We Are All Diamonds

by Footloose

Summary

As the precocious heir of a diamond magnate and a famous designer, Arthur lived his entire life sheltered, protected, nurtured and spoiled. He always knew that he would have to step out from behind the scenes and into the limelight to run the family business some day, but he never expected that it would happen so soon or that he would encounter resistance from a board of directors who believe that his disability makes him unfit to lead.

Merlin has stood on every stage in every city in the world, performing to critical acclaim, but after years of globetrotting, he's well and truly burnt out. He didn't quit -- he ran away from stardom, dropping to obscurity in the blink of an eye, forgotten, just another face in the crowd. He's aimless and without purpose until a friend asks him to fill in on a job.

Neither Arthur nor Merlin are looking for salvation. They don't think there's any for them, that things are just too rotten, too far gone. But in the end, Arthur's quiet strength will be a balm to Merlin's broken soul, and it will be in Merlin's steadfast faith that Arthur finds courage.

Notes

This is a modern AU with magic, because everyone needs a little magic in their lives, and it's made up of a proverbial cast of thousands, because no matter who they are, they've had an impact on someone's life.

My betas dimanchemieux and etharei did a fantastic job catching me out on a lot of mistakes, and it was the combined cheerleading from dimanchemieux and greenclove that kept me from (multiple) meltdowns when the story wouldn't behave. But most of all, I have to give massive thanks and love to my talented braintwin greenclove for her artwork.
and her support, all of which makes me squeak with unspeakable joy.

I’d like to thank all the folks in the paperpushers chat for putting up with me (and, boy, did they ever put up with me -- they deserve more than just thanks) and the_muppet for making my first Big Bang painless.

Update 2012-09-04:
La Temperanza (AO3)/FuckYeah (LJ) has put together an amazing fanmix for this fic, available over on her LJ. On top of amazing, it is also accessible, because the lyrics for the song have also been compiled.
THANK YOU!
"Shit. The PR department warned us that it was going to be big this year, but they didn't say it would be this big," Owain signed, his hands moving in big, jerky gestures. He almost hit a passing server when he signed big.

Arthur rubbed his face with his hands, trying to wipe away his growing anxiety. It wasn't working. There were so many people that the building was going to burst at the seams, he was sure of it. Or there might be a stampede, and he'd get trampled, but he knew that was ridiculous. Arthur shouldn't be surprised; the show had grown every year since its first year, but where previously the increase in attendees had been additive, this year, it was exponential.

If this happened again next year, they would have to start looking for a larger venue to host the show. Arthur idly wondered if the Maple Leaf Gardens were available.

Owain caught his attention with a wave of his hand, and signed, "Are you all right? You look a little pale."

Arthur didn't trust his voice to be audible in the visible chaos, and he tapped his thumb against his chest, the fingers of his hand splayed out. "I'm fine."

Owain pursed his lips together and signed, "Bullshit you're fine. You look like you're going to pass out --"

Abruptly, Owain turned around, his face splitting into a broad smile. He shook hands with the newcomer, and the two burst into animated conversation.

Arthur didn't bother trying to join in -- he was too on-edge to read lips right now. As soon as he was sure that Owain's attention was diverted, he made good on his escape. They wouldn't need him for a while yet.

He could get lost in the crowd -- as much as he could get lost in the crowd, considering that everyone knew who he was.

Arthur mumbled an apology under his breath as he broke a path through the groups of business suits and tuxedoes and evening gowns milling around the diamond-shaped bar in the middle of the concourse. He stumbled to a helpless stop once he was on the other side, momentarily paralyzed when he recognized a few people.

He immediately turned away, hands in his trouser pockets, shoulders brushing his ears as he ducked his head and looked for another route to freedom.

He didn't want to talk to anyone he knew. He didn't want to see anyone he knew -- already a difficult task. He was nervous enough as it was without being cornered for curious questions and awkward conversations.

Almost as if the Fates had read his mind and were laughing at him, one of the show organizers appeared and signed carefully, with the uncertainty of someone who had just finished the first level of American Sign Language, fingerspelling the words she didn't know, "Gwen's backstage, looking for you."

Arthur ran a hand through his hair and came in close, hoping that she would hear him. A crowd this big had to be loud. "Does she need me right now?"
And, of course, he had to repeat himself because he wasn't loud enough, and he flushed with embarrassment. He felt like he was practically shouting in her ear.

"No, it's all right. She wants you to know you still have an hour and a half," the woman signed, but her fingers were so clumsy that Arthur read her lips instead. It was just easier.

He checked his watch and nodded. The woman smiled nervously, waved a hand, and stood there as if she meant to say something else. Arthur waited, but she bit her lip, hugged her clipboard to her chest more tightly, and was jostled into the crowd.

Arthur exhaled a sigh. If there was anything that he could count on, it was that it always took time for people to warm up to him. He didn't understand. He didn't think he was that unapproachable.

The Pendragon Diamond Show was one of the premier, highly-acclaimed events of the year, and, as usual, it had been planned to precede the large and well-known Prospects and Developers Association Convention where Pendragon Incorporated was also hosting a booth. When Arthur had been growing up, he thought that the timing was happy coincidence. As he grew older, he learned that there was no such thing as coincidences -- good or bad -- in business. His parents had taken great pains to bookend the show not only with the PDAC on one side, but with the Brilliant Earth Jewellery Show on the other. It was a stroke of business genius -- the world's best designers would drift from the BEJ to the Pendragon Diamond Show, while early arrivals and serious investors in the mining industries attended to see what they would be getting if they pursued contracts with the exploration branch of Pendragon Incorporated.

This was the first time that Arthur would be not be watching from the sidelines anymore.

Originally, Uther Pendragon was meant to be giving his usual keynote speech, followed by Ygraine DuBois-Pendragon walking the runway with other fashion models to show off her latest diamond designs, but three months ago, all that changed, and it was down to Arthur.

The plane crash that took Uther and Ygraine had been a shock to the mining and jewellery industries, but business was business, and money marched on. It seemed sometimes that Arthur was the only one who remembered them. Some days, not even the pervasive hollow in his heart could dull the pain of knowing he would never see them again.

One of the show's organizers had prepared a memorial in their honour to be shown at the start of the show. Arthur had approved the idea -- but he wouldn't have if he'd known that the vultures would be circling. Now that he saw them, he wished that he could get out of giving the keynote speech. The temptation to throw himself off the upper balcony of the conference center was overwhelming.

According to the preliminary numbers that the head of Public Relations had helpfully given him -- the same ones that made Owain purse his lips in an impressed whistle earlier -- the Pendragon Diamond Show was receiving unprecedented attention this year. The organizers had presented Gwen with a long list of requests for a chance to kowtow to the new head of the company. These people were investors who usually sent underlings, mining partners and prospectors and explorers who had hoped to talk to Uther Pendragon at the PDAC, and the heads of large diamond companies who had always seen Pendragon Incorporated as their largest rival -- and who would continue to see Pendragon Incorporated as their largest rival for many, many years to come, if Arthur had anything to say about it.

Young artists and jewellers hoping to break into the big leagues were here, too, because Ygraine DuBois-Pendragon's death had left a void in the fashion world, and there were plenty of hungry piranhas eager to fill her shoes. Arthur had deferred all those appointments to the head of the
artistic department, his stomach turning to know that his mother's future designs were gone from the world, forever.

Worst of all were the members of the press, here in hungry, maniacal *droses*, and Arthur hated every single one of them. It was the press who had dubbed Uther and Ygraine's marriage as the dawn of a new dynasty in the diamond industry, who had hyped up Arthur first as the golden child, then as the most eligible bachelor *on the face of the planet*, and who were now milking the plane crash for headlines and by-lines until the next big scoop -- a scoop they hoped to find at the show.

There were very, very few people in the crowd that Arthur could stand to be around, and he didn't see any of them right now. The businessmen had been quick to move to secure their own assets. The fashion industry was already looking for the next passing craze. The reporters didn't care whose lives they were destroying as long their stories made the front page of their newspapers. None of them were here because they cared about Uther and Ygraine.

They'd bow their heads politely at the memorial, they'd clap their hands at the recounting of Uther's and Ygraine's achievements, but what they really wanted was to secure their own assets and positions in their respective professions.

When the tables turned, they turned quickly. There was a time when all these high-powered businessmen and self-absorbed artists and bloodthirsty reporters had smiled and patted Arthur on the head and pinched his cheeks while Uther and Ygraine looked on fondly. The instant Uther and Ygraine's backs were turned, Arthur had been unceremoniously shoved out of the way so that these people could simper and fawn, hoping for attention of their own.

Arthur had been underestimated before; he would be underestimated again, and no matter how many times he proved himself, he doubted that it would ever change. The only difference was that, now, these people couldn't turn to his parents anymore. They had no choice. They had to talk to Arthur, whether or not they wanted to.

Arthur understood. Or he tried. Some people were just too hard to figure out. They made appointments with him, but once they were face-to-face, they barely spoke. More than one person had smiled at him before detouring to converse with another representative of the company. They were keen to establish themselves, but not sure how to interact with him. They were either afraid, or they were intimidated, or they were uncertain and shy and awkward. Arthur tried to make them as comfortable as he could, but there was only so much that he *could* do.

Those people, unfortunately, were the well-meaning ones. There were others -- nasty, prejudiced bastards -- that Arthur wished he never had to deal with. If he was in the room, they dismissed him and continued to talk as if he wasn't there. Arthur had eyes. He wasn't stupid. He could see what was going on. He could lip-read even from across a room. He knew there were doubts, that there was a lack of confidence in his abilities. They would never say it to his face because they were cowards. People were never half as sincere as they pretended to be.

A path cleared up in front of him. Arthur took it, moving quickly, letting the ebb and flow of the crowd shuffle him along.

The opening night party was in the massive main hall of the Crowne Convention Centre, but a few attendees had escaped the main area to the relatively wide open space of the exhibition floor. Arthur stopped for a moment on the inside of the curtains, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to relax.

He had a speech to give. He didn't know why he had thought it would be a good idea to give the keynote speech himself. Plenty of the board members had offered to speak in his stead, including
his uncle. He shouldn't have let pride get in the way -- he should have said, yes, please, if you wouldn't mind, breathed a sigh of relief, and washed his hands of this whole mess.

Arthur wiped his sweaty palms on his thighs and tried to remember that he wasn't new at his job. He'd been working at Pendragon Industries in one capacity or another since he was a teenager, and he'd grown up with it in his blood.

For the last three months, he'd had to meet with the board of directors, with the northern diamond mining councils, with the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, with different departments of Pendragon Incorporated, not only in Toronto where Pendragon's main offices were located, but at each of the international offices -- London, Johannesburg, New York, Antwerp -- where he had introduced himself, allayed fears for the company's leadership, and set them firmly on the same mandate that Uther had established at the start of the quarter.

This evening's speech wouldn't be the first that he'd ever given. He thought that the others had gone over fairly well. This one would, too.

It was just so hard to believe that everything would be fine -- for both the speech and for the company. He wished that he had a moment's peace, that he could find his footing. The last three months had been a nonstop whirlwind of necessary action to prevent takeovers, to stabilize the company, to secure himself and Pendragon Incorporated on the world stage.

In all this, Arthur had barely had the time to grieve. Maybe burying himself in work was best. He missed his parents, but the ache was easing every day.

Arthur stopped in front of a large display. It was smaller than most, but whoever had decorated it had managed a careful balance of eye-catching without drowning out the centrepieces. There were rich purples and lavenders, slivers of gold mixed with heavy silvers. The glass cases were polished, the mirrors shined, and although there were no major pieces of jewellery just yet, there were enough examples of hand-made rings and earrings with semi-precious stones for Arthur to get an idea of the artist's style.

It was very different from his own. Very different from his mother's. It was raw and vibrant, full of subdued flash and fire, a coiled wilderness captive by chains of silver and gold and the perfect facet cut.

Arthur didn't know how long he stood staring at an absurd necklace that was a cascade of solid turquoise strips -- he didn't know who would wear this monstrosity, and he wondered why it was even on display when it didn't fit in with the rest of the artist's designs -- when there was a shift of movement in the mirror. He looked at the reflection and whirled around abruptly when he saw that someone was standing behind him.

She was pretty in a sweet girl-next-door sort of way, with a shy smile and big, guileless blue eyes. Her hair framed her round face in multi-coloured brown-and-white-and-blue wisps from a bad dye job by a hack of a hairdresser, her makeup was light and understated, and her dress was halfway between a two-piece business cut and club wear. The only thing about her appearance that really stood out to Arthur were the big dangly earrings that were the little sisters to the ugly turquoise necklace in the cabinet. She was looking at him expectantly.

As expectantly as if she'd asked a question and was waiting for an answer. Unfortunately, it was practically empty in the exhibition hall, and he didn't have an obvious excuse for not having noticed her earlier.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" He glanced down at her name tag -- he could kiss the genius who had thought up the idea of having name tags at conventions. The woman's name was Elena
He wasn't the only one checking the ID cards. The woman's eyes drifted down to the clip around
Arthur's neck and widened. Her lips spread in a big smile, and there was a nervous giggle as her
shoulders raised and lowered and she tried not to gush.

But she did gush, talking a mile a minute, and Arthur didn't understand a thing. Christ. He tried,
he really did, but the most he could pick up were random words.

"That's." He paused, trying to come up with a word that was a little more diplomatic than the one
he wanted to use, and which hopefully was an appropriate response. "Interesting."

"It is, isn't it?" Elena said. She took a step forward; Arthur took a step back. She didn't notice that
she was in his personal space and far too close for him to read her lips properly. It wasn't until he
felt the table's edge on the back of his thighs that he cleared his throat, interrupting her ongoing
babble, and glanced at his watch.

"Excuse me. I have to be somewhere else," Arthur said. He very carefully extricated himself from
the other woman -- she's a human octopus, he thought, when her fingers found his arms and
tugged, pulling him to a different section of the exhibit -- and worked his way back to the party as
quickly as he could. He lost her somewhere around the corner from the sprawling Tacori display,
ducked past the Simon G, and made a beeline for the exhibition hall exit.

Before he walked through the curtains, he pulled his name tag from around his neck and tucked it
in the inner pocket of his tuxedo. There were people who would recognize him on sight, but he
didn't need to exacerbate the situation by wearing an advertising billboard around his neck. He
might be well-known, but sometimes people forgot that he couldn't hear, if they even knew about
it in the first place. And when they did find out, they never, ever caught on fast enough to the fact
that that Arthur couldn't hear them no matter how loudly they spoke, and that raising their voices
was not going to help.

Arthur took a steadying breath. He was sure that the woman had meant well, and under any other
circumstances, he knew he would have handled the encounter better than he had. He felt a pang of
guilt at having been rude -- his parents had taught him better than that.

Still, conversations with virtual strangers didn't go much better when he had an interpreter. At least
six times that Arthur remembered, a different person would mock the sign language and promptly
dismiss Arthur. Or, worse, they would end up talking to the interpreter, as if they were in charge
of the company.

Arthur did not like being ignored.

Arthur heaved a sigh. He snatched a champagne flute from a passing server's tray in a smooth
motion that he'd perfected over years, and downed half of it in one gulp. The alcohol was vile and
didn't do anything to drown the butterflies in his stomach.
He nodded to a few people he recognized as he walked past and made no effort to slow down. He knew that if he did, he would get sucked into discussions he couldn't follow, be introduced to people whose names he wouldn't be able to catch -- names were the absolute hardest to lip read except when he lucked out and there were name tags that weren't obscured -- and end up staring and nodding and occasionally making the right sound to indicate that he was paying attention. Arthur couldn't deal with it tonight.

There was a tap on his arm, and Arthur turned around to see one of the art assistants. The man was repulsive, but at least Edwin treated Arthur no differently than any other department head, sucking up by sharing watercooler gossip, the rumours that were spreading throughout the business units, the politics that were being played, who was stealing what paper supplies.

"Edwin," Arthur said, forcing a smile.

"Arthur," Edwin said with a grin that pinched his features. Arthur had never really learned how Edwin had gotten the scars on his face -- something about a fire when he was young -- and although plastic surgery had smoothed out most of them, but the skin still tugged in the wrong places, making it difficult for Arthur to interpret Edwin's expression sometimes. Lip-reading was a challenge, but he could manage.

"Aren't you giving a speech tonight?"

Arthur glanced at his watch again. "Not for another hour and a half."

"So, it's really you who's going to give the speech? I mean, it's going to be you and not someone else?"

"Of course it will be me. Why wouldn't it be?"

Edwin shrugged his shoulders. "Oh. I don't know. I heard a rumour that Mr. DuBois would be giving the talk. I guess I heard wrong."

"You did," Arthur said. His guts twisted into different kinds of knots that had nothing to do with being nervous about standing on the stage in front of everyone and everything to do with how warmly he regarded his uncle -- which was to say, not at all.

"I suppose I have at that," Edwin said pleasantly. He changed the subject by gesturing at the group of young people behind him. "Can I introduce you to a few people?"

"Maybe later," Arthur said. "I should get backstage."

"Surely you could stay for a few minutes," Edwin said. He raised a brow at the same time as he tilted his head in invitation. Arthur caved in to curiosity and followed Edwin. "I heard more rumours."

"You're in the wrong line of business if all you do is gossip," Arthur said dryly, stopping dead. "I don't have time for this, Edwin."

"Not even the rumour that the Diamond Council is investigating allegations that the company has been issuing questionable authenticity certificates?"

Arthur must have been dumbstruck, but Edwin interpreted his expression as sorry, I didn't catch that, say it again and repeated himself. Arthur covered his surprise with a frown and asked, "Where did you hear that?"

"Is it true, then?"

"I heard that it's been going on for years. Forgeries -- and good ones," Edwin said.

"Edwin," Arthur said, and Edwin must have heard something in Arthur's tone because he shut up. "I heard a rumour recently."

"Yeah?"

"In fact, I'm not even sure it's a rumour. It might even be fact," Arthur said.

"You have my complete attention," Edwin said. He leaned in and lowered his head.

"Apparently, the new head of the company has a very low tolerance for people rumormongering, especially when they're unfounded and bordering on slander. He'll fire you without batting an eyelash." Arthur patted Edwin's arm, raising both brows as he gave Edwin a yes, I'm serious nod. "If you'll excuse me."

Arthur left without another word, leaving his champagne flute on a table covered with canapés and fresh fruit. His heart pounded so hard that it felt like it would knock its way through his ribcage. How had Edwin heard that? Who was talking behind Arthur's back? His associates at the IDC had spoken to him in confidence, preferring not to bring the investigation to light just yet. Their consideration was out of respect for the work Arthur's father had done in shutting down the illegal trade of conflict diamonds -- they didn't want to besmirch his good name and reputation. They were giving Arthur a chance to track down the forgeries, to make reparations, but Arthur couldn't do that if he was busy chasing gossip and stomping it out. The board of directors would start breathing down his neck, asking questions that Arthur wasn't prepared to answer --

Especially then. He didn't know who he could trust.

And now with Edwin's big mouth blabbing it around the company -- Arthur wondered how long it would be before the board started asking uncomfortable questions and for those questions to get back to the company's investors. Arthur needed time. Leon had told him that it would be a while before he could scour through all the paperwork that Arthur had gotten hold of thus far and tracked down the people they really needed to be talking to about the situation.

Arthur went find his uncle. What was this story that Agravaine would be giving the speech and not Arthur? And, barring that -- maybe Arthur should find his interpreter.

Where the fuck was Cedric? Arthur hated the necessity of Cedric's services in the first place, but he couldn't afford not to have an interpreter. Although his parents had done everything to ensure that Arthur would be independent -- the finest speech therapists; the best tutors; large endowments on institutes and academies and universities. not to merely pass Arthur through his classes, but to ensure that someone was available to take notes for him, that he would receive timely transcribed copies of the lectures, and had alternate accommodations when it came to the oral requirements -- Arthur wasn't under any delusions. He knew his limitations.

He never had any issues with doing the work. He just couldn't hear.

Arthur had proven that he could memorize ten pages of speech and be able to repeat it word for word. He had stood on a little platform in front of a small group of students at the University of Toronto without the slightest bit of trepidation to teach classes while a grad student himself. He could handle delicate one-on-one negotiations. What he couldn't do was speak clearly when he needed to be understood.

Even when he wasn't nervous, Arthur's voice was heavily accented, his words sometimes rushed
and mangled together, his volume wrong. He mispronounced words entirely, he would stumble and stammer and sound like a monotonous idiot. Whenever he opened his mouth to speak to new people, they backed away, giving him pitying looks, and promptly went to someone who sounded competent enough to address their needs.

Arthur only used an interpreter to translate what people said to him; he preferred to handle his own end of the conversation, even if it meant repeating himself several times. But tonight, while he planned on giving the speech, it would be Cedric's voice that the crowd would hear.

And Cedric, who should have been by Arthur's side at the opening of the show, wasn't. In fact, Arthur hadn't seen him at all tonight.

Arthur checked the usual spots. The food spread -- where Cedric was probably embarrassing himself by shoving shrimp down his throat without chewing. The bar -- where Cedric was nearly guaranteed to be snivelling his way into someone's good graces. The bathrooms -- and only because Arthur had noticed the white powder on Cedric's suit, once, weeks ago. Cedric might have a drug problem, but as long as he showed up on time and did his job, however mediocre…

There was no sign of him.

A man like Cedric shouldn't be difficult to find. He stood out because he didn't fit in. He was shorter than Arthur, skinny and sunken-chested, with mousy brown hair and brown eyes and a hooked nose and hollow cheeks and an annoying drowned-rat type of moustache that Arthur really wished he would shave off. Cedric was so ordinary and average that, in a group of beautiful people like those who had come to this evening's party, Cedric would stand out like a sore thumb.

Arthur headed for the concourse where the show's organizers had raised a stage for the speakers and a runway for the models who would be dazzling the crowds with this year's Pendragon line. A line that was also his mother's last collection.

Arthur felt a dull ache. A part of him didn't want to show the designs because he knew they would be snapped up by those vultures out in the crowd trying to get a piece of the DuBois-Pendragon legacy.

He had to fish out his photo badge to get behind the scenes. The security guards mouthed apologies and let him through. He spotted Gwen with the show organizers, her iPad close to her chest, waving a finger here and there as she gave final instructions. She was gorgeous as always in a strapless evening gown that set her light brown skin aglow, her long wavy hair half pinned up and falling down around her shoulders, a monstrous gold lamé bag on her shoulder filled full of file folders and papers and organizers. It always amused Arthur to think that Gwen probably could run every branch of Pendragon Inc., worldwide, solely from the contents of that purse.

She saw him approach and smiled one of her small, sweet, reassuring everything is under control smiles, and waved off the harried attendants.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, watching them scurry off at a sprint.

Gwen, patient as always, waited until Arthur was looking at her before signing, "There's a problem with the sound system. They think they'll have it fixed in time for the beginning of the show."

"They think?" Arthur asked, raising a brow.

"They're trying to find a sound engineer. They think he might have left for the night. Murphy's law," Gwen said. She signed, too, but her gestures were distracted.
"It feels as if we're far beyond Murphy's law at this point," Arthur corrected. He shared a small smile with his personal assistant. He'd known Gwen for years, ever since she joined Pendragon Incorporated as a business administrator, but when the company's reins fell so suddenly into Arthur's hands, he'd found himself in desperate need for someone who could handle not only his suddenly overwhelming schedule, but all the other demands for his time.

The board of directors had offered to loan him their assistants -- his uncle Agravaine had shoved three different people at Arthur -- but Arthur had never been comfortable with any of them. After one particularly harrowing visit with an investor -- who had apparently conducted the meeting with Arthur at the top of his lungs, audible nearly three floors up and four down -- Arthur asked Gwen for help.

She had moved so smoothly into her role over the last three months that Arthur wondered how he had ever done without her. He wasn't one to depend on other people, but Gwen was a godsend -- on top of her usual duties, she had also arranged for a notetaker to be present at every international committee videoconference and had worked out an agreement with the Canadian Hearing Society for a semi-permanent interpreter to be present at nearly every meeting or occasion that Arthur had when he was in Canada. He had different interpreters for overseas trips -- talented men and women who could sign in either the French langue signée Québécoise or the English American Sign Language, and translate Arthur's words in the other party's native tongue.

Those were the little touches that he appreciated.

"Have you seen Cedric?" he asked.

"He's not here?" Gwen signed, her eyes alarmed, her brows pinching in the middle of her forehead.

"I haven't seen him."

"You should have told me earlier," Gwen scowled. She whipped out her phone and dialled a number.

Gwen's hands were too full for her to sign the conversation -- something for which Arthur was grateful, because Gwen was something of a sloppy signer. He eavesdropped by reading her lips. "It's ringing. Cedric. Hello, Cedric, this is Gwen Leondegrace. Are you at the show? What do you mean -- I gave you the night off? I did no such thing."

She gave Arthur her iPad to hold, and flipped through several screens before she had her email open to the Sent Items folder. "I'm looking at my email right now. I sent you the schedule a week ago. You confirmed your availability. I sent you a reminder this morning, and you confirmed again. What do you mean -- no, I most assuredly did not call you earlier this evening to cancel. No, that wasn't me. What time was this? It doesn't matter. You have time to come to the Crowne --"

Gwen shot an alarmed, angry look at Arthur.

"No. Never mind. Enjoy your evening. We'll see you tomorrow at the meeting. Yes, it's still at four o'clock." Gwen hung up. Her everything is fine smile vanished. "He went to see his mother. In Peterborough. There's no way that he'll be here in time."

Arthur's mouth went dry. The butterflies in his stomach didn't so much fade as die all at once under a shockwave of panic, landing in his guts with a heavy ten-tonne thump. He glanced at his watch for the third time that evening and knew without looking that it was too late get someone else -- even if they could find an interpreter who was willing to work overtime, after hours, and
who could keep up with Arthur.

On the eve of the biggest night of Pendragon Incorporated's existence -- the most important night of the rest of Arthur's life, he was well and truly fucked.

It must have shown on his face, because Gwen said, "I know. You don't have to tell me. This is a disaster. I'll call -- let me call a few people. I have the coordinator's phone number -- I think he gave me his private number, too, for emergencies. Maybe he'll be able to help us --"

Arthur stopped paying attention. His heart was beating so loudly that it either would burst from his chest, and he found it hard to breathe. His vision darkened around the edges, and the logical part of Arthur's mind remarked, this is what panic must feel like.

"I'll call him. As soon as I find his number," Gwen said, scrolling through her contacts list.

Arthur watched Gwen's eyes dart up to glance behind him in a meaningful look. He turned around and grimaced. "Hello, uncle."

"Is there a problem?" Agravaine asked.

There were times when Arthur's uncle irritated him, and this was one of those times. The way Agravaine's eyes crinkled up in an almost perpetual expression of sheer amusement, no matter how dire the situation. The smug, self-assured smirk that was on Agravaine's face all hours of the day, except when he was particularly unhappy. Sometimes, Agravaine's smile was laced with schadenfreude, because the man delighted in the misery of others. The way he talked at Arthur instead of with Arthur, and when there was someone else in the room, how he would ignore Arthur to speak with them instead -- it got under Arthur's skin.

The man was family. He shouldn't be treating Arthur as a non-person, but he did. Most of the time, Arthur could ignore it, but not now.

Not now! Arthur willed Agravaine to go away.

"Arthur's interpreter isn't here," Gwen said, signing at the same time.

Agravaine affected a concerned look, but to Arthur, it seemed as if Agravaine was pleased by this turn of events. Then again, Agravaine always seemed pleased, whether it was the news of finding a new diamond or whispers of a stock market crash on the horizon.

Arthur had never really understood why his father had hired Agravaine to work at the company in the first place. Uther had never hidden his emotions well, and it had been obvious to everyone how much he had loathed his brother-in-law. Agravaine's background wasn't in diamonds. It wasn't even in precious metals mining. It was in petroleum, whose only similarity with the diamond business was that they were both made out of carbon. Even Arthur's mother had nearly fired Agravaine on more than one occasion.

The only fathomable reason that made sense to Arthur why Uther and Ygraine would have kept Agravaine on the books after all these years despite the games Agravaine played and the drama he caused had to do with Agravaine's business tactics. Alternate acquisition venues that had saved company millions; diversionary tactics to avoid hostile takeovers; underhanded information to throw negotiations in their favour -- Agravaine had done these things and more. It was for that reason, and that reason alone, that Arthur kept him around instead of handing him that signed pink slip that Uther had kept in his desk for over twenty years. For all that Agravaine's personality was at times loathsome, he still had good advice for Arthur.

Although, lately, Arthur had to admit that Agravaine's advice wasn't up to the usual standards.
"That's a shame," Agravaine said, barely glancing in Arthur's direction. "Does this mean that Arthur will not be giving his speech?"

"Arthur is right here, uncle. You can ask me," Arthur said. Between his nerves, being accosted at the booths by a lovely young lady who had practically assaulted him, the rumours that Edwin was spreading, and Agravaine's dismissive behaviour, he was raw and snappish.

"Yes, of course you are," Agravaine said, giving him a jovial Santa-Claus grin. Arthur was already stressed enough with the evening's presentation -- everyone was waiting to meet the new head of Pendragon Incorporated -- without his uncle being the same prick that he always was. "Does your interpreter's absence mean that you will not be giving the speech?"

"I'm giving the speech," Arthur said. He hoped he sounded more resolute than he felt.

"Oh, Arthur," Agravaine said. His shoulders slumped, his chin tilted down, and he shook his head in an expression that Arthur recognized as disappointment.

Arthur hated that look. That horrible feeling he got whenever he saw it, that he had disappointed someone, made his stomach twist and his skin flush. His father, his mother. Even Agravaine.

Agravaine placed a hand on Arthur's shoulder and led him away from Gwen. "I don't think you should, not without an interpreter. Is that really the first impression you want to give to the public?"

"What impression is that?" Arthur asked.

Agravaine waved a hand over Arthur. "Honestly, Arthur? Do you really think you're ready to be the public face, the voice of the company? Our investors, our partners, they're expecting someone older, more established, someone respectable. They'll see you on the stage, stammering and stumbling through your speech like a doddering fool -- that's not how you want them to think of the company, is it, Arthur?"

Arthur clenched his jaw. Agravaine was touching on Arthur's private nightmare. "You know it's not."

"We have to think about the public. There will be criticism. First that we're allowing someone as young as you are to take charge of an old, well-established company. The investors will be worried, of course, because the last thing they want is to suspect that you are leading the company in a non-traditional route. There's also the matter of..." Agravaine gestured to his ears. "You can't hear, Arthur. People will think that we can't do any better than to allow a cripple to lead the company."

Arthur stared at him, stunned. He hadn't even realized that there had been a knife in his heart until Agravaine twisted it again and again. Arthur tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

"Well. I only see one solution to this dilemma," Agravaine said, taking Arthur's arm and walking him further away from Gwen, who was looking on, head tilted, eyebrow raised in concern. "You need to find someone else to give the speech."

Arthur swallowed hard. He tried to find his mental footing, but it kept slipping out from under him. So this was the rumour that Edwin had heard -- it was coming straight from Agravaine himself. Arthur should have known that his uncle would want to be the centre of attention after chasing the limelight for two decades. "No. No. This is my company. They'll be expecting me, not someone else."
"It'll be a simple matter of making your excuses. We will tell them that you've fallen ill or some such. It's done all the time. Surely you have to agree that we're better served by having someone competent address this crowd. You do know how many important people are here? How many members of the press? What do you think they'll write when you hem and haw through your speech?" Agravaine smiled one of his slimy little smiles and said, "I'm sorry to tell you this, Arthur, but there are times when I can barely understand you."

Arthur looked away. He hated -- he hated it when he was reminded of the things that he couldn't do. He would always be different, less than anyone else. Never good enough.

"I should --" Arthur pressed his lips together. He wavered between the relief of knowing that he had a way out of this, that he wouldn't have to speak in his awkward, clumsy way, that he could pass on this task to someone else, and with the knowledge that this was his duty to attend to, his responsibility, his birthright. This was just another one of Agravaine's games, just more of his drama. Uther had reminded Arthur again and again to ignore Agravaine and to not let the man get under Arthur's skin the way that he was doing now. "You want to give this speech, uncle?"

"I would be honoured to," Agravaine said.

"What a surprise."

"Perhaps if you gave me a copy of your speech to read through beforehand?" Agravaine asked.

Arthur worked the knot in his jaw loose. "You misunderstood me. I'm still giving the speech, uncle."

"Oh." Agravaine smiled another one of his plastic smiles. "Perhaps I should have a copy regardless. On the off chance that you change your mind?"

"I don't have one on me," Arthur said, and that was a blatant lie. He had it on his iPhone, and he knew that Gwen had both electronic and paper copies with her. He was not letting Agravaine give the keynote speech. He needed to buy time to find a replacement for Cedric. "I'll have one made."

"As quickly as possible, so that I can prepare," Agravaine said. He gave Arthur a curt nod before walking away.

Gwen was next to Arthur the instant Agravaine left. She was usually too kind-hearted to glare at anyone, but she was glaring at Agravaine's retreating form as if she wished the ground would open up under his feet and swallow him whole. Her lips tightened, her brows pulled down, and she looked as if she wanted to give Arthur's uncle a good slap across the face. "You don't have to give him your speech. In fact, don't. I could interpret for you."

"Oh, dear Gwen. I know you would do it in an instant if you could, but the last time you tried, you were absolutely horrible."

Gwen swatted his arm. "I wasn't horrible," she said. "It was your fault anyway. You sign too fast."

Arthur managed a smile. "I appreciate it, but, you're forgetting one important detail."

"What's that?"

"When I give my speech, I don't want to sound like a girl."

Gwen hit him on the shoulder hard enough to sting. "If your mother heard you say that --"
Arthur flinched, and so did Gwen.

"Oh, God. Arthur. I'm sorry --"

"No, you're right," Arthur said with a sigh. He rubbed his chest unconsciously. "I should apologize, yeah? After all, I don't know what a girl sounds like. For all I know, you sound just fine…"

Gwen's expression shifted from terribly embarrassed to narrow-eyed annoyance. She wagged her phone at him before unlocking it. "If you keep this up, I'm not going to call Lance for you."

ooOOoo

Big neon signs. Flashing signs. Twisted-tube halogen lighting. Two big spinning records in fiery red. The slick-black of asphalt, the honking horns, the screeching rubber of quick stop-starts, the rumbling engines. Street merchants spreading their wares on the sidewalk for unsuspecting tourists. Leatherneck toughs in subtle gang colours on the corners, paying no attention to anything but the music blasting from an old relic of a boom box and cassette tracks that went out of style almost two decades ago.

It was a garish strip of the longest street in Ontario, smack dab in the province's capital, and it was no different from the other asphalt scratches all over the world. In New York. In London. Belgium, Amsterdam, Sidney, Auckland. Beijing, Tokyo, Hong Kong.

Maybe if Merlin had started off his international circuit with a debut in Toronto, he would've been awed by the hustle and bustle on this road. As it was, Merlin could barely find the motivation to raise his head and look around.

He was numb. He had been numb for a long time.

Nothing impressed him anymore. Nothing touched him. He felt nothing -- not amusement or joy, only sadness and pain.

He barely noticed the overdressed woman in a long fur coat who trotted along the sidewalk, trying to get the attention of a taxi driver without getting her five-inch spike heel caught in a venting grate. He didn't see the teenagers who'd mastered the 1980s Wall of Hair look that had come and gone before they had even been born. He didn't hear the huskers and buskers performing their hearts out to masses of people who didn't so much as glance in their direction while dropping a few coins in their hats or cups. He didn't care about the cello player who had a prime spot outside the Eaton Centre exit, playing Bach through portable speakers powered by a miniature generator in a battle to be heard over the traffic.

