradley’s bladder was putting up a clamour to be emptied. He glanced at his watch: almost ten. Yee gods…since when did he sleep the day away…

Well, apparently since he spent the eves of his days off indulging in much hearty grog with the knights.

He hated it when he answered his own questions.

Colin had his ear buds in and was reading some thick book in the living room, but grinned and called “Good morning!” when he saw him.

“Shut up”, Bradley grumble, and shut the bathroom door on Colin’s amused snort.

One thing Bradley had always had going for him when he drank: He could always recover quickly. He was never sick or incapacitated, although he was usually left muzzy and tired, like this morning. The shower and teeth-brushing helped; as did the stout hot tea Colin had waiting for him when he emerged.

“Care for some breakfast?”

“Umm. In a bit. I think I’m still looking for the rest of my brain.”

“Sure you didn’t leave it at the pub last night?” Colin asked, mock-helpful.

“I’m going to leave you somewhere, if you don’t stop harassing me”, Bradley retorted. He slumped down on the couch, put on his most gloomy, pitiable pout.

Colin’s response to that was to chuckle at him, and then put an arm around his shoulders. “There, there, I’ll look after you. I did last night, after all.”

“You did, actually, cheers for that. The water and aspirin in particular were brilliant.”

“Any time”, Colin said easily. And then, “So you remember, then? How much?”

“All of it. I wasn’t that drunk.”

“Oh really”, Colin teased. “Like what?” Colin was still smiling, but his voice had a bit of an edge to it.

“Like you wouldn’t fuck me because I was pissed. I wasn’t that pissed, by the way.”

Colin really did laugh then. “Just a matter of full consent, that’s all. I wasn’t sure you were of sound mind, there.”

“Mm.” Bradley said nothing else, but he thought that was kind of chivalrous, really. Colin was beyond gallant.

“I was consenting”

Colin looked at him with a “C’mon” expression, huffed another chuckle. “You were trying to hump the floor lamp last night, and your eyes were as bright as Christmas trees.”
“Pfft. I don’t believe it; I’m seeing the last true gentleman on earth. No need to be so cautious if the occasion should arise again. Feel free to jump my drunken carcass any old time.”

“Anyway”, Colin said, shaking his head slightly as if trying to dispel that notion. “Trust me, you’re going to be taking care of me for at least two or three days when this show is over, because I intend to get drunk off my arse at the wrap party.”

“You always do, and you’re the funniest thing on two legs when you’re pissed.”

They both laughed a little, remembering previous wrap parties when Colin had let loose. He’d pretty much been the entertainment for the evening. Everything was funnier when one was sloshed, after all.

Case in point: A very pissed Macken had bumped Colin’s drink with his elbow the previous evening, and the two of them, Eoin and Tom, had dove for it, which of course not only knocked it over and spilled its contents completely, but also broken the glass it was in, and nearly knocked Macken out of his chair. Eoin was such a klutz. The whole place had laughed uproariously. Eoin, of course, had loved the attention, even as blitzed as he’d been.

“Do you remember anything else?” Colin pressed, and as if hit by an epiphany, Bradley realized what Colin was pushing at.

“You mean the L word, more than once, yeah?” Bradley leered at Colin, and bless him; Colin actually lowered his lashes demurely. “Yeah, I remember. And I have no apologies to make, mate. I’m afraid you’ll just have to live with that.”

Apparently having heard what he was after, Colin just smiled for a moment, a pleased, almost shy smile, and Bradley leaned in for a kiss.

“I would never hold a pissed man’s ramblings against him”, Colin murmured against his mouth. It was just a fleeting kiss, but the little bit of disappointment that Bradley felt over not hearing the L-word in return from Colin was eased a bit by it.

He knew what Colin was doing: giving him an out, if he wanted it.

When Colin drew back a bit, Bradley reminded him, “I believe I remember you saying something about fucking me today, going at it like a bunny”.

“I believe I said shag”.

“Semantics”, Bradley muttered, still resting his forehead against Colin’s.

Colin giggled, but then pulled away a bit more, and Bradley groaned.

“Wha…”

“I just…I have a couple things I wanted to talk to you about.”

Bradley ran his hand through his hair, sighed a little. “Okay, so talk.”

“Well…first I wanted to ask—do you want to go to the cinema today? There’s some friends of mine who worked on this film—” Colin produced a newspaper, pointed to an advertisement. “I thought it was mainstream enough that even you might enjoy it.”

“Looks good to me, sure”, Bradley answered affably. He hadn’t been to the cinema in quite awhile.
“What else?”

“Well, I have another friend...” Colin started and Bradley smirked at him.

“What?” Colin asked.

“You’ve been a busy little big-eared lad this morning, haven’t you? You must have been socializing the whole time I was snoring.”

“True, though I could barely hear myself think over all the racket that snoring of yours makes. You were seriously sawing some wood--Hey!”

Bradley poked at him, and the two engaged in a bit of slap and tickle again for a few moments.

When they’d finally settled once more, Bradley told Colin, “Good on you, then. What’d you and this mate talk about?”

“Hamlet”.

“Yeah?”

“Got a call from someone I worked with way back when, at the Young Vic.”

“Oh, that was your venue for your first turn at being bare-bottomed in public, wasn’t it?”

“A Prayer For My Daughter. Yes it was, and thanks for that.”

“You’re an old hand at this, aren’t you.” Bradley waggled his eyebrows at Colin at the innuendo.

“I’m sure that sounds as naughty as you meant it to”, Colin snickered. “You’re impossible.”

“I know, sorry, for interrupting. I can’t help it, you’re so easy...”

“So as I was saying”, Colin said, mock-exasperated, and they both laughed. “There’s a friend involved with the Young Vic who is now working at the Old Vic, and invited me and a guest to see their production of Hamlet. So...I’m inviting you to be my guest. It’s next Monday night, our day off.”

“And you didn’t think I’d like it, or what? Is that why you’re so nervous about asking me?” At Colin’s self-conscious nod, Bradley said, “Haven’t we talked about Shakespearean plays before, you and I? You know I’ve always wanted to play Mercutio.”

Colin just shrugged, smiled a little. “You’d be a brilliant Mercutio. But I didn’t know if you would prefer something else, or already have plans, or want to play footie with the lads, or...”

“I’d love to go to Hamlet with you. It’s a date.”

This was so nice—so normal, such a “couples” thing to do. For that matter, it was a comfortable, mates-thing to do too. Bradley felt the familiar swell of affection and warmth for Colin.

“Yeah, well, you get bored, we can always make out in the darkened theatre”, he said, straight faced, and Colin just rolled his eyes.

“You’ve a one-track mind”, Colin shook his head, smirking.

“Yes I do. Are you ready to get on that train with me yet? Can we shag now, my little bunny?” He
undid a couple of buttons on Colin’s flannel shirt. Colin didn’t try to stop him.

“Well, there is one other thing...”

Bradley stopped what he was doing, raised his eyebrows at Colin. Was he trying to fill their dance cards for the next year or what?

“I got a call from my agent this morning, about renewing my contract with the show. I’d wager that you probably have a message from him too, seeing as how he’s now your agent as well.”

Bradley hadn’t checked his phone yet, but he simply nodded at Colin to go on.

“Yeah, and?”

“Well...they want me to renew my contract. The BBC, the Js, my agent. And...I don’t know if I’m going to.”

It wasn’t a new topic between the two of them, that was for certain. They’d spent some time talking about it together, since about mid-series of the past year, and Bradley had chatted with his mother on it, but the conversations were always inconclusive. He and Colin had always let it be known they hadn’t reached a decision yet. And Bradley, for one, always liked to keep his options open.

But there had always been a certain amount of ambivalence about it all.

Bradley knew which direction he was leaning toward. As an actor, he craved variety and new challenges. Once his comfort zone became just that--comfortable--he wanted a new one to tackle and defeat. He knew that in this at least, he and Colin were very much alike.

And he’d found this new, exhilarating experience in doing this play, the kind of fun excitement and fear one got from riding the fastest, wildest amusement park ride. Putting his chainmail back on was going to seem almost like...going back to work after his holiday.

And the truth was, Colin was the titular character of Merlin, but Bradley’s character was near-equal in importance. The show wouldn’t continue without them, both of them together, at least not in it’s present concept. So if either of them made the decision not to continue and the other did not agree...

Bradley loved the people he worked with, almost all of them. He’d made lifelong friends on the show, and they were all incredibly talented, creative, hardworking, fun people.

But Bradley also loved meeting and making new friends. And he’d clashed more than once with the producers of the show and their uber-controlling approach, their disorganized, make-it-up-as-they-went-along storytelling, and their sometimes condescending treatment of Bradley himself.

Bradley spoke of none of this to Colin, simply sat quietly and waited. But when the silence stretched, he finally prompted him with,

“I have the feeling I know what your decision is going to be. Just know that I’m leaning that way too. That is, if you decide...what I think you will. And I’ll support you in whatever your final call is.”

Colin smiled at him slightly. “I haven’t decided yet, but...I know they’ll want an answer soon.”

Bradley waited a moment, but that seemed to be all Colin had to say on the subject for now.

Bradley sighed a little. Things were getting too heavy.

He sat up abruptly, lightly swatting Colin’s thigh. “Soon, yes, but not this moment. Come on, you.
We should exercise before we go to the cinema.”

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Bradley did forgo his usual morning run, opting instead for yoga and weightlifting with Colin, and then Colin did shag him thoroughly, just as he’d promised. They grabbed a quick bite and barely made it to the cinema on time, just sitting down as the last of the coming attractions completed showing.

The film was really quite good, though Bradley found himself unable to concentrate on it fully, his mind swimming over the discussion of that morning and the upcoming move back to Wales. Filming would resume on Merlin in slightly more than a fortnight, and they’d have so much to do, beyond the actual work itself.

Bradley and Colin were each provided their own personal flats by the Beeb while they were filming, one of the few status perks they received as co-leads of the show. It was the same apartment complex where actors from Doctor Who also stayed during their own shoots. All of the other actors from Merlin were housed in a hotel near the Cardiff studios where they filmed. The arrangement was one that Bradley loved since he’d been gifted with it in the third series because it afforded him some measure of privacy. The accommodations weren’t fancy, but they were comfortable. He’d hosted a few lads’ get togethers there, when his work schedule had allowed it, though he usually traveled home to his London flat on the weekends.

But this year would be different. He was with Colin now, and while they shared the same building, and Colin’s flat was nearby...

Well. Bradley doubted that Colin would want to travel home with him back to London almost every weekend. The logistics of all of this...it made Bradley twitch.

Colin’s mentioning of their upcoming contract renewals (or not, as the case may be), had set the wheels in Bradley’s head in motion, and it was all more than just a little distracting.

For the here and now, though, the two of them still had the play to get through. Richard had already started preparing and auditioning for his next production. This night’s performance, the knights were coming to see them in all their bare glory. Tom and Eoin had been quite boisterous in their anticipation of “seeing” them. Bradley had made them promise the night before to behave themselves, and he had no doubt they wouldn’t disrespect them, but...

It promised to be quite a show. And a showing.

Unsurprisingly, Bradley wasn’t wrong.

It was another very good performance with an enthusiastic crowd—louder and more demonstrative than usual, was Bradley’s feeling. But good shows had come to be what Bradley expected now. The one show that had gone so terribly wrong with Betty’s fall was their one anomaly.

No, they were doing well, with a professional crew of actors who knew how to cover any glitches. But there were almost always no glitches.

Tom and Eoin didn’t make their presence known at all until curtain call time, and even then they had the decency to wait until everyone had taken their bows. In fact, they waited until Bradley spotted them in the crowd and waved, and then they both did fist pumps and “Whoop, whoop” sounds, Arsenio Hall-style. Bradley burst out laughing, nearly doubled-over at their usual sophomoric nuttery, which of course alerted Colin to what was going on too. Colin waved and chuckled, and the
two clowns in the audience made kissy-faces, and mimed “Call me” and elaborate “OK” signs with their fingers. They at least stopped short of throwing roses at the stage.

Bradley was going to kill them…

But there was someone else at the show that night too, an admired performer that neither Bradley nor Colin had known about: John Hurt was in the audience as Richard’s guest, and came backstage to meet them.

Bradley had only met Mr. Hurt twice in the four years of Merlin’s run thus far, and those few times were just hurried introductions. He couldn’t claim to know him at all. He knew Colin hadn’t had the chance to work with their voice of Kilgarrah until the second series, and had enjoyed it and been impressed by the elder actor’s professionalism and obvious intelligence. They’d even exchanged a few phone calls, Colin and John had, usually discussing the storylines and why Merlin never seemed to listen to The Great Dragon. Colin had told Bradley that he was impressed with the gentleman’s wit and sense of humour about playing a gigantic lizard in his golden years, and his willingness to wear the CGI accoutrements, the awkward helmet and blue-sponged dots that picked up Mr. Hurt’s own facial expressions. These were mirrored in the face of Kilgarrah in the editing studio, usually about six months after he’d recorded his voice-overs.

Bradley was torn a little between wanting to be a part of everything, and the other side of the coin, (heh), that of knowing how exhausted Colin became around mid-shoot, because he actually was a part of everything.

Still, Colin had gotten to know this admired actor better than anyone else, save Richard. And, Bradley was a bit jealous of Santiago too, for having the chance at some interaction with the man as well.

Tonight, however, Richard, Colin and himself stood in a semi-circle and really had the chance to chat with the slight man with the distinctive voice. The knights didn’t join them for a good half hour after the show.

Apparently the two had been wayleighed by Merlin fans who recognized Tom’s height, and Eoin and Tom had been accommodating autograph requests. When they finally did meet up with the other cast members, all were in deep conversation about the play, choices, their reasons for accepting the parts, and some of Mr. Hurt’s experiences in the same theatre. It took a while before Macken and Hopper were even introduced to the co-worker they’d never actually worked with before.

Bradley was enjoying himself immensely, and he could tell Colin was too, but the stage area was clearing—it was just the six of them and a stage hand or two, and he started to realize that they would be closing the place. A bit embarrassing, that, but he didn’t want the give and take of ideas, and the anecdotal stories being exchanged with this revered actor to end just yet. Macken and Hopper were asking questions and listening intently too, serious in their intent…it all had the feel of a bit of a workshop for actors.

Finally, at a subtle signal from Richard about needing to clear out, Colin suggested that they all go out together for late-night coffee, and Bradley could have kissed the man, right there in front of these five people. Eoin and Tom immediately agreed, but Bradley was very disappointed when both Richard and John declined with apologies. John’s partner was waiting for him, and Richard’s night ended early by design on most evenings.

There was another round of handshakes and they said their goodbyes, telling John and Richard where they intended to stop for coffee if the senior gentlemen changed their minds.
As they prepared to leave, Bradley looked at Colin—his eyes bright and his cheeks flushed with excitement, and felt again that familiar rush of affection for him.

Heading for the door, jostling and jockeying with crazy Tom and Eoin for space, he slung a casual arm around Colin’s neck, just for the briefest of moments.

Life was good.

Of course, once they’d reached the coffee house, Tom and Eoin’s best behaviour evaporated into the ether.

As soon as their orders were taken, Macken asked about the nude scene.

“Are you considering a career in porn, when Merlin’s run is through?”

While Colin smirked and Tom snickered, Bradley told him, “Oh, shut it, will you. You’re familiar enough with being bare-arsed yourself, so why don’t you tell me.”

“Not quite the same, mate”, and now he was full-on leering at Bradley. “Just my bum was on display. Everyone’s got one of those. No, not like you, the two of you, with your badonkadonks let out to play under watchful eyes…”

Everyone at the table exploded with laughter, though Bradley himself fought valiantly to keep a straight face. He glanced at Colin with an “Et tous, Brutus?” feigned look of hurt. After all, it was Colin up there on display as much as himself. And Hopper was no stranger to baring it all either.

Colin, as usual, was unrepentant, mouthing “Badonkadonk?” at him and shaking his head, eyes crinkling with humour.

Bradley just rolled his own eyes. “I don’t believe you, Macken, a grown man who says ‘badonkadonk’. Have you no shame at all?”

Eoin made a show of appearing to seriously consider the question for a moment, and then predictably answered, “Er... no. None at all. You know me better than that.”

“I’ll drink to that”, Tom piped up.

“And neither do you,” Bradley said.

“We’re actors, where does the shame fit in?” Colin spoke for the first time since they’d taken a table.

Just then their drinks arrived, along with several decadent pastries, and Bradley was saved trying to answer something he had no answer for. Or maybe it had been a rhetorical question? One often couldn’t tell with Colin.

“That’s right, James. Weren’t you shirtless in almost every episode as Arthur last series, and trouserless in a lot of them too? I think Johnny and the Julians were reading the fan fiction again, and wanting to make those special fans happy.”

Bradley groaned amidst more catcalls and hoots and leers from his friends. Well, it was true, he had kind of felt like the show runners had over done it a bit with having him take his clothes off as Arthur last series. He remembered a couple of scenes with Colin that had taken forever to film because they’d both been giggling so much, the only way really to combat just how embarrassed Bradley had really been. One of them involved a set of keys, and the other a bath tub and a pillow…all played for comedy, of course, but it was still a task that gave him pause, wearing only flesh-collared modesty
undies before forty crewmembers.

“Hey”, Bradley said, when he saw Colin starting to chuckle along with them again. “Morgan was up on that stage right there with me tonight, and as bare as I was. Pick on him for a bit, why don’t you.”

“Yeah, but he’s managed to stay more or less clothed in four years of Merlin, unlike you. Can’t usually ever get the guy to even take off his neckerchief.” This from Tom.

“You don’t know it, but that’s because his girlfriend had written “Snugglebunny” and “Wildcat” all over him in indelible marker, and it took all season for it to fade away.”

“Hey!” Colin yelled, and laughed harder.

“Question is, how do you know that?” Macken teased further, and they all took a while to insult and tease each other before settling down again.

Fortunately, Eoin left mention of the nude and sex scenes in question alone after that, and they all fell into shop talk.

Bradley and Colin were both congratulated on their performance in the play, and their friends used the word Bradley had been hearing a lot of: Impressed. Eoin and Tom were impressed with both the show’s content and by the performance of himself and Colin. And they’d even told them that they admired the guts it took for ‘That Scene.’

Tom told them about the show he was doing during Merlin’s hiatus, how it was a small role but supplemented both his income and his drive for more experience, as well as padding his CV a bit further. He was enjoying doing it, working with good people and getting to know more creatives, but admitted that the production values were less than Merlin’s. He’d be glad to get back to Cardiff with them all, the date now looming ever closer.

It was the same with all actors—each role they took was often a stepping stone to the next role.

Colin told Tom and Eoin about the voice-over he’d done for a timepiece company, and Bradley described he’d signed with a new agency, with Colin’s own agent, and hopefully would get his name out there further and bring in new roles.

Eoin had done several commercials (and of course, the great consensus here was that he’d done ads for hair products)—and was also looking forward to the return to Wales and resuming the (possible) final season of their show.

“No, you nozzles, it wasn’t for Pantene or L’Oreal. It was for men’s cologne.”

That statement was met with only slightly fewer jeers than the nude comments, but Eoin didn’t seem to mind at all.

As they were getting ready to call it a night, Eoin suddenly asked Colin, “So, have you gotten sick of this baboon yet? Working with him not only so much during Merlin but during what is supposed to be your holiday from the show too?”

Where the hell had that come from? Bradley wondered, and waited with his most neutral expression (he hoped) for Colin’s response.

Colin played it perfectly, shrugging a shoulder and saying with studied nonchalance, "At least we don't have to live together. I'm sure that'd just be intolerable." And then did a slow, coy eye blink at Bradley across the table.
Bradley was torn between hysteria and the powerful urge to give Colin’s bony shin a good swift kick.

He settled instead for mimicking Colin’s accent, repeating back what he’d just said and making up a few more silly Colin-isms, ending every sentence with one of Colin’s favorite words, “Literally”, giving it all a fine Ulster spin.

Colin really did understand the fine art of irony, didn't he.

So Bradley turned to Eoin and asked him, "Why wouldn't he put up with me?"

“Oh, you know, you two are so different. You’re so noisy and such a social animal, and Colin reads books. Hey, Colin, maybe you can keep him in line, yeah?"

Colin made a “Ppptthhh” sound and remarked, “Doubtful. On the other hand, maybe he can keep you in line.”

Bless Colin. That shut Macken up, finally.

Bradley knew his friends weren’t deliberately being unkind, they were just taking the piss as usual, but still…

He wanted to ask again, to really find out if they truly thought that.

Their friends really thought that he and Colin were incompatible. Hunh. Interesting. And not in a good way.

But it showed in his face, it must have, because Tom reached across the table, gave his shoulder a friendly shove and then turned a critical eye on Colin..

“Hey, Morgan, have you done something different? You haven’t actually put on a few pounds, have you? Because I know you’re not the type to work out…”

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It was a good evening, despite the spots of discomfort that had come up here and there.

But when the four of them made their way outside to catch cabs, Tom invited Colin to share his. He knew that his own flat was vaguely in the direction of Colin’s, and it could be shared fare.

But Colin had planned to go to Bradley’s that night…

Colin suddenly looked like a deer caught in the headlights while he tried to think of a suitable excuse for refusing the offer. “Ehrm. No. That’s okay. I’m actually expected at a mate’s tonight.”

Bradley fought not to roll his eyes. Okay, so improv wasn’t Colin’s strong suit. And he’d been doing so well otherwise, too.

Eoin overheard, asked in a curious tone, “Seriously, this late? Why didn’t you ask her or him to join us?”

“Well, you know…” Colin shrugged, tried out the blinding smile that had been known to make people forget their own names.

Both Tom and Eoin looked at Colin expectantly, awaiting some further explanation.
“Oh God you guys, piss off, will you. You know how private he is. I’ve known him longer than the both of you and just found out his last name this past month.” Bradley did mock-exasperation pretty well too.

Colin swung around gratefully, a sincere smile back in place. “Actually, James, the place is next to yours. If you don’t mind, want to share the fare?”

“Did you hear that, lads? He just likes me better than you, that’s all.”

“Well, there's a surprise”, Macken muttered sarcastically, and Tom chortled, "Knew that!"

Bradley might have been over-egging the pudding, but didn’t care. There was something truly irritating about what they were doing, having to hide from their mates like this, just like the characters they’d been portraying for nearly a month now.

He wasn’t ready to tell them just yet, either, not any more than Colin was.

Especially Macken. The man was a menace on social media. Damn him and his damn twittering thumbs! If he knew, he’d out them, not out of any malice but just in-by-the-way conversation. For something to talk about. Or because he thought it was funny.

He was just incredibly relieved when he and Colin were settled in their cab, and waving to Tom and Eoin as they were getting in their own.

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Later that night, Bradley and Colin lay side by side in Bradley’s bed, tugging on each other’s cocks and talking.

“Have any plans for tomorrow?” Colin asked, his low voice hoarse.

“No…did you have anything in mind?” Bradley was actually hoping Colin did have plans. He was still nervous and sensitive about the whole no shared-interests thing, and it had been strengthened by tonight’s conversation with their mates.

Bradley no longer doubted that Colin wanted to be with him…it was now just a matter of finding some common ground when they were together.

On the other hand…he was also very sensitive to Anthony’s “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” belief. The last thing he wanted was for Colin to get sick of him.

“I didn’t really, no. I thought you were playing football in the morning?”

Colin’s voice became breathier in the dark, when Bradley sped up his hand on his long cock, giving a little twist at the end now and again.

“Yeah, I guess, but I can change if you want…to”. Bradley’s sentence ended higher pitched than it had begun, in reaction to Colin using his other hand to begin massaging the seam behind Bradley’s balls.

“No need. We have lunch with Tony and…mmmm” Colin never finished his sentence, apparently liking very much the fact that Bradley was now nibbling at his ear, and then his nipples.

After a long moment of that, Bradley murmured, “That’s…Thursday.” God, he was getting close…

“Yeah. The big… outing…oh God, Bradley…” Colin arched.
After that, there wasn’t much more conversation until they were both a bit sticky and damp and panting, and then it was to tell each other good night.

They could always talk more in the morning.

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“Colin”, Bradley whispered, very quietly. He fingered Colin’s hair gently, around his ears where it was curling, and then kissed his shoulder.