Merlin rounded a corner -- the same corner he'd been rounding for nearly a year. He went up the alley, stepped over spilled garbage cans, and ducked under the streetlight that had been flickering for the better part of a month. The shortcut took him to the other side of the block and he crossed the street. He turned right, left, and up scuffed cement stairs. He punched the entrance code to the apartment building, shut the security door behind him, took out a mailbox's worth of junk mail from his slot, ignored the box elevator that had a perpetual OUT OF ORDER sign taped to the stuck-open doors, and climbed the steps, two at a time, all the way to the seventh floor.

There had been a time when he thought that he would die from the boredom of a structured routine, when he craved uncertainty, never knowing what the next day would bring. The only constant in his life had been the packed bags left near the door of his hotel room, the front zippers open and waiting for him to add toiletries and other knickknacks in before he rushed off to his
next destination, to the next show. Sometimes he arrived at the airport without knowing where he was headed, and caught his breath while they processed his ticket at the counter.

Sometimes, he would look at the name of the city in confusion, the letters and numbers of the flight blurring together, the airport code new and strange, and he would have to ask his seatmate, the flight attendant, or some other complete stranger, "What country are we --?"

Now, Merlin found comfort in knowing that everything was exactly the same, day in and day out. Every morning he would wake up at seven o'clock. He would take a shower and eat a bowl of raisin bran. He would put together a cold lunch that he shoved into his backpack. He would walk to either the St Michael's Choir School or the Royal Conservatory of Music and run through his vocal exercises before his first job at the market. Once he clocked out, he'd head to the record store for the afternoon, listening to bad music piped through the staticky PA system while he filled in the day's orders made through eBay, packing obscure and rare records for shipping to a collector. For dinner, he'd stop at the Subway on the corner, buy his usual six-inch club sandwich with a bottle of water and two macadamia nut cookies. Right after, he would go to either the inventory job, or the janitor job, depending on which night it was.

He would come home, make a second dinner -- whatever didn't require much thought or effort, like a pre-packed salad or a supermarket container of sushi or a tuna sandwich -- and eat it on the futon in front of the TV stand that displayed a potted plant, but no TV. He'd read a book in the silence of his apartment for an hour before turning everything off and checking that the apartment was locked up before going to bed.

Tonight, the inventory job had only lasted an hour. Merlin's supervisor had clapped a hand to his shoulder and sent him home early because the only other job was across town, and Merlin never went out that way. He would have gone by the conservatory instead for the second time that day, but it was early enough that there would still be a troupe practicing for a show, and Merlin didn't feel like having company or an audience.

It was going to be an early night, with leftover frozen lasagne that he'd brought from the bulk frozen foods store for dinner, with a trashy romance novel about a girl who met a guy, fell in love and fucked for entertainment, because he could use some happily-ever-after right now.

He was yawning when he reached his floor.

Merlin stood in front of his apartment door, shrugged his bag from one shoulder to the other.

He fumbled through his jeans pockets, then his coat pockets, then through his backpack.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Merlin muttered. He cast his eyes heavenward. This made, what? The third or fourth time this week that he forgot his keys in his apartment.

He went through the routine again -- jeans pockets, coat pockets, backpack. Heaving a sigh of defeat, he mentally composed an apology and an excuse for his rampant absentmindedness and turned around to knock on his neighbour's door.

Except Lance was already there, leaning a shoulder against the open doorway, his arms crossed, a bemused smile on his lips. He was gorgeous as usual -- short curly brown hair brushed back, chocolate-brown bedroom eyes, a two-day scruff on his jaw. He was slim, trim, and fit, the way underwear models were slim, trim, and fit, which was just not fair at all, because Lance was very, very straight.

It was hard not to take in the view when Lance was wearing a tight cotton Moosehead beer shirt and low-on-the-hips grey sweatpants. Lance had to jangle the keys he was holding up in the air
before Merlin noticed them.

Apartment keys, storage locker keys, bicycle lock key -- though someone had stolen his bike a long time ago, and Merlin had never replaced it -- the keys to a flat in London, a bedsit in Christchurch, a lovely two-bedroom that he had barely slept in while he was in Zurich. Random keys to places he couldn't remember and wouldn't know how to return, but kept anyway because it was sentimental, because the weight of the keys on the ring made him feel as if he mattered.

Then it sank in that those were his keys, not the spare set to the apartment.

"Did I drop them?"

"Left them in your lock," Lance said. "Saw them when I left for work, figured I'd catch you when you got home."

"Oh. Thanks," Merlin said. He reached for the keys, but Lance plucked them away from his fingertips. "Please don't give me a lecture about getting robbed --"

"I've been to your place. You don't have anything worth stealing."

"Sad, but true," Merlin said, managing a small, tired smile. Most of his belongings were down in the storage space that came with the apartment. He'd been on the move for so long that there really wasn't anything that he couldn't leave behind in a hurry if he had to pack up and leave again. He hadn't quite gotten out of the habit of living as if he would have to drop everything and be on a plane before the sun rose.

It had only been a year.

Merlin made a small wriggling gesture with his fingers. "I got to take a leak, so, you know, if you don't want me to piss in your doorway --"

"I'm worried about you," Lance said. His brows furrowed. "You're always working. You never go out."

Merlin remembered when his mother used to tell him something along the same lines. "I'm worried about you, Merlin. You're always on the go. You never call."

He'd give anything to hear her nagging again.

Merlin's eyes stung. He'd been on a stage on the other side of the planet when his mother passed away at the Mont Royal hospital in Montréal. A heart attack, the doctors had said. They hadn't been able to resuscitate her. Close friends of the family and the parish had made the funeral arrangements, but Merlin's agent had never told him any of this until a week after the services and the interment, because she hadn't wanted Merlin to be distracted from his performance in Hong Kong.

How much of his life had he missed out on because of that bitch of an agent? How much of his life was he missing out on now because he didn't have anything else to give?

There was a light, warm weight at his shoulder. Merlin blinked the tears away but it was too late; Lance had seen them. Instead of asking what was wrong -- because Lance was the noble, caring, considerate sort who would never ask -- Lance tilted his head in invitation. "Hey. Look. I've got the first season of Red Dwarf. That girl, the one I told you about? Gwen? She told me I should watch it. I was going to make some popcorn to throw at the screen if it ends up being bad, but that's more fun when someone else's around. Do you want --"
I want you to stop being so damn nice to me, Merlin wanted to say, but he was done in by Lance's earnest expression. He sighed.

He didn't understand why people were so compassionate with him. He didn't deserve it. The girl at Subway who was always on shift when Merlin came in, who put extra cheese on his vegie subs or who gave him another cookie without charging him. His boss on the inventory job, who let Merlin work alone when he was having a particularly bad day and who would send him home early with full pay when they ran out of things to do. Lance, who watched out for Merlin when Merlin couldn't concentrate, when his head was in a big grey fog of obliviousness, when he was hurting and needed to be reminded that there really were good things out in the world if he would only just look.

He could barely muster up a simple thank you on some days, and people continued to be nice to him. It didn't make sense.

Merlin swallowed hard, sucking salty spit from his teeth where he could taste swallowed tears, and nodded. He used every bit of theatre training that he had to make sure that his voice didn't waver, didn't wobble, didn't betray anything when he said, "Yeah, sure. Why not. Let me just..."

He paused, shrugging his backpack, tugging at his jacket. "I'll have something to eat and wash up. Give me an hour?"

"An hour," Lance said, smiling big and wide and dreamy and why couldn't he like blokes, handing Merlin the keys. He pointed a warning finger at Merlin. "An hour and five minutes, I'm coming to get you."

Merlin chuckled humourlessly. He knew it was no idle threat. He unlocked the deadbolt and the doorknob and went into his apartment, conscious of Lance watching him. He shut the door behind him, leaned against it, and banged his head back, shutting his eyes.

He'd met Lance over a year ago when he was looking for a job. He hadn't even had an apartment at the time -- he'd been living out of his suitcase again for what he had hoped was the last time. Merlin had seen the ad in The Toronto Star -- Sign Language Interpreters Required -- and something about it had triggered a good memory from a time in his life before things had spiralled out of control. He had no certifications whatsoever, but he had grown up using sign language just to be able to talk to his best friend. Lance had pushed him through the certification test, found him an apartment in his building, and lined up all of his jobs -- And within the first few weeks, Merlin had had to quit.

He didn't know why Lance still spoke to him. He'd been there at the disaster -- a disaster that had pushed Merlin even deeper into his own despair, because no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't do anything right. He'd meant well, he had --

Merlin banged his head against the door. One. Two. Three.

He didn't want to think about it. There were a lot of things he didn't want to think about -- this one most of all.

It was almost a year ago, and he still felt horrible. Lance had brought Merlin along to interpret for some young children at a show -- Merlin's assignment had been a young girl with shiny red hair and big blue eyes and a giant smile that brightened the whole room. She had been so excited that day, and she kept signing, over and over, what are they doing now?, what do they sound like. Merlin answered back, they're playing music, or they're singing, and had done his best to interpret the music and the songs with hand gestures and motion and movement.
She had wanted to know so badly what it had sounded like and Merlin had been so tired. He'd invited her to put her hand on his throat, on his chest, so that she could feel the vibrations for herself. He still didn't know why his magic reared up at that moment when it had lain dormant for so long. But it had wafted out of his control, wrapping her up in sound.

Like Will had been able to do a long time ago because of Merlin's magic, for a brief, brief moment, this little girl could hear.

Her screaming and crying had stopped the concert. Her parents had been called in to calm her distress, but Merlin would never forget how she had wailed, "I want to hear it again, mommy. I want to hear it so bad," over and over again.

Merlin closed his eyes at the memory.

The worst of it -- the absolute worst -- was learning that his magic hadn't affected only the little girl.

Everyone at the concert had heard Merlin sing. Everyone in the building had heard Merlin sing. His voice had been magnified and enhanced, and three hundred people had heard him sing Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

It had been explained away as a glitch in the building speakers, caused by some sort of incompatibility with the concert's equipment and the school's announcement system, a preposterous explanation of crossed wires and radio waves and frequencies coming together to mimic baby monitors capable of monitoring police CB bands, and no one had questioned it.

The word "magic" never even came up in the conversation.

Until Lance said it. Lance believed in magic. He was the saintly sort of person who still thought that unicorns and leprechauns existed somewhere on earth. He had taken Merlin aside, and Merlin had been exhausted and heart-sick and so, so lonely, that he poured his heart out to someone who didn't know him from Adam.

And that someone had listened quietly, had believed him, and had told him to go sit down while he went to settle things with the little girl's parents.

All Merlin could think of were the many, many times that his mother had warned him, be careful, and how he'd failed her.

Lance was one of a kind. Anyone else would have... oh, Merlin didn't know what they would've done. Turned him in to the authorities who would have locked him up in psychiatric detention somewhere, he supposed, if not outright killed him on the pretence that he was a dangerous person who shouldn't be allowed near normal people. Scientific experiments might even be involved.

After everything Lance had done for him, Merlin was still a rotten friend. He'd rather stay in his apartment in a silence compounded by the low background hum of city noise and lose himself in novels with happier stories than his own, than to spend time with the man who had done more for him in one tumultuous year than the rest of the human race over the last ten years, combined.

Merlin dumped his backpack on the floor next to the door, right where he used to put his suitcase back when he'd always been on the go. He stared at it for far too long before abruptly kicking it so hard that it slid down the narrow hallway and into his cramped living room.

His foot throbbed.

"Fuck," Merlin said, rubbing his face. He needed to snap out of this funk. The truth was, it had
been a long time since he had had a friend that he was terrified of losing the only one he had -- even if Lance was so perfect, so nice, and so saccharine sweet, that his teeth hurt to be in his presence. It had taken Merlin a long time before he let his guard down around Lance, but Lance's sheer, absolute, unselfish goodness still unsettled Merlin, because he knew that he was lacking.

Merlin shrugged out of his coat and hung it in the closet. He tore his ratty grey beanie from his head and left it on the table next to his keys. He kicked off his Conversees and left them in a tumbled heap next to his sandals -- sandals that he hadn't worn since last summer. He ran a hand through hat-flattened hair and went into the kitchen.

There wasn't much in the refrigerator. A carton of milk on its last dregs. A quarter-loaf of marbled rye bread. A bag of tomatoes. A package of pre-sliced Swiss cheese. A bowl of tuna salad from the night before that he had been too tired to eat. The long-anticipated lasagne.

Merlin took out the Tupperware container with the lasagne, cracked the lid, and tossed it in the microwave. He poured himself a glass of water from the Brita pitcher, found one last clean fork in the utensils drawer, and ate his supper. He squirted liquid detergent in the container when he was done, turned on the hot water, and added it to the pile of dishes he was going to deal with in the morning.

"You have one message. Message one," it began, only to rattle off in Mandarin a second later, "Mister Emrys, this is Gail Xu. I'm afraid that I am going to have to cut your hours again this week. We don't have enough shifts to accommodate all the staff --"

Merlin tilted his head and muttered under his breath, mentally transposing the rest of Gail's message with what she really meant to say: "Because I've just hired my three pretty nieces, who are Chinese, and even though you speak Mandarin better than they ever will, you don't look Asian at all, and it puts our customers off. Hopefully by the end of the month you'll finally realize that I'm trying to get you to quit --"

Merlin deleted the message. He would see how long Gail would play this game of hers before she fired him over something as inconsequential as a missing penny in the till. Maybe at some point he would take pity on her and let her figure out that he didn't need to work, that he'd made enough in the last ten years to sustain him for a while. He really was only doing the menial stuff until he figured out what he wanted to do with his life. It was just that he needed to do something --

And maybe it was about time that he did something more meaningful than stocking grocery shelves. Maybe he could branch out into his field. Surely there were positions for someone with his experience. He could teach young children at a school choir. Maybe he could pick up a few classes for the university's theatre program. Maybe he could even try auditioning for a role.

Auditioning for a role meant the possibility of more roles, and if that happened he'd need to get an agent, but the only agent he knew was Nimueh Blake, and --

His innards clenched so tightly that he ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Merlin gasped into the toilet bowl, coughing and spitting out the last of the barely-digested lasagne. Of anything he could've preferred to throw up, pasta was way, way down on his list. He had learned from hard experience that acidic tomato sauces always burned his throat and made him taste tomatoes for days.

Merlin gargled with a saltwater rinse to get the worst of it out of his mouth, but he ended up
brushing his teeth anyway. He washed his face, avoided looking at himself in the mirror, and went
to the narrow bedroom, tossing his stained shirt into the laundry basket and finding a fresh Tee to
wear.

It hadn't been an hour yet, but Merlin padded in his socks across the hall to Lance's apartment. He
knocked.

"Come in! It's open!"

Merlin entered and shut the door behind him. Lance's apartment was the mirror image of Merlin's,
except it was a wider and longer and generally bigger. His kitchen had room for more than one
person; his living room could accommodate more than a student-sized futon. Lance had decorated
his place the way an apartment should be decorated. There was grown-up pine furniture in a dark
stain, bookshelves in the corner, a plasmascreen TV mounted to the wall, and a filing-cabinet style
DVD storage unit right beneath. Everything matched. Everything was neat and clean and perfect.

Just like Lance. Of course.

Merlin sighed inwardly. He could do this too, he knew. He could throw out all the old furniture
that had come with the apartment and paint the walls something better than a dull off-white and
put things on the shelves that he liked to look at, except he didn't really know what he liked
anymore. He wasn't sure if he had ever really known.

"Almost done," Lance said, glancing at Merlin before having a double-take. "Are you all right?
You look a little pale."

"Lasagne was off," Merlin lied. "Had to toss it. Is that popcorn ready? I'm kind of hungry."

"If you're hungry, you can help me make room in the fridge," Lance said. He opened the
refrigerator and took out a few containers, scraping the contents out onto a plate before Merlin
could protest. "Made too much for dinner, and I've barely got space for the groceries I got on the
way home."

Merlin caught a glimpse of mashed potatoes, sliced carrots, and something that might be breaded
meat before it went into the microwave, and his stomach growled hungrily. He couldn't remember
the last time he'd eaten an actual home-cooked meal -- the frozen dinners and sandwiches that he
scraped together for himself didn't count. He decided, for once, not to argue.

Lance gave him the plate and a fork, shooed him toward the living room, and went back to the
popcorn maker. Merlin sat on the couch, balanced the plate on his knees, and used the fork's edge
to slice through what turned out to be chicken, marinated in a Dijon-yogurt sauce and liberally
coated with garlic breadcrumbs.

"Jesus. I need to learn how to cook," Merlin said. He was sick of tuna sandwiches. He looked up
when Lance put down two bottles of beer on the coffee table and sat down next to Merlin with the
biggest bowl of popcorn he'd ever seen. "So, this girl Gwen?"

"Oh, my God. You would love her," Lance said. "I can't get her out of my head. I've met her the
one time --"

"Just once?" Merlin asked, raising a brow. Lance met a lot of people in his job, and he wasn't
prone to falling head over heels over just anyone. The girl must be special.

"You had to be there. Walks into the office, all business-proper, a little black dress under her
jacket, hair loose around her shoulders, and the most beautiful smile I've ever seen. If you'd been
there you wouldn't blame me --"
"Maybe if I were straight --"

"No, believe me, you'd have fallen in love with her right then and there, too. She's the kindest, sweetest --"

Merlin let his head loll down and snored a little. Maybe it was mean, but he really wasn't interested in hearing about Lance's love life when he hadn't had one in... well, ever. He'd rushed through his teenage years and didn't get his first kiss until he was twenty, and he didn't think the string of one-night stands over the last ten years counted as a relationship, not even cumulatively.

Lance shoved at Merlin. "Anyway, she's been booking an interpreter for her boss almost every day for the last three months, sometimes arranging weeks in advance, and when I have her on the line, we talk --"

Lance had a blissed-out look to him again. Merlin stabbed at the carrots and flattened the garlic mashed potatoes.

"When are you going to ask her out?" Merlin asked.

"I don't know. Soon, I think. It's just, she only ever calls me at work --"

"So give her your number," Merlin said, rolling his eyes. The obvious seemed to escape Lance sometimes. "Or ask her for hers."

"I already did," Lance said, his cheeks colouring. "But, you know, it's a little weird, though. She's almost a client, it would be unethical --"

"She's not a client, so it wouldn't be --" Merlin put his plate down on the coffee table and picked up the DVD box, flipping it over to read the series summary. He had no idea what it was about or even if it was any good. Except for when he was over at Lance's, Merlin hadn't watched television in more than a decade, and he wasn't up to date on the current pop culture. "And obviously it isn't, if you're watching this crap --"

"It's not crap," Lance said, pulling the box out of Merlin's hands.

"How would you know? You're taking a complete stranger's word for it --"

"Well, I'm about to, and if Gwen recommended it, it's not crap." Lance's phone rang. He put the popcorn bowl aside and went after his cell phone, glancing at the call display. The phone slipped out of his hand -- and it was only by the grace of Merlin's unreliable magic and Lance's hasty, frantic grasp that it didn't crash on the floor -- at least not right away.

An instant later, the plastic clattered on the floor. They both stared at it.

Instead of commenting on the fact that this was the most magic either of them had seen Merlin manage, consciously or otherwise, since they'd met, Lance said, "It's Gwen!"

"What are you waiting for? Answer it!"

Lance held out his arm, put the other one on his chest, and took a deep breath before answering. "Hello, Lance Dulac speaking."

Merlin smothered his chuckle behind a bitter mouthful of beer.

"Gwen! Hi Gwen. How are you? I'm at home actually. I'm about to watch that series you told me
about? Yeah. Oh, yeah, I'm really looking forward to it. I'll make sure to skip that episode -- wait. Would you like to come over to my place to watch it with me?" Lance’s expression went from schoolboy excited to crestfallen in a nanosecond, and he started to pace.

"What do you mean, Cedric didn't show up? No, I didn't call him to cancel. I wouldn't do that without your say so. When did he say he got the call? Wait, late this afternoon? No, that's impossible, he called me to confirm that he would be there. He knows to call me if he gets a cancellation from a client directly, and he didn't --"

Lance fell silent again. Merlin reached for the popcorn -- with real butter, he noted, and wondered yet once again why fate couldn't have been nice to him for a change and made Lance gay, because things might turn out for the better if Merlin had someone like Lance to come home to. Lance's gaze went to the wall clock, and he went to the kitchen, pulling his laptop out of his briefcase.

"I'm checking right now."

Merlin glanced from the television -- Lance had left it on the hockey game -- at the laptop on the coffee table. Lance navigated through the menus, opening an electronic appointment book, and scrolled through several tabs.

"I'm. I'm really sorry, Gwen. There isn't anyone available. Everyone's been working full days, and even if I called them now, they'd hang up on me." Lance's shoulders slumped, and Merlin knew it was because he hated disappointing people. "I suppose I could do it, but, you know, Arthur blows me out of the water when he signs. Cedric was maybe one of two people --"

Lance trailed off and turned to look at Merlin, raising a brow. "Three people that I know who can keep up with him. Cedric's out, obviously -- I can't believe he didn't call me before he went to P'bo -- and Elaine quit last month. You know, hold on a second --"

Merlin waited until Lance covered the sound pickup of his cell phone before saying, "No. Absolutely not."

"You don't even know --"

Merlin made the mistake of looking at Lance. The desperation in his friend's face was unmistakable. "You want me to stand in as an interpreter for one of your clients tonight because you don't have anyone else. We talked about this. Don't you remember the kids' concert? I don't want that to happen again --"

"It won't," Lance promised, but before Merlin could ask how can you be so sure, Lance added, "It's different now, isn't it? You were in a really bad place then. You're better now, aren't you? I know you are. Please, Merlin. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important --"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "How important? It's Saturday night. What, Gwen's got a friend who wants to go on a date and he needs some help telling the girl how to, you know --"

Merlin made a rude sign.

"He's giving a speech at the Diamond Show," Lance said. "It's a big thing. A really big thing. He needs someone to voice the speech, then stay with him afterward to interpret conversations."

Merlin raised a brow. Normally, it was the other way around -- when he'd worked for Lance, Merlin usually interpreted for the person, not voicing for the crowd. "Well, that's different."

Lance grinned. He brought the phone to his ear. "He's thinking about it --"
"I'm not thinking about it --"

Lance shoved the phone into Merlin's hand. "She wants to talk to you."

Merlin put the phone against his ear cautiously. "Um. Hello?"

"Do you own a tuxedo? Or at least a really nice suit? If you don't, I can get you one --"

"Um. Yes. Yes, I own a tux. Um. I'm sorry, Gwen, is it?" Merlin leaned forward and put the beer on the coffee table. "I don't know what Lance told you, but I'm --"

"We'll pay triple the going rate --"

"It's not about money, Gwen, it's that -- OW!" Merlin dropped the phone and wrenched his foot away from under Lance's heel. Lance recovered the phone and kept it out of Merlin's reach.

"He'll do it," Lance said cheerfully. "Yes, that's fine. I'll bring him there myself. We're not far. We can be there in twenty minutes, a half an hour, tops."

Merlin groaned loudly, slumping back against the couch. He wished that he'd told Lance that he hadn't been up to getting together to watch TV or that he had to go back to work or... He didn't hear the rest of the conversation between Lance and Gwen and didn't realize that Lance had hung up until Lance yanked him off the couch and walked him out of the apartment.

"Hurry up and get dressed."

"Why are you making me do this?"

"Because you're my friend, you need to meet people, and you want me to be happy with the girl of my dreams."

Merlin gave Lance a long, long look he sincerely hoped conveyed exactly how wrong Lance was, but Lance shoved him into the hall.

"Tuxedo! Ten minutes!"

ooOoo

Merlin suspected that, deep -- deep, deep, very deep -- down, he was a closet romantic, and somewhere in the dark recesses of his cold heart, he wanted to believe that the out-of-the-blue, love-at-first-sight romance-novel bullshit actually happened. He wanted to witness it for himself -- that was the only explanation he had for why he agreed to do the job.

The evidence so far was the way that Lance was beaming, completely besotted, at Gwen, and the way that Gwen was smiling shyly at Lance. It had been cute for the first five minutes, and it was definitely fodder for endless teasing for the next six months -- at least -- but it had been going on for ten minutes, and they hadn't even kissed yet.

Maybe it was the cynic in him, but for all that Merlin had played romantic roles, and watched romance blossom, similar scenes of love and courtship did not happen off the stage. If anything, when the curtain fell, the fantasy fairy-tale love fizzled out spectacularly. Merlin had learned to duck and cover to avoid the fallout of those botched relationships, glad that he had never gotten embroiled in one himself.
But now, instead of feeling sullen and angry at watching Gwen and Lance together, Merlin felt better, somehow. Maybe the two of them wouldn't last. Maybe they would have kids and a messy divorce and cat-fights for the rest of their lives, but at this moment, this perfect moment, Merlin saw something real. He felt a flutter in his belly, an ache in his heart -- the emotions were fleeting, but they reminded him that he had wanted this, once, before he'd given up any chance of it happening altogether and satisfied his romantic cravings by living vicariously through cheap paperback romance novels with bare-chested men with rippling, muscular torsos and long hair flowing in the wind on the front covers.

Merlin waited patiently. He flipped through the show's schedule and paid attention to the evening's events. He walked around in a small circle, nodding at the people behind the registration desk who were packing up for the night so that they could close the doors and join the rest of the festivities. Lance and Merlin had been given freshly-printed all-access passes to the Pendragon Diamond Show. Merlin hadn't paid attention when Lance gave him the highlights of the yearly exhibition conference, but he had gathered that the reason the event was important was because Arthur, the man he was going to be interpreting for, was the new young CEO of the company and this was his first appearance in public.

At the very least, the job would be interesting. It was already unlike anything he'd ever done in his brief career as an interpreter -- as anything that Lance himself had ever done. Most interpreting jobs were at schools helping kids of any age, at occasional staff meetings, at presentation events and conferences, on training courses, for doctor appointments, emergency room visits, or the rare court appearance.

Merlin tried not to have preconceptions about people, but he couldn't help wonder about this CEO whom he would be interpreting for. Lance had kept Gwen as the topic of conversation on the drive over -- Gwen this, Gwen that -- and there hadn't been any opportunity to ask about Arthur Pendragon. But he did wonder if the client in question was deaf or just hard of hearing, if he really needed Merlin there, if he was shy and subdued or loud and brash, or anything in between.

He couldn't help thinking about Will -- how he used to interpret for him, too -- and wonder how his friend was doing. It had been years since they'd last seen each other, but he was sure that Will was still the same old Will, cocky and arrogant and headstrong.

Merlin wondered if Will would ever speak to him again.

Merlin fidgeted, checked his watch, and glanced over to see if Lance and Gwen were done being smitten. They weren't.

He wandered around, stopping short when he caught a glimpse inside. It was a good thing that he was inured to public appearances, because the crowd through the fire safety doors was immense. Hundreds of people -- the numbers likely crested close to a thousand, if not more -- were milling around in their Sunday best. The women were dressed in resplendent ball gowns, and the men were in what appeared to be mandatory black tie, but there were a few who had opted for their flashiest business suits.

Merlin was glad that he hadn't thrown his tuxedo in a fire when he'd fled show business, otherwise he wouldn't fit in at the show. On the other hand, maybe he should have burned it -- then he would have the perfect excuse not to be there now.

He wondered when Lance and Gwen would finish gazing at each other as if they were the only two people left on the planet. He wanted to get this over with.

Merlin hoped that he would at least get to talk with Arthur before he took his position to translate the speech for the audience, but if Arthur was nervous, he probably was in the middle of
reviewing his speech and wouldn't be up to meeting new people at the moment. Merlin knew he should be preparing himself -- this would go more smoothly if he knew what he was going to be telling the crowd.

Merlin looked over his shoulder again and groaned inwardly. Lance and Gwen were still making goo-goo eyes at each other, and quite frankly, at this point, it was enough to drown his inner romantic. He was tempted to find a priest and marry the two so that they would skip the whole pretence of dating in the first place. Merlin didn't look forward to having to listen to Lance alternate between gushing about Gwen's sparkling qualities and crying into his cups that he didn't think he was good enough for her.

He was saved from having to interrupt their silent declarations of love by one of the show's organizers, who came up to Gwen and reminded her that "We really should be backstage."

"Oh, yes!" Gwen exclaimed, looking around until she spotted Merlin. She twined her arm through his in a possessive, you're not getting away hold, and said, "We're very grateful that you agreed to do this at the last minute. Arthur really doesn't want his uncle give the speech for him. I didn't want him to, myself, but if I hadn't found you --"

"Disaster?" Merlin suggested. He looked between Gwen and Lance and back again.

"You have no idea."

Merlin thought that maybe he did know. A long time ago, the first time he had a lead role, Merlin had been so sick from nerves that he had grudgingly stepped aside for an understudy who had massacred the part. The reviews had been horrible, the cast and crew had blamed Merlin, and the show had closed within the next week when there had been a rush at the box office to return the tickets. After spending months rehearsing, the cast was out of a job -- everyone but Merlin, who had been sixteen at the time. It hadn't taken long before he had been quickly snapped up by a rival opera house while the others were out of work for months.

Merlin let Gwen lead him through the crowd. He leaned close so that he could be heard over the noise and asked, "Will I meet Arthur beforehand? I have to talk to him, find out what he prefers, review his speech --"

"Oh, yes, absolutely. I have a copy of the speech with me, but I'll take you to Arthur first," Gwen said. She paused, and gave him a small, apologetic smile. "I should probably warn you. He's a bit nervous right now, he's not going to be very..."

"Personable?" Merlin suggested.

Gwen snapped her fingers and gave him a yes, that's it smile. "Personable. Yes. That is a good word. I'm going to apologize for him in advance. He really is a sweet person once you get to know him."

"I'll take your word for it," Merlin assured her.

"Shall we?" Gwen asked, and before either Merlin or Lance could respond, Gwen brought them into the crowd, where she gracefully dodged every attempt to slow them down until they had made it to the stage in a whirlwind rush. Merlin was grateful that Lance was right behind them. Merlin might not get the same sort of paralyzing stage fright that he used to get when he had been new to the theatre anymore, but between Gwen's determination and the very scary security guards blocking their way, he was starting to feel uneasy.

They let Gwen pass through unhindered, but they stopped to make note of Merlin and Lance's
badges, copying their names down on a clipboard, before letting them through.

The backstage at a conference wasn't that much different to the backstage at a theatre right before a show. There was the sound technician, the stage manager, the coordinator, the lighting engineers. There were people moving equipment around or just waiting for their cues. It was easy to spot the few people who would be speaking and Merlin could tell from the way that the coordinator was fretting that not everyone had shown up yet. If Merlin remembered correctly from the schedule, Arthur would be the first one up after some sort of memorial.

Further backstage, surrounded by sheer, draping curtains that guarded them from the crowd’s purview, were pretty, stick-thin women whom Merlin assumed would be walking up and down the runway later on. There was a large enclosure midway between the models' dressing rooms and the curtain that was completely surrounded by armed security guards.

Gwen pulled him toward the front of the stage, and she pointed. "Arthur is going to be standing right there, in the middle. We've put a microphone on the runway where you can see him. During the memorial, the lights are going to be off -- please don't trip over the microphone -- and that's when you should go and take your place. The light is only going to turn on Arthur after the memorial presentation is finished. Are you all right with that? You don't get stage fright, do you? Oh, no, please tell me you don't, I forgot to ask --"

"He'll be fine," Lance snorted, raising a meaningful brow at Merlin.

"I'll be fine," Merlin said, giving Gwen as reassuring a smile as possible while wishing that Lance didn't know so much about his background, because this -- among others -- would have been the perfect excuse to bow out.

Why hadn't he thought of any of those perfect excuses when he'd needed them?

Merlin leaned out a bit, mentally counting the steps in one direction, then another, that would get him to the runway. He made a special note of the microphone's position -- Gwen was right. If he tripped, it would be his neck, cracked on the edge of the runway. There would be blood everywhere, people screaming. It would be very bad.

Merlin idly considered doing just that -- it would be another excuse to get out of doing this job.

He had a healthy respect for the drop-off at the end of a stage; a runway was worse, because a step in any wrong direction could spell doom. Years of practice had honed his counting skills down -- he had been able to hit his mark ninety-nine percent of the time. Or at least, he could have a year ago. Hopefully he wasn't too rusty now.

It was strange, to be standing on a stage, and to not be nervous. The anxiety that he felt in his chest at the concerts toward the end of his career -- the tight grip of a ghostly hand around his heart squeezing ever tighter -- wasn't present, and he supposed it was because he knew he wouldn't be in the limelight this time.

That knowledge was strangely comforting.

"I'm all right with that," Merlin said again, more to reassure himself than Gwen. He looked around, looking for his client.

His eye was caught first by a man of average height with short black hair greying at the temples, his mouth cut into a permanent smirk, his small round eyes neatly shadowed by arched brows. He was standing in front of a full-length mirror -- a mirror that was probably intended as a final check for the models before they stomped down the runway. He adjusted his tie, straightened his long,
tailed jacket, smoothing down the fabric. His lips were moving, repeating a memorized speech to himself.

Merlin had the impression of a crow swooping down to salvage whatever shiny trinket had been left behind, flapping off to add it to his hoard.

Gwen's fingers were light on his arm. "That's Arthur."

Merlin followed Gwen's gesture to a man who was about his age -- maybe a little older. He stood off to the side by the curtains at an angle that hid him from the crowd but still afforded him a good view of the people milling about, drinking champagne, savouring the appetizers, chatting up old friends and networking with strangers.

He was...

Well, Merlin had been around handsome people most of his life. It was a hazard of the trade -- his old trade, he reminded himself sternly. Tall men reminiscent of Cary Grant. Slim, curvy women who were a cross between Marilyn Monroe and a young Elizabeth Taylor. Broad-shouldered men with a rugby-player's build.

He'd met all the acclaimed beautiful people whose names were always on the matinee signs, lit up by large Hollywood spotlights. He'd stood on the red carpet with them. He'd avoided bloodthirsty paparazzi and crazed fans alongside them, running down the city street of whatever city Merlin happened to have been in at the time.

He'd dated them, if rubbing each other off backstage right after a successful show could be called dating. He had anonymous one-night stands with young up-and-comers that he'd never seen again outside of the silver screen. He'd shared smiles with famous-on-Broadway stars, answered the wordless question they asked with tilted heads with a brief nod. He had hotel keycards pressed into his hand accompanied by a deep, husky voice whispering the room number. He'd never knocked on the women's doors -- he'd slip their keys under the door instead. But the men --

Merlin had seen all sorts of beautiful, male and female, from ethereal to surreal. They had caught his eye briefly, and once they were gone, that was it. There had been no appeal to them.

But Arthur was...

His wheat-gold hair was styled in a roguish cut. His jaw was clean-shaven and strong. His face was chiselled out of stone by a Renaissance master, his cheekbones sculpted, his nose Romanesque, his brow without a worried crease. From where Merlin was standing, he couldn't tell the colour of Arthur's eyes, but he could see how they were half-hooded in thought. His lips were a dark pink, set in a determined line.

He didn't fidget. He didn't sway. He didn't move.

Arthur stood out from the other speakers not because he was wearing a white tuxedo jacket over black trousers, a black vest, cummerbund and tie. He stood out because he was settled, without trace of the same anxious energy that had the other speakers bustling about, trying to work it off before it was their turn to walk onto the stage.

Merlin reached for a word to describe Arthur Pendragon, but the only one that he could come up with was... different.

It wasn't different in a bad way. Hardly. Arthur was calm, serene, composed. He was an ocean of stillness under the blazing heat of the sun, the quiet that kept the rambling chaos at bay, the eye of the hurricane that blew and raged all about.
The tension in Merlin's shoulders inexplicably eased. For a moment, a brief moment, the incessant chatter in his head ebbed to silence. For a moment, a brief moment, the fog lifted and Merlin was afforded a clarity that he hadn't had in years. For a moment, a brief moment, Merlin felt his guard come down.

It was bliss.

And it didn't last. Of course it didn't. Merlin would never be so blessed.

The slightest touch on his arm slammed the portcullis shut. The archers raced to the murder holes in the fortress walls. The army gathered and braced against an onslaught from the enemy. Merlin wrenched himself away, startled.

But it was only Gwen, giving him a small, encouraging smile. "Let's go meet him."

Merlin took a deep breath. He took Arthur in again, wanting to memorize the image of a man who could ease his unsettled soul merely by being there. He resisted Gwen's gentle pull. He wanted to turn around and walk away before he met the man and found him no different than anyone else. He wanted to keep intact the memory of someone who could care for nothing and care about everything in the same instant. He wanted to take that fleeting sensation of calm and lock it away where he wouldn't lose it.

But when he set his eyes on Arthur again, something had changed. It was the lock of his jaw, the clench of his teeth, a muscle popping, the narrow of his eyes.

He was a lone soldier in a battle against unfathomable odds, with no one by his side.

Merlin swallowed hard, trying to ignore the swell of emotion that he couldn't identify.

He followed Gwen.

Arthur remembered standing on a stage similar to this one, hiding behind the heavy curtains as a child. His father had patted Arthur on the shoulder on his way to the microphone and made his yearly show-opening speech. Uther would come backstage afterward, heft Arthur into his arms, and give Arthur's mother a kiss before letting her pass. The two of them would stand right there, Uther beaming at Ygraine, Arthur in awe of his mother, as she gave a much shorter speech and took a step aside, allowing her artistry to speak for itself in a glittering array of jewels on the models of the show.

In those days, the crowd had been a source of much amusement for Arthur. Children weren't usually brought to the Diamond Show, but everyone quickly learned that Arthur had a reason to be there. The designers and artisans and investors and Important People all knew him; they'd watched him grow up. They could recognize him on sight.

"I remember you when you were this tall."

"You look so much like your mother."

They would pinch his cheeks if they dared; they would smile pleasantly at him as he walked past. They would offer him candy from the bowls at their booths, or they would try to sneak brochures and pamphlets in his pockets, hoping his mother would find them before his clothes went into the wash.

He'd caught on to their games very early on. They wanted him to do something for them? They
could do something for him in return. Suddenly, he didn't only look like his mother, he had his father's shrewd cunning and brilliant mind.

But that had been a long time ago. As a teenager, he caught the eye of a fair few of the young men and women who worked the conference behind the scenes -- he'd been made to work, then, too, and sometimes he would make friends, but those friendships never lasted beyond the week when the exhibits were torn down.

He knew everything about this show. Its heartbeat. The ebbs and flows. He knew everything about the business -- from the source of the diamonds to their recovery to their cuts and polish. He knew about the creation process behind the designs that heralded the artistry of the Pendragon line. He knew these things because he had learned them from his parents.

They were gone now, and it was down to Arthur.

To Arthur. Not Agravaine. Not any of the members of the board. This was his company now and his alone. He had the final vote. He made the decisions.

He had to remember that. He couldn't forget. He refused to let his uncle get to him. Arthur was Pendragon Incorporated, not Agravaine.

And tonight, these people at the show would know it. They would. They would remember the child who had run amok through the booths, hiding under the curtained tables, using the fold-out photo displays as his personal jungle gym. They would remember the teenager who helped them unload their wares, who could answer their questions and direct them with the assurance of any of the event coordinators, who made certain that they had spare sockets for their lights and extra security when they fretted.

All these people would know Arthur again, the adult, the man who had worked at Pendragon Incorporated in one capacity or another since he came of age, who took over one of the senior positions while still in his teens, who had shouldered his father's responsibilities and contributed to his mother's designs.

Now, he was the one at the helm.

Arthur warred with himself for what had felt like hours before coming to the decision that even if they couldn't find an interpreter in time, he could not let Agravaine deliver his speech. What did it matter if the audience couldn't understand him, if his voice was too low or too high? What did it matter if he spoke too quickly, if, in the end, Arthur left them with the impression that he was too afraid to step into the limelight? Arthur had decided that the only fate worse than allowing the audience to see his weaknesses would be to let them see his fear.

While he waited to see if Gwen could find someone to interpret for him, Arthur had worked himself up to the idea of stepping out onto the stage, to gesture for a microphone, to give his speech himself, with his voice, and he would do his best. If his uncle believed that he would be an embarrassment to the company -- well, then, that was his problem, because his parents certainly had not thought so. He'd pumped himself up, remembering all the times and all the people who seemed to have no problem understanding him when he spoke. If it hadn't been an issue before, it certainly wouldn't be an issue now.

Despite the surge of self-confidence, Arthur had been nearly washed off the stage by the strength of his relief when Gwen told him that she had found an interpreter and that he was on the way.

All at once, his anxiety and nerves were replaced by humiliation and wounded pride. Arthur hated to rely on other people. He had been raised to be independent, to adapt to any given situation, to
find a way to make things work. But he couldn't compromise for other people all the time -- and he would never be without the need for an interpreter at fast-paced business meetings or at chaotic public events.

Arthur had nodded through Gwen's pleased descriptions of the man who was coming. He was a friend of Lance's. He was certified, even though he'd quit some time ago. He was fluent in both ASL and LSQ -- the American Sign Language and the Langue Signée Québecois, which was ideal, because Arthur understood and used both. He was one of those rare people who actually owned a tuxedo. And, most importantly, he was on the way, and Arthur wouldn't have had to desperately ask Gwen at the last minute to act as his interpreter if he lost the courage to give his speech himself.

That was all that he cared about. Beyond that, he'd stopped listening. It didn't mean he stopped fretting, though.

Arthur caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned in time to see Gwen's approach. She was with two men. Arthur recognized Lance, who was handsome in a black tuxedo, looking as fit as he had been the first time that Arthur had met him.

Arthur decided that it really was a shame that all of the best-looking men were straight. If circumstances were different -- if it hadn't been for the turmoil of his parents' sudden death, the long days and late nights of trying to keep the company from falling apart, the upheaval of his new position, the stressful rush of the Diamond Show, and, most importantly, for the way that Gwen lit up from the inside out whenever she spoke to Lance on the phone, Arthur might have been tempted to try. Just for one night. Just to -- just to be with someone who had an idea of what it was like not to be able to hear. Who would pay attention to him and not make him feel as if he was less.

But that wouldn't be fair. Not to Gwen, who adored Lance. Not to Lance, who was heads-over-heels over Gwen. And least of all to Arthur himself, but only because he knew he would always demand more -- he would always need more from a one night stand than a single night.

And, if Arthur were honest, Lance wasn't Arthur's type.

Arthur spared a glance for the man following behind Gwen, but barely took in the details before Gwen started signing.

"He's perfect. He has a gorgeous voice."

Arthur released a breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding all along, giving Gwen a small little nod of thanks at the confirmation. He wanted this speech, this evening, to go without a hitch, and if he could do it by without sounding like a complete idiot, so much the better.

Gwen shifted to the side and signed and spoke, "You remember Lance?"

"I remember Lance," Arthur said. He didn't bother to sign and held out his hand instead. "I'm glad that you could make it. Thank you for finding someone on such short notice."

"I didn't have to look far," Lance said, but his hands echoed his words. He was a small, precise signer, almost self-conscious of attracting attention. "He's my next-door neighbour."

"Well, that's lucky," Arthur said, his eyes lingering on Lance in case Lance was going to add anything more. Instead, Arthur caught the exact moment Lance happened to glance at Gwen and couldn't look away, giving her a completely besotted smile. With an inward sigh, Arthur looked at the newcomer.
And paused.

The first thing he noticed was that the man's tuxedo was tailored and that it fit him with the snug comfort of a second skin. It was of a finer material than most on the conference floor, but not so fine that it eclipsed Arthur's own suit.

The interpreter -- Arthur realized with some embarrassment that he hadn't been paying attention when Gwen told him the man's name -- wore it with the ease of someone who had worn it many, many times, with a casual grace and complete lack of self-consciousness. For all that the interpreter had an air of professionalism, there was something more to him.

He was guarded, but friendly; careful but aware; cautious with a willingness to be kind. Arthur was reminded of a dog he'd seen on the streets, once, teased and tormented by teenagers throwing things at it. Terrified, beaten, with no reason to trust anyone, the dog had still come to Arthur, its tail wagging between its legs, and allowed itself to be petted and fed and taken to someone where he would be cared for and loved.

Arthur didn't understand the feeling of wanting to take care of this man, but it was strong and overwhelming and suffocating. Arthur looked away, but he couldn't tear his gaze away for long, and he met the interpreter's eyes. They were a soft blue-grey, with a twinkle of gold around the rims, made bright and startling by the sharp contrast of black eyelashes and the glimpse of a promise of untold emotion hidden behind them.

His lips were -- they weren't too wide. They weren't too thin. They were just perfect, with a subtle curve of the crown of his upper lip, a slightly fuller lower lip worried at the corner. Arthur wanted him to speak, wondering if he would be the type to mumble, or if he would enunciate his words, or if Arthur would be able to understand him at all when he wasn't making an effort to be understood. It didn't seem to matter to Arthur, because he thought he should like to look at those lips anytime that he had the chance.

His cheekbones were startling -- high and cut so sharp it was almost as if a feather would be rendered in twain to fall upon them. His jaw was an angular set covered in the scruff of a long day. His ears stuck out a little, with curls of black hair half-hiding the lobes. He wore his hair short, stylishly ruffled.

Before Arthur could take a mental step back and take in the whole picture, he was distracted by the man's hands.

He had strong hands and long, thin fingers. The fingernails were cut short, the knuckles were rough and raw. It was the quick, graceful movement of hands and fingers that captivated Arthur.

"You must be Arthur. My name's Merlin. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The fingerspelling of their names was like a butterfly's wings fluttering in the air. The gestures of the signs were crisp and clear, with a flourish of personal style hinting of a lifetime of signing, with not a single ounce of self-consciousness. It was a relief to see next to Gwen's sloppy, hasty, always busy hands, even after Lance's subtle, muted signs.

"It's nice to meet you too," Arthur said, shaking the hand that Merlin offered. It was a firm grip, warm, reassuring. Arthur didn't want to let go. He ignored the nervous clench of his stomach, because now that his interpreter -- that Merlin -- was here, there would be no getting out of giving his speech.

Merlin must have picked up on Arthur's sudden apprehension, because he gave Arthur a small
smile. He signed and spoke at the same time. "I understand that we're short on time. Why don't we get ready?"

Arthur was gratified to see that lip-reading Merlin was just as easy as it was to understand his precise signs. "That's a good idea. Gwen told you the arrangements?"

"She did," Merlin signed and said. "Do you have a copy of the speech? I'd like to familiarize myself with it -- I only need the context --"

"I have it here," Gwen signed with one hand, digging in her purse. She came up for air with several folded sheets, handing them to Merlin.

Merlin barely blinked at the length. "Long speech."

"If it's too long for you," Arthur began, but Merlin waved him off. "Not at all. I can prompt you if I need to," Merlin signed.

Arthur's eyes narrowed in an emotion that tripped and stumbled when Merlin did the unexpected. He winked -- he winked -- at Arthur and smiled so brightly that Arthur was blinded. In that instant, he saw a glimpse of the Merlin behind the mask, vibrant and alive -- and Arthur was too stunned to be angry that Merlin had dared to talk to him like that.

The flare of anger dissipated so quickly that Arthur barely registered being angry in the first place. He was amused in a way that he couldn't explain. He opened his mouth for a rejoinder, but before the words could come out of his mouth, the walls came up around Merlin, and his smile faded to professional neutrality. He gestured at a spot behind Gwen and signed, "Is that the speech?"

Arthur turned and saw his uncle approach. Merlin shifted, moving so that he stayed in Arthur's line of sight, and gestured to Gwen before signing her words. "I just had it printed out at the business centre."

No one but Arthur and Gwen needed to know that Gwen was lying.

Merlin pointed at Agravaine. "And not a moment too soon. I'll read it over, but I don't think I'll have the time to memorize it before we begin. I'm going to have to ad lib as best I can --"

"Actually," Gwen said, and Merlin deftly dodged Agravaine's attempt to yank the printout from where it was tucked under Merlin's arm. "We found an interpreter for Arthur. This is --"

"I thought we agreed that I would give the speech," Agravaine said, rounding on Arthur, moving to block Arthur's line of sight to Merlin.

"I said that I would think about it, uncle," Arthur said firmly, glancing at Merlin over Agravaine's shoulder, and feeling warmed to see that Merlin's full attention was on him. A calm settled Arthur's nerves; Merlin's raised brows and encouraging nod gave Arthur a confidence he hadn't known he had been missing. He looked at Agravaine, and said, "You said it yourself. You won't have time to learn the speech. I may as well do it myself."

"I thought you understood why this was a bad idea," Agravaine said, frowning faintly.

A small tinge of doubt stabbed at his heart. Arthur ducked his head down, and when he raised his eyes again, it was to see that Merlin had moved to the side, no longer blocked by Agravaine, his eyes locked on Arthur. It was disconcerting and frighteningly reassuring all at the same time. Merlin was watching Arthur as if he were important. As if he mattered. Arthur didn't know why a complete stranger -- this complete stranger -- could make him feel that way, but it was a feeling he
didn’t want to lose.

"I’m giving the speech, uncle," Arthur said, turning away. He gave Merlin a meaningful nod. "And if you don’t mind, Merlin and I have a few things to go over before I open the show."


ooOOoo

It took a minute to get used to the pitch black, and the darkness gave way to the faint overhead lights.

The only illumination came from the projectors running a film clip on the raised screen behind the stage. Merlin stood on the runway in front of the microphone; Arthur was some distance away in the centre of the stage, so still that Merlin almost couldn’t see him.

There had been a time when Merlin suffered from show jitters so bad that he’d lunged for a bucket before he threw up his nerves over someone’s costume. He was relieved that he wasn’t feeling them now.

Experience told him that the presentation could go one of two ways for Arthur -- the first few minutes might be a tangled mess of signs before he eased into his speech, or the entire speech might be a stuttering mess that would stop halfway through because Arthur fainted dead away.

He thought at first that it was nerves that kept Arthur so calm on the stage, but it hadn’t been until the show’s organizers played the memorial with recorded background music that Merlin understood why Arthur was frozen where he stood. The audience had been so respectfully silent that Merlin could hear the quiet sobs of the people nearest the stage -- the Pendragons had friends in the audience, but even to those who hadn’t known them personally, Ygraine and Uther had been important.

The memorial made Merlin miss his mother. Merlin’s throat tightened with emotion that he hadn’t let himself feel in a long time. Merlin let his gaze drift to the featureless floor of the platform rather than to watch the memorial -- a series of photographs of the Pendragons from the time they met, all the way through their marriage, mixed in with a selection of images from far-flung lands, to the pair of them as an elegantly dressed couple at one fundraiser or another. Merlin couldn’t quite tune out the music in the background, poignant and heartfelt, and he swallowed hard several times to clear his throat.

Merlin hadn’t so much read Arthur’s speech as he’d become completely engrossed in it, looking up to glance at Gwen to wordlessly ask if Arthur had written it. She’d given him a quick, confirming nod, before Arthur had turned to him to ask what he thought.

This is an amazing speech, Merlin had wanted to say, but he’d caught himself. There had been a crackle in Arthur’s voice, a hint of self-doubt, a chink of insecurity in otherwise perfect armour.

"I suppose it will have to do," Merlin signed. He didn’t know what prompted him to react the way he did, to poke and prod at the other man in an attempt to make him relax, but he could tell from the quick change in Arthur’s stance that the distraction was helping.

Arthur raised a brow, and his tone was halfway between insulted and indignant. "You suppose?"

"This isn't by far the worst speech I've ever read," Merlin signed, ignoring Gwen's wide eyes and Lance's open mouth.

"Don't you dare blame the speech if you fuck up," Arthur shot back.
"I wouldn't dream of it," Merlin signed. "I was thinking of blaming you."

"Don't be an idiot," Arthur said before turning away, ending the conversation. Gwen's eyes had gone bigger, if that was humanely possible, and Lance shot Merlin a warning look that said they'd have words about his behaviour later, but Arthur wasn't fooling Merlin. The man was confident in his speech -- it was just a matter of making him see that. And the teasing worked; there was a small smile on his lips, and the tension that had bunched at his shoulders while talking to his uncle had eased.

Maybe it was Arthur's quietness, maybe it was his intensity, but whatever it was, Merlin was comfortable with Arthur in a way that he hadn't been with anyone else in years. Merlin's only regret was that once the job was over with, he'd never see Arthur again.

The lights dimmed as the memorial came to an end. The music's last few notes lingered, cloying in the air. The stage remained dark for some moments longer -- someone's idea of a dramatic pause, but the audience was taking advantage of it to dab their faces of tears and to collect themselves before the opening speech.

The darkness didn't lift when Merlin expected it to -- Arthur's otherwise calm decorum shifted and he glanced behind him to find out what was taking so long. He waited patiently, but Merlin saw traces of uncertainty in his stance until the lighting finally changed, casting a spotlight over him.

The audience broke into light applause.

There was a ripple in the curtains near the backstage. Merlin saw Gwen waving a hand for his attention. His heart sank when he saw her desperately sign -- "There's no sound. Stall him."

_There's no sound_ was code for "You're fucked." Merlin had been in shows where the sound system had burned down moments before the curtains raised, and the audience had been treated to a shouting match instead of a world-class opera.

Merlin started to raise his hands to warn Arthur, to tell him to stretch out the pause, to wait or to go backstage and to send in someone else instead for a shorter speech. But when he looked at the man, all Merlin could see was how fragile the moment was. This was important to Arthur. Arthur needed for the night, for his speech, to go well.

Merlin wasn't certain what prompted him to reach up to touch the microphone to ensure that it was off when Arthur looked at him and gave him a small _are you ready_ nod, but for the first time in over a year, Merlin closed his eyes and deliberately reached for his magic.

Bitte, please, please. Be there. Please.

His magic hadn't worked the way it was supposed to -- when it responded at all -- for such a long time. He crossed his fingers behind his back and prayed.

Merlin just wanted a little bit of magic. Enough for a small, minuscule spell. Was that too much to ask? It was magic that he had used, sometimes, when he was too tired from too many shows in a row and not enough rest in between and needed that extra volume to sing at the top of his range. It was magic that he hadn't been able to reach, not for ages, not since his magic flickered and faded weakly away, until he didn't even have that to rely on toward the end of his career.

He hadn't reached for his magic on purpose since then. It never seemed half as important to try as it was now.

When Merlin reached for his magic, he expected the familiar hollow feeling, the emptiness. He expected his magic to withdraw from his grasp and cower into a shell where he couldn't hold it.
But his magic came to him in a rush of eager strength that nearly made him gasp in surprise, and Merlin shivered with relief and joy as he felt the tingle on his skin.

He returned Arthur's nod. *I'm ready*, he signed.

Arthur uncrossed his arms, letting them fall to his sides. After a long, measuring glance around the conference floor, Arthur raised his arms and began to sign.

His hands moved with precision and grace and emotion, and Merlin stared, entranced. He marvelled at how easily he could pick out what Arthur was feeling in only a few signs. Merlin wanted to sink in those gestures, he wanted to lose himself in them.

Instead, he took a deep, deep breath, his magic welling in his chest, and spoke as clearly as he could, his voice magically-magnified to fill the conference hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Arthur Pendragon."

Arthur lowered his hands and waited. There was a short silence as the crowd turned to the stage. With the innate talent of an experienced toastmaster, Arthur choose exactly the moment when everyone had leaned closer to gesture again, his signing larger than the world.

Merlin shifted his voice to match, as deep a rumble as he could manage, and said, "Allow me to welcome you to the twenty-fifth annual Pendragon Diamond Show."

There was a soft, giggling gasp nearby, a murmur of delight. Merlin thought he heard *a showman like his dad*.

Arthur was patient, because he watched the audience intently and waited until the applause died down. He unbuttoned his jacket, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and gave the audience an indulging smile.

When he finally raised his hands again, it was to sign in a different tone. He was subdued now, his expression serious.

"Ten years ago, I went to South Africa with my family. My father took me to one of our stakeholder mines. He gave me a shovel and a bucket and put me to work alongside the men without whom we would not have our livelihood. They were tall men, short men, young men, old men. They were members of several different tribes and they spoke every language from Tsonga to Sotho to Zulu. I was bewildered and lost, because I was a young, white boy who couldn't understand a word.

"It was a miracle to me that these men found a way to work together, that they could make themselves understood, and that despite my own shortcomings, they welcomed me with open arms, if only because I was there to shoulder the load, sparing their backs for a while."

There was a short pause as Arthur allowed that to sink in. No one could miss the implication of his words. Here he was in front of a crowd, giving a speech with nothing but his hands. He had found a way to make himself understood now; he had done the same thing ten years ago with people who spoke a foreign language, and *surely* if he could do it, anyone could do it too.

Merlin couldn't help but smile, even though no one could see him in the dark. It had been one thing to read the speech and to be impressed by Arthur's writing skills, but it was something else entirely to *listen* to Arthur, to see his cadences, his quiet pauses, the stresses and the emphasis.

It was a challenge to Merlin, to try to match the emotion in Arthur's signs with his voice.
"I didn't work there for only a few hours or even only one day. Oh, no. My father had something else in mind. He had meant for me to work at the mines all summer long. I was a teenager. You can imagine how well that went over.

"At the end of the first day, I whined that my shoulders ached and my arms were sore and my hands were covered by blisters and that I'd break my spine if I had to carry another sixty pound bucket up the muddy, slippery slope. I thought if I complained enough, my father would have mercy on me, and let me have a cushy office job instead of this back-breaking labour that was sure to kill me before the week was out. My father gave me a long, long look, and told me to get some rest, because I was going back to the mines first thing in the morning."

Arthur's recounting was done with a dramatic delivery, his expression twisting with complaint as he gestured to his shoulders and let his arms hang loose at his sides and stared at his hands as if they were covered in something monstrous and painful.

"I did the only thing I could. I went to my mother and pleaded with her to talk some sense into my father."

There was disdain in Arthur's signs, the confidence of someone who knew that the other parent would save him from his misery. The crowd chuckled.

"My mother, bless her, told me to get some rest, because I was going back to the mines first thing in the morning."

Arthur rolled his eyes. A collective, spontaneous laugh rippled through the crowd. Arthur shoved his hands in his pockets again, giving a Parents. What can you do? shrug that was right out of the Petulant Teenager handbook.

Arthur paced in place, walking a few steps that way, a few more in the other, before returning to his spot in the middle of the stage. He ran a hand through his hair and gave the audience a small, rueful smile. There was something so honest about his expression, his gestures, that scattered applause broke through the audience.

Merlin raised his hands in the air and shook them to indicate the reception Arthur was receiving. Arthur must have seen his gestures, because he checked himself, his chin ducking down, eyes fixing to the ground, and his cheeks coloured. The embarrassed shyness only increased the applause.

Merlin smiled in delight. He had known actors who couldn't elicit half of the response that Arthur was giving with his speech.

The clapping eased. Merlin lowered his hands. Arthur gave him a slight, subtle nod, giving the audience a long look before continuing.

"Many of the men at the mines became my friends. An old man named Yerome, who was half my size but so strong and determined, he could wrestle a stampeding water buffalo into submission. Another man named Neidi, who had hands the size of shovels, but who could pry out the tiniest raw diamond out of a stubborn piece of granite with just his fingertips. And there was Einoch, a boy who took me under his wing and showed me the ropes. He taught me how to walk through the mines in the dark. He showed me how to identify the different minerals, to be able to taste the ores in them, to let the veins guide me to the stone where diamonds have been trapped for millions and millions of years. He pointed out the spots in the tunnels where the rocks were coming loose and made sure I knew how to watch for a cave-in and what to do if I was ever trapped."
"It was dangerous work.

"Einoch was sixteen years old. A year older than I was at the time, but he already walked and talked as if he were a mining veteran with years of experience. He had a nose for diamonds -- he said it ran in his blood, because his blood was the blood of Kings. The way he helped people, the way the others came to him for advice -- even my father, if you can imagine Uther Pendragon seeking out the counsel of a sixteen year old boy -- I believed him.

"He was -- he still is -- a King."

Arthur's stance straightened even more, if such a thing was even possible, and Arthur was a King himself in that moment, regal and courteous and graceful, presiding over his court. Merlin was grateful for the pause; the sight of Arthur stole his breath away.

Merlin shook himself, forcing himself to concentrate.

"Einoch, Neidi, Yerome. They are the men who work our mines. They are the men who run our mines. They write to me every year and tell me about their families. Yerome's granddaughter just had a baby boy. Neidi's oldest son graduated with honours in mining engineering from the University of Johannesburg. Einoch writes one full page in his perfect block handwriting to tell me about the mine that he's operating for us, then spends the next four pages gushing about his young bride and her big round belly. He's expecting twins any day now."

The applause was light, but louder were the feminine Aww's. Arthur's pause was short this time.

"Maybe my father made me work the mines because he wanted me to know good, honest, hard labour.

"Maybe he thought I was a bit of a brat and that the mines would set me straight. I might even have needed that.

"A bit."

Arthur lowered his hand -- the one making the a bit gesture, with finger and thumb spread a bare centimetre apart -- and made a resigned, distasteful face. The crowd laughed.

Arthur's expression changed then, polished and professional, and his signs had a precision and seriousness to them, emphasizing the weight of his next words.

"Whatever my father's reasoning, I learned several important things from the experience.

"One, that there is nothing more satisfying than getting down into the dirt to work, and coming home at the end of the day, feeling as if your arms are going to fall off your body, because there's that moment when you close your eyes at night right before you fall asleep that you know that nothing could be more perfect.

"Two, that nothing in life comes free, and that it's too easy to forget that. If I want to remember, all I will have to do is visit my old friends, and they'll happily send me back to the mines to teach it to me all over again."

An amused murmur rolled through the crowd. There was a strategic pause, heightening the anticipation as the audience waited for the next item on the list.

"And three. There is no richer resource than man himself, and that you can only accumulate true wealth through compassion and fellowship."
Arthur's signs were heartfelt and poignant, his expression open and without guile. Merlin did his best to match Arthur's mood with his voice, deepening it, intoning each word with softness and meaning.

Arthur lowered his hands to his sides. He didn't sign. He didn't need to, because the room broke into long, enduring applause.

Merlin's arms ached from holding them up as he indicated just how long the clapping lasted. It was strange, because Merlin didn't see the least bit of smug self-satisfaction in Arthur's eyes that he would see in a fellow actor who had just delivered a rousing soliloquy. Arthur was glad; he was pleased, but there was sorrow in his gaze.

It was a long time before the clapping died down.

"Seven years ago, my parents and I established the World Blood Diamond Relief Fund. The money that is raised through the charity is distributed with one specific goal in mind: to help those who have escaped the areas of war and conflict in Africa by helping them relocate, by giving them a bursary for training and education, and by building hospitals and hospices for their medical health and care.

"My mother and I managed this fund, and I will continue to do so with the assistance of Elyan Leondegrace, who will be speaking to you later this evening. Elyan has been with Pendragon Incorporated for the last four years, but before he joined us, he was one of the lead relief coordinators with the World Health Organization. He's not just another pretty face or a financial wizard or someone to lighten your pocketbook, although I will warn you now that he is all three of these things.

"I have great faith in Elyan's ability to direct this large charity because Elyan has been there, in the dirt up to his elbows, and he brings to the World Blood Diamond Relief Fund a passion that we should all have for helping our fellow man."

There was more applause. Again, Arthur's pause was brief.

"My father was one of the most vocal proponents behind the passing of the Kimberley Process Certification. It's thanks to this certification that the distribution and sale of conflict diamonds was diminished in the late 1990s and that, for a while, conflict diamonds ceased to be the major source of finance for the perpetuation of criminal activities in war-torn nations. Unfortunately, not every country in the world has adopted the Process, and there are those at every level of worldwide governments who succumbed to corruption, or who engage in blatant non-compliance."

Merlin had read those words in Arthur's speech, but seeing them signed and giving them voice sent a chill down Merlin's spine. They were grave declarations made shocking and blunt by Arthur's refusal to mince or soften his words.

The crowd had fallen utterly silent, and that must have been Arthur's intention all along, because when he continued, his signs, although as precise as ever, came with calming, soothing motions.

"My father believed that any country who would illegally support the trade of conflict diamonds was guilty by association of violations against basic human rights. He served as a diplomat for the International Diamond Council and both educated and persuaded governments worldwide to accept the certification process and to take measures to curtail the fraudulent practice of distributing forged paperwork that allows the continued flow of conflict diamonds into the world market.

"The International Diamond Council has approached me to continue in this role, and I have
accepted on the condition that it is a permanent position that I will co-chair with Bohrs De Ganis. Bohrs is the gentleman behind the Canadian Certificate and is the one who established a pilot program in the Northwest Territories that includes the certification inscription on each and every diamond by a novel new laser technology.

"As a result of Bohrs' efforts in Canada and my request to position him as my co-chair, the International Diamond Council is looking into adopting a similar process as part of the worldwide Kimberley Process Certification. This Process will allow us to accurately identify non-conflict diamonds and sequester the conflict diamonds that have entered the marketplace. We will be able to once again curtail their distribution and sale, and restrict the financial resources of those who would perpetuate warfare and terrorism."

Merlin raised his hands again to indicate the crowd's applause, watching as Arthur pressed his lips together, steeling himself for the next part. The clapping died down, and the silence trailed on for some time.

Arthur signed again, his hands moving with a fluidity that belied the strict precision of his earlier speech.

"If my parents were here, they would be pleased to see all their friends and acquaintances gathered at the Crowne Convention Centre tonight to continue the celebration of the diamond industry's long history, its rich present and its promising and enduring future. I would hope that they would be happy to see me here tonight, on this stage, speaking to all of you as the new head of Pendragon Incorporated."

Arthur paused. Merlin did not miss -- he doubted anyone could miss -- the wet glisten of his eyes, the way he took a shaky breath, the falter of his hands as he signed Pendragon.

Merlin's eyes burned, and he swallowed hard, struggling to detach himself from the emotion that was weighing on Arthur's shoulders.

It hurt.

It hurt to feel.

After years of pretending to be someone else upon a stage, of contriving false emotions and ignoring his own, of cutting himself off from reality -- Merlin was suffering under the onslaught of heartache. Once, to save his sanity, Merlin had laid a tourniquet on a perfectly healthy limb until he hadn't been able to feel it anymore, and until now had thought would never be able to use it again.

All because of this man's speech. A speech Merlin had read before taking the stage, that he had prepared against, and yet, Merlin's walls were crumbling, the dust was settling around him, and he had his first free breath of fresh air.

And it burned.

Merlin shut his eyes so tightly that he saw bright lights. He opened them again to find himself momentarily blinded, the rest of the world dark while he stared at the sun in front of him. He waited until Arthur was looking away before reaching up with his hands to wipe the tears that had streamed down his cheeks, unbidden.

He took a deep breath, and another, and another. He calmed himself and forced his attention on Arthur, only on Arthur, even though Arthur was the one bringing about Merlin's ruin.

Arthur turned to the crowd again, his signs strong and full of determination and reassurance.
"My family’s legacy is a long and enduring one and it will continue with me."

He paused again, looking on both sides of the runway, his eyes hooded as he looked over the crowd.

"I see many familiar faces. I've spoken to some of you already. I also see many new people, and I hope to make an acquaintance with you this week. If you see me wandering around the booths, don't be shy. Please come up and say hello. Don't let the fancy clothes fool you -- deep down, I'm still the same person who was badly sunburned by the strong African sun and who peeled out of his skin for weeks afterward. I'm still the same person who lost his footing climbing up a steep hill with one of those sixty pound buckets of rock and who swallowed a metric tonne of mud on the way down. I'm still the same person who sat around the bonfire with Einoch, Neidi and Yerome, giving names to all the stars in the night sky, and who listened to the dreams of the strong men and women who are the very foundations of our companies.

"We are all of us diamonds. Some of us are rougher than others, but we're diamonds all the same, waiting to be found, cut, and polished. Some of us don't need any cut or polish at all.

"Enjoy the show."

The applause grew until it reached that perfect unity where the members of the audience all clapped at the same time, their appreciation of Arthur's performance breaking in one thunderous crack. Arthur must have felt it, because he blinked in flushed surprise. He offered the crowd a small smile that Merlin swore had the power to melt even the hardest heart -- including his own, if he let it -- and gave the crowd a stiff nod and a Boy Scout salute.

The lights dimmed slowly, and Arthur dropped his hand, remaining where he was until the platform had gone completely dark. He waited a moment longer and turned and walked backstage.

Merlin wavered in place, reaching up to grasp the microphone to steady himself. His mouth was dry. His heart pounded madly. His stomach fluttered, but it wasn't nerves or butterflies.

He had only felt like this once before, the first time he had ever stepped on a stage as a young, awkward teenager, overly conscious of the fact that even though his voice had broken, he could still out-sing a woman in the upper registers. Still, he'd decided, damn them all, but he was going to make his mother proud of him.

That had been the day that Merlin realized how much he loved to sing.

And now, it was love all over again, because he'd gone and fallen in love with this man.

Merlin shook himself, letting his hand drop from the microphone, dissipating his magic. He shivered as the spell faded. He very nearly tripped over the microphone before walking up the catwalk, across the stage, and caught up with Arthur.

The curtains hid the paralyzed chaos of the backstage. Everyone had stopped what they had been doing to listen to Arthur's speech, and a fair few of them were showering him in awe. Arthur was surrounded by people lavishing him with praise by way of clumsy and sloppy signing and clasped hands and pats on his back, and his cheeks were high with colour. Merlin stayed off to the side, letting Arthur have his moment, because it genuinely was his moment, and he deserved it.

He was a star.

Slowly, slowly, Arthur's sudden entourage drifted away, because they still had a show to put on.
They had smiles on their faces as they walked away in twos and threes, murmuring wasn't that amazing? to each other before darting to their respective positions. Merlin watched as they moved away, and his eye was caught by the black-haired man in the dark suit that he had seen earlier, the one that he had initially thought to have been Arthur.

He was glowering unhappily in Arthur's direction.

He was the only one who was.

Merlin frowned, glancing between the two. Arthur was oblivious to his uncle's animosity, but it seemed to Merlin that surely a family member would have been pleased by Arthur's performance.

As if sensing Merlin's scrutiny, Arthur's uncle turned to glare at Merlin, hard and critical.

It reminded him of a time, years ago, when Merlin had used crutches to get to the theatre in time for dress rehearsal. He'd nearly crashed into Mordred, who had been wearing Merlin's costume, and they looked at each other, dumbstruck, for what seemed like ages until Mordred's expression soured, staring at Merlin like this, just like Arthur's uncle was staring at him now. There was unbridled rage in Agravaine's dark eyes. The disapproving downturn of his mouth was the only thing holding back the roar of outrage that was making his lips quiver. Merlin had foiled this man's plans to usurp Arthur's place on the stage, just like Merlin had foiled Mordred's attempt to rise from understudy to primary role.

Merlin felt -- it was a range of emotion he couldn't fully describe, never mind fully understand, and it skirted the edge of possessiveness and protectiveness. Before he knew what he was doing, Merlin let his lips curl into a smirk and brought two fingers to his brow, flinging them outward in mock salute. Nice try.

The man's lips pressed so tightly that they vanished from his face. Abruptly, Arthur's uncle turned and stalked off.