“Cols…” He called again.

Colin shifted slightly, twitched away from the breath at his ear.

Colin was sprawled on his back, mouth inelegantly open, one hand resting on Bradley’s hip. Bradley supposed only himself and probably Colin’s fan girls would be the only ones who thought Colin as attractive as he did right now.

“Colin”, Bradley said for a third time, just slightly louder now and very lightly kissed the pulse point as Colin’s neck. Colin twitched again, obviously preferring the allure of sleep to his lover’s call.

Bradley caressed Colin’s hair again, and then whispered in his ear, “Wake up for me, just for a moment, luv. I need to tell you something.”

Colin opened one eye, very reluctantly, then the other. He didn’t return Bradley’s smile, instead turning a bit grumpily to look at the clock on the nightstand. The clock that read only six thirty-two in the bloody morning.

“What”, he mumbled thickly. “Is it time already to work out?”

Colin went into a full stretch, and Bradley just watched him silently. He reminded him of one of those exotic cat breeds, the naked ones, that stretched so luxuriously and sensually when they awoke.

“No, you don’t have to get up for awhile, we have plenty of time. I just wanted to tell you something.”

After all, they were going to return to their twelve hour work days in Wales again, very soon, where sleep would be a precious commodity. And they’d been out very late the night before, after their show.

Still, Bradley had to tell him something important, and it couldn’t wait for Colin to have his morning coffee.

“Mm? Tell me what, Bradley?” Colin’s lingering sleepiness had apparently chased away his usually correct speech patterns and grammar. He looked about ready to turn his back to Bradley and fall asleep again.

“I just wanted to tell you, I’m going running in a minute….,” Bradley let the sentence trail off for a moment as he further gathered his thoughts. He knew what he wanted to say, really, but it was how to put it. Idly, he ran a hand up and down Colin’s pyjama-clad arm.

Colin moved his arm, caught Bradley’s hand and covered it with his own.

“You go running every morning…tell me you did NOT wake me up to tell me that.”

Obediently, Bradley told him “I did not wake you up to tell you that.”
“Okay.” Colin shrugged his shoulders in an obvious ‘I’m waiting’ gesture, blinked at Bradley again with heavy lids. “Then why did you?”

“Well.” Bradley cleared his throat. “You know how, at the beginning of last series, I was telling everyone that asked that I was more excited than I’d ever been, because of the knights? I just wanted you to know, that wasn’t exactly the truth.

Colin did a slow blink at him. “Okay.” And when Bradley said nothing more, “Bradders? Still waiting for why you woke me up, here.”

“The real reason I was excited about it was really because…you know. All of our scenes together. Doing all those…things.”

Colin waited with raised eyebrows. Bradley said nothing more, just smiled slightly at Colin, willing him to get what he was saying. Instead, Colin threw an arm over his eyes. “Don’t make me guess when I’m half awake, please. What are you on about?”

Colin was a bit grumpy in the morning, it was true.

“You know. All those silly scenes, and all the buddy stuff, and all the bonding things, as Arthur and Merlin. And carrying your skinny arse around, even. It’s not just anyone I’ll do that for, with my temperamental back and all. We hadn’t done those friendship-type scenes in a while and I really missed them.”

Colin snickered, removed his arm from his face. “I thought you liked throwing things at me.”

Bradley smirked back. “Okay, maybe a bit. But I think it also made Arthur look stupid and unsympathetic, and…well. I just kind of think this past series was good for us, you know, for our characters and for the two of us. Especially the first half of it.”

“I think the show runners wrapped the two of us in big satin bows and presented us to all the gay-icon fans”. Colin retorted, rolling his eyes.

“Well, they’d been clamouring for quite some time, hadn’t they? I’ve come to accept that we’re slash bait. If you can’t beat ‘em…”

Colin’s mouth just quirked on one side, the dimple beneath his lip showing, and he shook his head on his pillow. “Is that what you wanted to tell me? You liked our scenes together?”

“Yeah. That, and it wasn’t actually the knights that made me excited.”

“Cheers.” Colin said nothing more, just continued to look at him with that small smile. But he didn’t look quite as irked as before, half-asleep or not.

Bradley leaned closer to Colin, intending to just kiss his temple or nuzzle an ear, but Colin’s arm snaked out and wrapped around his neck. He pulled Bradley in for a proper kiss, morning breath and all.

When they separated, Colin whispered “I feel the same.”

It wasn’t the L-word, not yet, but Bradley thought that Colin was losing some of his emotional reserve with him. Baby steps…

He said only, “Swell. What a pair of saps we make…” to Colin, and was granted the expected smirking look from Colin again before he kissed him again, licked his neck.
After a long moment of just looking at each other, Colin asked, “What else? You have something else you want to tell me, I can tell.”

“Just that I’m looking forward to the fifth series. And...I’ve made my decision about whether to carry on with it. And it’s the same as yours.”

Colin grew serious. “Are you sure?”

“I am. I haven’t told anyone but you, but--yeah.”

After that, Bradley was so delayed from his morning run that in the end, he declared it unimportant and didn’t go. That didn’t stop himself and Colin from other forms of exercise, though. And as it turned out, Colin wasn’t granted that extra hour of shut eye after all. Bradley didn’t hear him complaining.

Well, not right away, anyway. They both dozed off again, slotted up close to one another, after their morning “exercise.” By the time they got out of bed, it was nearly half past ten, and Colin sniffl ed a bit, coughed and mumbled something about coming down with a cold.

Just lovely. Colin hadn’t had a cold (that Bradley knew of) in all the time he’d known Colin, and based on the amount of spit they presently shared on a daily basis, chances were good that Bradley would probably catch whatever germs Colin was incubating, and get sick too. Bradley didn’t handle being sick very well at all.

And they had only a little over a week left on their run of the play, before they had to prepare for Wales and the start of Merlin’s series five…they had lunch and their “outing” planned tomorrow with Richard and Anthony, Colin’s parents were going to be in town in a couple of days, they were entertaining Katie and her date on Friday, they had a play to go to on Monday night, plus Colin would probably be somewhat testy while sick and not want as much sex as usual…

Bollocks….rather than trying to comfort Colin or ask him if he needed anything, Bradley just sat on the edge of the bed, scrubbed a hand over his face and groaned. Sometimes, his life just sucked. And blew.

Colin told him he was just going to stay in and rest, try to stave off his symptoms if he could. He assured Bradley he didn’t mind at all if he went out for a while. Bradley told him he’d be back well before they needed to leave for the show, and would bring with him whatever cold remedies and comfort food Colin named.

Johnny Capps called Colin on his mobile just as Bradley was going out the door, into what looked like a full-on downpour, on the way to the market. Colin actually waved silently at him to stay.

It really was a coincidence.

Colin’s call lasted less than five minutes, with Johnny telling Cols that they’d be in touch with his agent and would start the talks for “renewal of his contract” immediately. Colin told him politely and quietly that he “Hadn’t decided anything” and that his agent would be in touch.

Bradley was then treated to about thirty seconds of Colin reacting to dead air. Apparently Capps had expected Colin to blithely go along with what he was being told, though Colin had never committed or promised to, and was now struck dumb by Colin’s response.

They ended the call shortly afterward, and Bradley’s phone rang. It was Capps again.

This time, when he repeated almost verbatim what Colin had told him about no decision being finalized, Capps actually hung up on him.
Bradley just looked at his dead phone wrly before returning it to his pocket. It was Colin that took off on a tirade against their boss.

“Of all the fecking arrogant, entitled, presumptuous...”

Colin was actually kind of hot when he was ranting.

He let Colin continue for a few moments, nodding in appropriate places but not really listening.

They both loved Merlin. And there was the steady income, in a business that could be brutally mercurial. But working on this show, in this play, doing something different and exciting...it was almost surreal. An awakening.

If nothing else, Capps' response had been confirmation that their decision-that-wasn't, was the right one.

When Colin had wound down and quieted again, Bradley joked, "Yes, but tell me how you really feel."

Colin huffed a little laugh that made him cough a little. "How do you feel about it?"

"Pretty much the same."

"Yeah."

"And actually, not much like going out or playing footie. I think I'll just stay in and we can order in if you want, or I can cook something. I'll be quiet if you want to take a nap."

"And I think that the rest of Game of Thrones and some cold tabs sounds like the perfect way to spend the day."

They settled in, in front of the telly, a proper domestic couple.
Chapter 14

Rather than have food delivered, Bradley did a little research on the net and came up with a recipe for vegan soup, a very fragrant carrot-apple-ginger soup that he was very proud of (and wore his onion goggles while prepping it, even though there were no onion ingredients in it), and served with dry toast. Colin made happy sounds and devoured it, calling Bradley's culinary skills "Perfection" and saying it was very satisfying, soothing and flavorful. Bradley too was pleased with his creation. It was delicious, but it wasn't filling enough for someone battling a cold. He made himself a bit of salad to go with it and, as a secret rebellion to the idea of veganism, sprinkled bits of deli chicken in with the lettuce and cucumbers.

Afterward, Colin stretched out on the sofa with his feet in Bradley's lap and they loaded the dvd player with the next Game of Thrones disc.

While they watched, Bradley idly surfed on his laptop. He emailed Anthony and told him about his conversation with Capps and about how this was looking more and more like it might be his last series with Shine and Merlin. Anthony's response was almost immediate--he had to have been online at the same time. Anthony congratulated him on the courage it took to make that leap of faith, and told him whatever he decided to do, he had Anthony's support and faith in him.

And ended the email with a breezy, "Say hello to Colin for me, and tell him I congratulate him on the same."

Oh, fuck, the old boy knew what was going on with himself and Colin. Bradley was certain of it.

He clicked the laptop's cover closed abruptly and shook his head wryly.

"Bradley?" Colin asked hoarsely. He had looked like he was watching telly, but his eyes were a bit unfocused.

"Hey." Bradley answered. "How are you feeling, there?"

"All right. Tired and achey."

"Want me to get you anything? Water or juice or a blanket or something?"

"I’m fine, really. Just stay just as you are, you’re keeping my feet warm."

“Glad I’m good for something”. Bradley quipped the familiar line.

So they stayed in, rain tapping at the windows, and watched DVDs, and Bradley rubbed Colin’s feet a bit. Colin did doze off intermittently, and Bradley found himself just content with this, another scene of domestic tranquillity for them, until it was time for them to get up and go the theatre and that night's performance.

So it looked like they could get along, alone together for a day without doing anything special, and even be quite happy without driving each other mad. Bradley wasn’t even bored or restless. It was good to know.

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Consummate professional that he was, Colin even managed to make being a bit sick work for him during that night’s performance. His usually deep, rumbling voice was scratchy and hoarse and had every marker of being a sore throat---but Colin had always gravelled and roughened his voice
anyway during the most intense scenes. The sore throat just enhanced the intensity, and his watery eyes made his heartrending tears during the death scene that much more realistic. Even so, Bradley could hope for Colin that he didn’t have to work in that condition every night, enhanced performance or not. He knew from experience how draining working while being ill could be, and deterred from the healing process.

They were home just after the eleventh hour, not having dawdled on the way back to the flat. It was a sad testament to how Colin was feeling when his teeth were brushed and he was changed into pajamas and in bed fifteen minutes later. Bradley brought him more cold tabs, and put a bottle of water and a box of tissues on the nightstand along with a small wastebasket on the floor by his side of the bed. He retrieved his menthol rub from the bathroom cabinet along with his softest cotton handkerchief, and smeared some of the malodorous goo on Colin’s chest as a vaporizer. He then folded the cloth over it and tucked it inside his pajama top, trapping and confining the warmth and the vapours for him. It was something Bradley’s mother had done for him when he was young and sick.

Colin watched him with red-rimmed eyes, a fond smile playing around his mouth. “Cheers, mate. You’re a good caregiver”, Colin wheezed.

In truth, Colin undeniably did bring out the protective, nurturing instinct in Bradley.

“It should help a bit with the congestion. Makes you stink to high heaven, but I don’t want your folks coming all the way from Ireland to find you sick. They’ll think I’m not taking care of you. Do you want another pillow, to help you breathe easier?”

He helped prop up Colin a bit more comfortably, and then completed his own night time routine in the bath. By the time he’d changed into his own pyjamas and slid into his side of the bed, Colin’s snores were so loud, Bradley swore he was rattling the windows. Bradley vowed Colin would be taking the piss for a long time to come about his deafening lullaby. He briefly contemplated recording him for posterity, but eventually discarded the idea.

As if sensing his thoughts, Colin shifted, coughed slightly, snuffled, and then snuggled closer to Bradley, draping one arm over his chest and snorting loudly.

“Great. I’m sleeping with a heat-seeking, stuffed-up, cacophonously snoring, skinny Irish man with big ears and a sweet arse. God save the Queen”, he muttered to the dark.

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Colin was still ailing the next day, their scheduled lunch day with their respective mentors. Bradley offered to postpone their meeting, and Colin appeared to be contemplating it for a long moment before shaking his head and telling Bradley that he was well enough to have lunch.

“We’re not operating any heavy machinery, after all. I’ll be fine.”

Colin tried to shoo Bradley out to play football in the morning, telling him he was just going to lounge about and rest anyway, no babysitter required. Bradley told him he had no plans, and offered again to give Colin his space by staying in the living room while Colin dozed or watched telly in the bedroom.

Colin, it seemed, was one of those people whose method of combatting a cold was to sleep it off until the wretched thing took up residence elsewhere.

Bradley watched the first disk of Camelot on low volume, but became bored with it and started
playing around with his laptop. Then he began making calls to various friends he hadn’t talked to in a long time. He remembered to keep his voice down and his laughter under control, mindful of Colin and his feeling poorly status in the next room.

When it came time to prepare for their lunch meeting, they showered together and gave each other proper hand jobs (“It’s for medicinal purposes, mate—I’ve heard all those endorphins and you know, other stuff, are good for a sick body”, to which Colin agreed and chuckled to the point of wheezing). The hot water’s steam did seem to help with Colin’s congestion though, and the tender area under his eyes wasn’t looking quite as bruised and swollen as they had when he’d woke up that morning.

Bradley briskly rubbed Colin down with a towel, scrubbed at his hair with another, all along muttering about how going about with damp hair was liable to give Colin pneumonia, his gran had told him so, and they needed to dry his hair quickly.

Colin finally, gently, took the towel from him and told him he was fine, he was perfectly dry now and all the pneumonia germs in existence had been frightened away by Bradley’s keen mother-henning. And also, bully on Bradley and cheers, mate. Bradley stuck his tongue out at him and snapped the towel at Colin’s lovely, naked arse.

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Even after being warned by Colin that he was feeling a mite poorly and was likely akin to a walking petri dish, Tony still gave him his usual bear hug greeting at the restaurant. Richard, of course, was a bit more restrained, but they were all so happy that he’d deigned to join them—Management vs. The Help, at least as far as their roles in the play—that Bradley dropped a quick peck to the old man’s cheek He didn’t even care who might see or have a camera phone ready.

Colin, being Colin, shook Richard’s hand and clasped his arm warmly, and then handed him a bottle of hand sanitizer from his ever-present knapsack. This, of course, earned Anthony’s patented giggles for some time.

The restaurant was nice but not stuffy, their table private, a place where they could be comfortable to speak freely. Their server recognized them from the show and seemed to be doing some sort of inner struggle not to squeal, long and loudly. It was Richard who requested of her, in his staid and polite manner, to please not draw attention to them as they were all off the clock.

But after she’d taken their preliminary orders for teas and coffees, Bradley was almost certain the young, uni-student looking girl was scampering off to call all her friends on her mobile. Oh, well…

They all easily fell into shop talk, Anthony telling them he’d been contacted by Shine for a guest appearance in the first block of Merlin, and Bradley couldn't contain himself: He fist pumped and whooped, though it was a reserved whoop. Colin just beamed at Tony and asked him if he had any other details, and they all laughed about how death meant nothing on their show.

For Bradley, though, it was especially welcome news, even poignant. He missed having his father figure onset with them all in Cardiff and in France. Even if it were only for a bit more than a week, having Tony with them all again would be something to look forward to.

Richard talked about prep for the next show he was doing (and the guys teased him about no longer being the centre of his attention making them feel bereft).

That set Tony’s giggles off again, and Colin did a deep, rumbling “Aww” before coughing again.

Their server arrived to take their orders—Bradley ordered soup, salad, bread, steak, mixed
vegetables, baked potato, “and leave room for dessert”. Tony, vegetarian that he was (though not vegan like Colin) decided to sample the pasta and vegetables the restaurant offered. Bradley understood Anthony's commitment to animal rights and causes, but he'd never understand someone who ate only vegetables. For him, veggies were something you had with a meal, not as one. And Richard ordered the lamb again, which seemed to be his favorite meal of the moment.

Colin ordered soup and a steamed vegetable platter with brown rice, tomatoes, peppers, carrots, cauliflower, broccoli, and asparagus.

Bradley turned to Colin after the server had left again and admonished him with “Asparagus, Morgan? Your piss is going to reek.”

“Have you been smelling my piss again, James?” Colin asked sweetly.

Richard turned to Anthony and remarked, “Can’t take the kids anywhere, can we.”

Anthony answered, long suffering and mock exasperated, “Can’t even dress them up.”

While waiting for their soup and salads to arrive, Bradley asked after Sarah as well as Cammie, and was in asked in return about his own family. (Discreetly, no mention was made of Bradley’s dad.) Colin also told them how excited and a little nervous he was that his mam and da would be at the play tomorrow, and would be able to spend the weekend with him.

It was all small talk, of course, and Bradley could sense that the two older men were waiting for them, waiting for them to say something about why they’d been called to this “meeting”.

Now that they were all together like this, though, he didn’t know how to approach the topic at hand, that of his and Colin’s sexual identities being turned on their heads. It would be upsetting the proverbial apple cart forever.

Fortunately, both Anthony and Richard were made of strong stuff. When they were all digging into their appetizers, Richard said, “Well? You lads obviously have something you want to tell us, and I suspect, have for some time now. How about telling us while I, at least, am still young. Oh, no, wait….”

Bradley looked at Colin. Here they were, their moment had come… Colin’s face took on that neutral look that usually meant he was ready to do battle, swollen mucous membranes and all. But he still nodded at Bradley, a silent go-ahead for Bradley to take the reins.

“We—Colin and myself—we’ve sort of… I don’t know, changed, maybe isn’t quite the right word, since we began doing the play. We’re a bit different than we were… before.”

Anthony and Richard said nothing, just gazed back at them with twin expectant looks.

Colin didn’t say anything either, just idly stirred his vegetable broth without sipping any.

This might be a bit harder than coming out to his family, Bradley thought.

“I honestly don’t quite know how to say this, so I guess the best way is to just say it.” Bradley rested one palm on Colin’s leg under the table and took a deep, fortifying breath.

And then blurted in a rush, “Colin and I are now seeing each other on a romantic and intimate level.”

Bradley swore he could feel Colin’s pulse through the denim of his jeans.
Richard closed his eyes briefly and smiled a little. Anthony blinked and looked like he was trying to hide his amusement, before turning to Richard and asking in a conversational tone, “How long have you known?”

“Oh, I started to suspect something had changed right when we started intense rehearsals, and it was absolutely confirmed opening night. And you?”

“I’m usually a bad judge of these things, but Sarah knew right away, when we all got together that opening night. Just the way they were with each other, she said. I thought she was loony, but then I had to look after young Bradley here shortly afterwards, and Colin called looking for him, all in a lather. That woman and her weird intuition are never wrong, you see.”

“Indeed. I remember that night, that was a bad one for both of them, apparently. Colin was with me and wouldn’t talk, though he about paced a hole in my study’s carpet. Though I must admit to being somewhat taken aback, even so. I never would have predicted this sort of thing for them…”

“Yes, exactly, that’s what I mean, that’s what I said to Sarah…”

“Excuse me”, Colin finally spoke. “We’re both right here, you know. We can hear you.” He coughed a little.

Was it his imagination, Bradley thought, or was Colin looking about as perturbed as Bradley himself was feeling?

Anthony and Richard immediately seemed to realize what they were doing and apologized, and what followed was an awkward and pregnant silence.

This wasn’t at all how Bradley had envisioned this, this whatever it was, this coming out? -- would unfold. Not with these trusted friends.

“Well”, he said into the silence, if for no other reason than to end the silence.

“Well”, Richard and Anthony both echoed in unison.

“Oh, this is bloody awful”, Colin muttered.

If Anthony and Richard were anyone else, Bradley would have grabbed Colin then and left.

It must have shown in his face—there was that horrendous unable-to hold- anything-back trait of his again—because Anthony said, “Don’t be offended. You both know how the two of us feel about the two of you, and if you’re happy with this, we’re happy for you.”

“So why have you both reacted as you have? I get the feeling you think this is all a mickey…”

“We know it isn’t”, Richard said, and Anthony continued, “It’s just that… the two of you, as you’ve said…it’s an incongruous concept.”

Well, Bradley supposed he had to grant them that. It was still a bit unbelievable to him too…

Colin said, "You really do think it's so unlikely?"

“You mean besides the fact that you were both straight up until a few weeks ago? Well, let me see…” Richard had a biting wit when he wanted to.

“Didn’t we recently have a discussion with you about not labelling people?” Colin’s quiet voice was still scratchy with his cold, but reasonable and calm if puzzled and a jot hurt.
“Yes we did, but the reality is that most people don’t jump ship as you have so abruptly. I understand that you are both sincere, but I think… well…” Richard shook his head. “It isn’t really important what I think.”

“It really is actually, Richard. You’re gay, and I don’t understand your reaction to us saying that we’re, you know…together.” That familiar feeling of frustration and slight panic started to build again in Bradley.

What was this? He’d have thought Richard, of all people, would be elated for them.

Anthony spoke again. “Don’t get upset, Bradders. Here comes our food, by the way…”

They all fell silent while their food was served to them. It looked and smelled heavenly, but the last thing Bradley felt like doing right now was eating.

Bradley made no move to eat, just stared at a point in the carpet. This was so not right, so disappointing… He sensed Colin’s glance at him, felt him squeeze his thigh lightly.

“Maybe if you could explain a little what concerns you, why you’ve had this ambivalent reaction…” Colin the Diplomat, as always…

Before they could answer, Bradley raised his head and said, “We both suspected you knew long before now, you know. Would it have been better if we hadn’t said anything?”

“Bradley, stop and take a breath”. This from Anthony, and sounding very paternal. “First of all, neither one of us has any problem with whomever our friends are with, and all the people involved with Merlin in particular….”

“….As well as everyone involved with the play…” Richard interjected.He turned to Anthony again.“How could I have a problem with someone else living the lifestyle”, Richard said mildly.

“He’s not thinking clearly”, Anthony said in a quick aside to Richard, and then turned back to Bradley again. “We just couldn’t ever have predicted you and Colin…I mean, do you have plans together? I guess the fact that you’re telling us implies that you do…but I think, once you step away from the play and its insulation…”

“This isn’t a fly-by-night idea, no— we’ve both pretty much been living together, in one or the others’ flat, since February, and…”

Colin talked over Bradley, “You don’t see us as compatible in the long term? We’ve thought of this, we’re aware of the challenges, we’ve already started addressing…”

“Guys, guys, take it easy.” Tony’s voice was pitched at its most soothing and placating. “Come on, now. Bradders, don’t let that lovely steak go to waste. Eat up.”

“Not hungry.”

Anthony quirked his mouth, pushed his own plate away slightly. “All right. Truly, when it comes right down to it, whether you’re planning long term or a one night stand or experimentation or research isn’t even anyone’s business but your own. I want your happiness and I know I can speak for Richard on that too. As we said before, if you’re happy, then we’re happy. Do you doubt us on that?”

Colin immediately answered that he didn’t, and after a moment, Bradley said no as well.
“I guess what we’re concerned about is that if you are committed to each other in the way that partners are and should be, and it goes south while you’re working…that could be disastrous for so many. You need to have a working relationship for Merlin to work.”

“We were friends long before this began, we can be friends if it should end”, Bradley said immediately. “And I’m not planning on it ending any time soon.”

“No one ever does”, Richard muttered.