Merlin stayed on guard a moment longer, the tension in his shoulders relaxing only slowly, and he wondered what had come over him.

The crowd around Arthur had scattered, leaving only a few stragglers behind. Gwen was looking on like a proud mother, while Lance stood next to her, grinning broadly. Arthur shook someone's hand, nodding at whatever the person had said, and Merlin thought he should come closer and do his job. As he approached, Arthur made eye contact, his expression inscrutable, and an unexpected jolt of electricity made Merlin start.

The man whose hand Arthur was shaking finally moved away, revealing a gorgeous brunette with sharp features and piercing green eyes. Her brows were pinched in a frown, her hands were on her hips.

Arthur stared at this woman, his expression apprehensive.

"What the hell was that?" the woman signed. "You know that you're not allowed to do beautiful things."

Without hesitation, she took a step closer and threw her arms around Arthur's neck. Arthur caught her with a laugh.

Merlin's heart did something he thought it could only do once in a lifetime. It broke into a million pieces.

Again.
"I thought you were forbidden from leaving your troll's den," Arthur said, finally letting Morgana go. He knew that if he wanted to breathe, he had to push her away, so he did. She dabbed at her eyes with her fingertips. "Was I really that bad?"

Gwen pulled Lance aside and wandered a few feet away. Merlin was nearby, his hands in his pockets, his eyes averted, but he was aware, in a state of readiness that Arthur often let himself slip into when he was expecting someone to need him at any moment. Arthur resisted the urge to stare at Merlin now that Merlin was distracted.

"You were awful. I've never seen anything more terrible. Look what it's done to me -- it's turned me into a weeping mess," Morgana signed, throwing up a hand with the natural flair of a drama queen. She walked to one of the mirrors and pressed the back of her knuckles against her cheeks. She took a deep breath, fluffed her hair, and straightened her dress.

Morgana was a knockout -- as usual. Arthur had never seen his cousin anything less than spectacular. It was as if someone had passed a law that Morgana LeFay could never leave the privacy of her home unless she was the embodiment of perfection, and that if there was a single thing on her person that was marred, the universe would implode. Arthur didn't know a whole lot about fashion when it didn't involve jewellery, and he didn't much care, but he knew that Morgana would never be caught dead in anything other than one of her own, unique creations. The lavender dress had silver highlights and the faintest trace of bright blood red to capture and tease the eye. This particular dress could only be a deliberate choice because it flattered her curves and guaranteed that she would be the only person in the entire galaxy wearing this particular masterpiece.

Because, apparently, it was some sort of disastrous fashion paradox if someone else wore the same dress as Morgana at the same event. Someone might actually be forced to go naked, and God forbid it would be Morgana.

The multi-stone diamond necklace -- not one of Pendragon's designs -- was set in white gold and a bezel blaze that didn't do enough to bring out the threatening sparkle in Morgana's eyes. Arthur thought that was a shame; the hapless and idiotic who dared approach her wouldn't have the warning they needed to get clear in time.

Arthur moved away from the curtains -- the lights were changing again, and another speaker was walking out. If it was anyone but the stern-faced George Montcalm, Arthur might be interested in knowing what was said, but Montcalm always read the same speech year in and year out, and by now, the audience could probably recite it by rote.

He walked up behind Morgana, watching her eyes in the mirror. He tapped his own neck to indicate the necklace and raised a mocking eyebrow. "Really, Morgana? You'd shun your own kin by wearing Jaes Spence?"

Morgana's mouth dropped in mock indignation, and she signed, "It is not Jaes Spence!"

Arthur leaned in for a closer look. "Oh. Silly me. Spence would never be caught dead with lab-grown zirconium. Did someone win this for you at a carnival? Are you taken with the poor fool?"

Morgana gave him a look. Arthur grinned.

"Don't be mean," Morgana signed, turning around. She poked her French manicure into Arthur's
"It's your fault that I'm relegated to wearing second-rate cuts. You'd let my models wear your diamonds, but not me?"

Arthur chuckled humourlessly. He might have teased Morgana endlessly about her self-named "sparkle extravaganza", but she had done a fantastic job combining the latest designs from the Pendragon Rare Earth jewellery division with her own fashion line to put on a scintillating display. It might be to her advantage, having her name attached to Pendragon Rare Earth, but Morgana was already a renowned designer in her own right; she didn't need any additional acclaim lavished on her creations.

She was, however, something of an attention whore.

"The models know they have no choice but to return the diamonds. The security guards will shoot them otherwise," Arthur said seriously. "However, you frighten them more than they frighten you, and I know you, Morgana. You won't give them back."

Morgana's mouth opened in a gasp. She spoke and signed at the same time. "How dare you, you selfish bastard!"

"You overdone circus clown," Arthur smirked.

"You slimy snake-oil salesman," Morgana said, smiling.

"Tawdry back-alley two-dollar whore," Arthur said, grinning when he saw Morgana's eyes widen. He'd been holding onto that particular insult for a while.

"Twit."

"Harpy."

Morgana laughed. Then, in an uncharacteristic show of weakness, Morgana looked at him with a fond look in her eyes, taking his hand. "Aunt Ygraine and Uncle Uther would've been so proud of you."

Arthur blinked away the sting in his eyes and ducked his head. His mother had always been liberal with her affections and praise, but Arthur had always thought that she was a bit biased toward her only child. His father had been far less demonstrative, but he had surprised Arthur more than once by clapping a hand on Arthur's shoulder and giving him an approving nod. And here was Morgana, probably surprising even herself, because Morgana never gave anyone any sort of compliment if she could help it.

It was awkward and unexpectedly difficult to swallow.

"It was really all right?" Arthur asked, and he knew his voice was soft -- nearly too soft to be heard -- by the way Morgana took a step closer, tilting her head and raising her eyebrows the way she did when she hadn't heard him the first time. He tried again. "It sounded okay?"

Arthur had heard people describe Cedric's voice as nasal, but otherwise all right, no different than the average man. It was reassuring for Arthur to know that his interpreter would at least not embarrass him by giggling in a high pitch or stuttering. But he hadn't had any time to learn anything about Merlin's voice -- or even his ability to recite a speech properly -- beyond Gwen's affirmation that he sounded nice.

"There's no doubt that you write the most beautiful speeches," Morgana signed. "And don't deny that you've written Uther's speeches for the last four shows. If you're fishing for compliments, you're not getting any more from me."
"That's not what I meant," Arthur said, glancing over his shoulder. He could see Montcalm on the stage through a cut in the curtains and guessed, from the way the coordinator was mouthing parts of the speech from memory and rolling her eyes, that Montcalm was still going strong.

"I know what you meant," Morgana signed, her smirk teasing. She raised a brow and signed, "I know that wasn't Cedric, because your interpreter sounded wonderful, and recited it exactly the way you write. You absolute tyrant. How long did you make him practice it before he had it down perfectly?"

Arthur's retort died on his lips. Merlin had had even less time to review his notes than Arthur had to evaluate him. There had been pages and pages to his speech and too much for Merlin to remember after a cursory read. Arthur had given Cedric a copy to memorize a week ago, because he hadn't wanted any mistakes, but --

"Where is this mystery interpreter?" Morgana asked. "You've been hogging all the attention, but he deserves some of it, too --"

Arthur grimaced. Morgana was right. He'd been so caught up in himself, in the praises, that he'd forgotten the most important aspect of his success. It might have been his speech, but it had been Merlin's voice that everyone had heard, and from the way everyone had reacted, Merlin's voice and his delivery had been perfect. Arthur glanced around the stage, panicking a little when he didn't see Merlin -- what sort of interpreter was Merlin if he'd disappear when Arthur still needed him -- but there he was, at the rear of the stage, out of the way of the hustle and bustle.

Merlin's body was angled away from Arthur and his eyes were averted. He held himself stiffly, his hands clasped behind his back, his expression flat and bland and detached, as if he were only part of the backdrop.

Arthur frowned. He didn't know this man, but he could tell that there was something wrong. Whatever it was, it wasn't any of his business. Arthur gestured in his direction. "He's over there."

Morgana dragged him over, and it was some sort of signal, because Gwen and Lance joined them. Merlin shifted his stance to face Arthur, unclasped his arms from behind his back, and as far as Arthur could tell, the man was ready to interpret the conversation, not engage in one.

"And what's your name?" Morgana asked and signed at the same time, tilting her body so that Arthur could see her. Her eyes might have been on Merlin, but she hadn't forgotten to include Arthur in the conversation like so many people did.

"Merlin," he answered, and Arthur was once again treated to two beautiful visions -- the quick, feather-soft fingerspelling of the man's name and the clear enunciation as he spoke. Merlin glanced at Arthur, his brows quirking in a familiar question.

"It's all right, I can follow," Arthur signed, because he knew better than to get in the way of a conversation when Morgana was on a mission.

"Has anyone told you what a fantastic job you did breathing life into Arthur's sorry excuse for a speech?" Morgana asked, her hands gesturing in signs that were as sharp and cutting as her personality.

Merlin blushed, and Arthur didn't like how Merlin lowered his head, hiding the sight from him. He glanced at Arthur in consternation, and offered Morgana a small smile. "Arthur's speech was amazing. I'm happy that you think I did it justice."

"You did more than did it justice," Morgana said, frowning. "Arthur's other interpreter would
have massacred it, I'm sure --"

"You give me too much credit," Merlin signed and said.

"He would have," Gwen said darkly. She turned to narrow her eyes at Merlin. "That was a near thing, though. The sound system --"

Arthur glanced at Merlin, who immediately translated the parts that Arthur hadn't understood. "The sound system died. Didn't you see me trying to warn you?"

Arthur's eyes rounded. "What do you mean, the sound system died?"

"Sounded fine to me," Lance said. He was looking intently at Merlin, who, for some inexplicable reason, was blushing again. "Must have fixed itself just in time."

"Must have," Merlin agreed. Arthur looked between the two men, and decided that Merlin looked awfully guilty -- but guilty of what?

Morgana took advantage of the uncomfortable pause and asked, "So, Merlin. How did you learn to speak so well?"

"Um." Merlin said with a wince. Arthur didn't miss the sidelong glance he shot in Lance's direction, almost in warning. "I've had some voice training."

Morgana's eyes narrowed the way they did when she knew someone was lying to her, and Arthur noticed that Lance choked on his own spit. "That's some education, I must say. Where did you train?"

"Oh, um." Merlin waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Here and there. Nowhere important."

"Halfway through the speech, I realized that you sound familiar. Have you presented before?" When Morgana was on a mission, she was as deadly as a heat-seeking missile. She could smell weakness, and when Merlin's shoulders bowed defensively, Arthur knew that she would see it as a sign of submission, while Arthur only saw self-effacement and discomfort. Whatever was muddying the waters, Arthur could tell that Merlin didn't want to talk about it, and he felt an urge to protect him.


Maybe Arthur wasn't supposed to see that faint, tiny whisper on his lips, but he had, and he stepped in.

"Morgana. Don't you have a show to supervise?" Arthur asked, coming to Merlin's rescue. He raised a brow at Morgana when it looked as if she were about to ignore him and begin another volley of attack aimed at Merlin.

"You're right, I do," Morgana said. She favoured Arthur with a long we're going to talk about this later look that would have given him chills. Except Merlin shot him a grateful smile that warmed him.

Gwen glanced around the four of them, observant enough to know that something was up, but discreet enough to raise a questioning brow at Arthur before giving him a reassuring I will find out what's going on if I have to resort to waterboarding someone smile that she promptly turned to Lance. The smile spoke volumes of you will tell me all your secrets whether you like it or not.

Arthur felt sorry for Lance.
Lance grimaced faintly and glanced at Merlin; Merlin flinched and looked away. It was all very stiff and stuffy for several more minutes until Montcalm stepped from the stage, his chest puffed out like a peacock’s. He even had the iridescent tie to match.

Arthur turned back to Merlin and Lance, sure that he'd missed something, and was about to ask when Gwen spoke.

"There's only two more speakers before Morgana's show, and they're not long-winded," Gwen said, saving them any additional awkwardness. "Why don't we head down to the VIP area to watch?"

Arthur found their seats in the dark easily -- the VIP seats were in the same spot every year. The only difference now was that Arthur was seated in his father's spot. Gwen took the seat next to him. Lance settled beside her, but Merlin went to stand some distance away in Arthur's line of sight, somehow finding a stray beam of light that illuminated him enough for Arthur.

"Can you see me?" Merlin signed. Arthur answered with a nod. It was too dark to lip-read; he would have to rely on sign.

He struggled to contain a quiet, nervous excitement. Rare was the opportunity to sit through the show, to listen to the speeches and the presentations, but rarer still was to actually understand what was being said. Too often, Arthur didn't have an interpreter for these occasions, and he would spend the entire time staring at a random spot, pretending to be interested. He wasn't sure if it was this particular night or if it was Merlin, but he was conscious of being involved in the proceedings, somehow, in a way he had never been before. For once, he could understand not just the words, the content, or the implications, but the nuances of the speaker's voice, his body language, his intent.

The speeches ended, but before the lights darkened fully, Arthur gestured for Merlin to sit down in the empty seat next to him. When he felt Merlin's arm brush against his, he leaned over and said, "Take a break. I know Morgana's show backward and forward. She made me write the descriptions for every jewel and every outfit."

It was too dark to see Merlin's answer, but Merlin took Arthur's hand without the least bit of self-consciousness and put it over Merlin's own; Arthur felt Merlin's fingers curl into the letters O and K. A moment later, Merlin covered his other hand over Arthur's, and guided both toward his face, and Arthur felt the gesture thank you.

Merlin let go of his hand, and Arthur was suddenly bereft of warmth and comfort, because there had been comfort in Merlin's touch. He couldn't remember the last time that someone had found a way to talk to him despite the dark, who had even made the effort. When the lights went out, Arthur was always left in solitude and silence, but Merlin's gesture had chased the chill of loneliness away.

The lights came on in a slow twist of the dimmer switch. The announcer wasn't on the stage, but Arthur recited the descriptions in his head. The collection, altogether, had been named Avalon, and it seemed oddly fitting, somehow, in a way that made Arthur's heart hitch. The first model came out; she was a waif-like brunette wearing The Tears of the Sidhe and a glamorous midnight-blue strapless ball gown with a long trail of sheer silky fabric billowing out behind her. Arthur closed his eyes and tried to remember the words he had written to go with the necklace.

He couldn't.
What came to mind were his mother's hands sketching out the design on paper, smeared with charcoal as she highlighted the backdrop. Her smile when she caught him watching her, the warmth of her touch when her fingers touched his to gesture how she wanted him to draw the image to go with the necklace.

He'd laughed at her and said that it was silly to use fairies to represent the diamonds, but she'd insisted.

There had been times when Arthur had felt that he was being torn between his parents -- some days spent with his mother in her studio, working on the designs around the selected gems that she had plucked from the Pendragon vaults, other days in business attire at the round conference room table, watching and learning as his father negotiated yet another agreement with recalcitrant investors who didn't see the merit in the high operating costs of an old mine that only sporadically yielded diamonds -- but, oh, what diamonds they were.

This last collection wasn't the only thing that he had left of his mother, but it held a special meaning for Arthur. Her graceful, artistic fingers had last touched these jewels before Uther had whisked her away for their fateful flight. The papers for their release for public sale were still on his desk, unsigned, because he didn't want to see them go to someone who would never know the stories that went behind each design.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to realize he had missed nearly all of the show, because the last model, a curvaceous brunette wearing a sheer, ephemeral baby blue dress with the waterfall cascade of *The Lady of the Lake*, was standing in the middle of the stage by herself, and people were standing up and clapping. One by one, the other models emerged from behind the curtains and took up a pose in the centre of the stage, leaving the masterpiece alone on the runway.

Arthur half-expected that Morgana would come out on the stage to accept the applause that was her due. He wondered how she would feel walking out alone. At previous shows, Morgana had walked out arm-in-arm with Ygraine, both sharing the praise, but then... Arthur felt a shift next to him, and startled when Merlin walked away. Morgana took the vacated seat, wrapping her arm around Arthur's, and squeezed.

Arthur's heart hurt a little less.

The models left the stage, the lights shifted and turned low and brightened again, there were a few more short speeches that Merlin translated with his deft, unhurried signs, and Arthur could feel Morgana beside him, as tense as if she were a huntress who had found her next victim. Arthur wanted to chide her, to tell her to leave Merlin alone, that if Morgana truly wanted to tear someone apart, it should be Cedric.

It wasn't only that Cedric hadn't come to the show. It was every other time that he hadn't come. Arthur was tired of the excuses -- a miscommunication here, a message not received there. Surely it was bad luck, but there wasn't enough bad luck in the universe to explain the ridiculous frequency.

He knew he should fire Cedric, but he also knew that there were too few interpreters meeting Arthur's criteria and who were available. Still, Arthur watched Merlin speculatively, wondering at the coincidence. Gwen called Lance, who just happened to have a qualified interpreter nearby. His eyes narrowed in suspicion, and he made a mental note to ask Leon to look into Merlin's background.

It wasn't as if he wasn't already paying Leon a small fortune already. Arthur might as well get some worth out of his money.
If everything checked out, well, Arthur would know for certain that the coincidence was only a coincidence, and that it had nothing to do with some sort of elaborate plot against him. But he did need a new interpreter -- someone competent and useful.

Like Merlin. Arthur liked Merlin. He was good.

It helped that he wasn't hard on the eyes.

Once the main event was over, the crowd scattered slowly. Morgana stayed with Arthur, looping her arm around his, and they wandered the concourse, stopping to chat with a few people they knew. Each time, Merlin moved to interpret, quiet, subtle, self-effacing -- he was smooth and efficient, barely garnering anyone's notice.

Arthur wondered how someone as attractive as Merlin managed not to get so much as a second look from the crowd around them. If not for the interpreting, Arthur would have no reasonable excuse to be staring at him -- thank God for that, because Arthur really was staring.

It wasn't just the good looks, either. Merlin understood him. Merlin figured out that Arthur preferred to speak for himself, and gave Arthur subtle signals to speak up in order to be heard over the noise. Merlin understood that Arthur relied more on lip-reading, using sign language to fill in the gaps when Arthur wasn't sure of the context, or couldn't understand a word or a name.

Merlin was good, very good, Arthur realized. There were hints that he had lived with sign language his entire life. He was comfortable with signing, not at all self-conscious about gesticulating in public, not at all afraid to use facial expressions or body language to indicate tone and demeanour.

Arthur was better than most at lip reading. He could figure out someone's mood and demeanour from their body language. But there were subtle nuances -- missed words and concepts, tones of voices and random sounds -- that Arthur missed.

When Merlin interpreted the droning monotone of a short, rotund man by letting his body droop and his face go slack, his eyes rounding, twitching here and there in an expression that Arthur could only identify as the sort of boredom where the speaker devoutly wished to be somewhere else, Arthur realized just how much that Arthur missed from a conversation.

Listening to Merlin was, Arthur decided, very near to being able to hear.

There were so many differences between Merlin's and Cedric's styles of interpreting: Merlin's was far more natural, with casual gestures and the occasional tendency to slip into slang, while Cedric stuck primly to book-perfect signs, his face giving away no hint of the speaker's emotional state. But the biggest difference of all was how Arthur didn't have a headache when he listened to Merlin. He didn't feel tired. If anything, he felt energized.

It was exhausting having to pay attention all the time, to concentrate on lip-reading, to try and anticipate the twists and turns of a conversation in order not to be left behind, to scramble to catch up when he was. Watching Cedric interpret was to witness the mastery of concise point-form that told Arthur nothing at all, and he always spent most conversations trying to keep Cedric's signing in the corner of his eye while he lip-read the speaker instead.

He always walked way with a throbbing headache. Gwen told him that he would end up with an ulcer if he kept popping painkillers the way he did.

But with Merlin? With Merlin, everything was easy.

Arthur glanced around them. There was a lull of people milling around, and Arthur smiled when
he saw a familiar face.

"You did a fantastic job," Leon signed.

Arthur broke free of Morgana's arm to return Leon's hug. "Now you're just trying to flatter me into a raise."

"I prefer to think that you like my work so much, you'll give me spontaneous bonuses," Leon said with a grin. Arthur could tell from the way Leon's mouth formed the words that he was whispering, careful not to be overheard and knew without asking that Leon had something serious to discuss with him.

They'd known each other since their fathers had prospected unclaimed mines together in Australia, becoming fast friends and staying that way despite distance and erratic schedules. Leon's family business -- mining precious metals -- had been folded into Pendragon Incorporated years prior and was one of the profitable branches of the business, but it was Leon's younger brother, Owain, who sat on the board of directors. Leon had, in a fit of rebellion that wasn't out of character given his father's adventurous streak, taken his inheritance and joined the RCMP. He took his retirement -- his very early retirement following a suicide-by-cop incident that ended with the suspect alive and well but Leon injured -- and opened up his own private investigator's office in Toronto.

"There's mysteries, and then there's mysteries," Leon had told him the night of his retirement party, six years ago. "There's only so much I can do while I'm an officer, and even less when I'm a detective. I could join CSIS, but sitting behind a desk analyzing data for years before I get assigned to fieldwork is going to bore me to tears. I figured this was the next best option. Plus, it's not like I'm hurting for money, not as long as dad's mines keep producing, yeah?"

In many ways, Arthur envied Leon his liberty. Leon hadn't been expected to fall back into the family business, although the doors to do so were wide open for him. Leon had gone from his first passion -- law enforcement -- to an even greater passion -- solving mysteries, and he was good at it. He was his own boss, with no one to report to but the client, for good or for bad, and his business' success ensured that he was never lacking for work.

Thinking about work reminded Arthur that Leon was on his payroll -- his, and not the company's -- for a reason. "Spontaneous bonuses don't come free. How was your trip to Johannesburg?"

"Warm," Leon said, smiling broadly.

"I was hoping you would say something along the lines of profitable," Arthur said with something of a grimace. "Or even illuminating."

"It was both those things too," Leon said with a reassuring nod. He ran his hand down his silk tie. "Picked this up there at that shop you mentioned. Do you like it?"

"Did you expense that?"

"Of course I did."

"Then, no, I don't particularly fancy it. It's not your colour. Doesn't suit you at all," Arthur said. "It's more my shade. You should hand it over right now."

"Very funny. I'll have you know that I looked spectacular in it. So spectacular that it dazzled my contact, and he might have a lead for us." Leon raised a meaningful brow.

Arthur raised a startled brow. "Really? That's good news. Does he have --"
Leon put a hand on Arthur's shoulder and continued to smile. "Not here. Why don't we go for lunch at the usual place? I want to let you know what I've found out so far."

Arthur grimaced. He wanted to know now, but he knew he needed to be patient. "When?"

"As soon as possible, I think. It's important, Arthur."

Arthur nodded, feeling his smile fading. "As soon as possible, then. Is it more of the same?"

"Worse," Leon said. He shrugged. "Anyway, where's your usual crap interpreter?"

Arthur followed Leon's casual glance in Merlin's direction. Morgana had curled a proprietary hand around his arm, and if Arthur wasn't mistaken, her claws were digging into the fabric of Merlin's tuxedo. He didn't look half as terrified as most men were when they were alone with Morgana, but his brows were pinched in concern, and Arthur decided that Merlin was calculating the odds that he'd escape Morgana's clutches with his arm intact.

Merlin gave him a hopeful smile. "Do you need me?" he signed.

Arthur shook his head and gestured for Merlin to stay where he was. Merlin nodded, hiding his dismay with aplomb, and turned to Morgana to answer her question as if she had had his attention all along. The man was smooth, and he was definitely heads and shoulders above Cedric when it came to social skills.

"Cedric bailed," Arthur said. "Never showed. Claimed that Gwen called him to cancel. Gwen doesn't know anything about it, and neither does Lance."

Leon raised a brow. "What a coincidence. You have a major event, and he's conveniently unavailable at the last minute."

"Shocking," Arthur said with a nod. "Appallingly so. The Fates must be against me or some such. It's getting to be a habit."

"How many times does that make now?"

"I've lost count," Arthur said sourly.

"That many. Shall I look into Cedric? Find out if he's really that flaky?" Leon asked, with the tone of a man who most likely already was.

Arthur narrowed his eyes. "You just want to pad your bill."

Leon snorted. "What makes you think I'm not already? Consider it a freebie. Cedric's given me a bad feeling ever since I saw his piss-poor translating job last month."

Leon had popped into the offices under the pretence of seeing his brother and taking him out for lunch; since he was still a major shareholder in the precious metals division, Owain had dragged him into the meeting, loudly proclaiming that he wasn't going to suffer through yet another boring accounts rendering by himself.

Owain was nothing if not subtle, but it was Leon who had confirmed that Cedric wasn't interpreting everything that Arthur needed to know, including important details that prompted him to request a written review on the accounts afterward.

Arthur gave Leon a small nod. "Yes. Look into it, if you could."

"Gwen found him on Lance's couch," Arthur said. "I suppose he's not half-bad."

"Not half-bad at all." Leon gave a quick nod of approval, but his eyes narrowed. "With everything that's been going on... Arthur, do you trust him?"

"Are you sure you shouldn't have joined CSIS? You're suspicious of everything," Arthur said.

"I get that from you," Leon said with a wink. He fell silent with raised brows that Arthur easily recognized as a question. A very patient, indulgent question, because Leon knew the answer anyway.

Arthur snorted. "Of course I don't trust him. He's only on the job for tonight."

Leon waited patiently.

"Yes, fine. Go to town. Check him out," Arthur said, rolling his eyes. There were times that he wondered whose brother Leon really was, because he was as protective of Arthur as he was of Owain, if not more.

Arthur would never admit it, but he was grateful for everything that Leon did.

Leon was all innocently-raised brows, lightly reproachful that Arthur would even request such a thing (even though they both knew Leon would have investigated Merlin anyway), and smiling haplessly, because he did like mysteries. The more complicated, the better. "His name?"

Arthur sighed. He glanced over his shoulder to make certain that Merlin was still otherwise occupied by his devil of a cousin, and turned away. He'd learned from horrible experience that most sign language interpreters -- the good ones anyway -- could lip read, too. "Merlin Emrys. E-M-R-Y-S. Lives next door to Lance. And I don't believe that Lance is involved in anything nasty, just so you know."

"Neither do I, but as nice as Lance is, I wouldn't put it past someone to use him anyway," Leon said, fishing his phone out of his pocket. His thumbs flew over the keyboard, and he showed the message to Arthur before sending it.

_Cedrc mssng 2nite. Find out why. Strt bg ck on MERLIN EMRYS._

"I'll text you when I have something," Leon said. He nodded over Arthur's shoulder at Merlin. "Well, if he hasn't cracked under pressure yet, he might actually be innocent."

Arthur glanced at Merlin again. Morgana had somehow acquired herself a small retinue of people who were hanging onto her every word, but she had an iron grasp on Merlin's arm. He looked a little pale, but resolute and brave, and when he caught Arthur's eyes, he offered an apologetic smile. Merlin was drawing on some sort of unheard-of font of strength, putting on a stoic face that was a telling _I'm used to this and God, do I ever hate this_ that pulled a small smirk to Arthur's lips. Arthur shouldn't be enjoying Merlin's misery, but there was such an _animation_ to it that Arthur was impossibly drawn to the man.

Leon touched his arm. "Do you want me to distract Morgana so that you can have your interpreter back?"
"If you wouldn't mind?"

Reporters. Merlin couldn't believe that the only reason that he managed to deflect Morgana's questions was thanks to his past experience with reporters. Granted, he didn't run away from her though he couldn't promise that it wouldn't happen next time she grabbed his arm and dug her nails in, but her persistent interrogation bordered somewhere between a police Noir dark-room-hot-lights scene and a horde of frothing-at-the-mouth-for-a-headline paparazzi, so it was a near thing.

"So, how long have you known my cousin?"

"Your cousin?" Merlin glanced over to where Arthur was speaking with another man, trying to see the family resemblance between the scruffy strawberry-blond and Morgana. Or maybe she was talking about Lance? He knew Lance had a big family --

"Arthur," Morgana said.

Merlin nearly gave himself whiplash -- he'd turned around so fast that he could smell the brakes burning. "Sorry. What? Arthur's your cousin? He's not --"

Merlin pointed a finger at Morgana and thumbed over his shoulder toward Arthur, aborting the gesture when Morgana raised an eyebrow and her lips pulled in a smirk.

"Right, not your -- never mind." Merlin hoped she couldn't tell how relieved that he was.

Merlin resolutely stopped himself from going down that road.

"No, ma'am. This is the first time I've met him," Merlin said.

Morgana's eyes narrowed, but she tilted her head and gave a smile to someone walking by. "Then, you must spend a lot of time with people who can't hear."

"You could say that, I suppose," Merlin said, ducking his head. A few weeks interpreting for the Canadian Hearing Society's clients counted, he supposed, but his thoughts went to Will.

His best friend. The only one who had stayed with him when all the garbage with his agent began. The first one whom Merlin turned his back on when it came down to a choice between his career and his friends.

"You don't get it, Merlin," Will signed, his hands a flurry in the air. He was not -- he had never been -- a graceful signer; his hands beat the words in the air like a sledgehammer. "I'm not telling you to quit. I'm telling you -- she's fucking with your head. She's killing you. Do you even like to sing anymore?"

Merlin hadn't spoken to Will since then. Not in years.

"I'm still curious about your voice training," Morgana said, her elbow sharp in his ribs. Merlin's head jerked up. He'd forgotten where he was for a second, and he used all of his theatre training to cover for his slip.

_Fucking pit bull. How does Arthur stand her? Why can't she let it go?_
Merlin glanced around in the vain hope that someone would come by to distract Morgana, because right now would be perfect. Instead, there was a lull with the crowd drifting in and out, everyone content to chat with whoever was nearest instead of moving on to find someone more interesting. Merlin scratched the side of his neck, and looked over to Arthur, hoping that Arthur would need him.

Arthur was standing several feet away, *fucking gorgeous* in that tuxedo now that Merlin had a chance to properly appreciate how fit he was, from the broad, strong shoulders to the tapered waist and the solid legs --

*Can't think like that. Just. Can't* --

-- and the man Arthur was talking to was just as attractive, with short, dirty blond hair, several-days’ worth of scruff, and an almost eerie brightness that made the man shine every time he smiled. They were friends, Arthur and this man, the two of them at ease with each other in a way that couldn't be explained otherwise. The other man knew how to sign, but he wasn't using it now, and Arthur seemed content to read his lips instead.

Morgana was watching Merlin with a placid but predatory *there will be no escape* stare, and Merlin ducked his head, offering her the same vague smile he would give his agent when his agent had demanded to know where he'd spent the night before, only to suffer a barrage of *who did you fuck, so that I can yell at you for ruining your career before I leave to do some damage control*.

"Sorry?" he asked, leaning in, pretending he hadn't heard the question in the first place.

"Voice training," Morgana said, and Merlin could hear the way that she underlined both words. She wasn't fooled, not in the least. He thought she would make a good police officer. "We were talking about your voice training."

Forget police officer. Morgana would make a great torturer.

"What about it?" Merlin asked. It was easy to play dumb with people who didn't recognize him, too easy to fall back in the old patterns of lying and duping people simply because it amused him, because it was the only thing that had made him *feel* anything. The feelings were a mixture of intense guilt and pretentious arrogance and false superiority all rolled up into one, and it made him vaguely ill.

He knew this game of push and pull, of false flattery and backhanded compliments, of snipe and stab. It was just like he remembered. He tasted bile at the back of his throat and swallowed hard.

Morgana raised a delicately arched brow. "Where did you train?"

Merlin shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

Avoidance and deflection was the order of the evening. Merlin wondered yet once again why he had agreed to do this job after he'd already put in a full day at work, but all he needed was a glimpse of the way Lance and Gwen were standing close to each other, gazing into each other's eyes like their lives were clean out of a sappy chick flick to remind him of the reason. That reason had everything to do with him wanting them to end up together so that he wouldn't have to deal with Lance forcing Merlin to live his life, and nothing at all to do with *wanting to be in their shoes.*

He'd never have that fairy tale romance, he knew. He glanced at Arthur. Even if someone could overlook all of his flaws, it would never last. He hid everything that he was from other people --
his singing, his career. It was best to keep that part of his life in the past, forgotten, and he knew that he kept it secret only because acknowledging it would come chasing after him like a tidal wave and wreck him upon the shoals. Again. And again.

Merlin was already wrecked. He didn't need any more battering and breaking. He didn't know who would want him, anyway.

He glanced in Arthur's direction and caught Arthur's eye. "Do you need me?" Merlin signed.

"No, I'll be a minute longer," Arthur signed back.

"Why?" Morgana's full attention was on him, and Merlin couldn't help feeling that his value was being weighed the way he'd always been weighed by men and women who thought themselves his betters, somehow qualified to judge him, to decide if he was good enough for admittance into an exclusive music program, if he was good enough for the opera troupe, if he was good enough to stand on his own.

He had always hated that feeling.

"Why what?" Merlin paused. He waved a hand around them. "I'm sorry. It's really loud in here."

It was loud in the convention hall. The acoustics were terrible. Merlin wouldn't even think of singing in here if he had to -- he needed a proper theatre --

Nearly as soon as the thought came to mind, Merlin squashed it. If he felt sick playing games with Morgana -- even if it was out of a warped sense of self-preservation, he would be sick if he let himself think about the theatre, about singing, about the opera.

Morgana gave him a small, thin smile. It was the I like you dearly, Merlin, but you're not going to like what I have to say smile, and Merlin sighed in resignation. There was a predatory flash in Morgana's green eyes, a shark smelling blood in the water, but before she could strike, a group of people came up to them and plied her with praise and attention.

Merlin breathed in relief. He was free --

Morgana's hand was still around his arm, locked as surely as an iron shackle, but Merlin sighed. Not as free as he'd hoped.

He was content to act as eye candy -- as ridiculous a concept as that was when he stood next to a knockout like Morgana -- and nod here and there in answer to comments thrown in his general direction, but he didn't pay any real mind to the conversation. He was here on a job -- a job that was a one-off, he firmly reminded himself, and he wouldn't be doing this again no matter what it would do for Lance's romantic aspirations. He returned his attention to Arthur.

Arthur had his back to Merlin, and the glimpse of his friend's expression told Merlin all that he needed to know. It was a serious conversation, the sort best kept to the privacy of quiet words and whispers and lip reading, because the odds of someone being able to understand sign language in a crowd this large were actually quite good. Merlin didn't try to eavesdrop on the conversation and instead stood as docilely as a well-trained dog next to Morgana.

Every now and then, a member of Morgana's adoring public gave Merlin a long, lingering look that made his insides clench. Had he been recognized?

His appearances might have been mostly in Europe and Asia, in full costume and under heavy makeup, but this group of exceedingly well-dressed fashionistas looked to be the well-travelled kind, and there was a possibility, however rare, that this vapid bunch might have attended an
opera, and might have even paid attention to the people on the stage. They could have been at one of Merlin's performances, and there was a chance that they could recognize him now, despite the lack of distance and theatrical lighting and heavy makeup.

Merlin glanced around for the nearest emergency exit.

"You're not a model, are you?" one of the men in Morgana's entourage asked, reaching over to put a proprietary hand on Merlin's free arm.

"Um. No," Merlin said.

"Would you consider --"

Morgana, beside him, made an indignant squawk. It was only distantly that Merlin heard her say, "Hands off. I saw him first --"

"You don't even design men's clothing, sweetheart," the man reminded her.

"I would do a far better job than those horrible togas you make those poor pseudo-Roman gladiators wear on the runway," Morgana retorted. A hard yank in one direction pulled Merlin toward Morgana; another made him stumble toward the man.