“You seem to be focusing an awful lot about what will happen when we break up. Why are you so certain we will? We’ve been friends for a long time…”

Richard answered, “You were friends, yes, but you were never two to socialize much outside of work parameters, were you. And Bradley, this past series when the knights came on board…how much did you and Colin even talk if it wasn’t work-related? You were so busy off playing football with them and out at night partying…they are guys you’d have made friends with in any circumstances. I don’t think that would be true with Colin.”

This again. Bradley fought the urge to bang his head on the table. This had been re-hashed so many times, and apparently everyone was in agreement that he and Colin were and should remain just co-workers…

“Well, then, I owe a debt of gratitude to the show, I’d say, and it’s not any of the knights I’m with right now. I just told Colin about this the other day. I was more excited about the types of scenes he and I had together this past year than anything…”

Colin gave an abrupt little laugh. “Erhm. Bradley. That was a nice thought, really sweet, that was, but I knew it to be bullshit, really. We both know you didn’t even have but the one script when you started saying that last year, and I wasn’t even around yet—I had that family thing in Armagh when rehearsals started without me, remember?”

Bradley felt his face heating. It would have been really, really nice if Colin had backed him up at some point here. The fact that what he was saying was all true, notwithstanding…

Colin turned back to Richard and Anthony. “We know this isn’t going to be easy. Believe me, we’ve already talked about it at great length, with the only conclusion being that we don’t know what the future will bring.”

“Have you told anyone else yet?” Anthony asked.

“Yes, my family”, Bradley said. “And they accepted it readily, invited Colin for a meal and asked after him when I called them yesterday. And Cols is going to tell his this weekend…”

“Well, maybe”, Colin said. “We’ll see how things are when they get in…”

Bradley snapped his mouth shut, feeling betrayed and embarrassed once again. Apparently, he was just a gormless bloke who lived in denial and ignorance of reality or was completely oblivious to everything He should probably just leave now. He straightened his legs to stand up.

And was stopped when Colin grabbed his hand, right there in the restaurant, and cradled it in both of his.

Bradley couldn’t be sure, when he thought about it later, if he’d telegraphed his intent, or if Colin had suddenly gained some insight. As it happened, though, Colin managed to avert Bradley’s walking out on them all.
“Don’t go Bradley, please”, was all Colin said.

“You could have helped”, Bradley told him. Colin said nothing, just squeezed his hand tighter, and then brought it to his mouth and kissed the inside of Bradley’s wrist. It was apology, agreement, affirmation and promise all in one small-but-public gesture.

Colin didn’t do public gestures.

Bradley sighed, turned back to Richard and Anthony, who were both staring at the both of them. Just staring. They were as aware as Bradley that Colin didn’t do public displays of affection.

After a long moment of feeling Colin’s hand in his own, Bradley addressed their friends once more.

“You’re both fucking rude”, Bradley said, and Anthony and Richard widened their eyes in surprise. That had really registered. Bradley never spoken to either of them that way. “I was expecting something so supportive, so positive from this lunch, and instead you’ve turned it into, I don’t know, us trying to defend ourselves…”

Colin interjected, “I would think you’d both realize by now that we’re professional enough not to allow this, us being together, to affect our working relationship. It’s disappointing to discover that you’d think otherwise.”

He hadn’t let go of Bradley’s hand, either. And he wasn’t trying to hide it under the table…

“You’re right”, Anthony said, and shook his head. He seemed about to say something more, but Colin wasn’t finished yet.

“I know you’re just trying to be cautionary, trying to warn us of the pitfalls ahead, all very subjective and pragmatic. But we’re realistic. We’re grown men, as questionable and dubious as that may seem at times. We’ve already come face to face with the fact that we are extremely different people in a same-sex relationship, and this isn’t going to be easy at all. We’ve made the commitment, together, to try anyway. We were hoping for your blessing and support, even if you don’t happen to agree with our decision.”

Bradley actually turned to stare at Colin himself. That was just… extraordinary. Colin had pretty much laid it on the line. That was more open than Colin had been with Bradley since they’d started seeing each other.

“Wow”, he said to Colin approvingly.

Colin just smirked a little at him, shook his head. But he also squeezed his hand again.

“Ah”, Richard said. He was smiling a little. “You’re willing to fight for this. That’s a good sign, anyway. And please don’t be too put out by our initial reactions, more due to a habit as mentors than anything. Of course we will support you.”

“It’s probably the first time I’ve ever stuck with anyone when the going got even a little tough, quite frankly. I’ve already told Colin what I’ll tell you now: I don’t know what’s going to happen. I left my crystal ball at the cleaner’s. But I want to try.”

“I was a worried that it may have been something a little too one-sided, more than anything”, Anthony remarked.

“What do you mean?” Bradley asked him.
“You, Bradders. You throw yourself into everything you do. It can be a little overwhelming for some. And you love easily and fully, and wear your heart on your sleeve, as the Americans say…a full-on object of your affections and attentions had best prepare themselves for an intense experience.”

“I think I can handle him”, Colin said, very dryly.

Bradley was pleased that Colin would say that on his behalf. He still had the same insecurities about being so different from Colin—loud where Colin was quiet, athletic where Colin was scholarly, a social animal where Colin enjoyed being private or gathering in only small groups. And Bradley was more inclined to enjoy being lazy whereas Colin was a self-proclaimed workaholic.

“Anthony”, Bradley said abruptly. Something was bugging him about all this. “You and I had a recent conversation about very different people being able to make things work if they want to. You seem really hung up on the fact that Colin and I are unlikely to do so. Why is that?”

“Well, have you taken any interest in each other’s hobbies? Have you gone to an Indie concert? Has Colin gone to a footie match of yours?”

“No…but we have quite a few things in common, too, we’ve discovered.”

“Have you? Well, that’s good then. Maybe I’m wrong, maybe we’re both wrong and you’ll surprise us all.”

Anthony said nothing more, just drew his plate back and began eating again, leaving Bradley feeling unsettled still. But what could he say? He couldn’t force anyone to be on board with this. Richard and Anthony had both apologized and seemed to wish them well. And Bradley couldn’t claim to not actually understand the reasons behind their trepidation; they were big and glaring and the reason for most of the arguments and misunderstandings he and Colin had already had.

Still, some encouragement and backing would have been so much appreciated…

Bradley was beginning to become accustomed to, if not actually expect disappointment regarding this.

The rest of the lunch was uncomfortable, to say the least. He really didn’t feel much like talking, and he took only an occasional nibble from the now-cool food on his plate. Colin made polite conversation with Richard and Anthony and picked at his own food. Dialogue continued mostly between Richard and Anthony. He knew this wasn’t like him; he was usually the one nattering on the most.

“Bradley, are you going to stop sulking, there, and at least have some dessert?”

It was too much. The man who had been so understanding and kind and insightful so recently was now being insufferably condescending to him. Even Bradley had his limits.

“I’m really not sulking, and thanks for being rude again, Tony”, he snapped. “I guess I’m ready to go now. Colin, are you coming or did you want to meet later at the theatre?”

“Erhm, I’ll come with you. Good to see you both.” Colin stood up too, much to Bradley’s relief and a great deal of pleased surprise.

They walked out together, no longer holding hands but with shoulders almost touching.

They were waiting for a cab when Tony walked up beside Bradley and hugged him tightly. “We’ll
talk again later, yeah? I’m sorry this all went so wrong.” Bradley returned the embrace but said nothing, merely nodded.

Tony hugged Colin too and told him to look after Bradley and himself.

Bradley and Colin were silent on the ride back to Bradley’s flat. Bradley couldn’t get the phrase “You and me against the world” out of his head.

Once back at the flat, there wasn’t much time before they’d have to leave again for the theatre. It had probably been stupid of them to not just go straight from the restaurant to work, but Bradley felt like he needed some time to regroup in a soothing atmosphere. He flopped down on the couch as soon as they got in.

Colin wandered around the kitchen rather aimlessly for a few moments. He asked Bradley if he wanted anything, reminding him he hadn’t eaten much of anything and would be hungry soon enough. Bradley just shrugged; he couldn’t think of anything that appealed to him right now. He threw his arm over his eyes, willing himself to let go of his present mood. If he tried to take the stage tonight feeling this down and disheartened, he’d have another poor performance to add to his collection…a collection of one, sure, but that was far too many.

He heard quiet noises from the kitchen, the fridge and a cupboard being opened and closed, Colin’s footsteps.

After a long moment, he felt Colin sit down beside him, his sharp hip pressing against Bradley’s side. He didn’t take his arm away, but he did shift over slightly to give Colin more room.

He felt something cool and soft gently touch his lips.

He opened his eyes to find Colin lightly pressing a grape to his mouth.

“Eat”, Colin murmured, and Bradley opened his mouth to accept the fruit.

Colin continued to hand-feed him grapes and berries from the bowl he held in his lap. Bradley, of course, couldn’t resist licking and sucking on Colin’s fingers occasionally.

“Aren’t you going to peel the grapes for me, Beulah?” he teased.

Colin chuckled, recognizing the reference of course.

It was intimate and comforting, lying down while being fed like this. He never would have expected something like this from Colin, to be so nurturing. He doubted Anthony or Richard would either, but that was the problem, wasn’t it. They’d never witnessed the two of them interacting in anything but their work environment. They couldn’t share with anyone the level of passion or intimacy they’d found now. He shouldn’t be mad at them, not really. They just didn’t know…

Well, he wasn't even mad with them. Just profoundly, wearily disappointed and sad, especially about Anthony's reaction. Richard had merely surprised him, but he didn't feel as wounded by his not being on board as he did about Anthony.

“Thanks, I’ve had enough”, he told Colin eventually, and Colin nodded. He popped a few berries into his own mouth before putting the nearly empty bowl down on the floor.

“Thank you. That was just what I needed”, he said again to Colin, and drew Colin down to him to lie on his chest. The couch was narrow and it was a bit awkward, but they managed.
They didn’t have time for sex before they left for work, and they both knew it, but Bradley was comforted and calmed by this simple closeness.

Home again after their show that night, Bradley and Colin lay awake and talked about the day’s less than stellar moments.

“I still don’t see why they couldn’t support us”, Bradley said, for perhaps the third time. “Are we really such a shocker, the two of becoming this close…?”

“It isn’t just that, you know it isn’t.” Colin tightened his arm around Bradley’s chest, easing the sting a little from his words. “It’s the fact that we were straight up until two months ago, the both of us. And the fact that we really didn’t hang out together much, for anything other than work-related stuff, before now. And the fact that you and the knights are so bonded, all of you, like a giant eight legged crab, since the beginning of last series, and I’m not a part of that, and you went on and on about it, and the fact…”

“Thanks for that, mate, I think I get the picture.” Bradley cut him off. “In fact, I think I got it the first fifteen times this has been brought up. The focus is on the negative…”

“They think we’re going to break each other’s hearts”, Colin said into Bradley’s chest, his lips tickling Bradley, making him squirm. He could feel the rumble of Colin’s words against him…

Bradley didn’t answer. What could he say to that? After all, maybe they would.

“Of course”, Colin said after a few moments, “They haven’t seen you rubbing vaporizer on my chest when I’m sick.”

“Or you, feeding me when I’m too down to do it myself”, Bradley countered.

They were quiet together after that, and Bradley suspected Colin was dozing off, when Colin lifted his head and told Bradley, “They didn’t mean any harm. They love us, Bradley. I’m sure nothing would make them happier than us proving them wrong.”

“I suppose”, Bradley answered. Nothing would make him happier, either. “Go to sleep, why don’t you, before you give me nightmares.”

“Well, I have another nightmare to remind you of. My parents are in tomorrow, on the noon train, and I’ll be with them for most of the weekend until they leave Monday morning.”

“That means no sex for three and half days”, Bradley groaned. “Jesus, Morgan, what you do to me…”

“Yeah, I know, its shite, but keep in mind I’m not getting any either.” Colin laughed a little. “But there’s always tomorrow morning…”

“Come Monday, I’ll be ready to explode. Let’s hope the audience doesn’t notice that my balls have turned blue…”

“And mine. Two pairs of blue balls.”

“Maybe we can have a notice put into the programmes, something along the lines of ‘Pay no
attention the azure hue of the lead actors’ crotch plums. They’re not getting any.”

He could feel Colin’s chuckle against him again. “Yeah, James, that’ll work, I’m sure…just so we
don’t alarm anyone.”

“Just so.”

They both snickered at their own nuttery for a moment, and then Colin said, “But that’s not the
nightmare I was referring to…”

“Really? You can think of something worse than your being replaced by my right hand for almost
four days?”

“Katie. She and…whomever it is she's seeing these days are coming to the show tomorrow…”

“Oh, bloody hell!”

They made equal parts laughing and groaning sounds. “I can’t believe you would do this to me,
leave me alone with her while you escape with your parents. This is so unfair. You should have to
come with us. You are just so mean to me…” Bradley pretended to whine for the comedic value.

“Just the luck of the schedule, I didn’t plan it that way. Besides, look at it this way. She’s sees the
two of us together, she will just know we’re, you know, together.”

Well, that was true. Damn McGrath and her nosey know it all-ness.

“Well, at least she’d be happy for us, one of the few.”

“Mm”, was all Colin said.

Bradley couldn’t think of anything else to say after that, and then Colin really did fall asleep, curved
snugly against him.

Bradley lay awake in the dark, listening to Colin’s congested snoring for a long time, and telling
himself that everything would work out in the end.
Chapter 15

Colin was actually late getting to the train station the next morning because he and Bradley had lingered in bed. He’d left in a panic, amidst a great deal of running about and waving his arms. There was yelling on both their parts…not at each other, just the mindless kind of shouting that amounted to “I’m late, I’m late, oh shit, I’m late!” Bradley did everything he could to help him, locating his socks for him and calling the cab for pick up, but it still reminded them both of their insane, panicked horse race to the tube a few weeks ago.

Turned out, the universe was a dirty and ironic bitch with a black and twisted sense of humour. Colin’s parents’ train was delayed by a good forty minutes, and he arrived at the train station just in time to wait a long while for them. He texted Bradley that he was there, sorry for all the flailing, and he was being mobbed by a bunch of twelve year old girls in plaid school uniforms, thanks very much. Bradley texted back that he was certain none of them were as close to looking like a pixie as Colin was, and to give his best to the Morgan parents and their DNA for him.

Colin’s two word text:

Shut up

After that, Bradley went to his football game smiling.

He didn’t hear from Colin at all until they met up before the show, and even then they didn’t do much talking. Bradley was well aware of Colin’s need to immerse himself in his role and concentrate on what he was about to do, so after the briefest of, “How are you?”s and “How’s your folks?” and “How was your game?” they retreated to their dressing rooms to become Carr and Nigel once again.

Bradley was almost as nervous as he’d been on opening night, only without the anticipation and excitement. If they screwed up with Katie in the audience, there would be no end to her mouth reliving the experience for him and everyone in the known world. It was silly, of course, they were all very good at what they did, they weren’t going to screw up…

They didn’t screw up. In fact it was one of the company’s more intense presentations. When Bradley held Colin in his arms as the curtain went down, the applause was wild, and Colin opened his eyes and winked at him before they both scrambled to their feet.

“You’re a bit warm, Cols, you sure you’re all right? Not running a fever, are you?”

“No, I think I’m fine. I’m not feeling particularly peaked, anyway. Maybe just the adrenaline tonight —did you hear the audience? I tend to think Katie’s egging them on…”

“Wouldn’t put it past her”, Bradley muttered.

Unsurprisingly, Katie wasn’t hard to spot in the audience during curtain calls. She was the one jumping up and down whilst simultaneously applauding, laughing, throwing kisses, talking to the people all around her, signing autographs, waving, brushing her hair, eating bon bons, sipping champagne and skipping rope.

At least, that was how it seemed to Bradley, and he was pretty sure Colin would agree. Colin just burst out laughing when he spotted her. He’d once described Katie as “The only person I know on earth who talks more than Bradley.” And Bradley had countered that with the fact that Katie reminded him of an old song called “Ahab the Arab”, particularly the part that described a girl named Fatima. He’d recited the part just for them:
There she was, friends, lying there in all her radiant beauty. Eating on a raisin, grape, apricot, pomegranate, bowl of chitterlings, two bananas, three Hershey bars, sipping on a "R C" Cola, listening to her transistor, watching the Grand Ole Opry on the tube, reading Mad magazine while she sung, "Does your chewing gum lose its flavour?"

Of course, Katie had chased him with one of the prop swords all the way up to the battlements for that, but it had been worth it. If only all of her manic energy could be used for good instead of evil...

Her very patient guy friend Joe Dempsie, who had guest starred on Merlin in the first series, laughed a lot at his multi-tasking girlfriend. He applauded now and waved to Colin and Bradley.

After the applause died down and there were no more curtain calls to make, Joe came backstage without her to tell them she’d be along, she had made a trip to the ladies’ loo and was “greeting her public” (said with the obligatory eye roll of course).

Colin and Bradley just looked at each other. “Katie’s late again”, Colin grinned.

“I’m shocked, shocked I tell you, shocked and amazed”, Bradley deadpanned.

So the three guys stood talking while they waited for Katie, catching up on what they’d been doing since they’d last seen each other. They were there long enough that at one point, Colin excused himself to go and change into his street clothes, explaining that his parents were in town (they’d be at the following day's matinee) and he didn’t want to keep them waiting for him for too long.

When Empress Katie finally deigned to make her appearance, Joe and Bradley were deep into football discussions and Colin was just returning from his dressing room, ready to leave. After the usual squeals and hugs and cooing over Colin, (and punching Bradley on the arm), Colin made his escape, explaining that his family was in town and he wouldn't be able to socialize tonight. Of course, Katie pouted over that, acting like it was somehow the end of the world.

“Not to worry, sweetheart, you’ll get to be mean to me for the next eight months, starting in about ten days. I’ve gotta go.” And with that quippy zinger, Colin slipped out, escorted by two security guards. They knew the minute he was visible outdoors by the fever-pitch shrieks that began.

Joe, Katie and Bradley just looked at each other for a moment, and Katie muttered, “Magic man.”

Bradley had always suspected that Katie had a wee crush--or maybe not so wee--on Colin. Although now, truth be told, he didn't find it nearly as amusing as he once might have.

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At the café, the three of them sipped their teas, and Katie asked after Colin again.

“He looks good. I’ve known all along you two belonged together and were just too stubborn to admit it…how’s it feel to demonstrate your love bollocks naked before a live audience every night?”

Well, that was just McGrath’s wit; she didn’t know the real story of course. If she did…well. Bradley reminded himself that if the day ever came where he would out himself to her, he’d be sure to purchase high-quality earplugs first.

But that day was not today. “He’s good, in fact he's been working out a bit the past few weeks. Wanted to look his best since he knew everyone would be scrutinizing him closely on stage. He’s slightly under the weather with a cold right now, so good thing his mam is here to look after him.
The cold’s probably from being bollocks naked in public…”

“Poor lamb. And you haven’t caught his cold yet, with the amount of bodily fluids you’ve been sharing?”

‘Oh, dear girl, you have no idea’, Bradley thought, but said only, “I’m made of iron”, and thumped his chest to demonstrate.

“Just so”, Joe said approvingly, and of course Katie rolled her eyes.

“So what have you been up to? Playing a lot of football, no doubt?”

“Yes, not much else. This play has pretty much been my entire focus, and I’m glad for it. My mum and sisters were here a week ago, had a good time with them. Oh, and the Js have been pestering, wanting a commitment for another series or a movie or spin off or some such, but I don’t know. I think it might be time for other things. No formal decision reached yet though.”

“Aww”, Katie purred, pouting. “I’m kind of sad. And you and Colin will be off in your own flats in Wales too during filming. I miss the old days, when the six of us were all together, hanging out together almost every night. It was kind of like our own club, you know, especially the four of us young ones…makes me feel all nostalgic now for those days. Doesn’t seem so long ago, don’t you think?”

Bradley did know what she meant. He and Colin were immortalized in the video diaries, catching spiders, playing pranks on Angel, visiting amusement parks. Those had been fun, exciting times, when Bradley was still enjoying being occasionally recognized by new fans, he was new at translating Colin’s brogue, and he’d found a father figure in Anthony.

“Thanks so much for that, McGrath, now I’m kind of despondent…”

Of course, Katie responded with giggles and insults, and he and Joe talked more about footie and Joe’s projects when she excused herself for the ladies’ loo again. (It never ceased to amaze him how much time women spent in there. Were they born with bladders the size of a pea?)

When she emerged, Bradley began making his apologies and taking his leave. They hadn’t arrived at the café until nearly half past eleven, after all, and he had two shows to do tomorrow. His beauty sleep beckoned.

“Not all of us lead your life of leisure, witchy-poo.”

Katie hugged him warmly and congratulated him sincerely on his performance in the play, not even mentioning her view of his package. Apparently she was on her best behaviour tonight.

He couldn’t help grinning all the way home in the cab. She really was something else. Joe had a tiger by the tail, but he seemed to be enjoying himself. Bradley couldn’t help be very fond of both of them.

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The rest of the weekend passed too slowly for Bradley. He missed Colin terribly. He needed to talk to him, he needed the attention. So often, the two of them just talked nonsense to one another, just to amuse themselves and each other. They made up silly songs, they insulted each other or anyone else around them, and they indulged in private jokes no one else would understand. Bradley was finding himself on the phone to various mates all the time, whenever he wasn’t playing football or onstage. And he did manage to round up Rupert and a couple of mates from drama school for go-carting.
He wasn't alone. Bradley hated being alone. But even surrounded by people, and even people he'd been missing because he'd been so preoccupied with everything, Bradley missed Colin achingly, ridiculously. Seeing Colin at the theatre wasn't enough; it was like being teased with something he wanted that was just out of his reach.

After Saturday’s matinee performance, Colin’s parents came backstage. They were the same lovely, lovely people that Bradley remembered, though he didn’t know them well. As polite as they were, they were as reserved as Colin, and his conversation with them was very brief. He pulled out all the stops and tried to be as charming and polite as he knew how, but somehow, after the initial social pleasantries, congratulating him on his performance and telling him they’d admired the play very much, Bradley got the distinct feeling that they were waiting for him to leave so that they could be alone with Colin. He didn’t get that feeling from Colin, though. Colin sang his praises to his parents. Bradley had to admit, though, he was more than a little disappointed that he wasn’t invited to have brunch with Colin’s family, or treated more warmly as his own family had with Colin.

Bradley also knew, with unwavering certainty, that Colin had not told them about the change in the status of their relationship, and that he likely wouldn’t.

He heard very little from Colin the entire weekend. He tried calling him on Sunday morning, but his call went straight to voice mail. Maybe Colin had gone to morning Mass with his parents? He left him a text message that just asked how he was and to call if he felt like it, but it went unanswered.

So Bradley went to breakfast and then a quick round of football with other mates—it wasn’t as if Bradley didn't have a lot of friends, plenty of mates he could talk to and socialize with, but he still felt like he was crawling out of his own skin. He wanted to really talk with Colin, ask him how he was spending his time with his parents, did he miss him, was he feeling as ragingly randy as Bradley himself...

Colin, however, remained typically elusive, showing up at the theatre just in time to prepare himself for the performances and leaving directly afterward. If Bradley were the sensitive, paranoid type, he might even think Colin was avoiding him.

Which was ridiculous, of course…

After Sunday night’s performance, Colin did tell him that his parents were leaving on the early nine o’clock train the next morning—Monday, their day off—and was it all right if Colin came to Bradley’s flat afterward?

Bradley answered, “Get your arse there as soon as you can.”

Bradley hadn’t been sleeping well since Friday night. He was pretty sure he’d lost his touch for himself, because he couldn’t seem to make himself spill by his own hand. He was wandering his flat at odd hours of the early morning, and he’d finally watched all of the DVDs his family had given him over the holiday, even Camelot. (Which he’d thought was stupid, but whatever).

Finally, at nine-fifty am on Monday, Colin tapped on his door and stepped into Bradley’s kitchen.

It was like something out of the corniest of movies. Within seconds, Colin’s beanie and outer layers were on the floor along with his ever present backpack, and they were kissing passionately, right there next to the refrigerator.

And it didn’t take long before their jeans were down, and Bradley was bent over the small kitchenette while Colin prepared Bradley and himself. Bless the man, he’d thought to bring along condoms and lube, something Bradley didn’t usually store in his kitchen, as a general rule.
They didn’t remove more clothing than was strictly necessary. Their jeans were inelegantly around their knees, and Colin pushed Bradley’s tee-shirt up under his arms with one hand while inserting the other hand’s one lubed finger, and then two, into Bradley’s entrance.

“I’m ready, Colin, enough, just, just get inside me now, will you”, he told him, and thrust back on his fingers.

“You need a bit more…” Colin muttered, squirting some more lube directly onto Bradley.

“Oh, God, will you please hurry up”, Bradley groaned.

Quickly, Colin unwrapped a condom and rolled it onto himself, and then used one hand to grease himself while the other stroked Bradley’s bared and spread arse.

“I am going to put you into me myself if you don’t do something in the next five seconds”, Bradley all but shouted. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Colin wasn’t. He wasn’t even trying to tease Bradley. In the next moment, Bradley felt Colin’s fingers part him, and then the slow, distinct stretch-and-burn sensation of Colin penetrating him. Bradley spread hi legs as best he could, trussed by his own denims, and leaned further onto the kitchen table, panting harshly.

“All right?” Colin asked, his own breath as loud and laboured as Bradley’s. He pulled out just a bit, adjusted his angle, continued with short thrusts inside him until Bradley felt Colin’s balls against his arse cheeks. And then he just stopped for a moment.


In fact, it was hard enough that if Colin hadn’t been gripping Bradley’s hips, he might have knocked him over. That seemed to trigger something in Colin. He pulled out just a bit, thrust again, harder this time. Bradley met the thrust with another hard thrust backward.

Colin leaned over him, and Bradley could feel the fleece of Colin’s hoodie on his bare back. “You really want it this hard? We can do that, if that is what you want…”

Bradley panted, and thrust back as hard as he could again against Colin, feeling the tip of Colin’s cock hit his prostate perfectly. He yelled at the sensation, and the next time, Colin met his thrust at the same time.

After that, the only things Bradley was really aware of were the sounds of the two of them yelling in unison, the guttural, grunting “Unh, unh, unh” sounds of their passion, the slapping of Colin’s balls against his bare arse, the squelching noises of the lube on and inside both of them, the scraping sound of the table as it skidded slightly on the linoleum of the kitchen floor.

They’d never fucked like this before, animalistic and carnal, the two of them rutting into and against each other, so lost in the sensations of the moment.

Bradley felt himself getting closer, reached around with one arm to try to draw Colin by his hip even further within himself. Colin’s reaction to that was to fist Bradley’s cock, pumping him hard in time with his own thrusts.

When Bradley’s release finally came, Colin actually covered his mouth with his slicked hand. Bradley had a pretty good idea that he might have been keening. Or howling. Or wailing

His tightening around Colin at the moment of peaking sent Colin’s rhythm stuttering. Colin all but
brayed, a sound Bradley didn’t think he’d ever heard him make before.

It wasn’t long before Colin was actually lying on top of him, their two torsos on the kitchen table with their legs still semi-supporting them. Colin’s panting breaths were damp against the back of Bradley’s neck. It was messy, and obscene, and Bradley knew he was going to be hurting for a while after this.

After a long moment of trying to pull his mind back together, and his body slowly registering that his back hurt, his legs hurt, his arse hurt, even his dick hurt, Bradley managed to say to Colin, “Ah… Ahm?”

Thankfully, Colin spoke Bradley. He stirred slightly, managed to slither out of Bradley without moving very much at all, and then slowly, slowly, dropped to the floor.

Bradley joined him there a moment later. He couldn’t sit—his arse felt swollen and somehow misshapen, so he sort of sprawled on one hip and watched dazedly as Colin carefully peeled off the condom and dropped it on the kitchen floor.

He pushed his fringe back from his damp forehead and blinked a few times, and then really looked at Colin. He hadn’t said anything yet….

“Ah…” Bradley tried.

Hmm. This might not work.

He crawled over to the fridge, managing to shimmy out of his jeans fully along the way—he was pretty sure the zipper was ruined—and retrieved two bottle of water for himself and Colin. He crawled back to Colin, handed him a bottle of water. Colin took it, but let the bottle hang loosely from his hand, staring at it like he didn’t quite recognize what it was.

“Erhm”, Colin said.

“Yeah”, Bradley agreed.

Colin still had a rather confused look about him, so Bradley asked, “You all right there, mate?”

“I’m fine…you’re asking me? I just pounded you into the table! Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Better than okay. I’ll drink to your pounding me”, Bradley declared brightly, and took a draught from the water bottle.

Colin just shook his head slightly.

The coolness of the water seemed to help clear Bradley’s head a bit. “I’m fine, mate, really. A bit sore, yeah, but every once in a while, rough sex is all that will do. You scratched my itch good and proper. That really was quite a shag.”

Colin smiled a bit weakly at him. “It was, wasn’t it.”

“Yeah.” Bradley grinned at him. And then glanced down at the floor, where the limp, used condom still lay. For some reason, the thought of a used condom on his kitchen floor struck him as awfully amusing, and he started to giggle. There they both were, Bradley pantsless and Colin tangled and trussed in his own trousers. They must look like two pornographic puppets with their strings cut, sprawled on the floor. It was wonderfully, marvellously funny.
Colin was giggling too, though he looked like he didn’t quite know why.

Bradley thought Colin was adorable when he was befuddled, and it made him laugh harder.

Eventually, they were able to sort themselves out enough to stand, discard the condom into the bin, and slowly limp their way to the shower.

What a fine way to spend their day off.

In the shower, Colin gingerly checked Bradley and groaned in real distress when he discovered a bit of blood. Yes, Bradley had torn slightly, but it wasn’t serious. Bradley told Colin not to feel guilty at all about this. It wasn’t as if it was forced or non-consensual. Bradley had urged him on, told him to make it hard, and quite frankly, had had one of the best fucks of his life.

He then checked Colin’s prick for him, including the underside, and it was red and sore looking too.

They applied antibiotic salve to each other and then lay down in Bradley’s big, freshly made bed, Bradley lying on his stomach “Miss me?” Colin asked him innocently.

“Oh, fuck yeah”, Bradley said honestly.

And then, “You didn’t tell them, did you. Your parents, I mean.”

Colin looked away. “Bradley…”

“Can I ask why?”

“They’re getting older, you know. I see it in the way they move.”

“And?”

“I just…I worry, that’s all.”

“Is it really that abhorrent? Us being together?”

“Not to me, no, or I wouldn't be here….”

“So why didn’t you tell them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you going to tell them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you going to tell Neil?”

“Dammit, Bradley! Stop badgering me, will you?”

“Well, it’s no answer! You haven’t told me anything.”

“It’s the only answer I have, all right?”
“No…”

“Well, it’s going to have to be, for now. They’re my family.”

Bradley turned his head away. Intellectually, he knew Colin was right. They were Colin’s family, and it was his right to tell them or not tell them. There was obviously a different dynamic going on there, one he had no idea about, and it was very different from the support Bradley had from his own mum.

On the other hand, his level of disappointment about it all, and his insecurities surrounding this pairing, couldn’t seem to accept that. He needed to know why Colin didn’t want anyone to know, and Colin just refused to tell him.

“So many people know already”, Bradley murmured.

Colin said nothing more. Finally, he just sighed and said, “We haven’t seen each other outside of work in almost four days. I don’t want to fight with you. I haven’t been sleeping well…”

Bradley said nothing more. He hadn’t been sleeping either, and he would have thought that Colin’s presence like this would be just what he needed to nap until afternoon. But sleep wouldn’t come, even after he knew Colin had dozed off. Dammit, the man could sleep anywhere, under any conditions.

Eventually, Bradley got up, quietly gathered his clothes and dressed in the living room. He got out his phone and called Rupert, and then Tom and Eoin, and even Ade, leaving a message to ask if he was free. They might have lunch, or another session of go-karting, or if all else failed, just play a bit more football.

He was in the kitchen, collecting his keys and wallet when Colin came in, wrapped in Bradley’s blue dressing gown.

“I’m meeting the lads for lunch. I’ll see you at the theatre tonight”, he said shortly. They were supposed to see Hamlet that night, after all.

Colin said nothing at all, but the look on his face and the slump of his shoulders spoke volumes.

Bradley let himself out, jogged down the stairs and started up the road to the tube station.

And then stopped.

He stood still for a long moment, there on the sidewalk, his phone still in his hand, feeling the dull throbbing ache of his body from what he’d shared less than two hours ago with Colin. He shook his head.

Goddammit, but he was an absolute tit.

He turned around and walked back to his flat.

Colin was sitting at the table, the same table he’d bent Bradley over. They’d probably need to clean it with bleach before they ate off it again…

Colin still had the same look on his face, the same dejected posture as when he’d left, though with the added element of surprise at Bradley’s return.

“What did you forget?” Colin asked neutrally.
Bradley walked over to Colin, bent down and kissed him chastely on the cheek. Now Colin really looked surprised.

“Myself. My brain. I am so sorry, Colin. I never, ever want to be responsible for making you look the way you did just now, when I left. I’m sorry.”

Bradley just sat down opposite Colin, suddenly feeling exhausted and depressed and somehow, a little hopeless. Colin seemed to be watching him, an unreadable expression—was that wariness?—in his eyes. They sat there in silence, at the awful table that needed to be cleaned for some long moments, until Colin said “Thank you for coming back.”

Bradley couldn’t think of anything to say to that. He pulled out his phone, found the number he needed.

“Hi, Jesus (Bradley’s nickname for Rupert)—me again. Listen mate, I’m really sorry, but something’s come up and I have to take care of it right away. I can’t make it to lunch today. Give my sorrys to the others, would you?”

Rupert said he was disappointed, and did he want to re-schedule?

“I can’t right now, but let’s get together when you see the play later this week, yeah?”

Always amicable, Rupert agreed, and Bradley was able to end the call fairly quickly. He pressed the end-call button, left the phone on the table.

He couldn’t think of a thing to say to Colin.

What a picture they must make, the two of them sitting at a table stained with cold, dried jizz, and wasn’t that just gross.

Bradley just groaned, scrubbed a hand over his face. “I wasn’t thinking. I’ve become used to just seeing you at work….sorry. I’m really sorry. I don’t know how you put up with me sometimes”, Bradley muttered, and was mortified when his voice cracked on “sometimes”.

“I could tell you, but I don’t think you’d believe me”, Colin answered, equally quietly.

“I’m such a turd”, Bradley admitted, more to himself than to Colin. “I have no right to tell you when to come out to your family…I’m just…Well, now you know why none of my relationships ever work out in the long term.”

Colin seemed to ponder this for a moment, and then offered, “We’re both really tired.”

“Haven’t been sleeping well.” Bradley agreed.

“Yeah. Lack of sleep kills brain cells.”

“Well, thanks for providing me an excuse, anyway.”

They both snickered a little.

God, but Bradley really was tired. He’d been tired before, when he’d unsuccessfully tried to nap with Colin, but now he felt like he did after an adrenaline dump: almost dizzy with fatigue.

Colin said, “We should clean the kitchen. At least the table, if not the floor…”

And…this was probably the weirdest non-conversation Bradley had ever had.
“Yeah.” Bradley agreed. “But it will still be here if we want to catch up on our sleep now, and come back in a couple hours. Come to bed with me. To sleep, I mean.” He got up and held his hand out to Colin, praying that Colin would accept the oblique peace offering.

Colin took it, and they went back into Bradley’s bedroom. He began peeling off his street clothes, found a pair of red jogging bottoms and a tee shirt. Beside him, Colin took off the borrowed robe and slid naked beneath the covers again.

“Here. I know how cold you get.” Bradley found another old pair of pyjama bottoms and a soft tee shirt and handed them over. Colin gratefully accepted them and put them on under the duvet, wriggling about. Bradley watched him for a moment, and then lay down and gathered Colin to his chest. He kissed the top of Colin’s head, and willed sleep to come.

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He awoke alone and disoriented, his body still stiff and aching. Bradley stared around his bedroom, at the dimming light, and then thought to look at his watch. It was past four in the afternoon. He’d slept more than four hours. And they had a play that started at 7:00PM to go to.

Bradley actually groaned aloud at that. The day was gone, and he’d done nothing. He hated that—his energy level didn’t usually allow him to sleep during the day, and it made him feel so unproductive and in danger of missing out on something important. But now his throat was sore and his head a bit muzzy—he suspected he was coming down with Colin’s cold—and his arse was still a tad uncomfortable, along with his stiffened joints…

And where was Colin?

He didn’t think Colin would abandon him like this, even after Bradley behaving like such a sodding git. Colin had seemed to accept his apologies. On the other hand, Bradley’s insecurity and their latest disagreement didn’t allow him to dismiss the notion entirely, and Bradley didn’t hear any sounds from the living room… He got up, slowly and stiffly, and gingerly peered out the bedroom door.

Colin wasn’t in the living room, and the flat’s layout didn’t allow him to see into the kitchen, but he could hear quiet sounds of movement, and oddly enough…the sound of water sloshing. Now that he was more fully awake, he could also smell the scent of strong cleaning solution, too. And...maybe something cooking?

No, Colin hadn’t left. He was cleaning up the evidence of their recent libidinous ardour in the kitchen. Bradley quietly padded his way to the kitchen.

He decided that it would be best if they both just pretended they hadn’t just quarreled. Let sleeping dogs lie. Bradley wouldn't bring up Colin not telling his parents, and Colin wouldn't bring up Bradley's moment of being a drama llama. Hopefully Colin would be on the same page.

Colin had his back to the doorway and his ear buds in as he methodically mopped at the floor. He was completely oblivious to the fact that he was no longer alone. Bradley thought that the potential for comedic startling and reaction here were high, but…

Carefully, he tugged one ear bud from one of Colin’s generously-sized ears.

Colin, of course, startled anyway. He didn’t yelp or shriek, but he jumped high enough that Bradley could have sworn his stockinged feet left the floor for a second.

Bradley just grinned at him. “Hi”.

Colin rolled his eyes at him, pressed his hand over his heart. “Oh, look, Sleeping Beauty awakes.
You were really sawing wood, there. A mite congested, aren’t you…?”

“Massively congested, and all because of you. It looks like you’ve gifted me with your cold. I’m going to need you to take care of me. I may die if I don’t receive proper care and attention over the next few days.”

“You’re not going to die”, Colin said with exaggerated patience. “It’s a cold. I got through it, you will too.”

“Not unless you’re here to take care of me”, Bradley repeated. He couldn’t help it, he knew he handled being sick badly.

“D’you see me going anywhere?”

“No, just wanted to make sure you understood. You don’t want to have me dying of a cold when you could have prevented it, do you?” At Colin’s mock-exasperated smirk, Bradley added, “You should have woke me up. I would have helped with clean up, and now the day’s almost gone.”

“You needed to sleep. I’ve got it under control here. If you want, you can try some of my black bean soup with avocado and lime, and I made some vegan chocolate chip cookies too, if you’re up for it. And I’ll brew some tea. I haven’t eaten anything since a bagel this morning, and I think your lunch plans were hijacked, and we can leave for the play in an hour or so…”

So while Bradley had been sleeping, Colin had made homemade soup and cookies and cleaned up their sex puddles. What could Bradley possibly say to that?

So Bradley accepted tea from Colin and then went into the living room, turned on the telly. He called to Colin from his prone position, “Hey, do you suppose our spunk would be considered a bio-hazard?”

Colin gave him a look, muttered something along the lines of “Not if you mix it with peanut butter.”

“You do domestic so very nicely, Cols”, Bradley added. “I think I’m going to get you an apron. One of those French maid aprons…how do you feel about fishnet stockings, hypothetically speaking?”

Colin threw a sponge at him. “Forget it. I am not wearing a French maid’s outfit, not even for you. And anyway, I thought you were supposed to be sick. Why don’t you stop talking, rest your vocal cords and my ears for a minute. I’ll bring our food in there on trays. The old fashion tv dinner maneuver…”

Bradley pretended to pout over Colin’s refusal to play dress up, and Colin threw another sponge at him. Bradley just filed that image away for now, of Colin in drag…

"Hey, mate, thanks for going to all this trouble to make soup, that was very kind.

“I think you'll like it, it's very robust tasting, even without the meat you love. I'm afraid I've used everything in your pantry though, it's bare now.”

“Heh. You said bare…”

Colin rolled his eyes and shook his head at Bradley’s usual teasing immaturity as they settled before the telly and sipped their soup. It was hot and spicy and tangy, just what the doctor ordered for Bradley

Colin rummaged around in the medicine cabinet for a moment and then emerged with the remaining
cold tabs he hadn’t used.

“I’ll put these here on the table for you for now. You should wait to take them until after you’ve eaten.”

“Yes, Mum” Bradley said, secretly pleased that Colin was looking after him, even after Bradley had been such a giant pillock to Colin earlier. Colin just ignored his sarcasm. “We’re going to need to stock up on these soon…as a matter of fact, I think we’re going to have to start making major plans, because we’re leaving for Cardiff a week from tomorrow…”

Bradley stared at him, wide-eyed. It was true, of course, he’d known it intellectually, but now hearing it verbalized set off a kind of panic in him. Where had the time gone? They had only four more shows before the play’s run was over. Next Saturday was the wrap party, and Colin had reminded him again to expect to take care of Colin’s sodden arse for a couple days after that because Colin intended to get wholly bladdered. They’d arrive in Cardiff on Tuesday, and production expected them to get haircuts and shaves, costume fittings, get their medical exams for the insurance company…and that was all before they’d even get their scripts or go in for the first table read and start rehearsals.

And Bradley hadn’t even started packing or organizing or buying whatever they might need for the flat he’d be living in. As far as he knew, Colin hadn’t either.

Not to mention, the Js would be demanding both his and Colin's final answer on the subject of contract renewal.


And right now, they also had to get ready to go and see a play tonight...
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

We're down to it! The next chapter will be the final one. I just wanted to say thank you all for all your support and encouragement and lovely comments. And a belated happy birthday to Kesmith!

He must have looked just as overwhelmed as he felt, because Colin tilted his head at him and quirked his mouth a bit.

“Erm..”, Colin said into the silence. “Bradley. We don’t have to go out tonight, if you’re not up to it-”

Bradley was momentarily distracted by Colin cocking his head like that—rather precious, he thought—but then shook himself slightly.

“I’m fine, I definitely want to go to the show. I--I’m just thinking of all that I have to do between now and when we leave for Wales, and it just hit me. Like a ton of bricks. I have a shitload to do!”

Colin huffed a little laugh. “I’ll help you, if you want. It’s just organizing and packing your clothes and whatever personal items you’re going to take, isn’t it?”

That was true, their flats were already furnished, even with a telly, and had built-in storage. Put into perspective, it did sound simple.

“I’d love the help, but don’t you have some of your own packing to do?”

“Nah.” Colin shrugged one shoulder. “Mam and Da helped me pack everything this weekend. That’s pretty much how we spent our time. I’m all ready, with only a few necessities left to throw into my bag when its time to go, and whatever else I’ve left here at yours. Here, we made a chart...”

He started rummaging around in his backpack, pulled out his computer, which lead Bradley to wonder once again what else he had in that backpack of his. Bradley wouldn’t be surprised if he was stashing a grand piano in there too.

This was Colin—here Bradley had been ready to lose it and gibber in a corner, and Colin had already begun packing and planning and basically had both their living arrangements sorted before Bradley had realized it really was time to do that.

The man was a freak of nature. How did Colin do it every year, working in a play or a movie every winter and then preparing himself and getting himself to Cardiff for eight months of intense work, only to turn around and do it again? He did it every year, without complaint and without any hint of drama.

It was like he was the exact opposite of Bradley, yin to his yang. Or, he supposed, the other side of his coin.

Colin showed him what he’d done on the computer, and Bradley pretty much stared at the screen and then at Colin and nodded his head a lot.
“I usually just throw some stuff in some bags and haul it along.”

They spent a few minutes talking about moving, and coming to the agreement that while they’d still maintain separate living spaces in the Beeb’s complex, it would be very much like the arrangement they had now—staying with each other almost all of the time.

“It will be more convenient, for both of us. And if we’ve forgotten anything, we can always borrow the others’ deodorant or toothpaste or whatever...

It was all so homey, so nesting-like, that it had Bradley grinning like a Cheshire. It seemed as though something wobbly and uncertain deep inside him that had almost come undone earlier today had straightened and strengthened again. He was now in the “Shipping up to Cardiff” mindset, and it wasn’t a bad place to be anymore.

Bradley didn’t have to mention to Colin that they’d both be working fifteen hours a day again, with very little time to spend at home.

Abruptly, a small bell dinged in the kitchen, and Colin brought the soup, some thick brown bread (“It was in my backpack, I picked it up last night”), and some sliced apples. They ate on tv trays, a few moments of Dexter, Colin’s favorite show, on the telly.

“Hey, Cols”, he said around a mouthful of apple. “Do you have any copies of your movies? I haven’t seen them yet, you know…I’d especially like to watch Parked, from all I’ve heard of it.”

Colin seemed to hesitate a bit before answering. “Sure, I can get them for you, if you want. I don’t really think they’re your cup of tea, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, just kind of…non-actiony. A lot of dialogue. I’m thinking you’d probably be bored. And the accents I use, well, you’ll have trouble with them.”

“Oh, shut it.” Bradley poked him lightly. “I fancy you, you’re my cup of tea, and I’ve gotten okay at speaking Colin, most of the time. Bring ’em. I’ll watch them during the eighteen minutes a week of free time we’ll have once filming begins…”

“I fancy you too”, Colin said, almost shyly, and Bradley found himself grinning again. It was sappy, and stupid, and awkward, and corny, and he loved it, coming from Colin. “And I’ll bring my movies for you.”

Bradley started to lean towards him for a kiss when he happened to catch sight of the clock on the sideboard.

“Colin, oh fuck, we’ve got to get going, we’re going to be late for the play...!”

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They weren’t late for the play. They scrambled to wash and dress and catch a cab, but they made it to the theatre with fifteen minutes before curtain up. No one approached them as audience members, but Bradley did spt someone taking pictures of himself with her camera phone. (The irony was, she probably thought she was being discreet about it, too.)

Bradley thoroughly enjoyed the show (as did Colin) and found himself picturing himself in such a Shakespearean production, hopefully in the not so distant future. Colin too confided that he had always aspired to Shakespeare, though wasn’t sure which of the Bard’s plays he’d prefer to act in first.
“I’m not as decisive as you, you’ve had Mercutio in mind for a long time now. I’m open to what may come.’’

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The next four days and nights were a whirlwind as they began the packing process. Colin was patient and helpful through it all, neating and folding his clothes, and reminding him to make sure nothing was left behind in the laundry. Bradley wondered how he’d done this by himself the past four years. He didn’t think he’d ever been ready this far in advance before.

They even went shopping together, picking up things like light bulbs and bath tissue, all of which Colin methodically ticked off a list he’d printed out, as they purchased. Bradley supposed he could have had one of his cleaners or hire someone to do this for him, but it was satisfying and empowering to do it for himself, with Colin.

And—they had another serious talk. They were both expected to take medicals when they returned to Cardiff, and they’d both agreed to request tests for AIDS and any STDs. When they were cleared—and they were both certain they would be—they would bareback with each other.

Bradley was actually tingling in anticipation over that, especially when Colin told him he didn’t think he could imagine anything hotter.

First, though, they had to get through their last week onstage.

Bradley’s cold wasn’t bad, but it was bothersome, and it sapped all his energy. He wasn’t playing football in the morning the entire week. He was just grateful that he had no cough to deal with, which could have been disastrous onstage.

His relationship with Richard had cooled for a few days after their disappointing lunch, but Richard now seemed to be seeking him out. It seemed to Bradley that Richard was trying to reassure him of his support without directly ever mentioning his and Colin’s changed status.

They were discussing the upcoming season of Merlin almost every night (Richard would be joining them Wales in a week or two, once the finishing touches had been made on his current stage project.) Bradley felt his anticipation for series five of Merlin growing, even as a touch of melancholy also grew as the closing date for Exposed rapidly approached as well and the deadline for a decision about a series six of Merlin.