*How the fuck did I get in the middle of a catfight?* Merlin didn't know if he should feel flattered, embarrassed, or outraged.

The situation had every sign escalating into hissing and spitting and clawing. Arthur's friend appeared at Merlin's side, forcing the fashion designer to let Merlin go; the newcomer took a step into the group with deliberate obliviousness and kissed Morgana on both cheeks. "Morgana, you're as beautiful as always."

"Leon!" For an instant, a brief instant, everything that was gorgeous and evil and deadly about Morgana melted away into fondness and adoration -- emotions that more properly belonged on Gwen and Lance. The brief glimpse of vulnerability withered away a second later behind Morgana's otherwise intractable mask. "Of course I am, and it's about time that you noticed."

There was a flirtatious twinkle in her gaze, a come-hither tone to her voice, but either Leon missed it entirely or he was playing hard to get.

"Poor bastard," Merlin thought. He suppressed a smile. After only ten minutes in Morgana's delightful company, Merlin was ready to run away and never repeat the experience. Considering the people he had worked with in the theatre, that was saying something about Morgana.

Arthur was at Merlin's other side, an overwhelming presence that attracted the notice of Morgana's entourage. Merlin didn't miss the way Arthur raised his eyebrows in expressive question, and immediately broke free of Morgana's grasp.

It wasn't easy.

"He asked me if I'd ever done any modelling," Merlin signed -- and for the benefit of the group, also spoke out loud. He gestured toward the fashion designer before pointing at Morgana. "And Morgana said that she had dibs."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Arthur said, and in that moment, his voice was exactly as loud as it needed to be to be heard by the small group over the din, pitched in exactly the perfect way to show just how disdainful he was of the idea. "If anything, *I* have dibs."
The way Arthur eyed Merlin up and down wasn't quite like the practiced eye of a fashion designer trying to estimate his measurements, but more as if he were imagining Merlin naked. Merlin shivered unexpectedly.

Merlin blushed. He'd been on the receiving end of so many suggestive looks and outright invitations that he thought he had been rendered immune to them, but Arthur's look --

Merlin swallowed hard. It was his imagination. Wishful thinking.

*Wishful thinking leads to dashed hopes,* his bitch of an agent used to say. Besides, a man like Arthur probably already had someone -- someone better than Merlin. Merlin shook his head and tried not to think about it.

"That's quite unfair," Merlin translated for the fashion designer. "Why do you get all the pretty things?"

Without missing a beat, Arthur said, "Because all the pretty things are mine."

"We'll see about that," Merlin translated, putting some haughtiness in his expression to match the tone he heard in the man's voice. "What do you say -- would you like a job --"

"He's not interested," Arthur said flatly, but there was an edge to his voice, like a sharpened scythe sweeping across the field in one smooth, quick movement, cutting the other man at the knees. Arthur turned to Merlin and tilted his head. "Shall we? I should mingle."

Merlin smirked and stepped aside, making a quick *at your service, Sire* sign that pulled a quirk of a smile to Arthur's mouth. There were quick good-byes, with Morgana looking put out as Merlin followed Arthur.

Merlin breathed another sigh of relief. Arthur had saved him twice -- first from Morgana, again from that pack of piranhas.

"I am sorry for my cousin," Arthur said, once they had gone past the buffet table.

"She seemed nice enough," Merlin signed, unconsciously mouthing his words silently as he did. He watched as Arthur's eyes drifted to his hands, but noticed how Arthur's attention was mostly on his lips.

"Morgana? Are you having me on? Nice isn't even anywhere near the mark. Overbearing, maybe. Or pushy, conniving, or just plain nosy -- those are much closer to the truth," Arthur said.

Merlin forced a smile. "Oh. The interrogation, you mean? It's fine. I think she's just being protective of you. I understand."

Arthur was distracted by someone catching his attention with a wave of their hand. Arthur smiled and nodded but didn't stop walking, content to wander for a while longer.

Merlin let the silence stretch before signing. "You never did say what you prefer."

At Arthur's odd look, Merlin hastily added, "For interpreting?"

"What you're doing now is fine. The oral and the sign," Arthur said. He paused, then added, "Actually, all of it is fine. Telling me when it's too loud so that I can speak up, letting me know when it's quieter so that I'm not making an ass out of myself. I don't think anyone's ever done that before."
"Force of habit," Merlin admitted, but before Arthur could ask -- and he knew that look -- Merlin asked, "You mostly lip read, right?"

"Yes," Arthur said. He shrugged faintly, as if perfectly aware that he was an outlier -- most hard-of-hearing, deafened or Deaf people that Merlin had ever met growing up preferred to use sign, but that could just have been the circumstances of his friendship with Will. "But it gets tiring after a while, always having to concentrate on understanding someone. It's worse when it's in a place like this, when there's more people I have to try to understand. Even if I can figure them out, I don't always know what they're talking about in the first place, so I lose a lot of information. Using the signs to get the context helps."

Merlin nodded, filing the information away for later, though he didn't know why he bothered, really. He wasn't going to be doing this again.

"You're easy to lip-read, by the way," Arthur said suddenly. "Really easy."

"Good. I'm glad," Merlin signed. He gave Arthur a small smile.

"And your signs --" Arthur paused, and there was a slight pinch to his expression. His tone shifted, and the words came out in a rush of difficulty. "You're very clear."

"Practice," Merlin signed. He moved out of the way of a large woman with an enormous feather hat that nearly took out his eye. "Lots of practice."

"Was it someone in your family?"

"Who?" Merlin asked, too surprised to sign.

"The practicing. I can tell when someone's taken a class and when someone grew up with it. There's a difference in the way people sign."

"How's that?" Merlin asked.

Arthur didn't answer right away; Merlin shifted to interpreter mode as a middle-aged couple came up to Arthur and spoke a mile a minute, praising his speech and telling him stories about his parents and Arthur when he was young. Arthur was polite and charming and pained, as if it hurt a little to hear the story, but he hid it well. Eventually, they broke free, and Arthur guided Merlin through the open curtains leading to the exhibition booths, where it was quieter and there were fewer people.

"I need a break," Arthur explained. They walked for a while before Arthur gestured to Merlin's hands. "Tone. I can tell inflections when you sign. Also, it flows. You're not precise, not exactly, but it's like I can hear you."

Merlin froze. A quick sidelong glance at Arthur didn't reveal anything telling, and maybe, just maybe, Merlin's magic hadn't done something without his knowledge. Again. Merlin laughed awkwardly and shook his head. "Well, if only I had that power," he said, throwing on a smile that felt like a grimace.

Even as he spoke, it felt wrong. He didn't want to lie to Arthur. Merlin glanced away.

"I'm not sure I'd want to hear again, to be honest," Arthur said, and Merlin looked over to see him looking thoughtful, as if it had crossed his mind more than once. Again, Arthur had said, implying he had been able to hear before, and Merlin raised a brow in question. "It's not as if I remember what it's like."
Merlin nodded, because what did someone say to that?

Arthur touched his arm. It was a light gesture, smooth and fleeting, but it sent an electric shock through Merlin's limb, startling him even as the magic flared out uncontrollably and made a few objects on a nearby display tip over unnoticed. The way that Arthur drew his hand back, shaking out his finger, and frowned down at the carpet.

*Static charge. Fuck. That stung.*

Merlin glanced at Arthur again, suddenly very, very unsure.

Arthur must have interpreted his glance as interest, maybe even permission, because he cleared his throat and said, "You're also very good at avoiding questions. You never did answer. Was it someone in your family? That you learned to sign for, I mean."

"No, it wasn't," Merlin signed. Arthur's eyes on him were so intense, so clear, so curious, so -- so *blue*, that Merlin found himself adding, "My best friend, Will. We grew up together. Did everything together. I learned by default."

Arthur's smile was small, but it was there. Tiny, almost too easy to miss, and guarded. "Are you still friends?"

Merlin should've kept his mouth shut. A so-called professional distance. He knew that volunteering more information only brought more questions, and this was one of the many questions he didn't want to answer. That he didn't even want to think about *why* he had that particular answer. Merlin avoided the question with a simple, evasive, "We've lost touch."

"That's too bad," Arthur said.

Merlin ignored the gutted feeling in his stomach and nodded. He followed Arthur, the conversation withering to silence. He was content to listen to the background buzz of ambient noise, doing nothing else but wander around. A few sparkles in the displays caught his eye, but he stayed with Arthur. He caught the moment when Arthur tensed and traced Arthur's gaze to a young woman standing beside a booth. The two people she had been talking to wandered off, and she turned around, staring at Arthur.

"You know her?" Merlin asked.

For an instant, he thought Arthur would stop in his tracks and turn around. It seemed as if the blond woman was about to do the same thing herself. Her cheeks were pink with embarrassment, and she wrung her hands together in indecision.

"I may have..." Arthur trailed off, and Merlin heard a tiny, suppressed sigh. "I may have been somewhat rude to her earlier. Before my speech. She came up behind me, and by the time I realized that she was there... She must have been talking to me for a while. I just. Didn't know what to say. I walked away."

"Could've told her that you couldn't hear," Merlin signed.

Arthur snorted. "Yes, thank you, Merlin, for that illuminative advice. I couldn't have thought of that without you."

Merlin smirked despite himself. "So why didn't you?"

Arthur didn't answer for a long moment. "I don't like to. I hate it when..."
He stopped himself and took a deep breath before stopping, turning to look at Merlin.

"When people find out I can't hear, they say, I'm so sorry. Sometimes it's because they didn't know. Sometimes it's because they're embarrassed and don't know what to say. As soon as I hear I'm sorry, it's almost a guarantee that I'm never going to hear from them again," Arthur said, his volume dipping so low that Merlin had to strain to hear.

"Well, after your speech, she knows now," Merlin pointed out.

"Outed myself, didn't I?" Arthur said ruefully. "Wasn't much of a closet."

"And it looks to me as if she still wants to talk to you," Merlin signed.

Arthur scratched the back of his head, the gesture softening the somewhat cynical frown and accompanying tightening of his lips.

"Do you want to talk to her?" Merlin asked. He was careful not to point in the woman's direction, in case she was watching.

Arthur exhaled a soft breath and nodded curtly. He turned away and continued his unhurried walk, and the poor woman, Merlin noted, was having something of a meltdown, torn between running away and standing her ground.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Arthur told her, smooth, suave, charming. "My head was in a different place, and you caught me off guard."

Merlin subtly moved to stand off to the side, where Arthur could look at him and the other woman at the same time, and interpreted for her.

"Oh, God. I'm a bit of an idiot. I'm so sorry about that," the woman blurted out, glancing between Arthur and Merlin uncertainly.

Merlin didn't miss Arthur's resigned sigh.

"It's all right," Arthur said, obviously trying He held out his hand. "Why don't we try this again? I'm Arthur Pendragon."

"Elena Goodwin." The woman jumped on Arthur's hand and shook it with something close to desperation. Nearly as quickly, she let go and turned wildly to Merlin, covering her mouth with both hands, one over the other, her eyes big and round. She said something muffled and muted that Merlin didn't hear.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked.

"I don't know how to do this," she said desperately. "Do I talk to you? Do I talk to him? What do I do?"

A quick glance in Arthur's direction was enough for Merlin to see his pain -- or maybe it was regret that he had come over to try, to make the effort in the first place. Arthur raised his hand to scratch at his forehead, and Merlin knew that gesture, too, and it was familiar because he'd seen it on Will too many times.

Will had gotten tired of explaining to people too.

This once, Merlin broke the rules and spoke instead, when he really should be a neutral party. He didn't think Arthur would mind.

"You look at Mr. Pendragon," Merlin said and signed at the same time, pausing to gently turn
Elena around until she faced Arthur. "You speak to him as if he were anyone else that you know. Don't pay attention to me. I'm not even here."

"Um," Elena said. After a moment of silence, Merlin elbowed her. "Um! Um. I guess you didn't hear anything that I told you earlier."

Her voice faded out toward the end, and she hit herself on the forehead. "Right. You didn't. That was a dumb thing to say. I mean. Oh, God. Please, let's start over. Um."

Merlin could see that Arthur was trying to be patient, so he prompted Elena. "Why don't you tell him what you were trying to tell him before?"

Arthur nodded faintly, almost in thanks.

"Oh! Yes. I was trying to tell him -- you, I mean," Elena said, catching herself, "To please don't look at the ugly necklace, it's mine, that since Sophia wanted me to watch her booth tonight that I thought I'd sneak my stuff in, and please, please don't judge her on that one. She really is a talented artist. Her best pieces aren't even here, and she was hoping to catch you tonight, maybe ask if she could make an appointment. She's been trying for one for months. She would be here now, but her mom's in the hospital, and --"

Elena trailed off again when she saw that Arthur's attention drifted back to the booth, his expression thoughtful. "Which pieces are yours?"

"This one, and these two," Elena said, pointing them out. Arthur nodded, then moved to look over the other pieces in the cabinet.

Next to him, Elena was biting her fingernails.

"You said that her best pieces aren't here?" Arthur asked, his eyes still glued to the cabinet.

"No, no, she wanted to show them to her mom, so she took them out. That's why I put those in there, really, to fill the spaces," Elena said hurriedly. Merlin waited until Arthur turned around before repeating what Elena said.

"Is her mother all right?" Arthur asked.

"She had surgery last night, but she's doing really well. She's going to stay with Soph's sister when she's discharged, so Soph can totally come to the show this week, any time," Elena said, and Merlin watched as Arthur's expression softened. It wasn't so much hearing that someone's relative was doing well, or even learning that Soph would be coming to the show after all. Someone was telling him things, however useless and trivial, and Merlin realized with a start that Arthur liked that.

Will had liked that, too. He said it made him feel included.

Merlin thought of all the little questions that Arthur had asked him, how he'd dodged answering them, and he felt guilty.

Arthur picked up one of the business cards from the table. "Sophia's card?"

"Yes," Merlin signed needlessly; Elena was bobbing her head up and down excitedly.

Arthur looked at Elena. "I'm afraid that I'm booked very full and can't meet with her personally, but I will strongly recommend to my head designer that she make time to meet with Sophia. If I get a chance, I'll call her, see if I can meet with her on the floor. It would be very brief,
unfortunately, but I'd like to express my appreciation of her work in person."

"You will! Oh my God, Soph will shit," Elena shrieked, attracting attention and bursting Merlin's eardrum. Abruptly, she struggled to compose herself, and didn't do a half-bad job of it. "I mean, of course you will, and thank you so, so much --"

The gushing went on for a few minutes, and Merlin had never signed please and thank you so much in a short time span in his entire life. Arthur's serious expression soften into a tiny little smile of pleasure at making someone happy, but just as quickly, it changed to a look of embarrassment at the effusive gushing.

His hands continued to translate Elena's words, but he mouthed, I think she's winding down, she hasn't taken a breath, she'll stop when she faints and gave Arthur a playful wink.

Arthur blinked at him, and Merlin was suddenly self-conscious that Arthur was watching him, not really listening to Elena anymore, and that Arthur kept watching until Elena finally let them go.

"Wait," Elena said, grabbing Merlin's arm as they walked away. "When he comes by, you'll be here then, too, won't you? Soph is really shy, but when she talks about her jewellery, she talks even faster than I do, and --"

"I'm sure there will be someone with Mr. Pendragon," Merlin said, signing for Arthur's benefit, but pointedly didn't look at Arthur. This was a one-night emergency, as-a-favour-to-Lance-so-that-he-had-an-excuse-to-see-Gwen sort of thing, and he hoped everyone understood that.

Apparently they did, because Arthur made no attempt to correct him.

They drifted again through the crowds, away from Elena's booth. Merlin glanced over his shoulder and spotted Elena chatting animatedly into her cell phone, and smiled.

"That was nice of you," Merlin signed. "Are you really going to call her?"

"No," Arthur said.

"What?" Merlin glanced over his shoulder. A rush of disappointed anger rushed through him. "You're an arrogant, pompous ass after all. I mean, I knew you were an arrogant, pompous ass when I met you on the stage, and after that speech I thought you were actually a decent human being, and you were nice to that woman, but it's all an act, isn't it? You have everyone fooled, don't you --"

"Merlin," Arthur said, and there was a laugh in his voice that made Merlin stop signing and look, really look at Arthur.

"What?"

"I hate phones," Arthur said. "I hate having to deal with relay operators, and Sophia's card doesn't have a cell phone number or I'd text her. So I'll have Gwen call her."

"Oh." A sheepish flush came over him. "Right. Sorry."

Arthur nodded curtly, and they continued to walk. "Although. You're not wrong. I suppose I am an arrogant, pompous ass."

"As long as you know that," Merlin said. His face hurt from grinning, and he was aware that he'd smiled more in the last half hour than he had in a long time.
More people caught Arthur's attention at that point, wanting to show their wares or talk to him or get his opinion. Arthur helped himself to a champagne flute; he tried to offer one to Merlin, but Merlin shook his head with an apologetic *I don't drink* and an inexplicable guilty pang reminding him that that was a half-truth. The full truth was that he'd been sober for a year and wasn't about to fall off the wagon now.

Arthur spoke to the server; the server nodded, and disappeared, coming back several minutes later with a bottled water that Arthur held onto until Merlin had a chance for a break here and there. For the next few hours, Merlin interpreted for Arthur, learning more about the diamond industry than he'd ever wanted to know, quietly struggling against a growing fond feeling that warmed him every time he listened to Arthur be cutthroat with a businessman wanting a meeting *right this instant* one moment, but sweet to a server who had dropped the crudités on her tray by accident in the next.

The crowds thinned and drifted away and too quickly it was past midnight with only a handful of stragglers left. Merlin was flagging; Arthur looked tired but determined to persevere until the very end, and *thank God* that was Gwen and Lance coming toward them, *holding hands*, because that meant Merlin's sacrifice for the evening had been worth it.

He glanced at Arthur.

Well worth it.

"I'm ready to call it a night," Arthur said, raising a brow meaningfully at Gwen. "But if you're not, I can see myself home."

"I can get a cab home," Merlin offered, looking at Lance.

"No, no, I drove you here, I'll drive you back," Lance said, and Merlin translated for Arthur. Arthur waved his hand and shook his head and signed a tired *It's all right, you're off the clock now.*

Gwen flushed, turned and smiled at Lance, and let go of his hand to reach into her purse. She pulled out a tablet, made a few notations, and said, "You'll send me the bill for Merlin's time?"

"First thing on Monday morning," Lance said. The two looked at each other again, and there was a moment between them that stretched out into an eternity that had Merlin rolling his eyes. He caught Arthur doing the same and chuckled.

"I appreciate your help tonight. Thank you," Arthur signed.

"You're welcome," Merlin signed back wordlessly. "It was a pleasure."

There was an awkward moment when Merlin thought Arthur was about to ask if Merlin was available to work again, but the opportunity came and went. Instead, Arthur caught Lance's attention, signed "Good night", and dragged Gwen away with him.

It wasn't as if Merlin would've said yes even if Arthur had asked, but for some reason, the cold, casual dismissal hurt.
"There has been preliminary backlash from the diamond show," Cedric interpreted for Agravaine. "It appears that our stockholders are taking Arthur's opening speech poorly and have become skittish. At the first trade of the stock market this morning, there has been a significant reduction in the value of our shares."

Arthur bristled. His uncle made it sound as if Arthur had pulled out a machine gun and had randomly fired into the crowd at the show. It wouldn't be the first time that Agravaine hinted that customer confidence was wavering and that no one would invest in a company owned by someone who was deaf -- someone who would be seen as weak, incompetent, incapable -- and it would hardly be the last.

Frankly, Arthur had enough -- and not just of Agravaine's narrow-minded, bigoted comments. Arthur had made several inflammatory comments and veiled accusations in his speech, but it was no worse than anything his father had said in the past. And the market shares? They wobbled all over the TSX charts in daily incremental amounts with or without Arthur on a stage somewhere condemning countries who allowed the blood diamond market to flourish. Arthur -- and the rest of the board of directors -- had more important things to do than stress over Agravaine's tendency to see disaster around every corner. He certainly wasn't about to apologize for anything that he'd said at the show.

"I believe the board would agree with me, Arthur. I tried to convince you not to give the speech, but you're so much like Uther. You're stubborn. The simple fact of the matter is that once people see that you're young, they'll believe you to be too inexperienced to head of the company, and you proved that by the rash comments you made. This drop in shares is only the first reaction that the public has had to your speech. We need to move quickly and decisively to regain our investors' confidence."

Arthur glanced around the meeting room, taking in the subtle agreement from the senior board members and their cryptic frowns of disapproval. He couldn't believe the budding panic in men and women who really should know better than to panic in the first place. It was as if none of them had been in business before -- as if none of them had been in business, period.

"It's a point-two drop," Arthur said. "We've seen greater drops in the past. Surely you realize that the majority of our investors followed the show with the PDAC? That March is the end of quarter and most companies spend April at trade shows to promote their businesses? If you recall, this time of year has historically been the slowest growth period for us -- for any business --"

"Do you want to take the risk that this drop won't continue?" Agravaine asked, leaning back in his chair. "And it will be a continuing trend. I know very few companies that have survived when a young man or woman took over their parents' legacy. With all due respect to Uther and Ygraine, but they did indulge you, and you are hardly prepared for --"

"Agravaine," Olaf said. Arthur wasn't sure, but he looked unhappy.

"Don't scold me, Olaf," Agravaine said. "You agreed with me this morning when we discussed replacing Arthur as the masthead of the company --"
"I'm sorry?" Arthur interrupted, sitting up straight. "Replacing me? There will be no replacing me --"  

"No, no, you misunderstand, Arthur," Agraine said, smiling that plastic smile of his. "This is hardly a mutiny. You'll remain the head of the company, of course, but we'll name someone as CEO to be the public face. Someone older, more established, more well-known --"  

"And who's more well-known than Arthur?" Owain asked. His brow was furrowed, and Arthur knew that Owain really wanted to be swearing right now, but by some miracle of decency, he had managed to restrain himself. "He's a Pendragon. He's probably been photographed more than his parents, combined --"  

"This is hardly a beauty pageant," Agraine said, and although Cedric had the infuriating ability to interpret only what people said, completely ignoring tone, Arthur could feel Agraine's sarcasm filling the room. "It may have escaped your notice, young Owain, but this is an adult situation. We are attempting to protect the company from total collapse --"  

Owain rolled his eyes and glanced at Arthur.  

"Don't be ridiculous," Arthur snapped. "Pendragon Incorporated is a privately-owned company. We don't require investors in order to operate -- they finance our external operations, nothing more. There will be no total collapse, no naming of a new, older CEO, and no further disrespect to the members of the board with unfounded alarm. Is that understood?"  

"I was hardly being disrespectful, Arthur. I was making a point --" Agraine said, schooling his face to the same sort of sanguine kindness that Arthur would expect from a snake about to strike.  

Off to the side, Arthur saw Owain make a subtle gesture. What a jerkoff.  

Arthur was too irritated with the situation to smile.  

"And my point is, I am both the owner and the CEO of the company," Arthur said. He felt heat rise under his collar, a flush to his cheeks. His heart raced and he wanted nothing more than to hurl something heavy at Agraine's head right now. He was frustrated -- had been frustrated for some time -- and it was almost too much to bear. How could his own uncle even imply that Arthur was unfit to run the company? Agraine was family. He had watched Arthur grow up, overcome challenges, succeed. He should know better than anyone left alive what Arthur was capable of, and yet, all he could do was point out minor, inconsequential issues. "And unless anyone has something important to contribute that is more alarming than a point-two stock drop, I'm adjourning this so-called 'emergency' meeting. We all have matters to attend to, regular business to take care of, and the next jewellery collection to plan."  

Arthur rose without another word -- he could tell from Cedric's frantic signing that people were talking, trying to get his attention, but he didn't care who was speaking or what they had to say right now. He was furious, and the vast majority of his anger was directed at Agraine. Arthur shut his laptop with a slam, picked it up, and stalked out of the boardroom.  

He barely glanced at Gwen as he walked past her desk, entered his office, and threw the door shut behind him. He slid his laptop onto his desk and ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He saw a reflection in the glass, and said, "Gwen, I need you to call --"  

Arthur paused. God. He didn't even know who to have Gwen call, but the first name that had popped to mind was Merlin, because he...  

It had been over a month since the diamond show. A month since he'd seen Merlin. And yet it
was as if he'd last seen Merlin only the day before, because his memory of the man was so vivid. Arthur daydreamed about Merlin's hands interpreting for him, those lips speaking words for Arthur to read. He fantasized of Merlin's elegant fingers stretching him open, of Merlin's mouth around his cock.

But, mostly, Arthur wished that he could have the clarity of understanding and the confidence of self like he had on that night.

He needed Merlin. He needed Merlin to tell him what was going on, to show Arthur the tone and nuance of what people said, and to help him divine what they really meant. Arthur wanted to know what had been behind Agravaine's words -- had his uncle truly been concerned about the company, or had he been trying to throw Arthur under the wheels of an oncoming truck? In polite company, Agravaine was always careful, always politically correct. No one but Arthur had ever heard him say anything that hadn't been previously, carefully thought out and vetted by a team of lawyers to prevent even the slightest hint of discrimination.

Arthur couldn't forget the words that Agravaine had said to him on the morning after the speech. *It's a shame. That could have gone so much better.*

He'd been shaken for the rest of that day. He still was -- the uncertainty had taken root under his skin and he hadn't been able to shake it loose. He questioned... and he doubted.

Everyone he had seen, that he had spoken to -- Arthur had wondered if they had complimented him on the speech, only to turn around and laugh behind his back. He'd spent the weeks since alternating between being angry with Merlin for having destroyed his speech and turning Arthur into a mockery, and blaming himself for not having done a better job, for being too proud to take a step back and let someone else deliver the speech.

Gwen had given up trying to talk him out of his self-doubt and had called Morgana, and Morgana took him out to lunch where she very publicly smacked him on the back of his head -- the way Arthur's father used to do -- and had said, "I don't know where this bullshit is coming from, but you had better stop, or God help me, I will ruin my new Blahniks by shoving them up your ass."

Arthur had only just started to feel better about the whole thing when this... *this* meeting had been called. He'd nearly missed it. Cedric had already been there, which made Arthur wonder why Cedric had been there in the first place if the board had wanted to discuss such a frivolous emergency meeting. Why had Arthur been the last to know? He owned the company. If anything, he should be the very first that people told.

"Can you get a hold of --" Merlin. Merlin would tell him, wouldn't he? Merlin would tell him everything that people wanted him to know. That he needed to know. Arthur turned around and stopped himself from finishing his sentence when he saw that it wasn't Gwen in the office with him -- it was Agravaine.

Gwen stood in the doorway, and from the look on her face, the door had never swung shut after Arthur. Agravaine must have been on Arthur's heels the entire way from the meeting room.

"Uncle," Arthur grit out. "What is it?"

"This latest outburst only adds to the board's concern of your ability to run the company, Arthur," Agravaine said. He pointed a finger over his shoulder and raised a meaningful brow. "Do you truly believe that throwing a tantrum is going to endear you to them?"

"Me?" Arthur scoffed. "You're turning this on me? You're the one making it sound like I'm incompetent. You're the one stirring up panic over a tiny, inconsequential drop in shares --"
"In this economy, nothing is inconsequential," Agravaine said.

"We're in the diamond business," Arthur said, frustrated that he even had to remind his uncle of that fact. "On the stock market, diamonds are even less volatile than gold. Did you even look at the drop for gold? It was larger than the one for diamonds. Did you check out the stock for BRINKS? Or Herrod? Well, I did -- and by comparison, the point-two slip in Pendragon shares wasn't even a fucking drop in the bucket."

"If you knew that, why didn't you mention it at the meeting?" Agravaine asked, strutting across the room. Arthur had to move to follow him, to understand what he said.

"They're professionals. They should know this information or fire their assistants for non-performance. Because it's not my job to hold everyone's hands whenever they hear something that makes them think they won't get their end-of-quarter bonus," Arthur snapped.

"Yes, it is," Agravaine said, turning away. He was probably still speaking -- Arthur wasn't sure.

"What?"

Agravaine turned again. "I said, yes it is. It's your job to reassure the people who work for you. Uther did it all the time."

That was a lie, Arthur knew. He had never see anyone come to his father for anything other than a signature on paperwork or for advice or for decisions.

"So did Ygraine," Agravaine added. "Don't you remember how your mother would spend hours with the artists in the design division? They would chat over coffee and get nothing done. What do you think they talked about then?"

Arthur frowned. He remembered his mother meeting with Aunt Vivienne, or sitting with other artists, but not because they were nervous wrecks over a share drop in the company. Maybe it was, but it wasn't as if he eavesdropped on their conversations. He remembered laughter, shared touches, smiles, maybe even a few tears, but never, ever had he seen anxiety or fear.

Agravaine turned away abruptly and walked to the door, using his bulk to bully Gwen out of the room. Arthur didn't know what Agravaine said to her, but Gwen caught Arthur's eye before the door shut rudely in her face. Arthur gave Agravaine a sour look.

"Arthur," Agravaine said. He strolled across the large office, his arms swaying. He reached out to touch everything in his passage -- the bookshelf, the statuette that Arthur had purchased in Brussels, the back of the chairs -- with a proprietary slide of his fingers, leaving his fingerprints behind. Or his scent, like an animal marking its territory.

Arthur fought not to curl his lip into a snarl.

"Arthur. Your father was a devious, intelligent man. He took your great-grandfather's company from near-obscurity and became a challenger for the largest diamond companies in the world. It was a stroke of genius when he married a designer as famous as my sister -- it propelled Pendragon into the public eye. Can you imagine his disappointment when you lost your hearing? He may have indulged you, allowed you to believe that you were always meant to take over the company when he retired, but he was already making other plans for the future --"

"What?" Arthur's frown deepened, hiding the gut-wrenching pain he felt deep down to find out that maybe, just maybe, his father never had confidence in him at all.

Agravaine gave him a small, sympathetic smile. "Uther and I spoke at length about the future of
the company. In none of those discussions did Uther even bring up your name. It was always, *when I retire, the board will do this, the board will do that*. He even hinted that he would stay on as CEO in name only even after retirement and allow select senior board members to make decisions for the direction of the company. He was beginning to construct a leadership structure that would have you as its head, but not at its helm."

A hot flush coursed through Arthur's body. His fingers buzzed with incipient numbness. His ears vibrated with the ringing echo of a cymbal crash. His legs felt weak and rubbery, and if it wasn't for his locked knees, Arthur would have stumbled. Arthur's father -- no. Arthur didn't want to believe that his father would make all these plans and not tell him. That his mother wouldn't be aware of it, and that Arthur wouldn't have found out. As much as Uther had invested into his company, he would never -- never...

Arthur turned away from Agravaine. It took him some time before his throat didn't feel so thick that the words would come out muddled and full of emotion. "If that were true, how come I haven't come across those documents?"

He glanced at Agravaine only to find that Agravaine hadn't waited for Arthur to be looking at him before he spoke, and picked up what his uncle was saying in mid-sentence. "... the plane crash, Arthur. He'd only just begun to make the plans. You should contact his solicitor -- Uther also told me that he was changing his will to reflect exactly this. And, truly, given that I'm one of the few people he spoke to before he took his last trip --"

Agravaine's casual, flippant reference to the disastrous plane crash struck a raw nerve. Arthur grit his teeth and missed the rest of what Agravaine said. A hand on his shoulder turned him around. Agravaine was too close to lip-read -- he was too close, period. Arthur took a step back, and Agravaine's hand dropped off.

"I realize that this is all very difficult for you to hear," Agravaine said. "It's unfortunate that I am the one to tell you. The last thing I want to do is hurt you, Arthur, but I have to think of your father's last wishes and of the good of the company. I'll give you some time to think about what I've said, but the sooner we agree on a course of action, the better."

Arthur didn't answer him. Agravaine smiled again -- and *how* much did Arthur hate that plastic smile, the one that stretched across Agravaine's face? -- before clasping him on the shoulder.

"I'll have a few suggestions for a restructure of the company's leadership for you by the end of the day. It's for the good of the company. Surely you recognize that." Agravaine squeezed Arthur's arm painfully before turning to leave the office, shutting the door behind him.

Gwen opened the door a few seconds later. She started to sign, "Are you --" but Arthur didn't wait for the end of her question, didn't stay to answer it. He brushed past her and headed down the corridor after Agravaine, wanting to ask, wanting to tell him --

He didn't know what he wanted to tell his uncle. He didn't have a clue. His thoughts swirled around madly, with doubt and confusion chasing each other's tail. His stomach twisted with the thought that his father never had any faith in him. That neither of his parents ever had that confidence in him, that they'd looked at Arthur with the same reservations and contempt and disdain that everyone else did when they realized that Arthur was deaf.

Arthur didn't want to believe that of them. He couldn't. He wouldn't. His parents loved him --

Arthur rounded the corner to Agravaine's office, ducking out of the way of an intern with too many files in his arms, and glanced ahead to see Agravaine right outside his office with Cedric. There was no mistaking the two -- not with Agravaine's greying black hair, broad shoulders, and
distended chest and belly. Not with Cedric's narrow face and sunken torso and gangly limbs. The
two exchanged a few words -- Cedric smirked tightly, his narrow moustache crawling across his
lip. Agravaine tossed his head back in a short, stiff laugh before gesturing with an open hand and
inviting Cedric into his office.

Arthur pulled back before he was seen. When he dared look again, Agravaine and Cedric were
gone and the door to Agravaine's office was shut.

*What the hell?* What business did Cedric have with Agravaine? Gwen was the one who booked
all the appointments with Cedric -- through Lance, of course, never directly, contacting Cedric
only if the location and time details changed.

He took a hesitating step forward. His hands opened and closed in fists.

Agravaine's secretary wasn't at her desk, but the still-steaming cup of tea hinted that she wouldn't
be gone long. Arthur kept a wary eye on the door -- the fear of getting caught had always kept
him on the straight and narrow before, but it was the hate of *not knowing* that drove him to search
the secretary's desk. The computer was on but the software locked; Arthur wouldn't have gotten
anything from it that he couldn't access from his own terminal, anyway, so he didn't bother. There
were file folders on one side -- all tagged here and there with colourful post-it notes marking
where to sign. There were a few binders on the other side. Nothing incriminating or unusual.

Arthur pulled out the leather-bound appointment calendar. In theory, Agravaine had an electronic
calendar like the rest of the executives to make it easier to plan meetings, but, like most of the
older managers, he preferred paper to digital. Arthur flipped through the book, skimming
backwards through the entries until he saw the notation for the Diamond Show opening.

*Speech. 9:00 PM*

Arthur's brows pinched. He glanced at the door. It was still closed.

He flipped through more and more of the weeklies, but nothing stood out to him. He didn't have
anything to compare it to, even if he knew what he was looking for in the first place. He
recognized a few names -- the head and assistant advisors of the company's legal department. An
external corporate lawyer. A top financial whiz in the investment game. There were a number of
meetings with the legal department -- enough to be of concern.

Arthur glanced at the door and down the corridor. The tea was still steaming, and there was no
sign of Anna. He checked the time.

He came to an entry that made his fingers tremble.

*Pendragon Estate meeting.*

Arthur didn't want to turn the page to the week before. The paper crinkled under his fingers.

*Funeral.*

He flipped the pages, looking at an earlier date.

*Accident.*

Arthur's hand wavered over the calendar. He swallowed hard. He glanced over his shoulder
again, all around the corridor. He turned the page to the week before. The day before the plane
 crash.
There was an entry for a meeting with Uther at nine o'clock in the morning. Arthur's heart pounded. He remembered that day clearly. Uther had stopped by Arthur's office at ten thirty. They'd spoken about the company, a few things he wanted Arthur to tie up before the close of the business day. He'd have taken care of it himself, but he was overdue to pick up Ygraine before they went on a weekend trip to the cabin in the Muskokas, and Arthur was next in line for the delegation of authority. "We'll see you Monday morning, bright and early. Breakfast as usual," Uther had signed.