He didn’t know if Colin and Richard had had any private conversations regarding things, but it seemed to Bradley that there had been no change at all between Colin and his on and off screen mentor. Bradley highly suspected that Colin may have been instrumental in Richard making overtures to him once again.

On Wednesday, the last of their Merlin colleague guests, Angel and Rupert and their dates, were in the audience. Bradley and Colin once again tried to convince Richard to come with the group of them after the show, for coffee or tea and conversation. Richard and Angel had always had a special fondness for each other, and Bradley thought the odds better than usual that they might be able to convince Richard to come with.

In the end, though, it was just the six young people for tea and crumpets.

Rupert and Angel repeated how very good and gritty they had thought the play was, and pressed with one and all’s performance (There was that word, “impressed” again, Bradley thought wryly, but managed to hold his tongue). Their dates agreed, though both Bradley and Colin didn’t know them very well at all and it was a little awkward to talk about being naked in front of them.
Ah, well. An actor’s life.

They talked about the movie that Angel had worked on with Tony, and then they all started exchanging ideas for what might happen in the upcoming series of Merlin. Angel was thrilled about costumes she’d received sketches for, (“Wait until you see them, they will knock you out, and I will rock them!”) and happy to have an expanded role this series as Queen Guinevere.

“So, are you two going to sign for a next series or not?”, Angel asked abruptly.

“You like the new dresses that much, do you?”, Colin teased. “You want to wear them for another couple of years?”

“Just wanting to know early, to put in my datebook.”

“I don’t know. I’m so jealous that at least you’ve gotten new costumes every year, unlike me. I’m still in the same old rags I arrived in Camelot in all those years ago.”

“And I’ve worn nothing but fucking back-breaking chainmail for the past two years”, Bradley added.

It was an old joke between them all, and even Rupert’s and Angel’s dates could appreciate it.

“So how are you two going to swing being together all the time, anyway?” Angel said, out of the blue. “Won’t that just invite burn out?”

Colin and Bradley just looked at each other, and then at her.

“What?”, they chorused.

“Your flat-sharing. You’ll be at the BBC complex again this year, right? Away from the rest of us peons?”

Bradley grimaced, but didn’t say anything. He knew it was just a jab, but still.

“At least you’re less likely to be pranked these days”, Rupert chuckled.

“Unless it’s by you!” Angel shot back, and somehow that devolved into all of them laughing, and Angel and Rupert each nuzzling their dates. Bradley just examined his tea and crumpets closely, finding them extremely fascinating.

As obnoxiously smarmy as their friends’ cute coupledoms were, it made Bradley feel like he was missing out on something. He didn’t think it likely that he and Colin would ever be able to indulge in such outward displays.

In the same way that he often felt waves of affection for Colin, he now felt almost blanketed by a sense of loss and sadness at that realization.

Although he could probably do without the cooing of their friends, on most days…

“Listen, we’re not sharing a flat”, Colin said, and Bradley silently cheered. “We’ve both got our own flats, just like in previous years.”

“What made you think we were living together?”, Bradley added.

“Katie told me. I talked on the phone with her a few days ago.”
Katie. Of course.

All of the men, including Rupert, groaned a little.

“As usual, the witchy poo got her wires crossed”, Bradley said very wryly, and then poked the chuckling Morgan. “Shut up, you.”

“That’s the impression she was under”, Angel shrugged.

“Maybe you misunderstod?”

“I don’t think so. You know Katie, she acted like she was close to bursting with a secret she wanted to tell me and then mentioned that you were living together. Oh, I don’t know.” Angel shrugged again, seemingly dismissing the notion.

“Can you really see those two living together?” Rupert asked rhetorically, eyes twinkling. He turned to Bradley and started chuckling again. “Colin would probably have to kill you, when he’s trying to learn his spells and you’re putting shaving cream in his shoes.”

“That was just the one time”, Bradley muttered.

Colin interjected, “We’re living on the same floor, as I understand it. A couple of doors from each other, but each with our own flat. Katie gave you some misinformation.”

“Yeah, I know.” Rupert turned to Angel then. “Actually I can see them sharing a flat, if it came to that. They’d never see each other outside of work anyway. Colin would be home and Bradley would be off doing his own thing all the time.”

Angel nodded in agreement.

“Thanks, Jesus”, Bradley said sarcastically. Colin just shrugged and smiled agreeably as always, but Bradley wanted to scream at them all in frustration, “We have things we do together!”

Fortuitously, if not so welcome, they were recognized by a group of rather excitable uni-girls in the next moment, and spent the next fifteen minutes chatting, signing autographs and posing for pictures.

Well, actually—Bradley, Colin and Rupert posed for pictures and Angel fled to the loo, discreetly telling their friends she’d meet them outside. Two of the girls followed her in, though. If there was anyone more reserved around fans and adept at avoiding them, it was their Angel.

They didn’t even have the chance to say a proper goodbye, just eventually extricated themselves as best they could and went their separate ways.

It has been a bit of an awkward evening.

It was just after one thirty before they made it to Colin’s flat for night.

One thing that turned out to be equal with their het counterparts, they’d found, was that their most revealing and loving conversations took place after the lights were out, lying in bed together.

“Did the fans upset you again, tonight?” Colin asked. “You got pretty quiet there.”

“Oh. No, not really.” It was the truth, even though the fans had followed them up the street, all the way to the taxi stand, begging for “just one more” autograph or picture…

Colin hummed a bit, ran his hands through Bradley’s hair, something that never ceased to relax and
“Did it upset you to see Rupert and Angel together with their dates like that? Or did I do something…?"

He couldn’t let Colin worry or play twenty questions.

“I just…every once in awhile it hits me, that the two of us are having this clandestine affair and we can’t tell anyone. We may never get to a point where we can talk about it openly. I…I agree with you that we have to keep this, us, very private and discreet. But…it does make me feel like we’re missing out on some things, sometimes…”

“Bradley…” Colin said, and then stopped and sighed.

“I’m not appealing to you to change your mind, here. I actually agree, about being private about it”. The last thing Bradley wanted right now was another argument between them.

Colin kept on stroking Bradley’s hair, not saying anything. In their close proximity in the bed, Bradley could feel his heartbeat, his body heat, the rise and fall of Colin’s chest.

“I just think that we both need to stop taking the temperature of that which is us, together,” Colin said suddenly, his deep voice quiet. “I refuse to dwell on all the difficulties inherent in anything. If I did that, every day, I wouldn’t dare get out of bed in the morning.”

Bradley contemplated that for a moment, smiling slightly in the dark. Not only was Colin an intellectual but a philosopher as well…

But this was too intriguing for Bradley to let go, not just yet. “Aren’t you the same person who’s always prepared, always so well organized and plans ahead?”

“Yes, but I am also vastly aware that there’s some things that can’t be anticipated or planned for… like us, now, for example. We’ve always had our own unique propinquity…”

Bradley raised his head to peer at his friend in the dark. “Our what? Prop-ink-something..? The hell, Morgan?”

“Propinquity.”

“Is that a species of squid, or Figure Eight of the Karma Sutra?” He poked Colin lightly in the ribs, and they were both giggling ridiculously.

“Jesus, you’ve got to stop trawling those porn sites…”

Colin finally managed to quell Bradley’s giggling by rolling onto his own belly and setting Bradley’s hand to warming his bottom for him. They lay like that for a time more, with Colin stroking his hair, and Bradley his bum, slipping his hand inside the waistband of his pyjamas, both of them nearly purring.

Colin murmured, “It means our closeness, our kinship.”

Bradley grinned. “I know what it means. I just like the sound of the word, all the clicks and fricatives. Reminds me of the way dolphins talk.”

Colin started chortling again. “I just wanted to remind you, you’re the one who said we don’t know what the future holds. We’ve always had this….”
Bradley interjected with dolphin sounds.

“Yes, that”, Colin said, and gasped a little when Bradley squeezed one arse cheek. “I mean, in varying degrees. It’s normal, that a relationship and its closeness ebbs and flows. We’ve just embarked on another seldom-taken branch of this relationship, doesn’t mean anyone else needs to know about it, for now… Who knows, we might reach a point where we’re both comfortable with everyone knowing…”

After that, Colin stopped talking and did more reacting to what Bradley’s hands were doing inside his pyjama bottoms.

Afterward, Bradley was still wondering where this came from on Colin’s part, his even-keeled, well-adjusted outlook on everything. At some point he was going to ask Colin what source of strength and calm he was tapping into.

He fell asleep with the realization that his somewhat melancholic mood had lifted considerably.

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Thursday’s show brought an unexpected and very awkward after appearance from an old friend: Georgia came backstage to say hello to Bradley.

“Hi!” Bradley exclaimed. This was…he didn’t even know what to say to her, now. How had she even gotten tickets? Awk-ward…

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming…?”

“Because…” Georgia drew the word out. “You haven’t answered any of my calls or messages since Christmas.”

Bradley must have looked as nonplussed as he felt. “Er…sorry. I’ve just been incredibly busy, and I’m leaving for Wales in less than a week…”

“Oh, I’m not here to bust your chops over that, honest. My agent was able to wrangle a ticket for me. I just wanted to wish you well, tell you I miss you, that’s all. Do you have a few free moments; maybe we can go out for tea? Catch up on old times?”

Oh, boy, this was one of those blue-moon occasions when Bradley was truly at a loss for words.

And he could sense Colin, just outside his peripheral vision. Was he hearing this? Was he jealous? Threatened? This was the ex, after all…

Bradley couldn’t blame Colin if he was. Oh, man, what was he supposed to say…?

Bradley heard himself make several lame sounds while Georgia seemed to be waiting for him, first with a look of curiosity, and then one of more perplexed concern.

Dammit, Bradley was usually better at making things up on the fly…

“I wish I could, darling, but I’m recovering from a lousy cold, and I’m exhausted. And, there’s so much I need to do before Cardiff. You know how that goes….”

“Hey, Georgia, nice to see you again! You look great. How’d you like the play? Promise me you won’t hold anything you saw against me at any future date…”

Good lord, that was Colin, making small talk and saving Bradley’s arse.
Georgia greeted Colin with a quick hug and peck and they exchanged pleasantries. Georgia complimented him on his performance and wished him well on another season of Merlin.

Just as quickly as he’d appeared, Colin was gone again, leaving Bradley and Georgia alone. Georgia smiled after him fondly, remarked to Bradley, “He’s always such a sweetheart. You have to wonder if he’s really a closet serial killer…”

Bradley’s laughter burbled from his chest, and he was reminded once again why he and Georgia had gotten on so well, how much he appreciated her sense of humor. Truth be told, he’d probably always have feelings for her. It was just that way sometimes, with old flames.

“No, actually, I think he just likes to watch American television series about serial killers, and live vicariously through them.”

“Maybe pick up a few pointers?” Georgia added.

They giggled again, the two of them, and then Georgia’s face softened.

“Are you seeing anyone now?”

“I am”, he told her honestly. “Someone from the play”.

“From here? You’ll be missing each other in less than a week, then…”

Bradley just shrugged, didn’t say anything more.

“That didn’t take very long”, she said, a little wryly.

“I was very lucky, and, well, I hate being alone.” What could Bradley say? If she’d been available, things would be so vastly different, truly. They’d still be together…

“Which one is she, maybe she’d like to come along for conversation?”

He managed to find his voice again at that suggestion. He knew she was just being friendly, but--

“No, I think it would just be uncomfortable for everyone. You’re the competition and all that, you know. You’ll have to forgive me, I have to decline.”

“Well.” Georgia looked at him for a long moment.

“Thank you for coming, honey”, Bradley said, quiet and sincere. “You’re a lovely lady.”

And Georgia walked out of his life for the second time.

Friday. The Friday. The last time Bradley would ever do this.

He felt like he had on opening night, that almost-electric, almost-sick combination of excitement and nervousness. He wished he could slow things down a bit, savour every moment that was left. But it seemed as if this, like everything else in his life these past two months, was rushing past him at breakneck speed. All he could do was hold on tight.

Apparently, pretty much everyone else associated with the play felt similarly, because everyone arrived at the theatre very early and spent a great deal of time embracing, exchanging email addresses and phone numbers, and signing each other’s scripts. Even Colin was visible, though he’d been well
known at this point for his need to isolate himself and immerse himself in his part before the shows.

Steggie had his work cut out for him, trying to herd everyone to their places on time.

Just as they had on opening night, on what now seemed like several lifetimes ago, Colin and Bradley exchanged one silent, significant look just before Curtain Up.

He fought and shoved and was shoved by Betty, and was yelled at and abused by David, and the audience gasped and sympathized.

Bradley held Colin in his arms, kissed him, spoke words of love and commitment. He fell out of the moment, briefly; his own eyes stung a bit, as he felt the worlds of reality and stage collide for a moment, and buried his face in Colin’s shoulder. He felt those watching love and approve.

When he and Colin exposed themselves physically and emotionally for the watching audience, and they lay together in each other’s embrace, he felt the audience with them, their love for them and their empathy for the tragedy that was foreshadowed from the beginning.

And then he held Colin’s limp form in his arms, and shed bitter, cloying tears, and felt and heard the audience do the same.

When it was finished, when the curtain finally closed on their work to thunderous applause, the two of them didn’t move for a long moment.

Bradley kept his eyes closed, even as his tears—his own tears, now, not just Carr’s—escaped.

They didn’t move until Bradley felt Steggie’s gentle hand on his shoulder, reminding him that there was still one final performance to do: Curtain call.

Somehow, they made it to their feet and gathered themselves for final curtain call.

But this audience saw to it that the “final” curtain call would not be for some time. They whistled and shouted ‘Bravo!’ and applauded for long minutes, seemingly wanting to give back in some small part what they’d been given. Bradley clutched at Colin’s wrist, and saw more than one person weeping… and those were just the people in the audience.

They got through it, after four call backs, after which everyone was pretty much a sobbing mess.

They even managed to coax Richard to step out from the wings and take final bows with them.

And then it was over, and the mass of people on the stage clutched at each other and bawled. Bradley felt like a wrung out dishrag.

Finally, as they and their fellow performers began to regain some sense of equilibrium and break into small groups, Bradley and Colin found each other and just held on.

When Bradley could trust himself to speak without breaking down, he told Colin, “Thank you for this professional opportunity, for being so incredible to work with, for giving me all that I need professionally, for taking the risks that you did that allowed me to take mine…”

It was crazy, of course, but somehow he knew that Colin understood.

Colin buried his face in Bradley’s neck and said only, “You’ve done the same for me, and more. Thank you, thank you Bradley.”

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The wrap party was wisely held the day after the actual wrapping of the play.

Bradley had a pretty good idea of how the evening was going to go as soon as he walked into the restaurant. The production had rented it all for themselves for the evening, and it was lovely enough.

But the whole party seemed to be centered around Colin and himself.

First, it was the posters. Someone—probably one of the stage girls—had put up life-sized pictures of himself and Colin.

Bradley actually liked Colin’s picture very much: he was wearing a bright green shirt and was holding an Australian koala bear in his arms. Utterly adorable, it was, his hair fuzzy and tousled, his expression absolutely endearing, and he was clinging on for what looked like dear life.

Bradley couldn’t help but smiling when he saw it. Oh, and the koala was rather cute too.

But it was his own picture that had Bradley closing his eyes and chuckling in mortification for a moment. He recognized where the photo must have been taken from—he’d played in some charity football games earlier in the year, and this photo had him in his football kit, a silky nylon, royal blue ensemble. Normally, Bradley couldn’t object to his appearance in his football togs. He thought he usually presented a rakish charm while in them. But this photo—well. His adrenaline had been high, his blood had been pumping from his excitement at competing, and…he’d forgotten to bring his protective cup to the match.

As a result, his trousers were ridiculously, unmistakably tented. To add to his embarrassment, someone—again, no doubt one of the backstage girls—had drawn arrows pointing to said bulge, and had written, “What is this? Why does Bradley have an anaconda in his shorts?”

Bradley took one look at it, heard Colin begin to chortle—quickly covered by a cough—and resolved to ignore the walls and their posters for the rest of the night.

It really made no difference, after all. They’d all seen him starkers for the past month anyway.

Then, there was the music. It was brilliant music, with a professional deejay and a great mix of a little bit of all types, even the awful Indie stuff that was Colin’s favourite. But then they started playing eighties hits, and inevitably, You’re the Voice. Everyone in the place imitated Colin and Bradley in their long-ago video, and since many of them were actors, it was all done with a great deal of enthusiasm and aplomb.

It was pretty amusing the first time, and even somewhat the second time, but—

They played it four times over the course of the evening. Well, at least four times. Bradley stopped counting after that.

Ah, well. Speeches were made and gifts were given out. The food was good and the liquor was flowing freely. True to his word, now that the play had ended, Colin indulged in drinking along with everyone else, and Bradley and the others got to see him transform before their eyes. The somewhat shy, serious, reserved man who’d come to the party turned into a rather silly and giggly guy by the third drink, a boisterous hugging machine by the sixth, and by the tenth, well—had there been a chandelier in the place, Colin no doubt would have been swinging from it. He even joined in singing karaoke at one point, agonizingly off key. And just who had had the bright idea to employ karaoke at a wrap party, anyway…?

Of course, Colin had everyone laughing and charmed the bejeebers out of all present. (Some things never changed, even if Colin was pickled.)
He especially made Bradley laugh so hard he thought he’d haemorrhage himself.

Bradley kept an eye on Colin and still managed to mingle, saying goodbye to the people who had all had a hand in creating this brilliant professional experience. There were a few more tears, but mostly, there was the proud sense that they had all been a part of something unique and exceptional.

His mood was so light, and his courage so helped along by the drinks he’d consumed, that tonight he sought out Richard to thank him and shake his hand.

Richard embraced him, thanked him as well, and reminded him that he’d be joining Bradley and Colin in a few weeks’ time.

“Look after your young man until then”, he charged Bradley solemnly.

Bradley sought Colin out in the crowded, noisy room, finally spotted him at a table with some of the wardrobe people. His cheeks were very rosy, his eyes unusually bright. He was chuckling and wearing a dinner napkin round his head like a turban.

Bradley just smiled fondly. “Don’t worry, I’ve got him covered.”

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“Colin, you are never, ever drinking again. I mean it…”

“Oh God…you are so terrible to me. Just…leave me alone. Quietly.”

Seriously? Bradley had drank quite a bit at the party too. He’d gotten himself woefully, artfully, totally pissed, but he had the ability to bounce back quickly from a night on the town, an ability he’d acquired in drama school. A necessary survival skill that he’d have thought any bloke who had attended drama school would also have. Now he was trying to take care of Colin, just as he’d promised he would, helping him into the cab and into bed, getting him undressed, helping him to the loo, making sure he was hydrated and warm enough, having a barf bag handy, and this was the thanks he got? He actually liked the role of caregiver for Colin when he was needed, but Colin wouldn’t even thank him, just spent his time moaning and telling Bradley to go away.

It was kind of funny, to be honest.

Bradley sat down on the edge of the bed, careful not to jostle Colin too much. He had learned over the past two days that Colin was terribly sensitive to any stimuli, no matter how small.

Colin opened his eyes to look at him and then closed them quickly, as if the light hurt his eyes. He groaned again.

No matter that Bradley had drawn the shades in the room for him. “It’s Sunday, mate. Aren’t you feeling any better?”

Colin moaned, rolled over into a foetal position and grabbed a pillow to cover his head with.

“You need to eat something. I’m worried about you dehydrating. I’ll even make you some of that horrid gluey porridge if you’ll down it.”

Colin drew the blankets up over his head.

“Are you sure you don’t have the flu? My hangovers never last this long.”

“Bradley”. The mound under the pillows and blankets spoke. “I don’t have the flu. My hangovers
store themselves up over years and hit me all at once. This is the reason why I hardly ever drink. Please leave me to die in peace.”

Bradley very carefully and very gently patted his thigh and left the room. Coln just groaned again.

He was really quite disappointed that he didn’t have the chance to take care of Colin, as Colin would have nursed him.

Bradley was, however, quite proud and pleased with himself to take charge for the two of them. It was Bradley who got all of their boxed and bagged belongings sorted and ready for their move to Cardiff. It was Bradley that fielded the many phone calls that were coming in on his own and Coln’s phones, from friends, family, and colleagues, wishing them well and congratulations on the play and their upcoming Merlin season.

The Merlin front office and their agent was also calling more frequently, both about renewing their contracts and about what they would need to do before beginning work in Cardiff on Monday and what the first week’s schedule would be.

Bradley was even answering Coln’s phone with, “This is Coln’s phone, Bradley speaking”, and taking messages for him…or, in the case of calls from Johnny and the Julians, just telling them that Coln wasn’t feeling well, he was looking after him and they’d be where they needed to be, when they needed to be there.

He’d never fancied himself a PA before, and had gotten some surprised responses from a few of Coln’s acquaintances, but what the hell.

Eventually, Colin did emerge in a semi-human state, strong enough to eat the bowl of “gluey porridge” Bradley had promised him along with a cup of coffee. He then shuffled back to bed and slept until mid-morning on Monday. He also slept almost the entire train ride to Cardiff that evening and let Bradley shuttle him to their building with very little comment or protest, and he stayed with Bradley in Bradley’s flat that night, again sleeping most of the time.

Bradley was beginning to wonder if he’d been drugged rather than just drank too much.

Remarkably, Colin seemed almost back to normal the next day.

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Unfortunately, now that they were out of the theatre business and back in television, their schedules were mad: they were often picked up by the set van as early as five in the morning and didn’t arrive home until sometimes as late as eight in the evening. Their “down” time consisted of learning lines together and falling into bed (almost always Bradley’s) by ten at night.

Colin and Bradley had sex only once their first week in Cardiff.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Oops. This was supposed to be the last chapter, but I’ve been having some major computer issues. There’s still one more chapter to go...but here, in the meantime...

It was ironic, truly. Now that they were living in the same building, rather than commuting between their two flats in London, they hardly ever saw each other. Well, they did see each other, at work and onset, but it was almost always in the guise of Arthur and Merlin. Or just as they were falling asleep together, after another very long day and no sex.

Unless Bradley included checking out Colin’s eyelids while he slept, and Bradley didn’t intend to include that in his list of “When I get to be with Colin.”

There was just so much going on. The Js were pushing for confirmation from Bradley that he’d continue on for a sixth series, and Colin told him they were treating him the same way. It grated on Bradley how they were going about it though--acting as if it was a given:

“Now Bradley, next series, this is what we’ll be doing...”

He’d heard their “This is what we’ll be doing next year” promises before, and very few of them actually came to pass.

It was only the first week of filming, but Bradley was in frequent communication with his agent, who was running salary figures by him for a possible next year with Shine. They weren’t extravagant numbers, but they were comfortable. Bradley said simply he’d think about it. A few days later, another call again with another, slightly larger figure.

He discussed it all one night with Colin, in a near-midnight, exhausted, in the dark moment of frustration, how the offers simply made him feel pressured and boxed-in. Obligated, but not flattered. As if the Js thought he owed them something, for...Bradley didn’t even know what.

Colin nodded against his chest. “I’m pretty sure you’ve already decided, haven’t you.”

Bradley had. And he knew Colin had too.

“And you. When did you realize you’d made the decision?”, he asked Colin, more out of curiosity than anything else.

“I think...I think these first few days we arrived back here in Wales. Reading the new scripts for the first block, being reminded again how much everything got changed around at the last minute, how Johnny and Julian seem to think it’s my duty to indulge them, how they never listen to anyone’s input...after the elation of doing Exposed, it was all a jolt, and another reminder...I don’t know. I’ve loved doing this show, it was my first real job. And I love the people. But...it’s time to move on, for me, anyway.”

They were all the same things Bradley had been thinking about, weighing.

“Yeah”, was all Bradley said.
“When did you?” Colin asked, just as quietly.

“I probably knew before we got here”, Bradley said resignedly and felt Colin’s chuckle. “I was willing to allow them to change my mind, but...they haven’t.”

The next day, Bradley’s agent called him with another offer: The Js were now discussing a possible spin off series for the knights, and would Bradley be interested?

Bradley knew the time had come for him to give an answer.

“Please tell them I’m declining a sixth series or spin off”, he directed his agent, and then sought out Colin. Their agent could tell Shine of their declinations in the same meeting.

The day after their agent had informed Shine of his own and Colin’s decisions, Johnny Capps and Julian Murphy stepped into the makeup trailer where everyone congregated in the morning. Of the cast, only himself, Colin, Katie, Angel, and three of the knights, Tom, Eoin and Rupert, were present, plus make-up artists, hair stylists, wardrobe people, PAs, and the usual small city it took to get a production up and running each day.

“We will not be continuing with Merlin or with Shine at the end of this series of Merlin”, Julian Murphy announced gravely. “The reason for that is that several key players including ourselves have decided to pursue greener pastures.”

No one said anything for a long moment. Neither Capps nor Murphy looked directly at Bradley, or at Colin either, Bradley noticed.

“Just thought you should know.” Johnny Capps had finally said, with a shrug and an attitude that suggested he thought he was being very magnanimous. “Also, we may be forming our own company soon.”

And Murphy added “You are all under strict restriction not to say one word to the press or to fans or anyone, and we do mean anyone, about this. We will let everyone else involved know as well. If you are asked, as far as you know, nothing has been decided yet. Do not break this mandate....thank you. Go back to what you were doing, we’re already running a bit late and the weather looks threatening.”

They left.

A hubbub of conversation broke out as soon as the door closed on their retreating backs.

Colin and Bradley looked at each other, and Colin subtly shook his head. “If anything else, that’s confirmation we’ve both done the right thing.”

Bradley nodded back just as subtly.

Then Macken threw one of his socks at Bradley’s head, and was waving his arms around and going on about how there were better ways to announce these kinds of things, and Katie was gushing and fluttering and jabbering away, and the moment with Colin was broken.

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In the meantime, there was still a whole new series of Merlin...

Alex.
The first time Bradley and Colin met the young man who was to play grown-up Mordred...well.

During their first day together, Colin turned to Bradley and whispered “Were we ever that young and enthusiastic?”

They looked at each other and agreed, “Nah.”

In truth and fairness, Alex was a very good actor, very professional and serious when it was time to work.

One of the reasons Bradley had loved working with Anthony was because of both his talent and presence, his sense of fun and contagious, ridiculous and frequent laugh. Last season, they’d worked a lot with Nate Parker, who’d been both a consummate professional and an incomparable giggler. Much like Anthony, he’d often set the entire cast and crew off with his appreciation for silly humor and they’d all been known to blow take after take before order was restored again. They’d all loved working with Nate, though neither Colin nor Bradley became especially close to him personally.

But Alex was a different story. He was very keen on being on Merlin, and on being “one of the lads”. His enthusiasm was endless, so much so that both Bradley and Colin--and others--had told him more than once to settle down, they had eight months of this yet ahead and he would need to pace himself.

There were times though when Bradley watched Alex bounding about and felt almost wistful. Before he’d truly known what he was getting himself into, before he’d grown up a bit, before his eyes had been opened and his privacy violated, he’d been the same way. Probably even more so.

Besides, Alex played football, and pretty well too, so he couldn’t be all bad.

They’d all been forbidden to play football while on set, mostly because Tom kept tripping over his ginormous feet and either hurting himself or falling on others and hurting them too. But the knights, and the several of the cast and crew who played, along with Alex, were a resourceful lot and managed to schedule several off-set matches together, as well as practicing for some upcoming charity matches later in the year. Of course, usually those games and practice sessions continued on with dinner or a club or some film afterward, too.

Colin didn’t participate or attend, of course, but he was taking part in other physical activity. His weightlifting had been regular but not strenuous while in the play, but now he was throwing himself into it wholeheartedly. There was a gym within just a few blocks of where Colin and Bradley were living, and Bradley would join him there after work if Bradley wasn’t going out with the lads.

Colin’s sinewy body was responding very quickly to his ramped up work-out regimen. Colin was no longer “Only tiny”. In fact, he was seriously becoming buff and broad. The camera was loving it, and Bradley loved it too, even though he rarely got the chance to appreciate it fully these days due to their all-consuming schedules. Colin had told him that he’d heard a few grumbles from wardrobe about his tightening costumes and having to alter his usually baggy Merlin clothes. (Though of course they also told Colin he looked fabulous. Colin would always be the darling of everyone on the crew, even when he was old, balding and spotty.) Bradley had just grinned and asked him if they’d had to make a bigger neckerchief for him too.

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At least there was one person who was happy about costumes, and that was Angel.
She twirled for him, in her red-velvet, off the shoulder, low-cut queen’s gown, the first day on set.
“Isn’t it magnificent”, she’d asked, over and over, beaming widely.

He told her it was, and she did look lovely in it. Being with Colin didn’t mean he couldn’t still appreciate the female form, after all, and Angel had a lot of a female form going for her. But the cut of her dress, Angel’s petiteness in all that fabric, the overly-corseted bodice--it was all just too much. To Bradley’s eye, the gown (and all of the other gowns, all similar styles in different colors) made her look too short and boxy, and the plunging necklines of all of them were so revealing they almost embarrassed him, always making him wonder when one of her nipples was going to pop out unexpectedly. (He was pretty sure there was a betting pool going on about that onset too).

He kept his opinions to himself, though. Angel was far more happier than she’d usually been on the show (she had woefully complained more than once about Gwen never having anything important to do), with an expanded role now as Queen Guinevere, and a very-high handed queen she was too. She was enjoying herself. So Bradley kept his own, less-than-gobsmacked thoughts to himself.

First block was almost close to brilliant, really.

Bradley and Colin, along with Alex, got to play at freezing, with their noses, ears and cheeks pinched up by makeup, amidst artificial snow, on the hottest day of the year. They were “shivering” while sweat trickled down their backs and being told to “look colder”, and the crew worried about heat stroke. It was bonkers, and Bradley loved it.

Bradley and Colin banged their junk together in a net trap they could have gotten out of easily enough, hanging in very close proximity for two whole days, giggling and coming up with crazy and off-color ad lib lines, some of which were actually kept in. Colin kept putting his knee in Bradley’s crotch and swearing it wasn’t on purpose, but Bradley knew better. That man was a flirting machine. In revenge for both that, and a scene from the previous year when Colin as Merlin had dragged him out of bed and accidentally poked him in the eye in the process, Bradley put his slightly curled hand up against Colin’s closed eye when they were supposed to be net-sleeping, which was also, amazingly, kept in the final print.

Anthony was there during third block, too. He returned as Uther’s ghost, (summoned by magic, what else?) and the character had a raging hate boner for just about all the characters, including the one Bradley played, his own son.

(It was in this same episode that one of Bradley’s favorite comedy bits played out with Colin, involving King Arthur and his manservant reading poetry together. Rupert took the piss out of them about that scene for weeks.)

Bradley had received several texts and emails from Anthony since the disastrous coming-out lunch. Anthony had apologized again, told him he was proud of him for following his heart and being true to himself. Bradley was simply unable to stay upset with him and had answered back with brief “It’s ok, it’s forgotten” type responses.

Anthony invited Bradley and Colin out to dinner after his episode wrapped. Colin begged off, saying he had lines to learn, which of course Bradley could have predicted from a mile off. Even so, the look Colin gave him before leaving for his flat told him he thought Bradley needed to be alone with his “dad”, to sort things through and make sure no permanent damage would remain between them.

But it wasn’t the same. Not without Colin, and not with this more-careful version of Anthony, who told him how much he now regretted saying anything about Bradley’s personal affairs to him.
“And I want you to know that Sarah ripped me a new one when I told her, too”, he added wryly.

“How is Sarah? What does she think about Colin and myself?”

“She’s well and she loves you both. And she’s so much smarter than I, she will keep her opinions to herself, just as I should have, about your relationship. Can I get you to try some tofu? It’s very good…”

“When cows start growing on trees, that’s when I’ll become a vegetarian”, Bradley refused, and scrunched his face up in an unmistakable “Ewww” expression.

He recognized Anthony’s changing the subject, steering the conversation into safer harbors, and he knew why, but he felt disappointed. He’d pretty much always depended on Anthony to be loving but bluntly honest with him, and now, because of the way he’d reacted during the “coming out” lunch, he had a feeling Anthony would always be tactful and polite with him instead.

He wished, for about the thousandth time, that there was someone he could talk with about Colin.

The dinner was still enjoyable, Anthony laughed and made him laugh often, and told him of all of his latest adventures with his animals, and another new pilot. And Bradley did lean across the table closely and whisper that this would be the last year of Merlin, that both he and Colin had made the mutual decision to move on after this series.

Anthony raised his eyebrows in an expression of pleased surprise. “Good on you. I suppose it is time, isn’t it. “ Anthony mused, almost to himself, “I wonder why they haven’t announced this is the last series rather than keeping it under wraps. There’s huge marketing potential in that.”

“Why ask why”, Bradley shrugged. He didn’t have a stellar opinion on how Shine handled the marketing and PR for the show, among other things. “Do you know what they did on our first day back, right after read-through? They took a picture of the empty conference room table and chairs and tweeted it. Oh, and Katie in a hoodie and sunglasses, holding up a script. Exciting, yeah?”

That set off another round of Anthony-giggles. “If you’re five, I suppose.”

“They’re just stringing the fans along, you know that.”

“Yeah”, Anthony shrugged. “Any idea how they’re going to end it? The magic reveal, presumably?”

Bradley rolled his eyes. “The question we’re most asked, and the one plotline the J-boys keep saying isn’t necessary to pursue. It’s rubbish.”

Anthony pulled another of his faces, stirred his tea. “My show is the end of the first block, so you’ll be in second block in the next couple of days or so. They have a lot of ground to cover in ten episodes! What would you like to happen, for your character, for Arthur? I know how we’ve talked about it at length, but we’ve never been staring down the end of the series before.”

“I just want them to do right by Arthur, whatever they do”, Bradley said. He’d just about given up on seeing Arthur as the king of legend, smart and insightful and a gatherer of kingdoms. He’d have to settle for the small improvements he’d been able to help facilitate over the years, a wise, noble, brave character who had become kinder to his manservant and taken on the mantle of the crown with strength, good intentions, a good heart. Arthur was human and flawed and layered, and on most days, that’s what made him interesting to play.

At least on the days when Arthur wasn’t being written as a blind idiot.
“You know how they never listen to me anyway.”


Eoin had really had some go-rounds with the producers, complaining to anyone who would listen what control freaks they were, how they never listened to the actors’ input, how disorganized the “powers that be” were. They made things up as they went along with no thought to continuity or even sense. Bradley knew that Eoin, bless him, fancied himself a bit of a renaissance man and had wanted to do more with Gwaine than be just the butt of jokes as he’d become in series four, after he’d had such a good introduction. Eoin’s Gwaine was supposed to be “Strength”, after all, and they’d completely forgotten a storyline that they’d all thought would be important later. After the 4.6 episode, when King Carleon had been one of the characters and Eoin had expected his character to have more to do, (and been wrong), Eoin had pretty much given up. But he was still pretty vocal about it, even to fans on social network.

Bradley had agreed with Eoin (at least with his disgruntlement), because Bradley himself was disappointed that the knights weren’t more important to the show, hadn’t been given any real backgrounds at all. In fact, as Tom had good-naturedly joked more than once, they were the background, more often than not.

But it was nothing new to Bradley or to Colin, who had been there from the beginning and knew how the Js operated. He was seeing the same see-sawing again with Alex’s character, whom they seem to change their minds about every three days. (Should he be evil? Ambiguous? Sympathetic? Something else?)

Anthony chuckled a little in knowing sympathy, and they finished their pleasant meal and embraced. Anthony was leaving Wales that night, and Bradley didn’t know the next time he’d see him again.

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The lack of sex was killing Bradley. He and Colin had gone from shagging pretty much twice a day, to no more than two or three times a week, if they were lucky. Their schedules onset were grueling, more so, it seemed to Bradley, than any other year. There were times when Colin got home before him and went to his own flat and they didn’t see each other until the next morning. The same sometimes happened if Bradley was released from onset unexpectedly early--he often went out after work with friends, and didn’t want to disturb Colin when he came back in.

One of them was an extrovert, and the other an introvert. One of them loved being around people, and it wore out the other one. Bradley preferred to travel back to London when he had the weekend free, to stay in his own flat, meet up with friends at the pub, play and watch football, go out to dinner or clubbing or the cinema or go-karting. Colin preferred to stay in Wales on his weekends off, sleeping, working out, cooking, reading and...reading.

On paper “ColinandBradley” should have crashed and burned before “ColinandBradley” ever got off the ground."

Somehow, inexplicably, remarkably, they hadn’t. And it was working. It was still working.

Bradley had actually constructed a schedule on his computer, in a fit of boredom between shots. It wasn’t elaborate, not at all. Bradley hated elaborate. He’d merged their calendars. Set up their scheduled weekends off, with suggested dates for Bradley to go back to London alone one weekend, Colin to come with him once a month, and Bradley to stay with Colin in Wales when they were both working, or at least once a month.
It was the life of an actor.

Bradley thought it was pretty brill, and when Colin looked at it, his eyes had widened. He’d leaned forward, squinted at the screen, and then told Bradley “You truly never cease to amaze me” and then went on a diatribe about how communication was the key to curing the world’s ills, Bradley was a gifted genius or a unicorn with rainbows coming out of his arse, or something else. (Bradley wasn’t sure...Colin was talking in his Irish accent again.)

Now if he could just schedule another couple of hours in the day, enough for them to have sex a little more often instead of sleeping alone or with Colin snoring away beside Bradley...

The truth was, the schedule turned out to be rubbish. They couldn’t keep to a schedule, not while working for Shine and everything changing minute to minute. But the fact that a “schedule”, even for sex at least once a week, even existed—it was a kind of reminder for them to schedule some “Bradley and Colin time”, at least once a week. Even if one of them was an extrovert and the other an introvert, and on paper, at least, there really shouldn’t even be a “Bradley and Colin”.

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Just as second block began, Bradley and Colin were called together for a meeting with Johnny and Julian.

They were going to kill off Arthur.

Bradley was, at once, shocked at the idea, shocked that Shine had seen fit to tell them, and at once saddened, disappointed, confused, and also a little excited. He was an actor, after all, and actors loved playing dramatic death scenes.

But how would they do it? Arthur was still a very young man, and the Arthur of legend had died middle-aged. Bradley’s Arthur had not yet accomplished the legendary status that had been prophesied, and he knew that scripts were already in place for at least three more episodes. How were they going to pull this off?

“We’ll let that be a surprise for you”, came the guarded answer.

He should have known. Really, why hadn’t he guessed before now? The Js probably didn’t even have a plan yet. They were talking about forming their own company--maybe they intended to just blow up Merlin the series, on their way out?

Dammit, but he wished he could be more like Colin in all of this, accepting whatever scripts the show threw at him without much complaint or comment, and living by the creed of “The satisfaction is in the acting, not necessarily the finished product”.

Sometimes Bradley felt like he, himself, cared too much about a fictional character.

The meeting was brief and to the point, no more than fifteen minutes, and none of Bradley’s questions were answered. “We’ll let you know”, was the only promise given.

(‘Probably when you hand me the script’, Bradley thought wearily, but stayed silent.)

It was what it was. The PAs were already searching for them frantically, they were behind schedule, they had to get back to set right away...

Bradley wouldn’t have time to wrap his mind around this or sort out his feelings about it all for now. He and Colin were sworn to secrecy about it. Discussion about it with Colin would have to wait until that night. Bradley went back to work, feeling more ambivalent than he ever had before.
Bradley also rarely felt as exhausted as he did that night. His back was acting up again, stiffening under the weight of the chainmail and the jouncing of the horseback riding, as it was wont to do.

He and Colin were dropped off at their building together (Colin politely told their driver he wouldn’t be stopping by the gym tonight, thank you), and made their way to Bradley’s flat. Colin was going to cook for him tonight, some simple and quick pasta dish with vegetables...

Bradley needed this quiet time with Colin after the news they’d received. His phone was beeping with texts and invitations to go out, but he turned it off. Colin had already turned off his own too.

Once Colin had put the pasta to boil and poured them both some tea (Colin was indulging in some of the Irish tea from home he’d found, the only type he’d drink), they sat at the table together.

“What do you think?”

“I think I’m glad it’s my last year here. You?’

“Same thing. I hope they do it right. I hope there’s a magic reveal. I hope for once they’ll remember the legends...”

“I didn’t think you cared that much about the plotlines?”

“Au contraire”. Colin grabbed a handful of the colorful peppers he’d been chopping, shared some with Bradley, and said around the crunch, “I just have resigned myself, a long time ago, that they’re never going to do what I’d like to see. So I remind myself that I’m an actor, not a writer, and just act.”

“And it works for you? Lucky man.”

“Not really. I just pretend.”

They made wry faces and shrugged. Bradley glanced over at the stove, where the water for pasta was just starting to simmer.

“Are you terribly hungry right now?”

Colin caught the gleam in his eye and matched it. “Not at the moment, not especially. Did you wanna fuck?”

They turned the stove off and dumped out the water on the way to Bradley’s bedroom.

They’d gotten their test results back regarding their AIDS tests the week after returning to Cardiff, and since then, had both heartily loved barebacking with one another (that is, when they actually had the time to jiggle each others’ junk). Tonight was no different.

It was amazing, really, how a little physical release could make Bradley feel like a million quid. Oh, Colin could probably launch into great detail about the endorphins released during intercourse, but the truth was...

For a few moments he forgot all about what he’d been told that day in the meeting, and what might be in store for his character, and where and what he might be doing a year from now, and how he and Colin hadn’t been seeing nearly enough of each other, and how his sister had told a lie when he was nine and blamed him for breaking something that he hadn’t actually broken, causing him to take
punishment for it: two whole days without his football.

When Colin entered him, skin to skin, the sensation of just-us-no-balloon-between-us was so raw and intense that they let out simultaneous low, long groans of ecstatic pleasure.

That first moment of pleasure-pain, the stretch and burn, would never, ever get old for Bradley.

It also brought home to Bradley, with an almost jarring clarity, just how physical their relationship was.

It was over quickly, perhaps too quickly, but that was all right too. They were sated, but not exhausted.

Bradley got up to use the loo and fetch both their scripts. Maybe they’d order out for dinner tonight, just stay in bed, run lines, chat, watch telly...

But when he returned to the bedroom, he was disappointed to find that Colin was dressed again in his jeans and hoodie, although his feet were still bare. He was rooting around in a duffle back in the closet.

“What are you looking for? I thought maybe we’d have another go before the night was over…”

Colin didn’t answer Bradley for a long moment, and Bradley thought he hadn’t heard him. It really wasn’t like Colin to just ignore anyone. He was about to repeat himself when Colin looked up at him, almost shyly.

“Remember what we talked about, that last week of the play? The fantasies? I have a proposal for you, if you’re willing…”

Bradley was indeed very willing.

Which was how he came to find himself with his wrists bound tightly with handkerchiefs to the mission-style bed.

Colin, he was sure, had done all kinds of research on bondage and the like, and seemed more than happy to take complete control. For his own part, Bradley’s own heart was racing. He’d confided this fantasy one night to Colin, telling him he’d never had the nerve to suggest it with any girlfriend before. Colin hadn’t said much, although he had seemed rather intrigued with the idea.

And Bradley was reminded, more and more, that Colin loved to dominate during sex. So apparently this touch of kink was making both of them quite happy.

Colin finished tying the last knot—he’d position Bradley’s hands slightly above his head—and seemed to find them satisfactory. He moved on his knees to the foot of the bed.

Bradley had to fight a grin at how serious and intent Colin was.

“Hey, Colin, you’re still dressed. Take off your clothes, man. I can’t help you with that right now, so how about a strip tease for me…”

“Shh…” Colin said, almost absently. He began to position Bradley’s legs just so, parting them widely and planting his feet flat on the bed. He then knelt between Bradley’s thighs, pulling Bradley’s hips forward a little so that Colin had good access to his opening.

Colin seemed to contemplate Bradley for a moment, gently touching the tip of his already-quiet
interested cock, and then letting his fingers trail down to his cleft. “See what you do to me, Cols” Bradley said seriously. “We just went at it not more than a half hour ago, and I want you again. You’ve got me leaking into my belly button.”

Colin said nothing, but even with his head down, Bradley could see his pleased little smile. Colin pulled Bradley’s hips forward just a bit more, and then gave Bradley’s arse a very vigorous rubbing.

Bradley couldn’t help but grin, even chuckle a little. It felt nice. He’d never had his arse polished before. When he chuckled, though, Colin gave his arse a light swat. “Quiet, now”, he said sternly.

“Aww, c’mon Cols, fuck me, will you. You’re not even undressed yet.”

Bradley wrapped his legs around Colin, tried to pull him forward onto himself.

Colin’s face took on a shuttered look, and Bradley realized suddenly that Colin was play acting, and deep into his role. This was becoming quite interesting.

Gently but firmly, Colin unwrapped Bradley’s legs from around his waist, positioned them right back where they’d been. “Keep those there”, he told Bradley, spreading his thighs again as wide as they’d go.

Bradley just wrapped his legs around Colin again, pulling him forward. He was a footballer, he rode horses, his legs were very strong…. “C’mon, Cols, I want to see you nekkid…”

He felt Colin’s hoodie against his chest as Colin leaned down against him. He thought he must be coming in for a kiss, so he parted his mouth for him, raised his head a little.

Before Bradley even realized fully what Colin was doing, or even had a chance to turn his head away, Colin took a third, very large handkerchief from the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie and stuffed it into Bradley’s mouth.

“Mmmmmffffffff!” Bradley yelled. He could actually feel his own eyes bulging from shock. He so had not been expecting that…and his tongue didn’t know what to do with itself.

“Wiggle your fingers if it’s too much!” Colin said very quickly.

Bradley made absolutely certain his fingers were still, but shook his head vigorously. Shocking yes, but not too much. Just the right amount of shock.

He hadn’t thought it possible, but his heart rate sped up a little more. It was hammering like a racehorse.

Colin looked inordinately pleased with himself. Slowly, deliberately, he took the small edge of the kerchief that was still visible and tucked that inside Bradley’s mouth too. “You talk too much, Bradley”, he informed him, and then moved back between Bradley’s thighs.

He took Bradley’s ankles and pushed them back almost to Bradley’s shoulders. Not exactly a comfortable position, rather like how mothers held their kids’ ankles up while changing
their nappies.

“Hmm, aren’t you bendy. You’re kind of, like, rubbery.”

Great. He couldn’t talk, but now he was going to have listen to Quippy Boy Colin until he got around to fucking him.

He tried wrapping his legs around Colin a third time, pulling him forward again, but Colin quickly pushed his legs down and warned him, “Try that again, and no more of this for you tonight.” He grabbed his cock through his baggy jeans, pointed it at Bradley.

Not only was Colin Quippy Boy, but Cocktease Boy as well.

Bradley whimpered.

Colin chuckled a little bit, and then took Bradley legs and positioned him so that his knees were almost touching his shoulders. “Don’t move”, he ordered.

Bradley was starting to sweat and was breathing hard through his nose. His cock was swollen and neglected and twitching on his belly.

Colin bent down, rooted around on the floor for something, and then came back up to his position between Bradley’s thighs.

“God, if only you knew how hot you look right now. You’re so goddamn beautiful”, he muttered, and suddenly Bradley’s position wasn’t quite so uncomfortable.

Colin then took a picture of his bare, upturned arse with his camera phone.

“Mmmffftttt!” Bradley yelled.

Okay, that was not cool. He kicked Colin lightly in the side. Colin knew better than to take pictures like this…

“Easy, easy”, Colin said. He put his phone down on the bed. “Take it easy. I won’t do it if you don’t want me to, but I’ve got it locked under password and there’s no way to identify your arse as you know, your arse. It’s pictures for me to wank to when you’re not around.”

Oh. Well, that was a bit flattering, really.

It must have shown on his face, because Colin asked him, “Is it okay, then? Can I take a couple more?”

Bradley shrugged and rolled his eyes, and Colin took close ups of his hole, his balls, and his leaking cock before Bradley nudged him again with his foot.

Grinning, Colin put his phone away.

“All right, then. You’ve been so good, I think it’s time I gave a little back.”