At three o'clock on that day, less than an hour before the Pendragons' plane had gone down, Agravaine had a meeting with the legal head of the company, Thomas Cenred. There was no note of what it was about.

Arthur saw a flash of movement to his left. His heart raced. No one was there.

He went through every previous entry in the book -- there wasn't much more to it. The accident had occurred on the first week of January. He stared at the page for a long time. Three o'clock. Arthur couldn't remember where Agravaine had been at three o'clock. They'd gotten the news nearly an hour before. There'd been so many people around Arthur at the time, so much chaos, so much sorrow, and he'd been overwhelmed with pain and emotion and grief. If someone asked him now who had been there, Arthur could say with certainty that he couldn't remember anyone else but Gwen.

That was only because she had held his hand and had refused to leave him alone.

Arthur put the calendar back the way he had found it, glancing around one more time. The door to Agravaine's office was still closed. Anna hadn't come back yet. The elevator doors were shut but the up arrow was lit, the numbers on the side slowly ascending.

Arthur moved quietly around the desk and down the corridor, taking the long way back to his office. He couldn't help looking jerkily over his shoulder, feeling as if he'd done something wrong, but, damn it, it was his company, his building, and everything in it was his. If he wanted to snoop -- if he had to snoop -- to find out what was going on, he damn well would.

Gwen stood up when she saw him approach, her brows pinched with concern. Arthur gestured for her to follow him inside, and he signed, "Close the door."

He sat behind his desk, accessing the networked calendars. Cenred was a young man -- relatively young, in comparison to Agravaine -- and he was married to his Blackberry. He couldn't live without his secretary, and his secretary couldn't live without being connected, and -- yes.

Arthur loaded Cenred's calendar and scrolled back to early January. He saw not only the entry for Cenred's meeting with Agravaine, but he also saw the time that the meeting had been phoned in. Ten minutes before Arthur was notified that his parent's plane had crashed.

He froze when he skimmed down and read the details.

*Legitimacy of succession. Contest U.'s will.*

Arthur read the meeting's agenda over and over until his vision blurred. He moved on autopilot, saving a copy of the calendar to a thumb drive. He wanted to see how many times Agravaine had met with Cenred, and if there were any indications of what they'd talked about. Of *why*. There should have been no need for Agravaine to even consult with the legal department. Agravaine's responsibilities didn't include coordinating with Cenred. He wasn't involved in any of the long-term projects requiring legal advice from the *head* of the department. So, why was he --
Why, why, why?

Gwen was looking at him in concern. "Are you all right? You look pale," she signed.

"I need you to call Geoffrey Monmouth," Arthur said. He wouldn't -- couldn't -- believe that his father would change his will without so suddenly. He wanted to speak to the estate lawyer. He wanted Monmouth to tell him what he knew. Arthur's voice felt thick, swollen, muddled. "Then call Leon. I want to meet him today."

"I'll call them," Gwen said. She must have picked up on his mood, because she hesitated before asking, "What happened? Did Mr. DuBois say something?"

"Mr. DuBois said something," Arthur said flatly. He knew there wasn't any emotion in his voice because they were all swirling madly and turning into something ugly. He was disgusted, not only from the bile that his uncle had told him, but from what he had just uncovered and the implications related to everything else. "What was Cedric doing at the meeting?"

When the meeting had been called that morning, there had been no time to arrange for an interpreter and Gwen had come with Arthur to take notes. Once they arrived, Cedric was already there, and all of the personal assistants had been sent from the meeting room on the pretext of important, secret business.

"Obviously I'm out of the loop," Gwen said, her brows pinched in the middle of her forehead. "But I checked with Lance earlier."

There was a faint blush of her cheeks to indicate that she hadn't called him only for business purposes.

"He said Cedric asked for the morning off at the last minute. He's been trying to rearrange Cedric's schedule and find replacements for his other assignments."

Arthur clenched his jaw. He leaned back in his chair, staring a single spot on the wall in the hopes of suddenly developing X-ray vision and eavesdropping on the conversation that way. "Guess where Cedric is right now. In Agravaine's office."

Gwen's eyes widened, and she covered her mouth.

"Something's going on, Gwen. I'm not sure what it is, but it's almost like..." Arthur trailed off. He glanced at the door, at the phone, at the room, suddenly paranoid. He finished by signing, "...Gwen. You know all those things we've been seeing? The accounting issues? The problems with the audits? The missing reports? The fuck-up with the diamond certificates and all the other things going wrong?"

Gwen nodded.

Arthur couldn't speak; his throat was tight. He raised his hands again and signed, "I think it's my uncle. I think he's trying to push me out of the company."

"Oh, Arthur," Gwen said, dropping her hands. The dismay in her expression vanished in the next instant, replaced by fierce protectiveness. Arthur tried to laugh it off.

"I know. It's ridiculous. Maybe I'm just tired, really overworked, but after this morning, I'm not so sure. You should have seen him. He was whipping the board into a frenzy over a point-two share drop. Point-two!" Arthur rubbed his eyes.

Agravaine was up to something. It was as plain as day. Arthur didn't have any proof. He only had
a gut feeling to go by, but it was strong enough to make the bile rise up the back of his throat.

"Gwen, can you find out why Agraine was so intent on giving the speech at the show?"

"I will," Gwen said firmly, turning to leave. "But I'm going to call Leon first."

Lunch was at a tiny side-street restaurant crammed between two fabricators, the shop's glass windows blocked off by a garbage truck with a raised hood and two men in coveralls hanging over the fenders, tapping this part or that part to try to identify the source of the engine smoke. Leon was waiting for him in one of the more private back booths near the kitchen, two coffees already on the table.

They ate -- club sandwich on toasted whole wheat with fresh-cut fries for Arthur, hot chicken on white with thick gravy, spicy fries, and a side of coleslaw for Leon -- and made small talk until the waitress took away their plates, leaving in her wake two fresh cups of steaming coffee and two slices of pie. Raisin for Arthur, apple for Leon.

That was when the laptop came out of Leon's bag. It was signal enough for the staff at the restaurant, who knew Leon, to mind their own business, and for Arthur to relax. "About time."

"And here I thought you came to see me because you missed me," Leon said.

"I like you, but not that much," Arthur said, waving a hand in the air in a rolling motion. Get on with it.

"Don't be so impatient," Leon scolded.

"I am the epitome of patience, unlike Morgana," Arthur said, going right for the jugular. Leon's crush on his cousin was legendary -- but it was only recently that Morgana began to feel the same way. "She won't wait until you get it in your head to finally ask her out."

"All in good time," Leon said. He leaned forward a bit. "All right. This latest thing with Agraine? Very suspicious. I'll go through the calendar, see if there were any other meetings with your legal department, check to see if any court motions were filing. If there were, I'll be able to follow up on it, see where he was going with all this. The fact that he was meeting over Uther's will on the same day as the accident -- Shit. Fuck, I don't like this. If he's been meeting with the heads of your company --"

Leon unconsciously patted his front jacket for the USB that Arthur had given to him right before their desserts arrived.

"-- then who knows who else he's been meeting with and why. As for your gut feeling -- I'll take a look, see if any of these meetings coincide with what I have about the diamond certificates. And if Agraine is trying to push you out of the company... you do realize he doesn't have a foot to stand on? He can cause trouble, he can muddy up the waters, but ultimately, he doesn't have a claim to Pendragon Industries. Don't worry about that. We'll make sure of it."

"Then why is he going to the estate lawyers? That meeting we had this morning -- it was pretty obvious he was going on the offensive. He has something," Arthur said, "And I want to know what so that I can fight it."

Leon nodded. "Whatever it is, I'll find it."

"Fast," Arthur said. "You'll find it fast."
Leon favoured Arthur with a long, *well, obviously* look before opening the laptop. "I have some other information for you."

"What about?"

"Merlin," Leon said, pausing while he waited for the laptop to boot up. Arthur started and sat up straight. "That is, if you're still interested in him? It's been a month. I thought you'd be asking me about him by now --"

"I've been busy," Arthur said. "What did you find out?"

"Let's start with the usual -- good news or bad news first?" Leon asked.

"Christ, Leon. Just tell me."

"Epitome of patience, eh," Leon said. He keyed in a few commands on his laptop before reaching for his coffee and taking a sip.

The club sandwich that had tasted so delicious on Arthur's tongue sat like a brick in his belly, and his stomach tensed with a mixture of anticipation and dread. He did not want to find out that somehow, Merlin was in Agravaine's pocket.

"Your friend Merlin is surprisingly easy to find," Leon began. "A vanity search of his name on the Internet turns up nearly three million hits."

Arthur frowned, not understanding. "Three million? How is that possible? He's an *interpreter* --"

"No, he's not," Leon said. "He's actually... Well. Easier to show you."

Leon turned the laptop around. The laptop was open to the news feed of a search engine. The search option was *Merlin Emrys*, but the headlines didn't make sense.

*Montréal Company promises a rare Baroque show*

*Classical Music/Opera Listings*

*Emrys gears up for first international Baroque festival*

*Rare talent hits Auckland*

*Renowned countertenor to sing two chamber operas at Theatre Project*

*Benefit performance weekend events*

Arthur leaned forward, tilting the laptop. He scrolled down, but he only found more of the same. Some of the headlines were in Russian, in French, in Japanese. He went back to the first page and skimmed the first entries, scanning the dates. They were all from over a year ago. He clicked on the first few links.

*Renowned countertenor Merlin Emrys arrives in Lyons to reprise his most famous role as Tamerleno of *Oberon* in a rare string of performances to occur in a one-week festival at the Lyons Opera House. This latest appearance comes on the heels of critical acclaim received in Sydney, Australia --*

*Proceeds from the recital performance of countertenor Merlin Emrys were donated to the Children's Fund --*
It is hoped that countertenor Merlin Emrys will repeat the oratorio performances in London, Frankfurt, Vienna, and Amsterdam, which featured new works specially commissioned by Sir Bartholomew Harrison and Dame Judith Chance. These new works take full advantage of Emrys’ rare vocal range --

Merlin Emrys stands heads and shoulders above the young countertenors emerging to the world stage, none of whom can match his flexibility, his range, or his intelligent delivery --

Arthur sat back in the booth so heavily that he felt the plastic seats creak around him. His vision swam with questions for which he couldn’t conceive a single, possible answer.

"Not what you expected?” Leon asked, waiting until he had Arthur's attention to speak. "Believe me, not what I expected either. But I'm not surprised. Don't get me wrong, Arthur, your speech was perfect, but it wouldn't have been half as perfect with Cedric interpreting for you. And this guy, this Emrys? He gave it a world-class performance, and no wonder. It's what he does."

Arthur gave Leon a long, stony stare. He pointed at the screen. "What is he -- Why is he --"

He stuttered to disbelieving silence.

An opera singer -- a renowned opera singer -- in Toronto, taking on a simple interpreter job? It didn't make sense, and Arthur dreaded the worst. What if... What if Merlin was working for Agravaine after all? Arthur looked at Leon, about to ask, but he didn't have the words.

He didn't need them, because Leon understood. Leon turned the laptop around and opened a new webpage, letting Arthur see what he was doing in the process. When the page loaded, Arthur tried to read Leon's expression -- an impossible task, considering he was a practiced at breaking bad news to the suspicious other of a cheating spouse, or to an investment counsellor believing that someone at his company dipping into client accounts -- before leaning forward again.

The headline read, Mystery at the New York Opera. There was a photograph of Merlin on the stage, backlit in soft yellows and glittering greens and angel whites, wearing a tuxedo not unlike the one he had worn on the opening night of the diamond show. His arm was outstretched to the crowd, his lips parted in mid-syllable, and his eyes were full of emotion.

Full of anguish.

The caption read, Merlin Emrys, at his last performance in Edinburg. Arthur couldn't draw his eyes from the picture long enough to read the article. He was captivated by the extended hand -- a hand that Arthur knew well considering how much he had watched it form signs for him. Long, tapered, elegant, expressive fingers even when they didn't fashion a word. By Merlin's lips, frozen on digital photographic media, pale and white and bloodless -- nothing like the pouty red that they had been at the show. In the photograph, Merlin's eyes were hooded and aching, and no amount of makeup could hide the deep black of exhaustion under them.

Every seat was filled. Everyone held their breath, waiting for renowned countertenor Merlin Emrys to make an appearance on the stage for his first solo. Minutes after the curtain raised, the curtain fell again, and the only sound to be heard was the confused murmur of an audience who had paid more than 100$ per ticket to see Emrys perform.

Mezzo-soprano Vivian Olafsdottir, soprano Helen Cates, and tenor Gilli MacCraight took the stage in quick succession to fill in the void made by Merlin Emrys' inexplicable disappearance.

When contacted for details, Emrys' agent and manager, Nimueh Blake reported on the
countertenor's unfortunate and sudden illness that prevented him from taking the stage. However, when Emrys failed to appear at a show two weeks later and none of the troupe could admit to having seen him since before the New York recital, the police were brought in to investigate.

In true theatre fashion and in a convoluted plot that would have the best playwrights in a tizzy that they hadn't thought of it first, Merlin Emrys has disappeared without a trace. While the police do not believe foul play is a factor, there is speculation among the theatre crowd that a series of personal disasters, including the recent death of Emrys' mother, may have --

Arthur skimmed the rest of the article, but there wasn't any more information beyond praising Merlin's talent, more remarks about the police and the "no comment" that the reporters were able to get from Nimueh Blake, and an outline of the rest of the year's opera schedule. He took a deep breath.

"I know I'm not paying you to look him up on the web," Arthur said, his voice soft. His hand curled around the coffee cup, but he didn't raise it to drink. He needed it to steady himself.

"If only more people would do that," Leon said lightly. "I'd make a fortune."

"You already have a fortune."

Leon's lips pulled into a small smirk, but the smile faded quickly. "He was sixteen when he started to sing professionally. Still in school at the time, fast-tracked through the diploma program. By nineteen, he was performing on the world stage with some of the biggest names in the business.

"I called a friend of mine on the New York police force, he put me in touch with the detective who was on Merlin's case. Two weeks after this article was printed, Merlin got wind that the police was looking for him, so he called them up and said, look, I'm all right, I'm not missing. I fired my agent, I wasn't under contract to appear at that show or any other show that Blake says I'm supposed to be at. I didn't sign any contract, she did, and without my permission. There's nothing going on, just tell them all to leave me the fuck alone."

Arthur raised a brow.

"That's what I thought too. So I called around. Spoke to this lovely young woman named Freya Lahti," Leon said, pausing to fingerspell the name. Arthur nodded gratefully; names were the most difficult things to understand. "She sang with Merlin often enough that I figured that they might know each other well. It took some persuading, but I convinced her to tell me why she thought Merlin might have left his career behind the way he did.

"Number one reason is his agent. Freya wasn't sure when Blake became Merlin's agent, but it seems like it's been for a long time. As long as Freya's known Merlin, he's had bookings all over the world, but the pace of it -- he was in Amsterdam one week, Auckland the next, Berlin the week after, the Balkans after that. Almost as if Blake were working her way through the atlas alphabetically. If it had a theatre, Merlin was scheduled to sing there at one point or another.

"He had to give up his flat in London; he was travelling so much that he was basically living out of a suitcase and never knew where he was half the time. Freya didn't come out and say it, but I think she was hinting that Merlin was on painkillers and caffeine pills and sleeping pills just to stay ahead.

"She told me about this show they did once. The after-party went on until midnight, and most of the cast went home to bed because they had a show the next night. Merlin tried to leave, his agent kept him there, and afterward they went out with some of the show sponsors. At the next show, he looked like he hadn't gotten any sleep. He was drunk. He pulled it off, but it was by the skin of his
teeth, and that night, his agent told him they had to hurry to catch the next flight out."

Arthur grimaced. He'd seen his father run ragged by emergencies in the business, his mother staying up late to make certain the designers met deadlines, but those were short, necessary bursts of non-stop, full-go activity. From the sounds of it, Merlin's entire life was one long, fast ride down an unfinished highway with a jagged ravine at the other end.

"Freya was being really careful how she said some things. I got the feeling that she didn't want to paint anyone in a bad light, least of all Merlin, but Merlin's the victim in all this. His agent took over every aspect of Merlin's life. He didn't even know that his mother had died. He didn't know about the funeral. He found out about it by accident when his old mentor called Freya and Freya finally got a hold of Merlin to tell him. Apparently his mentor had been calling Blake, but she hadn't passed on the message."

"Oh, Jesus," Arthur whispered.

He remembered how he had felt when he heard about his parents. The stricken look on Gwen's face, the policemen right behind her to give him the bad news. The private jet had crashed, they'd said. They were very sorry, but there were no survivors. That no one had been certain why the plane had gone down, that it would take some time before they could find the cause. In the end, it had taken weeks for the crews to go through the wreckage, and the black box recordings had been inconclusive, the investigation stalled.

Arthur had had the chance to see his parents at the end, to say goodbye, to spend time in private vigil with their caskets before they were interred in the family plot.

But not even having that small grace for a final farewell? That last moment with a family member that he wouldn't see again?

Arthur was outraged on Merlin's behalf. He was sure not a small bit of it was a resurrection of his own grief, still very fresh these few months later. The sympathy in Leon's eyes could be equally for Merlin and for Arthur.

"He wasn't the same after that, Freya said. It broke him. His singing changed, he wasn't in it anymore -- not that he'd been for a long time, but now it was by rote, without feeling, without involvement. He started drinking more, missing shows, missing his flights out. Even his agent started to get concerned, but from the sounds of it, it was because she was losing out on her cash cow.

"Then about two months before the New York performance, Merlin had a meltdown. Massive public fight with Blake. He'd never said anything against her before, and after that, he was a model client, went where she told him to go, did what she told him to do. Everyone thought they'd kissed and made up. Then, New York."


"Yeah," Leon said. "I made a few more calls. When Blake wasn't looking, Merlin hired a lawyer to go over all of his contracts, including the one with his agent. The venues he was booked for? He quietly broke the ones that he had signed on to and gave them advance notice to find someone else. He stopped signing any other contracts -- Blake did those. Didn't renew his agent's contract either -- it expired the day of the New York show. He was under no obligation to appear, because Blake signed for him, which, according to the original agent-client agreement, she didn't have any permission to do."

"He quit," Arthur said.
"Free and clear, too. Sounds like he needed it," Leon confirmed.

Arthur shook his head. He was heartbroken for Merlin and struggling not to show it. He hadn't realized how much time had passed in silence until Leon tapped the table, getting his attention, and raising a brow in question. "I'm just thinking. Poor guy. He's been through a lot."

"That has," Leon said with a nod.

Arthur swallowed a wince. He didn't want to ask, but he did. "So, what's the bad news?"

"That was the bad news. There's massive amount of drama in his background. Also, there's a chance that if Blake finds out he's here, there might be fireworks. I wouldn't be too concerned, though. She seems quite enamoured of her latest protégé, the poor bastard," Leon said. He closed the laptop and put it away. "Ready for the good news?"

Arthur exhaled in relief. If Leon said that was the bad news, then that was the worst of it. That meant Merlin wasn't involved with Agravaine. It meant -- again, Leon tapped at the table, and this time, he gave Arthur a speculative look. "I guess it must be good news after all that," Arthur said.

"Yeah," Leon said, smirking a little.

"So? What is it?"

"Merlin's been in Europe for most of the last ten years, and the last few -- not much in a state to get involved in someone's nefarious plans." Leon raised a meaningful brow, and Arthur didn't need a big glowing sign to know who the someone was.

"He's been in Toronto for just over a year now, lives in a small bachelor off Yonge Street, same building as Lance. Started off working as a sign language interpreter but quit less than a month in, something about being too deeply affected when one of the kids he was working with had a freak out about wanting to be able to hear again," Leon said. He paused, waiting for Arthur's reaction, but Arthur only nodded and gestured for him to continue.

"He's working three jobs right now. Menial work, not much contact with the public -- stocking shelves at a grocery store, shipping rare records for a music store, after-hours inventory at warehouses. Sometimes, he moonlights as a janitor. It's not like he needs the money," Leon said. "Did well for himself the last ten years, even with the agent taking a big cut out of his earnings. He's not ridiculously wealthy -- like you -- but he doesn't need to work. Doesn't go on spending binges, doesn't even own a TV or a stereo or an iPod. His fridge is stocked with pre-made meals, and there isn't a drop of alcohol anywhere. His only weaknesses appears to be books --"

"What kind of books?" Arthur asked, not sure why he picked up on that detail but knowing that Leon would've been thorough enough to put together a list. It seemed safer than to dwell on this harmless piece of information than on the knowledge that Leon had broken into Merlin's apartment and taken a look around.

"Science Fiction and Fantasy, some contemporary literature, some non-fiction." Leon smirked a little. "He bought a stack on Saturday. Seven romance books, which I figure is his dirty pleasure."

Arthur half-chuckled.

"No photographs, no indication that he's with anyone, the only friend he seems to have is Lance. The only messages on his answering machine is from his boss at the grocery store -- cutting his shifts. Gets up in the morning, goes to work, comes home. Normal enough, except he doesn't have much of a life."
"Running away from it," Arthur said quietly.

"Yes. That sums him up," Leon said. He paused. "There's one more thing. He has unrestricted access to the St Michael's Choir School and an account with the Royal Conservatory of Music. He goes to one place or the other, uses one of the music studios, and practices his singing. Every day."

"He misses it," Arthur realized.

"Yeah," Leon said, nodding. He pulled a small thumb drive out of his briefcase and slid it over. "Everything's on here. I could keep digging, but I don't think there's much more to find. Whoever he is, whatever coincidences there are, as far as I can tell, he's as legit as they come."

Arthur took the thumb drive, turning it over and over in his hand. He made a decision. "I think I'm going to have Gwen hire him. Under my coin, not the company's."

Leon finished his coffee. "You want me to keep an eye on him? For a while? Just to make sure no one approaches him?"

Arthur considered.

"The way it looks like Agravaine approached Cedric," Leon signed, raising a meaningful brow.

_No_, Arthur started to say, but the practical, coldly logical businessman in him said instead, "Might be best."

"All right," Leon said with a nod.

Arthur spun his coffee mug around and around idly, lost in a storm of thought that wavered between the buffering winds of Merlin's situation and the hurricane that threatened the shores of his father's -- _his_ -- company. He leaned forward. "Leon. What's a countertenor?"

"It's a vocal range. Remember when I explained to you about pitch and depth?"

"Did a bang-up job of it until you brought me to see that music teacher you were seeing at the time to make sense of the mess you told me," Arthur said dryly.

"Yes, well, countertenor is the upper register. At least, that's what I understand. There aren't many men who can sing up there -- same range as a woman's, or as close as it gets for a guy," Leon said. "I heard some of his recordings on YouTube. It's mind-blowing, if you think about it. It's rare, but Merlin can hit registers that even some women have problems with."

Arthur had started to raise his coffee cup, but he let it fall on the saucer with a clatter. "Great. Are you telling me that I sounded like a girl when I gave the speech?"

"Oh, God, no, nothing like that --" Leon couldn't finish what he was saying. He was laughing too hard.

_ooOoo_

It was late on a Monday night -- or very early on a Tuesday morning -- after a long shift at his inventory job. By all rights, Merlin should be satisfyingly exhausted, but instead, he was restless.

For the last month, he'd been on edge, driving himself on some sort of caffeine rush without ever having drunk a drop. He didn't know where this energy was coming from, but he was vibrating
with \textit{urges} that he couldn't resist. It crawled under his skin, set his hair on end, swelled in his chest. Some of it was his magic, waking like Rip Van Winkle. Some of it was \textit{him}, shaking himself out of a daze.

Tonight, concentrating on counting containers and comparing them to the shipping manifests had been almost beyond his capability. Merlin had been lucky to complete his assigned section within minutes of his boss. If Henry noticed anything odd about Merlin, he didn't say beyond curtly offering Merlin a ride home.

"You can drop me off here," Merlin said. Henry grunted, but didn't argue. As nice as it was that Henry had even offered him a lift in the first place, Merlin could tell that his boss was looking forward to going home, putting up his feet, cracking open a cold beer, and watching the sports highlights -- the same sports highlights that had been blaring from his radio for the last few hours spent tabulating supplies.

Merlin was out of the car after a hasty \textit{thanks for the ride} when Henry clued in on their surroundings. "You sure? Long walk home from here."

"It's not bad. I can use the fresh air," Merlin said.

"No such thing as fresh," Henry snorted. "Not when you have to hoof it down Yonge. Got a mouthful of exhaust the last time I went down the strip."

"I keep telling you to quit sucking tailpipes. It could be bad for your health," Merlin said, raising both brows meaningfully. Henry wasn't too tired to miss the innuendo, but he was as exactly exhausted as he needed to be to fail at coming up with a suitable rejoinder. "Besides, Toronto's not exactly smog central. It's not so bad this time of the night."

"You never know." There was the hidden \textit{that's not what I'm worried about} in Henry's tone, but he didn't elaborate, and Merlin didn't ask. Henry shifted in his seat and the entire car jostled. He leaned across the passenger seat to better see Merlin through the open window. "Merlin. You're not -- you know. If you need more hours to make ends meet...? I can find you some extra work. If. You know. You don't need to be --"

Henry coughed uncomfortably.

"Turning tricks?" Merlin wasn't entirely certain where Henry had gotten the idea in his head -- too many crime dramas, maybe? -- and he hadn't decided if he should be worried by Henry's imagination or insulted.

Henry coughed again. "Yes. That."

"Aw, Henry, I didn't know you were interested in being my sugar daddy," Merlin said, teasing. His grin broadened when Henry squirmed. "But for the last time, I don't need the money, and I'm not a prostitute. I don't know where you got the idea, but stop watching Law and Order reruns."

"It was CSI, actually," Henry said, and Merlin decided that must be another crime drama that he'd never even heard of and probably would never watch. "Look, are you sure I can't drive you the rest of the way? It's not that much further."

"It's all good, Henry. I'll be fine. Don't worry. I'll see you on Thursday," Merlin said, patting the roof of the car. He took a step back and waved.

He watched Henry's cherry red Impala head down the road, the brake lights brightening up the gloom a few times before the orange-yellow blinker flashed once, twice, and disappeared somewhere down the left-hand road. Merlin waited until Henry was good and gone -- he wouldn't
be surprised if Henry doubled back to follow Merlin like a well-meaning but still creepy stalker, just to make sure that he would be all right -- but the street remained empty for several minutes.

Merlin walked several blocks before turning right, then left, down to the large stone building of the St Michael's Choir School. The parking lot was virtually deserted, which meant that few, if anyone, were rehearsing or working at this time of night, and he'd have the privacy he wanted. He took another glance at the cars parked nearby, wondering who at the school drove a silver Lexus - who could even **afford** it. Maybe it was one of the patrons, but why would they be out here this late at night?

The other car was a maroon Ford coupe that belonged to the Director, Father Gaius. Merlin hesitated. Maybe Gaius wouldn't realize that Merlin had come to practice. Maybe tonight was one of those rare nights when Gaius didn't make his usual patrols to see who was using the studios. Maybe Merlin wouldn't be subjected to that arched eyebrow full of restrained lecture and sad disappointment, **for once**.

Merlin decided it didn't matter if Gaius was there or not. There was only one thing Merlin cared about at the moment.

God. He wanted to sing so badly.

This **need/urge/want** had burned under his skin at a low simmer ever since the Diamond Show. Maybe it had been the feeling of standing on a stage again, that addictive taste of having the crowd's attention. Maybe it had been the performance he'd given under the guidance of a master conductor.

Maybe a part of him wanted to recapture that heady feeling of power over an audience, to relive his glory days, to feel the absolute, pure joy of creating emotion for a theatre full of people, to make their eyes water and their lungs gasp and their pulse throb as the notes of his aria reached a crescendo. Maybe it was the selfish, self-centred jealousy of not having been centre stage for once, which pressed a weight upon his chest, contracting his lungs until he could no longer hold in his air. Maybe it was the ebullience of youth again, the carefree desire to sing unrestrained, the way Arthur had been unrestrained on the stage, brave and unrelenting and determined.

Whatever it was that was driving him now, Merlin knew that he had never climbed up the side staircase to the St Michael's Choir School building so fast in the year he'd been renting time for one of the vocal studios. He entered his access code with trembling fingers -- shit, he felt like an addict, trying to get his next hit -- and made it inside on the second try.

The night steward wasn't in, but the sign-in book was laid out on the counter and there was a bowl of keys just under the counter. Merlin's usually florid handwriting was an embarrassingly jerky scrawl and he'd nearly tipped the bowl all over the floor in his haste to grab one. He didn't run down the corridors. He didn't drop the keys as he unlocked the studio door. He didn't fumble for the light switch. He didn't lean back against the closed door, checking to make sure it was securely locked. It was. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to settle his racing heart.

Merlin forced himself through his usual routine, to warm his voice, to flex his lung capacity. He thought the familiar practice steps would dissuade this aching desire to sing, but it didn't. It never did. Instead, it grew and grew until Merlin could hardly stand it. He forced himself to patience, to prepare himself properly -- he had weathered several scares when he'd pushed himself too far too fast, his voice raspy with strain. While he endured the tedium of running through the scales at every octave of his range, one by one, his mind was racing wildly, trying to find a song.

Any song.
There were too many to chose from.

Three-quarters of an hour had come and gone by the time he decided that he'd had enough of a warm-up, that it was time, and he dove into his backpack, searching for the sheet music that should be there, that had been there, once upon a time.

"Fuck," Merlin breathed, and he paced the length of the small studio, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. He didn't even have a MP3 player, an iPod, a cell phone that could play music that could give him a note to start with, a chorus to support his voice. He'd have to search through the vacant studios to see if someone left a radio behind. Maybe even sheet music. He could play the piano and accompany himself if he had to --

The lock clicked and the door squeaked as it swung open.

The janitor backed into the room, dragging with him a bucket full of dirty, soapy water, sloshing it all over the floor. The mop handle clanged against the soundproofed door.

"Wait --"

The janitor whirled around, armed with the mop. The soaked cotton fibres splashed on the wood floor, and the janitor twisted the handle up in the air. His eyes were round with alarm, his greying hair slicked back on his head, and there was a moment where Merlin thought Kilgarrah would lunge and stab the business end of the mop at his head.

"Oh, Jesus Christ. It's you," Kilgarrah said, lowering the broom. He made the sign of the cross and muttered sorry for taking your name in vain before placing a hand on his chest. He leaned back against the door, panting for breath. He crouched down, his free hand on his thigh, and stared at the floor.

"Are you all right?"

"Give a man some warning or something. You didn't flip the occupied sign --" Kilgarrah stumbled outside the door, and there was a rattle as he jerked the wooden notecard out of the slot. "See? This one here."

Merlin felt heat rush to his cheeks. "I'm sorry, I didn't think anyone was here. None of the other rooms were signed out, I thought --"

"Of course not," Kilgarrah said, his eyes narrowing. "Didn't you get the memo?"

"What memo?"

Kilgarrah stared at him. "A simple no would've sufficed."

"Then, no, I haven't seen the memo. Any memo," Merlin said. His eyes trailed down the length of the mop, watching the water pool on the floor.

"If you'd seen it you would've known not to come tonight," Kilgarrah said, "It's posted downstairs next to the sign-in sheet. The one you obviously didn't see. Because you're here. Studio's closed. I'm washing and waxing the floors."

Merlin nearly laughed, but held it back; it would have been a hysterical laugh, somewhere between disbelief and a sob, and he nearly cracked on the spot. Of all nights for the St Michael's Choir School to close the studios, it had to be the one and only time in the last year when Merlin was driven to do more than practice. He wanted to sing.
"Can't you... Can't you skip this room for a while? Just give me a few hours?"

Kilgarrah's eyes narrowed. "Skip this room? Are you telling me to alter my routine? Look, boy, I don't know what kind of substandard bullshit you're used to, but the people who run this place expect the floors to be so clean they can fu--"

Merlin didn't want to hear the end of what Kilgarrah was going to say. "Well, is there a room that you're not working on? Where I can go to..."

"No. No rooms. I'm doing them all. First, I sweep them up. I've got to do this room again since you're in here. Thanks for that, I was thinking I didn't have enough work to do. Then I'm mopping. Then I'm waxing. One after the other. It's a sequence, you see? One after the other." Kilgarrah went through his mental list of task with sharp gestures of his hand.

Merlin threw his hands up in exasperation. It was too late to go to the Royal Conservatory where he had a standing booking, and they weren't half as accommodating as the St Michael's Choir School anyway -- there were privileges to knowing people in high places. Merlin doubted he would have this rare access if his old mentor from Montréal wasn't the director here. This indulgence was Father Gaius' way of trying to help. "Where am I supposed to go, then? I need to practice."

"You don't need to practice," Kilgarrah growled. "You need to sing, boy. You can't sing proper in a small room. You've got a big voice and power and pitch, and you can't use it in here."

Merlin froze. "How do you know that? Do you know who I am?"

"'Course I know who you are, boy. You're the one who's disrupting my cleaning schedule," Kilgarrah said. He took a step closer. "And I can hear you. I know what you sound like. You think these rooms are soundproofed?"

Kilgarrah snorted. Merlin glanced around in alarm.

"You've got a big voice and power and you're afraid to use it like you should. Think it's going to bring the world falling down around your ears or something."

_Crazy old man_, Merlin thought. The studios were soundproofed. He knew it. He was sure of it. He had walked by studios full of students singing and had never heard a note through the door. The only way the janitor could hear him sing was if he were off his rocker or if Merlin's magic had snuck off with his music again in some sort of forbidden tryst.

Given that the magic hadn't answered Merlin's attempts to use it since the Diamond Show, Merlin doubted that was the case.

"Show me your feet," Kilgarrah snapped suddenly.

"What?"

"Show me your feet. I want to see the bottom of your shoes." When Merlin didn't oblige, Kilgarrah shot Merlin a look that could probably cause untold death and misfortune. "I want to see if you've tracked anything in."

Merlin lifted his feet one by one, showing Kilgarrah the soles.

Kilgarrah snorted. "Maybe I won't have to go back to get the sweeper. Good, good. That saves me some time. Now piss off, boy. I've got work to do."
"So do I," Merlin protested. The ache in his chest hadn't gone away.

"Then go do it somewhere else. Anywhere else. The back alley. The roof -- the kids go there to smoke when they think no one's looking but they don't fool me. There's ciggy butts everywhere. It's disgusting. And who has to pick them up? Me. That's right, me. I hate it. I'm chaining up the roof door, you know. As soon as the weather holds. I'm going up there and I'll lock it up and there won't be any more smoking. Not even the teachers. Ha. They think I don't know they smoke too, but they do. Even the Director. Filthy habit." Kilgarrah raised his mop, dipped it in the bucket, and sloshed more water onto the floor.

Merlin didn't waste any time wondering when Gaius started smoking, and hastily retrieved his backpack before it was soaked.

"Could try the basement. Bad acoustics, though. Plus the rats shriek. Terrible chorus. The yowling cats aren't much better. Or the theatre. But the theatre's free. The only one who's gonna hear you is me, and I don't care. I've heard you before. Can't impress me anymore."

Merlin stared at him. He wanted to laugh because the situation was ridiculous, but he couldn't help being a little afraid. Who was this guy? How did he know what Merlin sounded like? Did he know who Merlin was? Was his identity compromised? It wasn't as if he was really hiding, because he'd have changed his name if he were, but --

Kilgarrah waved his arm in the air like a policeman directing through traffic. "Go. Go. I'm not cleaning the theatre tonight. That's in the morning. Go. Piss off, boy. You're fucking with my schedule."