Bradley nodded his head. Hell yeah. He wasn’t trussed up like this for nothing…

Colin slipped out of his clothes effortlessly, began slicking his cock with his right hand while idly rubbing Bradley’s belly, his inner thighs, and the triangle just above his cock where his pubes had grown back.
In his state of heightened arousal like this, it was as if every part of Bradley was an erogenous zone. Even with Colin’s light touch, it was a fine line between pleasure and discomfort.

Colin was staring at Bradley now, his pupils blown and his face flushed, and Bradley was somewhat gratified to see that Colin, for all his teasing, wasn’t unaffected either.

Colin took his own cock in hand and slapped Bradley’s bottom, his cock, his balls with his own dick.

Bradley actually heard himself whine.

Colin chuckled a little, low in his throat.

“Alright. Alright, Bradley, we’re almost there. Just want to get you ready, that’s all…”

Bradley couldn’t help but kick a little in anticipation. He was already, ready. He was so ready, and he had been ready for some time now...

Colin touched a bit more lube to Bradley’s cleft, circled his entrance with one finger, but didn’t push in. Bradley tried to buck his hips up to meet his finger.

“No, stop that…” Colin hooked Bradley’s knees around his own elbows, pushed his legs back again almost to Bradley’s shoulders. And then he walked forward a little further on his knees, until his own hardened cock poked at Bradley’s cleft.

Bradley gasped, tried to buck again but was held steady when Colin tightened his hold on his legs.

Colin had managed to align himself and was sliding the length of his cock back and forth, back and forth across Bradley’s cleft. It caught a bit on the rim of his entrance on each slide, making Bradley jump a little.

He tried to growl at Colin to enter him, but Colin’s head was thrown back, his eyes closed, and he was humming contentedly.

Bradley’s cock and balls jumped and danced.

It was torture, so close to what he wanted but not quite.

But then Colin managed to reach around his knee and started lightly fisting Bradley’s cock.

Okay, enough was enough. He wrapped his legs around Colin again, refusing to let go until Colin was inside him and thrusting hard.

He could actually feel the bones of Colin’s sharp pelvis and hips bruising his arse cheeks. He’d remember this tomorrow when he was riding his horse…

“You are one bossy bottom, Bradley James” was the last thing he heard from Colin before lights exploded behind his eyes and he was coming, coming…

He didn’t unwrap his legs from Colin until he felt the still- new and unique pleasure of Colin’s come splashing the inside of his bowels.

Afterward, Colin eased the gag from his mouth and untied him very quickly, and Bradley just let his arms drop, limp and pliant as a rag doll.

Colin got him water, and then set about cleaning him up with a warm cloth.
But not before he told Bradley to clench, and held a mirror so that Bradley could actually see Colin’s spunk ease from his own opening. He took a picture of that, too.

When Colin finished cleaning him up, Bradley fumbled for his own phone, told Colin to lay down, and started taking pictures for his own wanking sessions.

It was a night of discovery, and they’d both happily discovered they were a pair of kinky bastards.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While Bradley had liked the scripts well enough from first block, the subsequent blocks didn’t impress him as much. In one episode, Colin’s character renounced magic, which to Bradley’s way of thinking, did irreparable damage to the Merlin character, even as Colin acted the hell out of the scene.

The unusually demanding schedule continued. They all said hello again to an old friend, Janet Montgomery as Mithian. Bradley’d loved working with her the first time around, but while Janet’s character had been introduced as a smart, sassy princess in the fourth series, she was now a damsel in distress, a victim of mad Morgana’s blackmail. That show, 5.4, was also meant to demonstrate Arthur taking the high road and just beginning the uniting of Albion’s five kingdoms...but not without Merlin’s influence. Just as he had with the sword in the stone scene the previous year, Bradley was disappointed that his character wasn’t given the opportunity to be more like the king of Arthurian legend. Instead, his Arthur didn’t do anything without Merlin’s help. His level of dependency on Merlin...didn’t make Bradley completely thrilled.

That episode also was the beginning of the end, as in another episode, (5.6), Tomiwa’s character was killed off. Bradley had enjoyed working with the intelligent, soft-spoken Tomiwa, and to him it was a kind of bittersweet feeling, to see people start to leave Merlin the show behind, pursuing other opportunities.

But this was the industry, and the life of actors. Intellectually, Bradley understood. He wasn’t naïve, though he was the first one to admit he had been when he’d first been signed to Merlin. Still, there were many people associated with the show that he’d grown to love.

But Bradley was very good at staying in touch with people and maintaining long distance friendships. He still considered himself close to several mates from his childhood in Florida. Bradley knew he wouldn’t lose track of Tomiwa. He’d vowed not to, not the least of which a bit drunkenly at Ade’s goodbye party.

The death of Tomiwa’s character, Elyan, also marked the beginning of the “puppet queen” arc for Angel, and saw the return of one of his and Colin’s--hell, the entire casts’--favorite directors, Alice Troughton.

Bradley enjoyed working with Alice, because he felt like she truly understood actors in general and the chemistry that he and Colin had onscreen in particular. More than once, she’d complimented them both on it, not in a patronizing way or insinuating anything, but simply pleased at how they were coming across on screen.

But they’d really given Alice a bum arc to make sense of. While Angel loved it --it was all about her character, after all, and she had the chance to sink her teeth in, acting-wise--it made Bradley uncomfortable. It didn’t matter that the “puppet queen” arc had no consequences, forgotten when it was over just as the enchanted bracelet/Lancelot storyline had been the previous year. It was fun for Angel to play (although there was a lot of weeping involved), and Angel thought it was “juicy”.

Angel was very much like Colin in that she was all about the opportunity to act, and never mind the characterizations or storylines that she was inserted into. Bradley wished again he could just distance himself as they seemed to be able to do, at the drop of a hat, and detach himself from what he was
doing. Bradley immersed himself into Arthur until he felt a lot of the things that Arthur felt. He rooted for his own character...and Arthur was too often on the losing side of things.

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Dolma. Heaven help them all, The Dolma.

Colin in drag turned out to be the most ridiculous, the most hilarious thing Bradley had ever seen. Or heard, for that matter. And after quite a few snickering, giggling, ruined takes, he was pretty sure Alex agreed.

They dressed Colin up in an old crone’s get-up, with bum padding and a bra that kept pinching him. (Colin told him this privately and then covered Bradley’s mouth when he started to scream with laughter). Colin was forever adjusting the offending woman’s garment. The makeup and the wig were downright dreadful. But it was the voice, and Colin’s affect...the fact that he started out trying to play ‘The Dolma” as straight and serious, and Alice and the Js directed him to go campier and more outrageous, had Colin shamelessly flirting with Bradley during takes in a mad, almost burlesque style. “Like what you see, big boy?” could have popped out of his mouth at any moment, or Colin trying to plant a big smacker on the king’s lips, and nothing would have surprised Bradley after that day.

And then there was the voice. Colin got a mate from drama school who was now a voice coach in Cardiff to help him. And he’d practice on Bradley, usually when Bradley was least expecting it. They’d be laying in bed together, or in the van on the way to the set, or Colin would be on the toilet and Bradley would walk by and hear Colin sing out, “The gangly boy!” or some such. Bradley would just about piss himself with laughter.

Long after, Bradley would look at Colin out of the blue and tell him, “Do the voice!” and Colin would utter, in the Dolma’s inimitable voice, “I am an old woman” or something equally Dolma-like.

If he took away nothing else from his last series on Merlin, he’d remember Colin prancing and larking about in an old woman’s rags, speaking in falsetto and gesturing like Eva Peron.

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They made one of their only two scheduled sojourns in this, their final year, to France right around the same time. Bradley loved Pierrefonds, and he knew Colin did too. He was going to miss the chateau terribly. He’d been shocked when he discovered, in his first day back onset for series five, that sets had been built in Cardiff to replicate their castle’s interior, in order to save money. In all other series, they’d almost always used the real thing for the show’s atmosphere. Bradley recognized and respected the efforts of all the craftsmen involved in the set building, even while knowing that none of the sets could ever compare to the actual splendor and beauty and old feeling of the chateau. He and Colin had often agreed that Pierrefonds was a character in the show unto itself.

But as much as he loved it, picking up the entire production and traveling to France was a huge, chaotic undertaking that always exhausted him and everyone else. They were on display to the fans who came to watch, like animals in a zoo, and he and Colin had an unspoken agreement between them--from as far back as third series--not to mingle too much together with all those cameras around.

Weather in France was always unpredictable, and this block was no exception--they were needing ice lollies one day in blazing heat, and a couple of days later, were freezing in pelting rain on the
grounds surrounding the castle.

Katie was feeling nostalgic on this trip and kept going on and on about the first time they’d all seen the castle, how Colin had floor-surfed in his socks in the throne room and they’d all played hide-and-seek together and explored it from parapets to catacombs. They’d been privileged to have it open to them completely, including some parts the public never got to see. And they’d gone to Disneyland Paris and Asterix and...

“Yes, Katie, we remember. We remembered the first six times you reminded us too…”

Production was going to great lengths this year to keep the fans at bay. Whenever the cast received their scripts for a new block, they were warned both verbally and in writing not to release spoilers. That meant no pictures, (Eoin). No tweets about it, (Eoin). No interviews mentioning what they were doing (Eoin) or that this was possibly the last series (Eoin) or they might be looking for other work (Eoin). Shine even posted signs at the chateau, asking fans not to take pictures, not to post spoilers to social medias. Bradley was doubtful the requests would make much of a difference, and was a bit disgusted that suddenly, all this effort was being made. Too little, too late, in his opinion. Fans traveled from all over the world just to see them. He knew this because he’d been told often enough. And, he remembered Candace, the fan that had waited for himself and Colin on the train when they’d been doing the play Exposed, how she’d told them she spoke with another fan online in Australia every day and couldn’t wait to tell her about meeting them...

No. Bradley didn’t have much faith that what fans saw of them in the courtyard wouldn’t find it’s way to youtube and Facebook before the same day’s nightfall.

Colin’s response over it: “Whatever. You know that prayer, the Serenity prayer, about changing the things you can and accepting those that you can’t...?”

“And the wisdom to know the difference. Yeah, yeah..” Morgan the bloody Philosopher... honestly.

He was learning, Bradley was. Things were so different than they’d been in early series time.

Pierrefonds had a different feel to it now for Bradley than it ever had before, but it wasn’t unpleasant. And he and Colin actually found a couple of hours to enjoy the clay courts in France and play some tennis.

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Things were going along swimmingly between them. They were both pushed endurance-wise to their limits, and they both confided in each other one night that they felt they had lost some of their sparkle in some of their scenes together due to their exhaustion, but. Privately, personally, Bradley had never felt closer to Colin and more confident in his relationship with him. The two of them hadn’t had a harsh word between them in six months.

Not until the Olympics came to Great Britain.

It seemed cut and dried to Bradley. How often did his birth country host the Olympics? It was an enormous event for all Brits. He was so proud to be English and proud of Team GB. Of course he would be there. Of course Colin would be there too. Shine and the BBC, in an unprecedented and uncharacteristically generous show of pride and understanding, even agreed to shut filming down early one week so that everyone could travel to London to take it all in, in person, (if for only one day), if they wished too.

Colin didn’t want to.
“I’m exhausted Bradley. I really need to lay low...”

“This is laying low! It’ll be good for you, to get away from everything, a change of scenery. It’s a big deal! It’s the Olympics in Britain. Aren’t you excited.”

Okay, Bradley knew he’d said the wrong thing in the middle of his wheedling, just from Colin’s expression, but--

“I’m not a Brit, Bradley. I’m Irish.”

“I know that! The guy you sleep with is British though, doesn’t that mean anything? Come on, Colin--”

“Bradley--”

“It’s the Olympics! More than that, it’s us, together, doing something besides working and drinking!”

“That’s part of the problem. If we’re seen together, the internet will probably break.”

Bradley knew he was right, and resented it. And resented Colin for pointing it out, because Colin spent so little time on the internet anyway and had probably never read just how rabid fans could be.

“Then come as part of the group. You know a lot of the crew are going, some of the lads, we’ll all go together --”

“The crowds are going to be overwhelming.”

Bradley sighed. “Yeah, probably.”

This was Colin, stubborn, can’t-make-him-do-anything-he-didn’t-want-to-do Colin. Bradley had thought he’d come to accept it. They both had “I Yam what I Yam” mottos that reminded the other of how disparate they both were, and reminding themselves and each other to accept their differences, but--

Bradley still found himself disappointed. Terribly disappointed. And annoyed.

“Okay, I get it. Never mind. Go read your books all weekend, and I’ll bring you back a hat or some other stupid souvenir.” Bradley turned his face away.

“Bradley.” Colin seemed to see suddenly that he’d hurt Bradley and it was more than just another unshared interest that had done it. “I didn’t realize this meant that much to you. I’ll go with you, if you want me to this bad.”

“No, it’s fine, like I said. I don’t want you there gritting your teeth and unhappy because I dragged you along.”

Colin shook his head. “I don’t grit my teeth. I said I’d go. I’m not sure why you’re mad at me now or what you want.”

“I wanted you to want to go with me, just because you want to be with me. But I can see it’s too much to ask.”

“Oh, that’s not fair, that’s not what I said...”

Colin had offered several more times to go with Bradley before the weekend came up, but in the end, Bradley had gone with Tom, Rupert, and several crew members, and three friends from London. By
the time they’d all met up, there was a veritable posse. And Bradley’d had a fabulous time...without Colin.

And he missed Colin awfully, too. He wasn’t mad at him anymore. He wasn’t even sure which one of them was being a douchebag. This was the guy he’d fallen for. The guy who hated crowds, guarded his privacy ferociously, and thought a fabulous weekend meant sleeping in, eating salads and being alone with a couple beers, a nature dvd and three novels.

Bradley returned to Wales to his favorite meal waiting for him (including beef, seared exactly to his liking), a Bob Marley download playing “Don’t you worry ‘bout a thing, ‘cause every little thing gonna be alright”, and he and Colin fucked until it hurt before falling asleep.

And Colin wore the hat he’d brought back for him in the van and back to the set for the next few weeks.

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It didn’t really seem real somehow, that it truly was going to be the last series of Merlin and Bradley’d no longer be donning his chainmail after October. That is, not until Bradley received his script for 5.13, “The Diamond of the Day, Part II”.

Bradley had done a quick google search as soon as he’d heard the title—it came from an Arthurian poem named Merlin, by Edward Muir:

O Merlin in your crystal cave
Deep in the diamond of the day

Those were the first two lines of the poem, anyway, but Bradley decided straight away that the writer was a bit of a downer.

And Bradley suspected that the crystal cave, first introduced back in series three, was going to play a part in Arthur’s demise. He just hoped Merlin or himself wouldn’t be in the cave the entire time.

The Js cherry-picking of certain elements of all the Arthurian legends and cobbling them together did hold some ironic humor for Bradley. He just hoped—fervently—they’d allow his character the departure Arthur deserved.

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As with every series before, the year’s finale—now, the show’s finale—was to be filmed first in the final block, out of order, because it called for elaborate CGI and required a boatload of extra time in post-production.

Bradley and Colin, along with the rest of the cast, received all three of their scripts for the final block, and he and Colin had raced home together and opened 5.13 to read out loud, as they had with their scripts in the early season. Even though they’d be losing the context of the two or three eps before the finale, neither of them wanted to wait to find out what Bradley’s character’s fate would be.

They settled on the sofa, tea in hand.

“Colin, you don’t think they’d killed off Arthur before the last ep, in 5.12, do you?” Bradley was only half joking. With the Js, anything was possible.

Colin took a quick peek at his script. “Nope, I see you there...though you look to be in a bad way...”

Colin wasn’t kidding. Arthur got sporked early by Mordred—and Bradley was tempted to look back at the earlier scripts to find out what had made Mordred finally turn—but then there was the dragon,
and old Merlin/Dragoon doing the dragon-call (which Bradley had always secretly found very hot, and had ragged on Colin on numerous occasions that the way he threw his head back and opened his mouth wide to mouth the Old German was a tame version of the face Colin made when he orgasmed.)

They speed-read through the description of Dragoon carrying an unconscious Arthur from the battlefield (“Insert mannequin-Arthur here”, Bradley thought), and hurried past scenes with Gwen and Gaius, and mind-control, screechy Morgana that neither of them were in.

”Merlin.”

”How are you feeling?”

Pained groans

”Lie back. Lie back.”

”Where have you been?”

”It doesn’t matter now.”

”My side.”

”You are bleeding.”

”That’s alright, I thought I was dying.”

”I’m sorry. I thought I’d defied the prophecy. I thought I was in time.”

”What are you talking about?”

”I did defeat the Saxons. The dragon. And yet I knew that it was Mordred that I must stop.”

”The person who defeated the Saxons was the sorcerer.”

”It was me.”

”Don’t be ridiculous, Merlin....this is stupid. What...? Why would you say that?”

”I’m a...I’m a sorcerer. I have magic. And I use it for you, Arthur. Only for you.”

”Merlin, you are not a sorcerer. I would know!”

”Look. Here. Staya draga.”

”Leave me.”

”Arthur....”

”Just..you heard...”

Bradley looked at Colin then. His Zen, Serenity-Prayer spouting boyfriend looked---impressed, Shaken, even.

Not so unaffected, after all.

“We got ourselves a magic reveal, Cols. Finally.”
Colin smiled weakly. “Shit just got real.”

“Who’s directing this...I’ve already got some ideas how I’d like to play this...”

Quickly, they both turned to the front page of their scripts.

Directed By: Justin Molotnikov

Good. Excellent. The big, burly directed with the ready smile and the deep Scottish brogue was another of Bradley’s favorites, and Colin’s too. Justin knew Merlin and its actors, had great creative ideas, was always positive, was open to allowing actors some leeway...

Bradley felt real excitement beginning to build. He turned back to his script.

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It took them a little more than an hour to read through the entire script, skipping over any scenes that the two of them weren’t included in. As they had at the first table read-through of Exposed, they pantomimed several of the actions described in what they were reading.

When the time came for Arthur to pass away in Merlin’s arms, Bradley laid his head in Colin’s lap, and Colin wrapped his arms tightly around him.

They were both near tears.

It was crazy.

The Js, who had come up with some mediocre crap in five years, some downright embarrassing, and now this. This was something they could both be proud of, something that would wring every emotion from them and their audience. It was going to be devastating for all.

Bradley couldn’t wait to begin working on it.

They stayed, wrapped in each others’ embrace, for long moments, neither of them willing to break the mood. Colin, being Colin, would need a moment anyway to come back to himself.

Finally, Bradley remarked, “Do you know what this is?”

Colin took a deep breath through his nose. “Our swan song. A rather good one, really.”

“Ah, are you as surprised as I am? Besides our swan song, I mean--it’s a mirror image. I held you when you died in Exposed, remember? Your character. And now our positions are reversed.”

“Yeah...” Colin sniffed. “You like it, don’t you.”

“A lot. It could be very good...oh, I hope Justin will give us our heads. Do you like it?”

“Yes...you know what this really is? Just two guys in the woods, talking about their feelings.”

They both started to laugh at that, and the moment was broken. That brought it down to it’s most basic, nuts and bolts level, but Colin was right. And it was what Bradley had always wanted the last episode to be.

They each made a loo run and got more tea, and then picked up their scripts for another read through. This time, they’d each make notes....

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The second time through took a lot longer. Not content to pantomime, they were both standing, using the whole living room, pacing, acting out as fully as they could what they were reading, and trying several different versions of particular scenes that intrigued them.

They also read through all the scenes now, not just their own, and it looked like just about every character had their moment to shine. Gwaine died tragically and Percival grieved over him; Morgana finally gained the peace her madness had claimed from her with her death at Merlin’s hand, and Guinevere took her place as Queen of Camelot.

Holy fucking hell.

Bradley did worry about the ending. Arthur died a young man, having never accomplished what he had been destined to, with Merlin’s help. The kingdoms had barely begun to unite, magic was still banned, and immortal Merlin was left alone and waiting.

The script had John Hurt (Kilgarrah-the-Great-Dragon, Bradley had to remind himself. He always thought of the dragon of the show as simply “John Hurt”). The dragon of the show proclaimed that Arthur would return, was the Once and Future King, but---

Arthur hadn’t accomplished much of anything he was supposed to. There just hadn’t been time, and this series had wasted so much time on episodes that hadn’t meant anything at all to Arthur’s arc as Once and Future King. Or for that matter, to Merlin/Emrys, as a leader of those with magic.

He asked Colin what he thought, expecting the usual “What can we do?” type of answer, but Colin nodded and said, “Yeah, I noticed that too. I’m wondering if they’re going to do anything to offer some hope at the end. This is such a depress-o-rama...and it’s supposed to be aired on Christmas, too.”

Hunh. And Colin usually loved the dark, massively angsty material. How about that.

“This could be the most satisfying or the most disappointing thing the audience has ever seen.”

The Js would probably just tell them to go with the flow. And after all, Merlin and Arthur’s love story was pretty amazing...

This was the same trepidation and the same excitement Bradley’d felt before Exposed. And he was keeping his clothes on this time around.

It was all going to hinge a lot on what the director’s vision would be.

“You want to run through it one more time, before we hit the sack?”

Colin did.

It was very late when the two of them got into bed that night.

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Justin didn’t let them down. If anything, he infused them with confidence when he met with them on their first day of shooting and greeted them with, “I’m going to trust your instincts on this one, lads...”

Bradley had been concerned, after the initial near-shock of the first read-through, that the usual out-
of-order, piecemeal method of filming episodic television might throw off his concentration, but Justin had been very good at sorting out their schedule so that it was almost in the correct order. Most of his scenes with Colin took place in the woods, so it was more a matter of moving from one place to another.

But oh, once he and Colin were allowed to follow their guts...his partner could always make words on a page sing, even some of the lamer ones they were sometimes given. Bradley fed off his energy and his intensity and gave all he had back.

This was actor’s paradise, and it came in cold, rainy weather, in a clunky polymer and metal costume, laying on a damp forest floor most of the time. Only a little more than a month before the show was to end, they’d found heaven together on Merlin.

And Bradley had never felt more in love with Colin.

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As luck would have it, the magic reveal was the very first scene they shot of 5.13.

Bradley played Arthur in controlled agony, going over the blocking with Justin and Colin before settling for their hands doing most of the talking for them. Arthur clutched at Merlin’s shoulder in both reassurance and desperation when they were first reunited, Merlin gripping his wrist like a lifeline. Then, as Merlin’s painful confession was revealed, he patted Merlin’s shoulder, trying to comfort his silly friend and his bizarre claims of having magic. When Merlin began to weep, he tried to convey real puzzlement and disbelief, even as Merlin’s hand tightened on his wrist. Bradley let Arthur’s confusion and denial make him impatient and annoyed, even as the reality of the situation began to creep in. When Arthur informed Merlin that he was not a sorcerer, that he would know---his hand slipped from Merlin’s shoulder and was held by Colin, under Merlin’s chin, until Merlin revealed his magic with...some special effects that would be added in post-production.

Only then did Justin’s quiet voice rumble, “Good. Very good. Now turn a bit, Bradley, away from Colin, that’s it...you don’t want him to touch you now, and it hurts you, far more than the physical pain. Suddenly he’s become something repulsive to you...”

When Justin was satisfied, he and Colin watched the monitor playback of their work.

Yes.

He felt Colin’s light, subtle touch on his back and turned to look at him, only to see his own feelings reflected in Colin’s eyes.

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Bradley was glad to work with Richard once more before the end of the series. He’d made amends with the older man for their falling out, just as he had with Tony, and would miss working with him.

Bradley grabbed Richard’s wrist. "He’s a sorcerer!"

Richard gave it a perfect, “No shit, Sherlock”, take on his reaction, his quirked eyebrow working overtime.

"You knew." Bradley infused the two words with a near-despairing sense of “Has everyone I thought I knew betrayed me again?” hopelessness.

Justin just watched and listened and approved.
The scenes they were filming were hard on Colin too. He spent most of the week in tears as Merlin, near tears, or otherwise looking pained.

Colin was always the one claiming he didn’t take the work home with him, and usually he didn’t. Almost always. But this week was different. Bradley lived with him, unofficially at least. Colin had no energy at all by the time they got home. Bradley had to coax him, more so than usual, even to eat.