Merlin hugged his backpack to his chest protectively, using it as a shield, half-expecting Kilgarrah to change his mind and start bashing him on the head with the mop. Merlin made it through the doorway without incident, and stood, rooted to the spot, unsure of where he wanted to go. The theatre? He hadn't stood on a theatre stage in a year. And it was in the open. He didn't want to be caught -- what if someone recognized him? The janitor hinted that he had --

He thought about going home, turning the water on in the shower and singing in the bathroom but it wasn't the same as a studio, just like the studio wasn't the same as a theatre. He had to sing, he had to get it out --

Merlin turned left for the theatre.

"No! Not that way! You dumb shit. I just mopped there. Go the other way."

"But that's the long way around," Merlin protested.

Kilgarrah raised his brows. "So? You've got legs. Use them."

"Jesus," Merlin muttered under his breath. If the urge to sing wasn't suffocating him, Merlin would just go home. He didn't need to deal with Kilgarrah's abuse. He was in fine form tonight.

The St Michael's Choir School was constructed in a C shape, with classrooms and studios and teachers' offices all around the edges and on three floors. The theatre was at the open end of the C, facing inward onto an audience of empty seats that could comfortably seat several hundred. The theatre itself was raised, recessed, and multi-levelled thanks to a recent renovation endowment from some rich person or other. There was a plaque in their name -- *The Tom Collins Memorial* on the giant, obnoxious plaque at the stage-left corridor entrance to the theatre proper.

Merlin pushed the door open. It shut behind him with a resonating clang, leaving him a victim for the darkness. He reached out to slap the walls until he found the light switches, flicking them on
one by one until the backstage was illuminated all the way to the open curtains.

He paused.

And froze.

It was the crush in his lungs, the incoherent *need* that pushed him forward until he stood in the middle of the stage, his backpack at his feet. He stared at all the empty seats, at the rows upon rows of pseudo-leather coverings, at oak and cedar paneling and elaborate evangelical design upon the walls. This had been a church, once; there was no mistaking that it was essentially *still* a church, not with its cavernous walls and lofty ceilings and the lingering presence of sanctity and the blessings of priests long gone.

There was a piano off to the side. A dais at the very front of the stage. A three-tiered platform stretched from curtain to curtain in a half-moon. An alcove missing its orchestra down below.

The theatre reminded him of home. Of the choir Merlin sang and studied with when he was young. He'd learned how to read music there, how to play the piano, how to sing. How to raise his voice in chorus, how to stand on his own. It had been his mother's choice to send him to Les Petits Chanteurs Du Mont-Royal, and Merlin had both loved it and hated it. Every second on stage, every time he learned a new song, every time he conquered a difficult melody -- he'd willingly endured the hours of religious services just for the opportunity to sing. He'd seen the world more often than his mother by the time he was twelve, transferred to the Conservatory at fourteen, became an overnight sensation at sixteen, saw his life start its downward slide to hell when he was eighteen, and hadn't even noticed.

Merlin had made so many friends at the *Oratoire*. Learned so much from the Fathers who taught there. He might not have enjoyed the whole religious aspect of it, but it had made his mother happy to see him sing in the Church's choir, and it had made him happy just to sing.

He dropped his backpack next to the dais and picked up a piece of sheet music stuck under a crack in the solid wood platform.

He laughed softly. *Abide by Me*. He knew this song in three different languages.

"Abide with me; fast fa-a-alls the eventi-i-i-ide," Merlin sang, his voice low and soft, reading the score on the sheet, listening to his voice resound in the hall. The last syllable trailed off, barely reaching the end of the theatre, tumbling shy of the second level.

Merlin climbed the platform, standing roughly where he had stood as a child, singing this song in Montréal, in London, in Rome. His voice hadn't changed that much since then -- it had matured, deepened, but his range was still as wide as it ever was.

Pierre had stood next to him, on his right, always elbowing Merlin for room. Where Merlin had grown in height, Pierre made up for in width, becoming a deep baritone when his voice changed, and he'd been moved down the rows. Gerry -- Gérard -- had taken his spot, a younger boy only two years Merlin's junior, but by the time the year was over, he had been moved to join the tenors. Merlin had become the centre of the choir, the others moving around him, while he stayed the same.

"Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me."
Merlin closed his eyes, feeling himself relax. His body shifted in minuscule variations, finding the right position on the stage by sound alone, listening as each note came back to him, sonorous and clear, as high a pitch as he could manage. It was back to the basics again, to the very first lessons he'd ever learned. To listen and to feel, to reach deep down in his centre, to breathe and release a bit of his soul with every note.

"Swift to its close ebb's out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me."

Merlin's thoughts drifted to Arthur, the sight of him lingering by the stage curtains, looking out into the crowd. Arthur had been a steady beacon in chaos, calm and steady, a bright light luring all those close where he could welcome them.

Merlin felt his magic flare and flicker, tingling along his skin.

"Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word;  
But as Thou dwell'st with Thy disciples, Lord,  
Familiar, condescending, patient, free.  
Come not to sojourn, but abide with me."

The tightness in his chest unfurled bit by bit, and he imagined himself singing to Arthur, to touch him with magic and to pull him close and to keep him there, because that was what Merlin needed the most. Someone unfazed by tumult, someone resolute and strong, someone who would stay and never leave him.

Merlin's magic danced down his skin and stretched across the stage as if it meant to do just that -- to pluck Arthur from wherever he was in the city and to bring to St Michael's, depositing him at Merlin's feet.

"Come not in terrors, as the King of kings,  
But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings,  
Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea--  
Come, Friend of sinners, and thus bide with me."

"Thou on my head in early youth didst smile;  
And, though rebellious and perverse meanwhile,  
Thou hast not left me, oft as I left Thee,  
On to the close, O Lord, abide with me."

Merlin clung to the memory of Arthur lingering at the end of the night of the show. He had wanted -- he still wanted -- to believe that Arthur had given a damn about Merlin, that he'd wanted to keep Merlin the way Merlin had wanted to stay by him. Everyone else had left, there had been opportunity. Merlin could have asked Arthur... God. He didn't know what he would have asked Arthur, but he knew what he would have offered. He would have offered never to leave that beautiful man, who had stood alone and isolated despite the sea of people who had moved around him as if he were their guiding light.

Just as he was for Merlin.

Merlin would never leave someone as blinding bright as Arthur. How could he? Someone like Arthur, who had done all those generous, caring acts, who did them still? All the charities that he gave to, all the foundations that he created? Arthur had done the things that Merlin wished he could have done, that he wished that he could do now -- anything and everything that he could
ever want to do to make amends.

"I need Thy presence every passing hour. 
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power? 
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be? 
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me."

If only Merlin had met Arthur before he had met his agent, before his ridiculous rise to fame. If only they’d become friends. If only Merlin could see him again.

"I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless; 
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness. 
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory? 
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me."

Merlin had liked Arthur. Did like Arthur. It wasn’t just that he was pretty to look at. The burnished gold of his hair, the glittering azure of his eyes, the set of his jaw, the knowing smile. He was quick-witted, judicious with his attention, guarding his heart from others but sharing freely of his time. He was fair, not only in the modern meaning of the word, but the elusive fair of beauty and serenity and calm.

The ache in Merlin's chest wasn't gone, but it had eased, only to be replaced with a pain of a different kind.

"Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes; 
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. 
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; 
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me."

The pain was the pain of want, of solitude, of unease. Merlin didn't like himself in his own skin -- he didn't remember any time that he ever had liked himself at all.

But he had liked -- no, he'd loved spending time with Arthur. Working for him, helping him, translating conversations, smoothing the way. He still remembered the power of Arthur's words -- the speech had given him chills. It still gave him chills, even now.

Merlin sat down heavily, elbows on his knees, his clasped hands against his mouth, his eyes unfocused and watery. He couldn't keep living like this. He couldn't keep up the pretence. The early morning or late night practice sessions in a room, safeguarded from anyone who might hear him. The menial jobs where no one would recognize him. It was killing him.

His magic shimmered in his vision, stretched out as far as he could see, flickers of starlight against the night, glowing, magnifying sound. Still he could hear the echoes of his voice --

O-o-o Lo-o-o-ord, abi-i-i-ide with me-e-e

-- and it sent shivers down his spine. He gasped, wiping the tears from his face. His magic trembled, fading, swallowed by grief.

He wanted to sing again. He wanted to stand on the stage -- not in the shadows, speaking for someone else. He wanted the limelight, he wanted the audience, he wanted the applause.

He wanted, he wanted, and he couldn't have. He couldn't, because if he did, he would lose what little he had left.

And, God help him, just when he thought that he didn't have anything else to lose, he'd gone and
had met Arthur.

Not one night had passed that Merlin hadn't gone to sleep thinking of him. Not one morning that he'd woken up without wondering how Arthur started his day. If he was even a morning person. If he preferred to be alone with his thoughts, perusing the business section of The Toronto Star. Or if he bounded off to work in the morning, rushing off without even a cup of coffee.

Merlin had a taste of what it was like to be himself again, to be with someone who watched him and who saw him, who didn't care who or what Merlin was, who had needed him.

*Christ. I'm obsessed,* Merlin thought. He rubbed his face and started to stand.

"Hey! You! You there!"

Merlin's head snapped up and he saw the doors at the rear of the theatre open and shut, limning the solid frame of the man hurrying down the aisle. He had shoulder-length wavy hair, a long suit jacket that flapped around his thighs.

"Who are you?"

The door opened and shut behind the man; someone else hurried after him. Tall, round-chested, his white hair brushed back, glasses pushed up to his forehead -- Merlin could see that much and it was all that he needed to identify the director of the school.

His hopes of one night without Father Gaius' raised brow of concern were dashed in that instant.

"Mr. Sullivan. Mr. Sullivan," Gaius called, chasing after the other man, his voice increasing in volume. "I must insist. Our supporters prefer anonymity. They come here because they wish to practice and perform in peace --"

"You can't tell me that the owner of *that* voice wants to be anonymous!" The man swept an arm toward the stage. Toward Merlin.

"If you'd allow me to explain. It's a special circumstance --"

Merlin stumbled down the raised platform and nearly tripped before reaching the stage, reaching his backpack just as the man reached the edge of the small orchestra pit. He froze; the man froze, and they looked at each other for a long moment.

The man was a few years older than Merlin. He had chestnut hair and a scruffy beard and dark eyes full of intent and determination. His mouth went slack as recognition crept into his features.

"I know you --"

A boulder of disproportionate weight landed in the pit of Merlin's belly.

" -- you're Merlin Emrys, right?"

Merlin hauled his backpack onto his shoulder. "Sorry, you've got the wrong guy."

The man rounded the orchestra pit and made way for the stairs at the very edge of the stage. Merlin beat a hasty retreat to the other end, already down at the orchestra level when the man reached the spot Merlin had vacated in the middle of the stage. "Mr. Emrys! My name's Gwaine Sullivan --"

"Nice to meet you!" Merlin shouted, putting in as much of *I don't care* in his tone as he was able. He hurried up the aisle. Father Gaius was standing midway up the slope, blocking the way. His
arms were crossed, his lips were pressed together into something that resembled both apology and
disappointment, and Merlin felt his heart sink. "I'm sorry, Gaius --"

"It was beautiful, Merlin. You sounded like your old self again."

Merlin lowered his head, embarrassed, pleased, but desperate to get away. He cast a glance over
his shoulder. "No. I can't. I'm sorry. I need to go."

"Merlin --"

"Please."

Gaius sighed with understanding and disapproval and patted Merlin's arm. "Go. I'll stall him."

Merlin moved past him, jackrabbit-quick, and was at the top of the slant when he heard the other
man -- Gwaine -- hurrying after him. "Mr. Emrys -- Gaius, can you stop him? Please!"

Merlin broke free of Father Gaius' grasp and ran.

ooOOoo

"Earth to Arthur," Gwen signed.

Arthur was looking right at Gwen, but he had to blink repeatedly to pull himself out of his daze.
He'd been staring at -- well, staring at nothing, really, and hadn't noticed Gwen come into his
office.

"Sorry. I was thinking," Arthur said, sitting up straight in his chair. He glanced at his desk, at the
mess of fiscal reports and jewellery designs and marketing campaigns; at the charity fundraiser
committee minutes; at a keyboard that had seen better days; at the cheap coffee cup he'd picked up
at a trade show years ago, the ceramic heat-cracked around the edges; the random grades of
sketching pencils that he could never keep organized in their protective case. He rubbed the back
of his neck, smoothed down his tie, and debated the merits of rolling up his sleeves.

This office, this desk -- it had been his father's. When Arthur was growing up, Uther Pendragon
had taken great pains to leave a square of his desk clean, a spot where Arthur could draw, an area
for Arthur to do his homework when he was older, and, later, when Arthur graduated from
university and began working at the company, a place for Arthur to slam down the reports and the
memos and the brochures and anything else that aggravated him. Now, that small corner belonged
to his father, cluttered with assorted knickknacks from his adventures around the world, from the
perfect amethysts that Uther had picked up in Thunder Bay to square gold nuggets from an
Australian mine. His pencils didn't dare roll into that sacred space. Not even the cleaners would
dust that spot, knowing that moving a single item might herald a punishment worse than death.

"Let me guess," Gwen signed once Arthur organized the scattered papers in front of him into a
semblance of yes, Gwen, I was looking at those contracts you sent me yesterday, but he suspected
Gwen didn't believe him anyway. "Dark hair, bright eyes, so gorgeous that even Morgana's
jealous?"

Arthur glanced down at a glossy brochure in his hands. It was a final print, but he'd circled in big
red marker an embarrassing typo. He couldn't muster the urge to throttle the marketing genius who
didn't use spellcheck before sending the final proofs to the printer (never mind all the other levels
of management who had missed it before the brochure got to him), but it helped to distract him
from what was really on his mind.
Despite the ugly, growing mess being quietly uncovered, Arthur's thoughts were barely on the situation with Agravaine, nowhere near the marketing mistake, and wholly taken over by Merlin. He cleared his throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right," Gwen signed, raising a delicate, doubtful brow. "You know, I still don't understand why you didn't at least get his number. Or ask him if he's available to come again. He was good, and you know it."

*The best,* Arthur thought, but he didn't say that out loud. Ever since the night of the Diamond Show opening, Arthur had been haunted by the fleeting memory of Merlin's long, graceful fingers; the flutter of movement as he fingerspelled a difficult name, or as he adapted an existing sign with another to represent a new word that Arthur had immediately been able to understand.

Arthur had felt Merlin's absence so acutely on the following day that it had almost been a physical pain.

Since then, Arthur had suffered through Cedric's interpretations and barely registered any of it, because he was too busy comparing Merlin's much more fluid, expressive, *informative* gestures to Cedric's comparatively concise, boring, bland and reticent signing.

There had been no better evidence of this than at the conference, on the day when Arthur had been booked for sixteen appointments with stakeholders and investors and mining heads and artistic designers and geologists. Although the meetings had been brief, the only good thing to come out of them was the realization that Cedric was nothing but a drain on Arthur's energy, concentration, and patience.

Arthur would have been better off leaving Cedric out of those meetings entirely and made his own attempt to lip read the other party involved for all the information that he'd gotten out of Cedric. It had been at one of those meetings, where a prospector discussed kimberlite pipes in Northern Ontario, that Arthur realized that Cedric was signing something completely different to what was being said. Kimberlite pipes had become some sort of plumbing problem, while *Northern Ontario* had become the Northwest Territories. It had gotten a little odd at one point, and Arthur had spent several long minutes wondering why the man had been talking about renovating a little cabin in the middle of nowhere with a marble bathroom before he stopped watching Cedric's hands and instead paid attention to the man speaking.

The prospector had been talking about resurrecting an old mine claim by his family where his grandfather had written in his journal about odd geological formations that might have been kimberlite pipes associated with diamond formation.

*Jesus,* Arthur thought. Cedric had been off the target during that conversation, and only God knew how many others. Just how deep in Agravaine's pocket was Cedric? Had Agravaine told him to give Arthur an alternate interpretation so that Arthur wouldn't know what was going on?

And -- just what was going on?

The more time Arthur endured Cedric, the more he craved Merlin's company.

It was ridiculous, he knew. Arthur had only met the man once.

Merlin had been beautifully precise when he interpreted conversations for him at the show. It had been nothing less than brilliant. Arthur had been completely, utterly addicted from the first conversation onward by the veritable fount of information that he was being given, by Merlin's easy signing, his expressive body language, hands that could make Arthur *hear* again, lips that could make him *understand.* He had been equally fascinated with the man's blue-grey eyes or the
way his long lashes framed them and made the colour as startling as aquamarine in bright light. By the faint pink that had made dry lips look soft and touchable. Arthur couldn't get out of his mind that moment in the deafening dark when Merlin had reached to speak to him, fingers warm and comforting, or when Arthur had touched him and there had been an electrical crackle between them.

Arthur cleared his throat and pointedly did not to look at Gwen, because he was sure that she had one of her knowing, smug smiles right now. He held up the marketing brochure. "Can you tell them to fix this?"

"I can," Gwen signed. She paused, and asked, "And Merlin?"

"There is no Merlin," Arthur said, feeling his chest tighten painfully. That was a complete and blatant lie. Ever since Leon had given him the file with the background check on Merlin, Arthur was bordering on obsessed, if the number of times he vanity-searched "Merlin Emrys" was any indication. He swallowed hard and grasped for the first plausible excuse. "He doesn't interpret for a living anymore."

"Lance told me he doesn't do much of anything for a living," Gwen signed, unaware that Arthur already knew that. "You could hire him for the company. As your assistant. You won't need to deal with Cedric anymore."

"I have an assistant. Granted, she's a like a pit bull when she gets a silly idea in her head, but --" Arthur trailed off when he saw Gwen's dark glare. It was an expression that he was familiar with and had grown immune to, but it was the way her fingers tightened, almost as if she were cracking her knuckles that made Arthur ask, "What?"

"Leon called. He said he's having some trouble confirming some information, and he'll need a few more days before he has anything for you," Gwen signed. Her eyes narrowed. "You're having him check Merlin out, aren't you?"

"That's none of your business," Arthur said, crossing his arms heavily on top of the keyboard. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his computer reboot. He winced inwardly, hoping he'd remembered to save the speech he'd been working on for the International Diamond Commission meeting in a month. "And even if I am, you should be pleased. I'm listening to you for a change."

"Me?" Gwen asked, startled, pointing at herself. "You're the one who said I need to be careful. I'm being careful. Besides, you can't tell me that it wasn't a coincidence that Lance had someone perfect on his couch the night you called him, and who just happened to have a tuxedo for the occasion. Not with this entire other thing that we're trying to deal with right now."

He raised his eyebrows meaningfully, hoping Gwen would understand. He had high hopes that Leon would have information on Agravaine soon -- information that would cast no doubt whatsoever of the man's suspected actions -- and he couldn't help the warring feelings of foreboding and dread in his belly.

Not only had Gwen caught his meaning, she decided to focus on the least important aspect of what he'd said. Gwen stood up abruptly, her expression thunderous. "Lance is a counsellor at the Hearing Society. He's the sign language interpreting services coordinator. It's not a coincidence that he has friends who know sign languages and who are interpreters themselves. Just listen to you -- I told you to be careful, not paranoid."

Arthur had crossed a line. Gwen never signed when she was upset -- she jabbed at the air with a
fingernail that could probably pierce a balloon, never mind a human heart and slashed gestures with an edge that was sharper than a sword's. Arthur had learned a long time ago to stay out of her arm's reach when she was angry.

This was a new level of angry, because he could see her cheeks darken with fury. "Tell me you didn't check Lance, too."

Arthur might not have any experience with women romantically, but he was friends with enough people of the feminine persuasion to know that there was no safe way to answer that question if the answer didn't start with no, of course not. He thought about lying, but the last time Gwen caught him in a lie, she'd done something to his coffee that turned his otherwise occasional acquaintance with the toilet into something a little friendlier. "I'm looking out for you," he tried lamely. "I would've said something if he wasn't all right. I haven't said anything, have I?"

Gwen gave him a long, long look that bordered on the poison-sweet, coupled with a thin smile that might be a smile if he looked at it in the right light, and said, "I'm sure you were, and I appreciate it, but stay out of my love life and do something about your own."

"My love life is fine," Arthur protested. "And sit down, you're giving me a crick in the neck."

"Oh, really?" Gwen sat down. "When was the last time you went out on a date?"

"Not that long ago --"

"Try six months," Gwen snapped. "It was a blind date."

"He was a nice guy," Arthur pointed out.

"A nice enough guy for you to have a hand job with in the men's washroom at the club, and who dumped you five minutes after he washed himself off," Gwen reminded him.

Arthur flinched. He regretted telling Gwen the story, but at least he hadn't been the whole story. He had never told her why he'd been dumped, because the explanation hadn't just stung -- it had gouged out his heart. The man had been fixing his hair in the bathroom mirror, thinking that Arthur couldn't hear him, not even realizing that lip-reading in a mirror was just as easy as lip-reading face-to-face. Eh. Fucking a deaf guy isn't as much fun as I thought it would be.

It was just another reminder of how he was different and didn't fit in.

Arthur was in the social equivalent of a rock and a hard place. He had few friends who were deaf, and far more who weren't. He had parents who pushed him to excel, who didn't take "no" for an answer and who refused to accept that Arthur would ever be merely average. He'd grown up with every advantage, and there were those in the deaf community who resented him for it.

He could function in society -- to an extent above and beyond most deaf people. He fit in well enough with others like him. But he was never comfortable no matter which world he walked in.

Arthur had dated a few deaf men, but the relationships had ended badly. The most memorable was Morris, who hadn't been able to tolerate that Arthur could have conversations with strangers without an interpreter, that he could order for both of them off the menu without having to point at the item, that he could intervene on Morris' behalf when he was having trouble. Arthur had dated many more men who could hear, but for one reason or another, they didn't have the patience to deal with him.

"It was a good hand job," he said weakly. At Gwen's frown, he sighed heavily. "I got on all right with Merlin. He's nice, he's smart, and he's totally my type. But that's it. If circumstances were
different, I'm sure we'd be good friends, nothing more. Anyway, I don't even know if he likes men."

The romance novels that Leon had found in Merlin's apartment had been of the female-and-male fall-in-love-live-happily-ever-after variety, which didn't really tell Arthur anything. Leon had uncovered rumours of dalliances with men and women, but they were just that -- rumours. Arthur wanted something concrete before he made a move.

"He does," Gwen said. Arthur stared at her.

"How on earth do you even know that?"

"Lance, obviously," Gwen said. She was still aggravated, Arthur decided, or she would have signed or offered more information or both. He leaned over his desk, elbows on his paperwork, and raised a brow at her, waiting. He could wait forever, and Gwen knew it. She sighed, rolled her eyes, and said, "It was a funny story but I don't remember it right now. It comes down to Lance trying to set Merlin up on a date with a girl. Merlin said no, because I'm gay, all right?"

Gwen's fingers curled in quotation marks.

"And before you think that Merlin's probably already dating someone, I asked that too," Gwen said, and Arthur groaned in mortification and dismay. Gwen was in her I'm-going-to-set-you-up-whether-you-like-it-or-not mode.

There were drawbacks to having a personal assistant with whom he was also good friends -- it gave Gwen license to meddle in his personal life. She smiled primly, decided that this was how she would exact her revenge, and Arthur sank deeper in his seat, bracing himself.

"Lance said he's very single. He tried to set Merlin up on a date with a guy and Merlin told him I'm sure you think we'll be a good fit, but I'm not really looking to date right now. That was a year ago, by the way. Lance hasn't seen him with anyone --"

Neither had Leon, after a few nights of surveillance, nor keeping an eye on his phone records. "That doesn't mean anything --"

Gwen gave him another look -- this one was sympathetic but unyielding, and he knew there would be no getting away from her if he didn't go along with whatever harebrained scheme she had in mind. "You need someone, Arthur."

"I've got you."

"No, you don't, and don't pretend you do, because even though I'll come to your place with a bucket of ice cream and watch movies to keep you from working too much, pretty soon, I'll be going over to Lance's house instead of yours."

Arthur raised a brow. "When's the wedding?"

"Oh, God. Don't jinx me. He hasn't even asked me out yet," Gwen blurted out.

"What's stopping you from asking?"

"I couldn't," Gwen said, reddening.

"You were holding hands at the show."

"He was just being nice," Gwen protested. "My hands were cold."
"Right. I believe that. I also believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy." They stared at each other for a while. Gwen was digging her fingernails into the arms of his expensive leather chair, Arthur relented and held up his hands to tell her he was done teasing.

"I'll ask him out if you'll let me cancel the rest of Cedric's bookings and let me hire Merlin," Gwen said.

Arthur's temple throbbed. He pressed a finger to the vein over his left eyebrow and waited for the ache to abate. He glanced to the door and made sure it was shut before he spoke. "Don't do anything for now. I don't want to alert Agravaine that we're on to him just yet. Please? Keep things exactly the way they are where Cedric is concerned. Business as usual. Let me talk to Leon first, see where we are."

Gwen's eyes narrowed. "The longer Cedric is involved, the harder things are for you."

"I'll manage. I don't want to do anything drastic until we have something tangible. I'd hate this to get out of hand because I'm misreading things."

"You know that you're not," Gwen said. Her concern was suffocating, and for a brief -- very brief moment -- Arthur thought about his mother, who would look at him like that sometimes when he was about to do something spectacularly stupid, but letting him do it anyway so that he could learn for himself why it was a bad idea.

"Humour me for now." Arthur chewed his lower lip. "Do me two favours?"

"It depends on what you're going to ask for," Gwen said.

"You're my PA. You have to do what I ask," Arthur said.

"Right," Gwen said, snorting. "What is it?"

"Confirm Leon for that meeting. Wherever and whenever," Arthur said. "And don't tell anyone who I'm meeting with or where I've gone."

"When do I ever? What's the second favour?"

Arthur hesitated. He bit his tongue for a second too long, knowing full well from the way Gwen's eyes started to sparkle and her lips tugged into a smile that she'd already divined what Arthur was about to ask for. "Merlin doesn't work for the Hearing Society, right?" At Gwen's grinning nod, Arthur said, "Offer him a job. As my personal interpreter. Figure out a salary. Don't put him on the company's payroll. I want him to be my employee, not the company's. I'm only going to need him on-call to start. Make it attractive to him."

"How attractive?" Gwen asked, raising a brow.

"Not so attractive that I'm going to have to fire him if I want to date him." Arthur pointed a finger at Gwen. "But as soon as you make him the offer, whether or not he accepts, you are asking Lance out."

She stood up, smiling as if he'd done something to make her life easy. But the smile faded a moment later. "Arthur."

"Yes?"

"I asked around," Gwen signed, her lips pressed in a thin line. "Don't worry. I didn't let on why I was asking, but I found out that Agravaine had a speech already prepared for the show."
Arthur leaned back in his chair, deflated. He wasn't surprised. Of course Agravaine would have his own speech ready. Agravaine had it marked on his fucking calendar. He had only been pretending to volunteer to read Arthur's speech to make it look like he was on Arthur's side. Had Agravaine been planning on switching them at the last minute? Would Arthur have even known what Agravaine was telling the audience, or would he have found out much later, after the damage was done?

He started to speak, but his voice felt crumbly, heavy, cracked. He swallowed and tried again. "Did you get a copy?"

"I'm waiting for it," Gwen signed. "Henry -- one of the copywriting interns in marketing -- he's the one who revised it. He said he thought he still had the file. He'll send it to me today. I'll forward it to you as soon as I get it."

Arthur nodded dumbly. "Thank you."

He watched Gwen leave the office, loaded his email program, stared at it for a long time, and willed Henry to send that speech to Gwen right now. Now.

Arthur had spent hours distracting himself with writing speeches for appearances that were so far in the future they would be obsolete by the time the presentation dates came around; with reading outstanding reports and signing off on approvals for contract work; with reviewing the fall line-up for the jewellery division and glancing over the end-of-quarter tonnage reports from the different mines owned by the company -- precious metals recovery, diamonds, other jewels. He ate a soggy tuna sandwich from the canteen, drank tepid tea that he could barely choke down, and sucked on a piece of soft toffee until it was gone. He spent some time at the drawing board and sketched a few designs.

And every ten minutes, he checked if any new emails had come in.

His heart raced when he finally saw the email from Gwen. The subject line was FW: RE: Speech.

He took a deep breath and double-clicked the attachment.

The document was eight pages long, single-spaced, and covered in red Tracked Changes with copywriting edits. Arthur selected and deleted them all, wanting to see Agravaine's speech in its entirety, untouched and unedited.

*Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Agravaine DuBois and I am the acting CEO of Pendragon Industries.*

Arthur read the line again. And again. He scoffed.

"Unbelievable," Arthur said. Just how big were Agravaine's balls? Naming himself the CEO of Arthur's company?

*Welcome to the 25th annual Diamond Show. We have an exciting program for you this week, the least of which includes several momentous displays and new jewellery designs from our top artists that will be coming out as part of the spring collection. I am aware that many of you are looking forward to these. There'll be a banquet hosted by one of the top chefs in Toronto, several floor shows, and a stockbroker's lunch later in the week. I hope to see you all there.*

Arthur shook his head. He could imagine Agravaine reading from his notes, barely glancing up at
the crowd. Thus far, it was the most boring thing Arthur had ever read, and he could only imagine that it would have been equally boring to listen to.

As you are all aware, Pendragon Industries has been struck with a terrible loss in the last fiscal quarter. The former CEO and owner of the company, Uther Pendragon, and the famed designer, Ygraine DuBois-Pendragon, passed away in a plane crash. We have just observed a lovely memorial in their honour. I would like to thank all of you for your kind thoughts and your condolences. Your compassionate support through these last few months has been essential for our continued success in the industry.

Arthur skipped down that page and most of the next, which were full of contrived memories between Agravaine, Uther and Ygraine. Arthur had no recollection of Agravaine ever being invited to the family cabin in the Muskokas, and he was one hundred percent certain that Agravaine had never joined Uther on any of his expeditions in South America, collecting geological samples for future land claims. Arthur's uncle fretted whenever he got any dirt under his fingernails or went too long without creature comforts.

For the last twenty-five years, I have worked tirelessly behind the scenes of Pendragon Industries. I know I am not a familiar name to most of you, but I am sure you have heard the old adage -- the power behind the throne. For many years, I was that power. While Uther was in the limelight, I handled contractual affairs, negotiated diplomatic treaties between the company and governments of the countries where we have our mines, and was instrumental in not only the acquisition of new, profitable mines, but in the takeover of important worldwide assets that expanded Pendragon's market share.

"What a fucking load of bullshit," Arthur muttered. He skipped over several more similar blowhard declarations that were more of a cover letter for a resume than a speech for the conference.

The company's loss of its two famous figureheads, has been tragic, however, it is time to move on. I have the honour of having been named by Uther and Ygraine as their choice for the incoming CEO of Pendragon Industries, as I mentioned earlier. For the last three months, I worked on a new mission statement for the future of the company. As solid as the diamond industry is, it has grown stagnant over the last twenty years, and I will be taking our explorations in a new direction. This new direction will be of a benefit to all, and not just to the select few who can afford the fruit of our hard work.

"What!" Arthur glanced at the door, wondering if Gwen had heard him shout. He put down the speech and rubbed his forehead, forcing himself to calm down. His parents had named Agravaine CEO? Arthur knew that they would sooner have drowned Agravaine in a tar pit.

Arthur took a steadying breath and read between the lines: Agravaine wanted to widen the customer base so that there was more revenue.

In the very near future, we will be expanding our business base for petroleum and natural energy exploration. With the current worldwide crisis, it only makes sense that Pendragon Industries gravitates toward profitable product sources with a known demand base. We will begin with supporting new mining operations in Russia and off the Bering Strait to take advantage of the opening Arctic waters and the potential for hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil to fuel our independence from foreign sources. This is a large undertaking and we hope to have this new division up and running by the end of the calendar year. We have several key personnel already on board with this approach --

A cold anger poured down Arthur's spine as he continued to read. He jotted down the names listed. They were top members of the board.
They were so fired.

*This large, important shift in Pendragon Industries' focus will require a concentrated approach from the parent company. We have taken a hard look at all of our divisions and determined which departments will be closed. I am saddened to announce that we will be selling our jewellery division and shutting offices worldwide in order to focus on our new enterprise.*

"Fucking hell," Arthur said. He resisted the urge to throw his monitor across the office.

*This shift in focus also means that we will be withdrawing our position from the Diamond Commission until the company stabilizes.*

Arthur couldn't read any more. It made him sick to his stomach. He skimmed down the rest of the document, catching a few more sympathetic phrases -- *These are very tumultuous times, we appreciate your support, these changes will benefit the company and its investors,* and buried his face in his hands.

He sat back in his chair, drained of energy. He watched the door to his office open as Gwen came in, pale-faced and shaken.

"Did you read that? What does he think he's doing?" she signed.

Arthur didn't answer. He couldn't. A slow burn of rage was boiling under the surface, threatening to erupt into an out-of-control forest fire that would decimate the entire far North of the province.

He finally let go of the armrests and signed, "Call Leon. Tell him to hurry."

**ooOoo**

It was life as usual for Merlin, a return to his predictable routine that was being curtailed by the owner of the grocery store where he worked; Lance's daily insistence that Merlin stop holing up in his apartment, that he re-engage with the rest of the universe; and the foul weather front that hit unexpectedly on his way home.

Merlin was dripping rainwater when he answered the door to find Lance on the other side, looking far too pleased with himself.

"What do you want?" Merlin asked. He didn't bother to hide his irritation.

"Did you get caught in the rain?" Lance asked. Merlin decided that Lance's grin was *mocking,* and that didn't help his already foul mood.

"No, I thought I'd save a few quarters and do my laundry in the shower today," Merlin snapped. "Of course I got caught in the fucking rain. What's wrong with you?"

Lance barged into the apartment; Merlin backed away quickly before he was on the receiving end of a one-man stampede.

"Are you working tonight?" Lance asked.

Merlin contemplated lying. The last time he told Lance that he wasn't working, he'd ended up on a freelance job interpreting for a gorgeous blond man -- the same gorgeous blond man that Merlin had been fantasizing about ever since, whether it was a quick pull of his cock in the shower or a long, languorous masturbation in bed.
Answering in the negative might mean more of the same, and Merlin knew he wouldn't turn down the opportunity to see Arthur Pendragon again. But right now, Merlin really wasn't in the fucking mood.

He must have hesitated a little too long, because Lance snatched the wet jacket out of Merlin's hands.

"You're coming with me."

"Um. Why?"

"Because Gwen called and invited me to this posh dinner event thing tonight as her date," Lance said.

"Again, why? She asked you, not you and me, and you don't need a wingman if you've already got it in the bag," Merlin said. He went into the kitchen, wanting to drip the last of the rainwater in peace. He threw a dish towel on the floor and stepped on it.

"Because Arthur wants you to come."

"Wha--" The dish towel slipped under Merlin's foot like a banana peel. "--aaaaat!"

Merlin landed square on his back, his legs jammed against the oven and the cabinets, his hand on the edge of the sink. He'd narrowly avoided hitting his head on something sharp and uncomfortable, but it didn't matter because the rest of him was hurting, from every hair on his head down to the last alveoli in his lung tissue gasping for breath.

"Are you all right?" Lance asked, helping him up.

"Ow! No! Also, what?" Merlin rolled his shoulders, grimacing. Bone cracked against bone, there would be a large, uncomfortable bruise on his butt for a few days, and his wrist felt sprained, but it didn't feel as if there was any serious damage done other than to his pride.

"According to Gwen, Arthur's been kicking himself for not getting your number at the show," Lance said, liberating a bag of frozen vegetables from the freezer. Merlin placed it on his wrist.