"Arthur. ” Merlin’s voice cracked slightly. 

Arthur rolled his head towards Merlin, but didn’t look at him. Didn’t meet the eyes of this sorcerer, this betrayer, this liar.

"We need to leave at first light. Almost a whisper.

"I’ll decide.” Bitter. Unforgiving.

"I can’t let you die.” A plea. An apology.

"It doesn’t change anything.” No quarter given. And the unspoken ”How could you?”

Gaius’s ”Let him sleep, it’s late” broke the moment. But Colin was tearing again, and would remain that way the rest of that afternoon. And the next.

Merlin helped him onto his horse, slowly, painfully, and stared up at him, not moving.

Arthur closed his eyes for a moment, fighting near-overwhelming pain and nausea, fighting the unconsciousness that threatened.. How was he ever going to make this journey?

"Gaius.” Only then did Merlin move away, sensing this was a conversation he was not privileged to.

Arthur slowly slipped the corded royal seal from around his neck with one hand and pressed it into the old physician’s palm.

"Give this to Guinevere.”

"It’s the royal seal, Sire. Appalled at the implications.

Arthur managed to rouse himself at the alarmed look in the old physician’s eyes. No, he wasn’t giving up, not by a long shot. But he’d been trained in his responsibility and duty all his life. And that meant always being a realist, and always being prepared.

"If I am to die, I can think of no one else I’d rather succeed me.”

They clasped hands, and Arthur did his best to smile his most reassuring smile, despite the liquid fire that was his flank. Judging by Gaius’s reaction though, he may have just grimaced instead. But at least Gaius had accepted what needed to be done in case of...well, whatever may come.

He didn’t turn, afraid he’d overbalance on his horse, but he heard some quick murmurings between
Gaius and Merlin, and then Merlin moved to take the reins of his horse to lead them.

"Merlin." The old man’s voice broke. No doubt saying goodbye to the sorcerer.

Arthur didn’t look, but he heard Gaius say “Go. Look after him. Go.”

Only when Merlin was in front of their mounts did Arthur allow himself one glance back, one last look at the man who’d taken care of him since he was an infant.

The look on Gaius’s face made him wish he hadn’t.

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Everyone was bringing it to this episode, everyone. Richard’s performance pulled out all the stops. The crew was incredible as always, careful to allow Bradley and Colin the privacy they needed and to not make eye contact during scenes or break their concentration during set ups or between shots. And their director, Justin--Bradley was just a little bit in love with him, and his rich, Scottish accent too.

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"You’ve lied to me all this time.”

Merlin didn’t deny it. He didn’t even spare a glance for the men he’d just magically blasted, probably into their graves.

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Arthur watched, fighting hard to stay awake, as Merlin tried to get a fire going with a flint. Unsuccessfully tried.

What was the point of continuing the lie now?

"Why don’t you use magic?"


Arthur just glanced down, indicating the place where the fire should be if Merlin were not so incompetent. Permission given. Curiosity unspoken, perhaps.

The fire flared to life. Arthur just stared.

"Feels strange.”

"Yeah.” Arthur watched as Merlin moved away, prepared his bedroll. His movements were jerky, unsure. "I thought I knew you.” How could he have been so wrong?

He saw how Merlin stiffened, cast about for something to say.

"I’m still the same person.”

"I trusted you.” The word trust infused with so much.

"I’m sorry.”
"I'm sorry too." Sorry I trusted you. Sorry I let you into my heart. Sorry I didn’t see what you really are. Sorcerer..

Merlin understood his meaning. His face said it all.

Which is why Arthur was startled and utterly perplexed when Merlin moved to him and tugged his boots off, setting them close to the fire.

"What are you doing?"

"They need drying."

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“This’ll be good for you.” Merlin held the spoon with stew for him, supporting his head with the other.

When Arthur didn’t move to take the offering, didn’t open his mouth, Merlin told him, "You need to eat."

Arthur couldn’t contain himself any longer. He voiced the question, demanded, what had been bothering him since the night before. "Why are you doing this? Why are you still behaving like a servant?"

Merlin stared at him for a measured beat, and then deliberately lowered the bowl of stew to the ground.

Arthur waited.

"It's my destiny...as it has been since the day we met."

Arthur remembered that day well, couldn’t contain his smile at the memory. "I tried to take your head off with a mace."

"And I stopped you, using magic.” Merlin smiled a little too.

"You cheated!" Why was he even surprised...

Merlin actually had the audacity to laugh a little. "You were going to kill me."

His smile gone, Arthur looked away. "Should’ve."

After a moment, Merlin said "Glad you didn’t."

Arthur could only huff a painful breath. Every memory he had of this man...all lies.

Merlin leaned closer to him. "I do this...because of who you are. Without you, Camelot’s nothing."

"There was a time when that was true but not now. There are many who can fill the crown."

Merlin shook his head, and his smile was disbelieving, denying.

"There will never be another like you, Arthur.” Despite himself, despite what he had learned about Merlin, Arthur still felt warmed by his words. He allowed himself to smile his acceptance.

Merlin picked up the bowl of stew again, balancing it in his lap, and lifted Arthur’s head with the other hand. Arthur exhaled another painful breath.
"I also do this...because you’re my friend and I don’t want to lose you."

Arthur accepted the offered stew.

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It was becoming harder and harder for Arthur to stay conscious, to stay upright in his saddle or, as now, sitting on a fallen tree while Merlin packed up their camp. He felt himself start to fade, and heard Merlin calling his name, running to him.

“Arthur! You need to hold on.” Merlin helped him upright, linking his arm with Arthur’s to help steady him. “One more day. One more day.”

Merlin mopped the sweat from his brow with a cloth while Arthur tried to focus his eyes. Merlin reached for the waterskin.

"Why did you never tell me?” He didn’t look at Merlin when he asked.

Merlin stopped. "I wanted to, but..."

"What?"

"You’d have chopped my head off."

Merlin held the waterskin for him, helped him to drink. Arthur tried to help himself, to tip the water a bit more, but...all of his limbs seemed to be turning to jelly.

The water felt good, and Arthur rolled the water around in his mouth for a moment, savoring, before swallowing.

Swallowing was uncomfortable.

"I’m not sure what I would have done.” He really wasn’t.

"And I didn’t want to put you in that position.”

Arthur looked at him with dawning wonder. "That’s what worried you.”

"Some men are born to plow fields. Some live to be great physicians. Others, to be great kings. Me, I was born to serve you, Arthur. And I’m proud of that. And I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Arthur just stared at him, speechless. The greatest sorcerer ever to walk the earth, Gaius had said...

"Ready?" Merlin the servant asked, and at Arthur’s tired nod, slung one of Arthur’s arms over his shoulder and helped him to his feet.

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It was one of Bradley’s favorite scenes, ever.

They’d nailed it on the first take, this so-intense moment between these characters. Justin continued his policy of letting himself and Colin follow their instincts, and when Bradley saw the playback (after their coverage had been followed up with), he could understand why.

Colin’s intensity in the scene was fantastic, and Bradley was pleased with his own performance as well. He was playing Arthur as stoic but obviously dying, perhaps drugged a bit to help ease his
pain, fighting to stay conscious, sometimes with unfocused eyes or slurred, sluggish speech.

And bloody hell, but he and Colin looked like they were eye-shagging the hides off each other, the way they looked at each other in that scene. They were playing off each other, giving and taking in perfect harmony. It worked.

“You are doing some pretty powerful stuff here, guys. You feel it too, don’t you?” Justin asked.

Yeah. They felt it too.

Justin had always seemed to appreciate himself and Colin and their pairing as Merlin and Arthur, in a way no other director did (with the possible exception of Alice).

Justin and his team had found the perfect spot for the scene, a visually interesting grove with a downed birch tree that bounced when Colin helped him to a standing position from it. The weather was cooperating for once, they’d not had many downpours thus far, and the whole forest felt almost...reverent. Like it had gone quiet out of respect for what was unfolding.

Bradley privately laughed at himself again for being so poncey. That was ridiculous, of course. Their crew had probably scared away everything that made any sound in the woods for ten kilometers with all their tromping about, like a herd of elephants.

Although. The crew wasn’t making that much noise either. Relatively speaking, anyway, compared to their usual three-ring circus.

That night, together in Bradley’s flat, Colin and Bradley both agreed they would only refer to the Js as “Jackasses” only once in awhile after this point, if they’d just write more scripts with scenes like the one they filmed that day.

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Arthur witnessed Merlin’s magic twice more, both times helping them evade Saxons.

"All these years, Merlin...you never once sought any credit."

"That’s not why I do it...come on." And Merlin was half-carrying him now, as Arthur’s pain increased. It was getting so much worse.

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He sagged in the saddle, unable to hold himself upright any longer. For all his resolve, it was becoming too much. Merlin ran to him, urged him upright, tried to convince him to hang on...

"I can’t go on."

"There’s not far to go! We need to reach the Lake before dawn--"

"No, Merlin. No." He shook his head wearily.

"Alright then. We rest for an hour."

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Merlin helped him to drink again, but Merlin’s hand on his back was the only way he was able to keep himself seated upright.

Merlin kept looking around nervously. He was jumpy.
"Merlin," Arthur said, bringing Merlin’s full attention back to him. "Whatever happens...

"Shh. Don’t talk."

"I’m the king, Merlin. You can’t tell me what to do."

There was something very much like humor, their old teasing banter, in Merlin’s voice. "I’m not going to change now."

"I don’t want you to change." It was so much effort to talk, he was so very tired he could barely hold his head up, and he could hear his own words slurring together, but this was important. It needed to be said. "I want you...to always...be you."

Merlin stared, speechless, a slight smile on his face.

"I’m sorry about how I treated you." He tried to gesture to make his point, but...

Merlin shook him slightly, trying to keep him from slipping into unconsciousness again. "Does that mean you’re going to give me a day off?

Much like their old banter, yes. He opened his eyes wide in a last-ditch effort not to fall asleep again, tilted his head back. "Two.

"That’s generous."

He nodded, tried to agree that yes, he was a very generous king and Merlin was indeed fortunate, but he felt the blackness creeping in on him again. He felt Merlin’s hands on his face, gently supporting him, and something softly caressing his cheek before he slipped into sweet oblivion once more.

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"I don’t want you to change. I want you to always be you”.

Bradley remembered saying those exact words to Colin--a naked Colin--long ago, after they’d had their blow up and Bradley had made pasta for him. The words were perfect for both Colin and Merlin: acceptance of near-insurmountable differences. The parallels between character and person were profound and uncanny now.

Bradley and Colin watched the playback of the scene together with Justin in silence. Bradley’s eyes had been closed, so he hadn’t seen Colin’s tear-filled, near-hopeless look around, or Colin’s lips moving soundlessly as if in desperate prayer.

“You see how the most effective gestures are sometimes the most subtle? Colin’s thumb stroking your face, Bradley having to fight to make eye contact with you, Colin. Outstanding actors’ choices.”

Justin was great at noticing the details. The small moments he had picked out and praised had all come from the two of them, none of it rehearsed or even discussed beforehand. They’d just done what had felt right while in the moment.

As actors, they were so rarely given this level of control over their own performances. It was so gratifying to learn that their instincts were so spot on. And the emotional intimacy they had--they’d always had it, long before they were lovers--just made these scenes pop.

“I don’t think this episode would be half of what it’s going to be if the two of you didn’t have the
rapport and trust and level of comfort with each other that you do. “

Bradley had graciously accepted the compliments and thanked Justin for his support and trust in him, just as Colin did.

If only Justin knew....

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The following day, the relative quiet of their location was broken by the arrival of one Katie McGrath. They would be filming Morgana’s death scene.

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"Arthur. We need to get moving."

Arthur opened his eyes, but he was so tired, so tired. He closed them again.

"Arthur!" Merlin’s voice, insistent as it had ever been. He shook Arthur slightly, and the pain that shot through him brought him to something resembling wakefulness. "We’ve wasted enough time."

Merlin draped Arthur’s own arms over his shoulders and lifted him to his feet, the way a parent might lift a toddler.

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They were off their horses, Merlin almost dragging Arthur now. Merlin let Arthur sit before telling Arthur, "Avalon. We’ll get there.

The horses neighed, and Merlin was yelling and panicked, and---

Morgana.

He reached for his sword, or where it should be. It wasn’t there. Merlin had it...

But Merlin was flying through the air, away from him.

He let his arm drop. It was over.

She was going on, and on, about something. He couldn’t focus beyond the rushing in his ears and the all-consuming pain of his body, but she was gloating and her hair was wild and she was so, so pleased about Arthur dying.

Merlin killed her. With Arthur’s own sword. And dragon’s breath.

Arthur winced. His sister.

Merlin ran to him, slung his arm over his shoulder again.

"You’ve brought peace at last."

Stumbling, tripping, all but dragged by Merlin, his sword scraping the ground, each step an unendurable burning agony.

"We have to make it to the Lake."

They fell, together, entangled, and almost immediately, Merlin was urging him back up again,
desperately trying to get Arthur back up on his feet.

It was impossible. He knew it, even if Merlin didn’t.

"Merlin--not without the horses. It's too late. It’s too late." Merlin was hyperventilating, fighting him, and Arthur could feel Merlin’s panic bubbling up. He put his hand over Merlin’s on his chest, holding it there with the last of his dwindling strength, willing him to be calm. "Shhh. Even your magic, Merlin...won’t save my life."

"I’m not going to lose you."

"Just...just...just hold me, please." He patted Merlin’s hand, trying to let him know it was alright. Merlin’s breath was so loud in his ear, and he could feel his heart racing, racing....

"There’s something I want to say..."

"You’re not going to say goodbye."

"No.” It was so hard to form words...”Merlin.Everything you’ve done...I know now. For me. For Camelot. For the kingdom you helped me build."

"You’d have done it without me."

He laughed a little. "Maybe. I want to say something I’ve never said to you before..."

"What?"

"Thank you.” He tried to smile, gathered every last bit of energy he had to cup the back of Merlin’s head.

Merlin pressed his head back into his hand.

Merlin’s anguished face was the last Arthur saw as the dark edges of his vision closed in and overwhelmed him.

He could hear Merlin calling his name, and he sounded so upset, so distraught, he tried to pull himself back, he tried so hard, and for a moment, almost, he almost did--

"Arthur! Arthur! Stay with me...”

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It was absolute hell to film.

Katie was annoying him, talking too much and doing her French perfume ad flouncing and generally disrupting the week of peace they’d had filming this episode. His suspicions of her having a crush on Colin were further confirmed by all her cooing over him and his crying scenes and her insistence that they do something special when Merlin stabbed Morgana and put her out of her misery.

Colin smiled and indulged and he and Katie, with Justin’s okay, worked out the scene to resemble the penultimate scene at the end of series two when Morgana was poisoned.

Justin had Bradley’s back, though. Katie wanted to stay, watch the death scene, but Justin had smiled and winked and told her they were in the zone, it was so intense, and Bradley and Colin would probably do best to have as few distractions as possible.
And didn’t she have pick-ups with second unit?

She left.

Bradley was going to send Justin a bottle of seventy five year old Glenlivet in gratitude when this was all over.

Colin just raised his eyebrows and cocked his head slightly in his patented “You okay?” look.

Bradley loved Katie, truly. But there were times, like now...she could be a bit much.

So he spent the better part of two days in Colin’s arms, on top of him, legs tangled...

There were times, as they waited for lights or sound to be adjusted, cameras to be positioned, when the two of them, himself and Colin, would whisper together, ask each other if they were alright. Colin in particular was crying for hours and Bradley knew that he often developed migraines afterward from the intensity of that kind of acting. Colin was nailing it, though, every time, and Bradley was so proud of his lover, and so glad to have his energy and intensity to work with.

Bradley was proud of his own performances too. There were times when he’d noticed Colin watching him with an odd expression on his face. He remembered the same kind of look from his friend when they had been filming the last two episodes of series four, and Bradley had been playing Simpleton!Arthur. Bradley remembered Colin looking at him with especially fond smiles, and sometimes looking like he was fighting not to laugh. And sometimes, he just looked a bit proud and delighted for him and what he was doing with his acting choices. And being out of character was a rare occurrence for Mister Morgan.

Colin was giving him the same looks now (without the laughter). There were times when Justin would call the scene and Colin and Bradley would hold the moment, and then Colin would whisper "Well done" or "Amazing" and wink at him.

Either that, or Colin was flirting with him very oddly...

It was the only time Justin reigned them in a bit, probably for their own mental health and sanity.

They were trying different levels of grief and agonized reactions, and Justin kept gently steering them towards the more quiet and subtle. He asked Colin not to weep or to howl or raise his voice until after Arthur had died...he suggested to Bradley that he not allow too much physical pain to show.

And when they watched themselves on the monitor after, saw their various performances, Bradley found himself agreeing almost always with Justin.

There was only one time Bradley wished Justin had allowed himself and Colin their choice.

It was in the moments after Arthur had passed away, and a weeping Merlin eased himself from beneath his king, turned Arthur’s head toward himself, and kissed him on the forehead.

“Erm...” Justin said.

They watched the playback. There was nothing sexual or suggestive about it. It was a servant honoring his liege. It was supplication. A friend saying goodbye to his dearest friend. Nothing non-family approved about that, was there?

“Well”, Justin said. “Let’s try this. Colin, instead of kissing him in this take, try just pressing your forehead to his...”
That scene as filmed looked almost like Colin had kissed him.

In fact there were quite a few scenes where they looked like they were about to.

Justin had said he’d leave it to the editing room to pick and choose, but Bradley and Colin both knew the decision had already been made.

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The last few scenes were left undone before they had to return to the studio and begin filming on episodes twelve and eleven. The dragon-ride would probably be a green screen day, worked in when they could. And just why hadn’t Merlin called the dragon and gotten Arthur where he needed to go in a matter of moments in the first place?

Colin had answered what Bradley had already known, mocking the Js once again: “You’re not going with the flow...”

The other scenes--dead Arthur on the ground while Merlin talked with Kilgarrah, and Arthur’s funerary boat--those would have to be fit in somewhere, who knew when.

But Bradley had come away from filming five thirteen feeling good, and almost confident the fans would be satisfied. He only wished they would be given some hope for Merlin and Arthur’s reunion.

How in the hell were they ever going to get through filming the previous eps, with Arthur alive and well and Merlin oblivious?

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Filming frenzy only increased after that.

On this day, they were filming in Puzzlewood with horses and knights and scores of extras.

Between takes, Bradley leaned down to speak with Colin, and Bradley’s horse chose that moment to go mental, toppling Bradley from his saddle, tangling him in his cape, and landing him unceremoniously on top of Colin.

Bradley had always hated the damn capes, no matter how splendid and spectacular they looked on screen. They were created to trip him up, and he was going to burn his on the last day of filming in revenge.

They were both in a lot of pain. Bradley had wrenched his back, Colin had turned his ankle, there were various scratches...they were hurting.

They were shuttled off to A & E and then both allowed to go home for the day, (and furthering a filming delay, as the Js both pointed out to them in “concerned” phone calls), wrapped and iced and given painkillers.

Their handlers saw them to their building, and they hobbled the rest of the way to bed. Colin helped Bradley arrange himself with a thick towel and a heating pad so he wouldn't burn his skin, and then lay down beside him, bad foot elevated.

They took turns groaning about their fates before the painkillers took effect and they both dozed off.

They started awake at the sound of knocking, and then the flat’s door being opened, and Eoin’s and Tom’s voices calling “Hello? You here, James? You all right? The door was open, we brought
One of them had forgotten to lock the door when they’d come in. Well, actually, they both had come in here, they’d both forgotten. Anyone could have come in while they snored...

And then Tom and Eoin and Rupert and Alex were standing in the doorway to the bedroom and looking at the two of them with unreadable expressions.

Well, not completely unreadable. Rupert and Tom looked torn between amusement and embarrassment, and Alex was silently laughing. He covered his mouth and turned his head away when he made eye contact with Bradley.

And Eoin...Eoin’s grin was as wide as his hair was long.

He and Colin were in nothing but pants, and cuddled up quite closely and snugly in the same big bed.

There was a moment of very pregnant silence while they stared owlishly at their friends, and they stared back.

“Um. Hi”, Tom said.

Eoin seemed to shake himself, smiled a little. “Hey, sorry to disturb you. We were just concerned about you both after your fall today, brought you some food.”

Rupert and Alex obligingly held up several take out bags.

“Thanks”, Colin said weakly.

“Cheers” Bradley added. “Mind just tossing it in the fridge for us? We’ll get it later.”

Alex took the bags from Tom and went off with a little wave towards the kitchen.

“You need anything, mates?” Rupert said.

“Just sleep, I guess. Did my horse fall on me?”

“Drama queen.”

How about you, Colin, you need anything?” Tom asked.

“A new foot would be nice.”

“Yeah, no kidding. They x-rayed it and nothing serious? Just hurts like hell?”

“Nothing serious.”

“Alright, well, we’ll leave you to rest, then. Call us if you need us.”

And Tom, Rupert, and Alex let themselves out.

It was Eoin who lingered, just a little bit, and gave them a little smile and wink and a jaunty salute before going out.

Bradley waited until they heard the door shut behind them before he started to giggle.

Colin threw an arm across his own eyes. “They were here. They saw. Imagine what they must
“So what. Let them think. It wasn’t like they caught us in the act.” He pondered that for a moment and then added, “Wow. Think of the comedic possibilities if they had caught us in the act.”

“If your back wasn’t broken right now, I’d hit you.”

That, of course, just made Bradley laugh harder. “We’ve been exposed again…”

“I think the painkillers are making you loopy. That was Eoin Twitter Macken in our bedroom, in case you didn’t notice. He’ll be talking about us on his feed in a matter of minutes. He probably already has…he might have taken pictures…”

Bradley stopped laughing…”I’ll break his thumbs.”

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Just as they’d said, they were back on set the next day. Time and money waited for no man, wrenched back and purple ankle be damned.

As with every end of series, they were filming more than one episode with more than one director, and Alice happened to be directing Colin and Bradley this morning.

She was as always focused on the work, but called them over after one take to tell them, “Don’t know what you’re doing these days, lads, but your chemistry is just jumping right off the screen. Keep it up, well done”, she praised crisply.

Off to the side, Eoin, Tom, Alex and Rupert, dressed in their red caped costumes, heard the remark and waved to them, making kissy faces and pretending to hug themselves. Eoin batted his eyelashes. Rupert just waved and chuckled. Tom gave Bradley and Colin his widest smile and nodded to them. Alex just giggled.

He didn’t know what Colin was thinking right now, but Bradley just stared back at their mates and their teasing for a long moment, feeling amused, and relieved, and rather fond of these great gits who may or may not know the source of this renewed chemistry he and Colin were tapping into. He just shook his head slightly at them, mouthed “eejits”.

Alice turned and gave the guys a stern look, and like naughty schoolboys, they all turned exaggeratedly serious at once.

Bradley heard Colin chuckling quietly beside him.

And then Alice was calling them to places once more, and he and this fellow actor he shared so much chemistry with, more than most people really knew, hit their marks once more and prepared to make magic once again.

Here and now, with these people—it no longer mattered if anyone knew their secret.

~~~End~~~

Chapter End Notes
Thank you all to everyone who has taken this long journey with me, some of you for the second time. All your support and encouragement has been greatly appreciated!

Of course, it has to be mentioned: the driving force behind my not only reposting Exposed but also adding almost 20K more words, just to irritate and annoy them further: the mm, those malignant maligners, and especially Conspiracy Anon and all her little enablers. They're still insisting Exposed is a hate bomb to Bradley, that he's written as stupid, pathetic, disorganized, (oh, the horror!), and fan-hating, and that Colin is written as "perfect". Sorry, I just don't see it that way and that's not what was intended at all. Reading comprehension, CA & Company: you need it. Badly. But I know your problem is not truthfully, actually that, is it. You're so off the rails that the stark truth of anything really doesn't even matter.

I don't want you to change, CA, or your pals. You provide too much amusement for me and fodder for mockery. You've reminded me that I love to write and I'm going to continue to do so for a long, long time. Please keep in mind that everything I write now will be dedicated to you, because of you, and in defiance of you, Haters.

Laughing at you always,

GP

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