He didn't make eye contact with Lance. Arthur had asked for him. Arthur wanted to see him. He vacillated between a ridiculous surge of excitement, terrified anxiety, an eagerness to see Arthur again, and nervous suspicion.

To say that Merlin had been upset by Arthur's casual dismissal was like saying that the ocean was wet, winter was cold, and the sun could make someone go blind if they stared at it too long, but, quite honestly, Merlin had no right to be angry. It had been a job. He had been paid for his time -- and rather handsomely, too. He hadn't been given any indication that this would be a recurrent gig, even if he had wanted it to be in the first place.

Which he most assuredly didn't want. Much. Hardly at all.

Going to St Michael's, being on the stage for the first time in ages and singing, really singing, had helped ease some of the dull ache he had no business feeling over this random, arrogant, completely gorgeous man.

All that had been ruined when he'd been found out -- and worse, by someone who recognized him. Merlin had been avoiding Gaius' phone calls in the hopes that everyone would forget it had ever happened.

"No, I do not!" Merlin snapped. "Why the hell would I be attracted to an anal-retentive, self-centred, totally rude asshole, no matter how shiny his blond hair is, how blue his eyes are, how gorgeously expressive he is? I don't know anyone else like him -- someone who can be such a complete jerk one second and so fucking amazing the next -- and I don't want to!"

Lance raised a brow and crossed his arms.

"Oh, shut up!" Merlin turned away.

Lance was right. Merlin did like Arthur.

He liked the way that Arthur adapted to each situation. He liked how Arthur had positively glowed when he walked off the stage, accepting praise with embarrassed grace, flushed and pleased, revealing then and there just how nervous he had been in the first place. He liked how Arthur had leaned in to whisper to Merlin during the show when everything had gone dark, how he hadn't jerked his hands away from Merlin when Merlin signed a response, how Arthur's expression seemed to brighten and relax when Merlin interpreted a speech or a conversation.

He liked how Arthur recognized his own flaws and grudgingly admitted to them -- to Merlin, who was a complete stranger. He liked how Arthur had apologized and patiently endured Elena's nearly-hysterical attempt to make amends for a blunder that had been no one's fault. He liked how Arthur would ask questions, but not pry when Merlin avoided having to answer them. He'd liked wandering around the displays with Arthur, he'd liked how it had been comfortable, he'd liked how there had been absolutely no pressure.

He liked how Arthur had smiled at him, how his expression softened, how his hands narrowed speculatively when he was thinking, how his hands floated from one sign to the next with precision and grace.

It had been so much easier to deal with his feelings when he'd thought that Arthur had been with Morgana. Safer. As it was, knowing that Arthur was at least potentially single had resulted in at least two dozen hand jobs while fantasizing that Arthur had been there with him. Touching him. Fucking him.

Merlin stared at Lance, betrayed. Seven different things wanted to be said out loud all at once, but he bit it all back. He couldn't help the anger that slipped into his tone when he was finally able to speak. "That's a good one. Very funny. You know, I didn't think you were cruel, but you are. I trust you, I bleed all over your floor, I reveal my deepest, darkest secrets and you torture me like this. You're a horrible, horrible person. You had me fooled with this goody-two-shoes act of yours."

"I'm serious, Merlin," Lance said, hurt. "Besides, Gwen wants to talk to you but says she'd rather do it in person, and if you come tonight, even better. She said something about a job offer."

Merlin's laugh was forced. So much for the brief, completely painful hope that there might have been something else behind Arthur wanting to see him again. "His other interpreter probably bailed on him again. You did tell Gwen that I don't do this anymore? That I haven't for a long time? That this was a favour? So that you could get into her pants?"

"Merlin!"

"The whole point of my helping you out in the first place was to get you two together so that you
could go and get married and have babies and be disgustingly happy as long as you left me out of it," Merlin snapped. He struggled out of his wet shirt and dumped it in the sink.

"Merlin," Lance said, his brows pinched in a frown. "Gwen said Cedric's working tonight. That Arthur wants you there as his guest."

Merlin's heart picked that moment to start training for a marathon. He tried to cover up for his wide-eyed, deer-in-the-headlights look by scrambling around and turning away.

"Bullshit." Merlin leaned against the counter and yanked off his left sock. He misjudged both his own strength and the elastic power of the wet fabric, because his sock went flying and landed on the wall, narrowly missing Lance. "A man that good looking? That ridiculously rich? That utterly fascinating? He can't get himself a real date?"

Merlin pulled off his right sock, turned around, and squeezed the water out over the sink.

He heard Lance exhale a patient sigh behind him. "Arthur's can get himself a date, but he didn't get your number, so he had Gwen ask me. I had to tell her that you don't have a cell phone, so Arthur couldn't text you. You don't have a TTY, so he couldn't call. You have a landline, but you're never home, so he could try the relay operators, but then he'd have to leave a message, and he hates that. Then I had to explain that you don't have a computer and you don't have an email address and that you're pretty much a hermit, and that if he wants to ask you out on a date, he has to ask you in person, but he can't because he's at a meeting right now, but he sent a car --"

"I'm not going," Merlin said. His heart was pounding. "Even if this wasn't some sort of cosmic joke, I've had a shit day and the last thing I want right now is to inflict my pissy mood on someone I actually like."

Merlin blanched when he realized what he said, but it was too late to cover it up now.

Lance's eyes narrowed. He crossed his arms over his chest. "You are going to take a hot shower, and you are going to put on a suit, and you are going to be ready when I come and get you in thirty minutes, because the car will be downstairs, waiting for us, if it's not already there by now."

Merlin struggled to come up with an excuse not to go. "I have to work," he said lamely.

"No, you don't."

"I'm hungry," he said. His stomach seconded the motion with a loud growl.

"There'll be food there. Fancy dinner, remember? We will both be fed by our dates," Lance said.

"It might be a date for you --"

"It's a date," Lance said firmly, and he frowned, his mouth set. He wouldn't be entertaining any additional arguments.

Merlin slumped back against the kitchen counter, the damp dishtowel sliding under his feet. "Fine."

Lance broke into a big, love-struck grin. "Good. Thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes," Merlin said resignedly.

"Oh, don't sound like that. It's not as if you're not infatuated with Arthur --"
"I'm not!"

"-- and you're inwardly secretly pleased that Arthur wants to see you again --"

"I'm not!"

"-- and by the way, wear that red tie you have. Gwen told me it's Arthur's favourite colour."

Merlin stared at the empty spot left behind by Lance's retreating form, and didn't move until he heard the front door shut with a click.

He glanced at the time. Thirty minutes.

"Shit."

Merlin considered not being ready in time, but that lasted as long as it took for him to remember Arthur's bemused, nearly fond smiles. He darted for the bathroom, and struggled to get out of his wet jeans without breaking his neck in the process.

Merlin did not wear his red tie. He wore the blue tie. It had silver diagonal stripes on it and stood out against a light blue shirt and his charcoal grey suit.

"You look good. You almost don't look like you're going to a funeral," Lance said when Merlin opened the door.

It took Lance ten minutes to convince Merlin that he'd been joking and that there was no need for him to go back inside to change. Merlin's already foul temper had worsened when they were stuck in rush hour traffic for another twenty minutes. Lance called Gwen to let her know and stayed on the phone for the duration of their wait. The driver turned the radio to an obnoxious talk show that Merlin didn't know, and all Merlin had to distract himself from his growing jitters was the kid making scary faces from the car next to them.

They arrived to a light crowd at the banquet hall, the majority the attendees lingering in the lobby, drinks in hand; staff members milling about here and there, trying to look busy and hinting at stragglers that it was time to get inside.

Lance spotted Gwen nearly right away using his innate Gwen-radar. The two exchanged smitten smiles and besotted looks and took each other's hands with such gentleness that Merlin couldn't help but groan inwardly while they finished their mating dance and noticed that there were people around them.

"I'll get us some drinks," Lance sand, prying his gaze from Gwen long enough to glance at Merlin. "Wine or beer?"

"Ginger ale or club soda or something," Merlin said with a shrug. He watched Lance go before realizing that he was under a microscope. He turned to look at Gwen and smiled faintly. "Um?"

"Arthur mentioned that you don't drink," Gwen said.

"Not when I'm working, no," Merlin said.

"You're not working now," she said with a soft smile and a knowing twinkle in her eye that made Merlin shiver involuntarily and glance around for the candid cameras, absolutely certain now that this was a joke, because why would someone like Arthur be even remotely interested in a nobody like him?
Merlin covered up the flare of insecurity with a forced smile and a faint shrug. "Between you and me, I'm a terrible lightweight. I'll probably get buzzed just from the fumes in the room."

Gwen's laugh was soft, and she twined her arm through his, guiding them out for a walk. "Did Lance mention the job?"

"Job?" Merlin's eyes pinpricked with tears that he blinked away. So this was all a joke, after all. Merlin had let himself think that maybe this was a date, that Arthur wanted him, not his interpreting skills, and he'd been wrong. The fancy dinner was probably an attempt to wine and dine Merlin into agreeing to do whatever it was that Arthur wanted Merlin to do. He gave Gwen a fake smile and glanced around. "What is it this time? Arthur's giving another speech? Lance did tell you that I don't do this kind of thing anymore?"

Gwen tilted her head to the side, and he saw the little wince on her brow, the way her lips tightened. Very slowly, as if building momentum to get to the end of her pitch without being interrupted, Gwen said, "He did, but he also said that you had a bad experience --"

Merlin tensed involuntarily, and a million thoughts streamed through his mind at once -- *I thought I could trust him he swore he would never tell anyone I can't believe he told Gwen he's not even married to her yet she could turn me in to the police and I'll get sent up as a lab experiment and how dare he give me up for a piece of tail no matter how fine she is I can't believe he told her he's not even married to her yet she could turn me in to the police and I'll get sent up as a lab experiment and how dare he give me up for a piece of tail no matter how fine she is I was his friend first --*

He shook his head and forced himself to listen to what Gwen was saying. If nothing else, he'd know if he should pull another disappearing act. The first one had worked well enough, hadn't it?

" -- it would break anyone's heart, you know. Lance feels terrible about it. He thought you could handle really young kids, that you did fine with them before, but that this one kid was taking her hearing loss badly," Gwen said. "It wasn't your fault, you know. And Arthur's not a kid anymore. He doesn't even remember what anything sounds like, and he really doesn't care."

Merlin ducked his head guiltily. Of course Lance wouldn't sell him out. He felt badly for even thinking that Lance would have. Merlin was pretty sure that betrayal wasn't in Lance's genetic makeup.

He shut his eyes for a moment and listened to what Gwen said, letting it sink in. In many ways, Arthur was like Will. Will had lost his hearing shortly after he was born, and he'd never really known sound. From what little Merlin knew about Arthur, Arthur was something of the same, except he'd been a kid when he lost his hearing to some sort of illness. Merlin remembered what Arthur had said about not being able to hear -- how he wasn't bothered by it, how it didn't matter to him, and while that did support what Gwen said, Merlin couldn't help but grumble, "You shouldn't put words into his mouth."

He realized too late that he sounded rude and protective. Gwen's cheeks coloured, and she was more appalled than offended. "Oh, no, no, I didn't mean it that way. It's just, he makes it very clear that people shouldn't worry about him or feel sorry that he can't hear."

"Oh," was all Merlin could say.

"You'd be good for him," Gwen said suddenly. Before he could laugh or snort or find a way to make a quick escape, Gwen continued, "He takes on too much for himself. He doesn't know how to ask for help. At the show, he didn't *have* to ask for you to help him. You just did it, like you knew exactly what he needed. It's like that woman he went to apologize to --"

Gwen paused, a little fond smile on her lips as she looked up at Merlin. "He wouldn't, not
normally, you know. It's awkward for him. He hates having to tell people how to interact with him -- it's not like he thinks that everyone should already know it. He just hates..."


Gwen nodded.

Merlin couldn't forget how much more relaxed Arthur had been when Merlin intervened on his behalf, when he told Elena to talk to Arthur as if he was anyone else that she knew, to let Merlin handle the interpreting. After that, Merlin and Arthur had fallen into a comfortable routine -- Arthur would glance at him expectantly, and Merlin would intervene when needed.

Merlin had overstepped his bounds -- an interpreter was supposed to be neutral, an invisible presence during a conversation between two parties, but Arthur had seemed so *relieved* that Merlin didn't feel so bad to have spoken for Arthur each and every time.

"He thinks he doesn't deserve to," Gwen said suddenly. "That he doesn't have the right to ask for anything. That he has to prove himself first before he can get what he wants or what he needs."

"That's ridiculous," Merlin said, unable to help his scowl. "It doesn't matter if he can't hear or not. He blows everyone I've ever met out of the water. How he deals with people, going up to them because otherwise they won't come to them, treating them like they're equals -- I've known people too afraid to even talk to... to whomever, but Arthur -- he's fearless. I'm --"

*Smitten*, he didn't say.

"-- impressed with him. Anyone would be."

"Most people are afraid of him," Gwen said. "It's not just the hearing thing."

"It's because he's a bit of an ass," Merlin said, and Gwen laughed.

"See? That's why you would be perfect for him. He doesn't scare you in the least, does he?"

"Why should he?" Merlin asked. He knew from Gwen's soft smile that he'd successfully fooled her, because Arthur *did* scare him.

There had been a time when he hadn't known better and had let himself be overwhelmed by someone with an aggressive personality. Nimueh had bullied Merlin until he had agreed with whatever she thought was best, and he had put a stop to it nearly too late when he had found out that she had never had his best interest in mind. He'd fought her; he'd resisted her until he'd become too tired, too bone-exhausted, too stretched thin to do anything else but preserve what little he had left by letting Nimueh have her way. Merlin had promised himself that he'd never let that happen again.

Arthur had an aura about him that was larger-than-life, and Merlin wasn't simply leery of him -- he was terrified. He could imagine Arthur as a conqueror, plundering new-found lands, plumbing it for riches and resources before leaving it behind, broken and barren, just as Nimueh had done to Merlin.

Arthur was everything that Merlin wanted. That he was afraid to have. He couldn't see himself ever saying *no* to Arthur, and even if he tried, he wasn't so sure that Arthur would ever let him have that *no*.

Nimueh never had. It was only when Merlin had done the only thing that he could do to protect
himself once and for all -- cutting all legal ties and running away -- that Merlin had been able to save what was left of his soul.

Merlin didn't need to look at Arthur to know that he craved the man more than he'd ever craved his only love -- music. He wanted to do all sorts of foolish, romantic things, to even let himself grow out of this silly crush and to love this man, but he was afraid of trusting someone who might render him down to his bare bones, stripping him of flesh and muscle and heart.

Merlin caught a glimpse of a blond head of hair on the other side of the room. He craned his neck for a better look, knowing for certain that it was Arthur even before Merlin saw him. Arthur was surrounded by a small group of people, four or five men, all of them dressed businessman prim. There was an interpreter off to the side, narrow and pinched, looking a bit like a drowned rat blow-dried and styled to be pretty enough for the crowd, his expression the blank and empty of having been hit by a two-by-four. Arthur was talking to one man while a second nodded and commented now and again while their entourage tilted their heads both in interest and agreement.

Merlin's heart pounded with a heavier drum, his stomach fluttered with a sensation comparable to show jitters that he hadn't felt in over a year, and his magic flared with something Merlin could only identify as delight.

He looked away from Arthur, hastily reining in his magic, wondering why now when it had been dormant since the Diamond Show, and again since he was nearly caught by that man at St Michael's.

Merlin wondered what was keeping Lance and their drinks -- Merlin's throat had suddenly gone dry -- and glanced over his shoulder. His gaze was drawn toward Arthur.

Arthur was a bright man burning with passion and conviction, a determined leader who looked at those who served him and sought to do his best by them.

Merlin knew it was too late for him. He was well past this being merely a crush. He loved this man. He truly did.

"This isn't all it is, is it?" Merlin asked with a sigh. He rubbed his chest unconsciously, trying to ease the hurt. He shook his head and gave Gwen a disarming smile before she could answer. "If I take this job, he's going to take over my life, isn't he?"

"Somehow I doubt that you would let him," Gwen said.

Merlin snorted. A muscle clenched in his jaw. He couldn't shake off the ghost of Nimueh Blake. His former agent wasn't even here. He'd cut her out of his life as surely as if he'd amputated a limb. She hadn't been good for him, to him, not once, but Merlin had been so young when she came to his mother's house and made an offer of representation. They hadn't known better, hadn't known anything, had been taken in by the adrenaline rush and the excitement and the effusive flattery that Merlin had a rare and unique gift that had to be shared with the world. Nimueh had said that she was the only one who could take him from being an unknown to the international stage -- and, to her credit, Nimueh had done as promised.


They walked in silence. A few people said kind words to Gwen as they wandered by. Others asked her for information. Two of them requested a meeting with Arthur, and Gwen smiled at them and took their cards and promised to do what she could. Lance should have caught up to them by now, but Merlin imagined that Lance, being the noble, chivalrous sort, was letting the
two talk in private about the job.

Merlin opened his mouth to say, *thanks, but no thanks*, but what came out instead was "What's the job, exactly? I mean, it's not like he needs an interpreter all the time. Plus, doesn't he have that guy? What was his name? Cedric?"

"Oh," Gwen said, in the same way Merlin's mother would say *Oh*, full of barely restrained disappointment, disapproval, and distaste, but simultaneously too polite and diplomatic to come out and say what was really on her mind. Merlin glanced at her, and she collected herself with a strained smile. "Cedric works for the Hearing Society. It's not really fair of Arthur to use their services all the time when he can afford to hire someone for himself."

Maybe it was cynicism. Maybe it was ten years of being told one thing when the speaker really meant another. Merlin could have taken what Gwen said at face value, ignored the white lie, and left it at that, but something prompted him to raise a brow and ask, "Really?"

The twist of Gwen's lips meant *no, not really*, but her words were heartfelt when she said, "Arthur likes you. He's had interpreters his entire life. For school, for work, for events. I've seen him go through dozens since I've known him, but I've never seen him *miss* any one of them. He's *pining*, Merlin. Over you."

Merlin found he couldn't meet Gwen's earnest eyes anymore. He looked away sharply and fought valiantly against the smile threatening to make an appearance.

Gwen saved him from having to say anything by changing the subject. "The job would be on-call, at least at first. We'll set up a schedule for regular meetings and events, but sometimes things pop up unexpectedly."

"Like what?"

"Late night or early calls to the international offices -- Arthur usually takes those from his apartment, so you'd have to go there. He'll take trips to some of the mining sites around the world, and he'll definitely want you there with him. Charity events -- he usually buys two tickets but rarely ever goes except on the spur of the moment. That sort of thing," Gwen said, looking at him hopefully.

Merlin didn't say anything.

"You'd be on salary, whether you work or not. All expenses paid. Benefits," Gwen said. Merlin could feel her studying him, and when he didn't answer, she continued to toss more tantalizing bait in the water, dangling the hook a bit deeper. "The use of company cars. A clothing allowance for the fancier events. Four weeks vacation per year, to start. The loan of Arthur's cabin in the Muskokas."

Merlin couldn't help it. He chuckled. "Does Arthur know you're offering up his camp?"

"He told me to do whatever it took to hire you," Gwen said, her smile so bright that it was sparkling. Merlin felt his fortress walls crumble, defenceless against Gwen's good nature and his traitorous *want* to be close to Arthur. He ducked his head in capitulation. To hear that Arthur was *that* intent on hiring him stirred up feelings of flattery and reluctance, because the last time someone had wanted him this much, his entire life had been derailed.

Logic and self-preservation screamed *no, don't do it*, but what came out of his mouth instead was a shrugged shoulder and a quiet "I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask for, but I hope the answer is yes," Gwen said, and suddenly the pressure to make
a decision was gone. He smiled at her, understanding why Lance liked Gwen so much.

Thinking of Lance was like summoning him. No sooner had they changed the subject of the conversation, Lance made an appearance, masterfully juggling two wine glasses in one hand and a narrow-bodied glass of fizzy ginger ale. Merlin took his drink gratefully.

"Dinner will be soon," Gwen supplied, and apologetically added, "Arthur will join us when he can. He had a few last minute meetings, but we can wander around and mingle until then."

They did just that, but the third wheel eventually snapped off and rolled away. Merlin watched as Lance and Gwen walked off, not really noticing that he had hung further and further back until they were on their own, and if he were honest, he was a little relieved. He needed to think.

It was easy to lose himself in the crowd.

Merlin's mind was already made up. As much as Merlin fervently denied liking -- no, loving -- Arthur, he couldn't see any employment, any relationship with him being mutually beneficial. Merlin would have no defence against Arthur's demands.

If he took the job, it was entirely for the torturous pleasure of being close to Arthur. At the same time, Merlin could see himself leaving within a week out of self-preservation, and that wasn't fair. The little that he knew about Arthur, the little that he'd seen, Merlin suspected that he needed some stability in his life. The revolving door of interpreters probably hadn't helped in that regard. It would be best if Merlin didn't give the job a chance to begin with.

He nodded to himself as he walked, sipping his ginger ale, and decided that he wouldn't ruin the evening by giving his answer right away. He was also being selfish. He wanted to see Arthur again, to pretend that it was a date.

Maybe he could even manage a good-night kiss, somehow.

Merlin walked the circuit of the main room at least once before coming upon Arthur speaking with a tall blonde woman dressed in something better suited for an exploration expedition in the Amazon than at a fancy banquet. He caught Arthur's attention -- or rather, nothing escaped Arthur's attention -- and gave him a slight nod, fully intending on giving the group a pass and wait until Arthur was done for the evening.

There was a faint frown on Arthur's brow, and it deepened when Merlin started to drift away. Arthur gave Merlin the slightest shake of his head. Arthur gestured unobtrusively, and if Merlin hadn't been watching him intently, he would have missed the request that he should stay.

Merlin could have smiled and shaken his head and wandered off, but where would he wander off to? He lingered nearby, studied the people around them, and spoke politely to those nearby. Bit by bit, people drifted away toward the large banquet room. It wasn't long before there was just enough of a crowd around Arthur for Merlin to stand by pretending to be one of the hangers-on trying to get his attention, positioning himself in Arthur's line of sight and listening in without really listening in.

At least, until he glanced over at the interpreter and realized that he wasn't interpreting everything. Or, rather, he was interpreting everything wrong.

The woman that Arthur was listening to was struggling to be patient, but there was no missing her frustration when Arthur didn't answer her question or even seem to be talking about the same thing that she was. And Arthur -- his lips were pressed tight and there was a set to his jaw that looked as if it were doing a few thousand dollars of dental damage. He was trying, he really was,
his expression one set to intense concentration, trying to lip-read the woman when the interpreter lagged behind, but to no avail.

Merlin wasn't surprised that Arthur was having trouble. Anyone would. The woman's accent was lilting and thick, and she was speaking at a blinding hundred kilometres per minute.

Arthur's expression changed subtly, and Merlin wasn't sure, but it looked as if Arthur was about to lose his temper in spectacular fashion.

When Arthur's gaze drifted in his direction, Merlin subtly signed, *Your interpreter sucks donkey balls at this.*

Some of the aggravation eased from Arthur's brow. There was the faintest quirk of a smirk that promptly turned his frustration toward the woman to irritation with his interpreter.

*He's not telling you everything she's saying. Not even close,* Merlin mouthed silently.

Arthur glanced away abruptly, turning his attention to the interpreter who hadn't noticed Arthur's lapse in attention -- and if he had, he wasn't the least bit bothered. Arthur waited for a moment, made a show of checking his watch, and waited again as the woman took the hint and stopped talking.

"Unfortunately, as much as I would like to continue this conversation, I'm expected at the banquet," Arthur said, snake-oil salesman smooth. "Why don't I have my personal assistant arrange another meeting so that we can continue to discuss this matter?"

"Why don't we," the woman said frostily, turning away abruptly in rude dismissal. Merlin flinched involuntarily when he saw Arthur's expression, but whatever Arthur was thinking, he hid it almost immediately and turned to the interpreter.

"We're done for the evening, Cedric," Arthur said. "Thank you for your assistance."

Merlin heard the woman snort and mutter under her breath in something that distinctly sounded like Portuguese.

"Not inviting me to the banquet tonight, then? It's been a long day. I'm feeling a little peckish," Cedric signed.

"No," Arthur said flatly. "As I recall, you indicated that you weren't available for the remainder of the night. I'll muddle through on my own."

The woman turned back to look at the two, shook her head, exhaled in frustration, and stalked off.

"Are you sure?" Cedric shoved his hands in his pockets and pulled out his keys.


Arthur glanced at Merlin with steely determination and gestured, "I need you. Now," and headed after the woman.

The woman reached a man at the end of the long corridor outside the banquet hall, her right arm lashing out in the air like a whip to point behind her. Her voice was raising in both pitch and volume, and the man made placating gestures to calm her down.

"Ms. Romão," Arthur said, but his voice didn't carry. "Isolde. Isolde!"
"What do you want, Arthur? Didn't you insult us enough?" The man's accent was thicker than
Isolde's, if that was humanely possible. Merlin hurried to get closer, but he was too late. The
damage was done; Arthur hadn't understood, and the pause and lack of response was just long
enough to make the man sneer, "Right. Come on, Isolde."

Merlin saw the clouded expression cross Arthur's face, the moment of indecision, the need to say
something but not knowing what, and the words were out of Merlin's mouth and his fingers were
signing before he knew what he was doing. Again. "Wait. Please. I'm afraid there might have
been a misunderstanding."

"Yes, there was," the man said, walking away, pulling Isolde along with him. Isolde took one
look at Merlin, at the way he was interpreting for Arthur, and stopped.

"Tristan. One moment." Isolde favoured Merlin with a scowl. "What do you mean, a
misunderstanding?"

"I'd like to clarify something, if possible," Arthur said, quick to take advantage of the opportunity,
but sparing a moment to shoot Merlin a grateful nod. "Earlier, when you said that you were taking
your mines off the table --"

Isolde's gasp was horrified, and Merlin signed, "I said no such thing! I wanted to know why Mr.
DuBois advised us that the agreement was cancelled, that Pendragon would no longer be pursuing
the Andes mining operations. And what I'd like to know right now is why you were playing me
for a fool, pretending you knew nothing about this?"

If dark looks were thunderstorms, the banquet hall would be washed away by the modern-day
equivalent of Noah's flood. Merlin watched Arthur reel his temper in, and he wasn't the only one
to notice, if the way Tristan and Isolde glanced at each other was any indication.

"You didn't know," Tristan said, glancing at Merlin and staring at his hands.

"No, I didn't know," Arthur said, and Merlin could tell that Arthur hated to make that admission,
ever mind humbling himself even more as he went on to add, "And it appears that I failed to
grasp the magnitude of what you were telling me earlier, Isolde. I apologize. But I would like to
know now, if you would? And perhaps discuss the agreement?"

Tristan and Isolde exchanged glances. "What about your banquet?" Isolde asked.

"It can wait," Arthur said. "I know somewhere we can talk in private, if you'd like?"

There was another long, considering pause as the two looked at each other again, and if Merlin
hadn't picked that moment to look at Arthur, he would have missed the tension coiling him so
tightly that he might shatter to pieces at any moment. Something wasn't right here, Merlin knew.
He was damned if he understood what was going on -- the business world was a complicated
miasma of paperwork and numbers and laws, and he doubted that the diamond business was any
different -- but he could recognize a power play for control and supremacy when he saw one. He
had Mordred and Aglain and several other opera hopefuls to thank for that knowledge, though
none had been better at it than Nimueh.

Arthur was lucky to have uncovered this secret machinations, this power play. This time.

Cedric was involved, somehow. He must have been paid off -- no interpreter could be as bad as
that. No one could be so blatantly wrong, though it could be argued that Isolde's accent was the reason, not Cedric himself -- but it didn't make sense. What was going on?

Before Merlin could tell himself that it wasn't any of his business, that he shouldn't get involved, that this was just one more reason why he shouldn't take the job -- he had had enough of complications and intrigue and drama to last several lifetimes without inviting more -- he was struck wordless by the determination in Arthur's expression, the willingness to sacrifice pride to save something more important. Merlin had an inexplicable feeling of purpose, of wanting and needing to protect this man.

For all Arthur's charm, for all his brash manner, for all his cocksure demeanour, he was -- he truly was -- a good man.

"Yes, I think we would like to talk about this," Isolde said. She put a hand on Tristan's arm. "In private."

Arthur gave them a curt nod, but his eyes drifted to Merlin. He hesitated, and said, "Merlin, could you --"

Merlin's mind was made up about the job. It was. There were so many reasons why he shouldn't take it. Why he should walk away.

"Yes. Absolutely," Merlin said.

The smile Arthur gave him was every reason why he should stay.

ooOoo

It wasn't until Tristan and Isolde had left, leaving Arthur in the Pendragon suite at the Royal York with a stack of papers with copious notes about their meeting, that Arthur let his composure drop. With a long, heavy sigh, Arthur rose to his feet and headed to the bathroom, where he splashed water on his face. He automatically reached for the bottle of painkillers in his pocket. He felt the pills rattle around and considered how many to take.

For all intents and purposes, the paperwork that Isolde showed Arthur -- in fact, had left with Arthur -- outlined how the Andes mines were nothing but a money sink and not at all bit profitable for Pendragon Incorporated. In them, there was every business reason for Agravaine to cancel the agreement between Arthur's father and the Romão family. If the company was taken to court over the refusal to carry through with their promises, the argument would be simple: that in the wake of the new ownership of the company, contracts and negotiations and pending purchases had been legally suspended and cancelled. Arthur had discovered that the Romão were not the only ones to receive a letter of notification that this re-evaluation was underway and "may result in the termination of business partnership, stewardship, or acquisition". The contracts had enough legalese to protect Pendragon Incorporated. It was ironclad.

Agravaine had protected the company, but he had also acted without authorization. Arthur would never have agreed to this approach. How many other companies would be affected by Agravaine's actions? How many people would be out of work? How many avenues of exploration had Agravaine effectively shut down?

Agravaine couldn't have known that Uther had involved Arthur in the early negotiations with the Romãos, that Arthur was aware of the conditions and stipulations that had been agreed on by both sides, or even that Uther had been perfectly willing to take over the mining operation on the basis of data produced by independent mineralogists confirming the presence of pathfinder elements and
minerals, hinting at not only the possibility of high deposits of precious metals, but of more diamonds of the same size and quality as the carbonado diamond that now sat in the Royal Ontario Museum.

A diamond that had been found very close to the properly line bordering the Romãos' lands.

Agravaine also couldn't have known that Isolde would have insisted on meeting with Arthur, but obviously Cedric had been briefed on what to say and what not to say, because that meeting had bordered on absolute, complete disaster.

If it hadn't been for Merlin --

Arthur placed the plastic bottle of painkillers back in his pocket without taking any. He didn't need them. He was tired from the last few hours and the long day, but he didn't have the usual headache he normally had after having to concentrate for too long. There was no question why he had lucked out this time. It was down to Merlin.

Merlin had made everything so easy for Arthur.

He smiled. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror and fixed his hair. He was alone in a hotel suite with Merlin -- he'd be lying if his mind hadn't abruptly veered off in some interesting directions.

Arthur walked out of the bathroom and came to an abrupt stop.

Merlin stood by the window, framed by the black of night with the city of Toronto a sparkle of multi-coloured lights all around him. His arms were raised, and he stretched, long, lean, limber. In that moment, for that moment, Arthur forgot all about the stress of the last few hours -- the renegotiations, the tentative agreement, the promise from Isolde that she would forward the paperwork to Gwen directly as soon as the papers were drawn up -- and allowed himself the rare chance to want

and, in what he knew was restraint of Herculean proportions, leaned against the doorframe instead of wrapping his arms around Merlin, to whisper filthy things into his ear, to pull him toward the bed that was a few steps away.

Merlin rolled his shoulders, oblivious to the fact that he was being watched. He rolled down his sleeves -- coats had been removed, ties had been loosened, sleeves had been folded up -- and buttoned the cuffs before reaching for his jacket. Merlin was leaving -- and Arthur had to stop him.

He just wanted Merlin for himself. For a little while. He had been looking forward to their date, and the unexpected turn of events had ruined that. Arthur hoped that Merlin didn't hate him.

"You know that I didn't ask for you to come tonight to work," Arthur said, satisfied when he saw Merlin's hand waver, his eyes widening as his head snapped in Arthur's direction.

"You needed help," Merlin signed, recovering from his surprise with a faint shrug. He picked up his jacket and shook it out before signing one-handed. "Don't worry about it. I know I'm not officially on the payroll but just make sure the contract is backdated to include today, yeah? That way we'll both be covered by a NDA, and everything you talked about tonight? I won't say a word."

"Of course you won't," Arthur said. Then, because Merlin seemed to have missed the intent
behind Arthur's original statement, he added, this time not too subtly, "We didn't have dinner."

Merlin pulled on his coat, but didn't say anything until his hands were free. He gave Arthur a cheeky grin. "That's all right. You can make it up to me. A nice bonus with my first paycheck."

It wasn't quite the reaction that Arthur had been hoping for, but it was an opening and he wasn't going to miss the opportunity. "How about dinner?"

Merlin's usually animated features stilled into something Arthur could only describe as a "Hmm?" expression.


Merlin's eyes crinkled with amusement, and his lips parted in that little exhale of breath that Arthur recognized as laughter, and he frowned, insulted before Merlin signed, "It's after eleven. It's a little late for dinner. Where would we go?"

"Well --"

"And don't you dare suggest room service," Merlin signed. The darkness that fell over his eyes and the sharpness of his hands went well together, because Arthur could almost guess at the unspoken *I'm sick of it. If I never have room service ever again --*

"I know a place," Arthur said -- which was something of a little white lie. Now that he knew for certain that room service wasn't on the menu, he was scrambling for options.

He was saved from having to come up with the name of a restaurant when Merlin signed, "Your phone's vibrating."

Arthur crossed the main room to the coffee table and picked up his phone before it slid off the table. It was a text from Gwen. *How was yr mtng?*

*Good. Expect docs frm Isolde nxt fw days,* Arthur replied. And, because the situation was dire, he texted again, *Can u mk rsrvations @ Touché? Shld still b open, y?*

"What kind of food do you like?" Arthur asked, looking up in time to see Merlin glance at his watch and frown.

"I'm easy," Merlin signed. Abruptly, as if realizing the connotations of what he'd said, he clarified, "I mean, I'm not fussy."

"Good to know."

Arthur smiled at the flush on Merlin's cheeks. Merlin's flustered expression was cute.

"You don't have to sign anymore," Arthur said, glancing down at his phone. *Rsrvation made. They'll stay open for u,* Gwen texted. Arthur looked up and said, "You're easy to lip read, remember?"

"Force of habit," Merlin said. He gave Arthur a small smile that hinted at lowered defences, and Arthur wondered if Merlin would answer questions about himself if Arthur asked, or if Merlin would deflect them again. "Isn't there a Lone Star up the street?"

For good measure, Merlin's fingers fluttered to spell out the restaurant's name, and Arthur smiled despite himself at how Merlin seemed to know exactly what he needed to sign so that Arthur would understand. Names, places, anything out of context -- he usually had to ask people to repeat
them, or at least have to write them down, but not with Merlin.

"Too dark. They have terrible lighting," Arthur said.

Arthur unrolled his sleeves, fastened the top button of his shirt, and fixed his tie before pulling on his suit jacket.

"There's a pizza place up the street, pretty bright in there, but this time of night there's lots of kids," Merlin suggested.

"The banquet dinner menu was Maine lobster, Kobe steak, and yellowfin tuna," Arthur said dryly. "I am not settling for pizza."

"Oh, of course not. What was I even thinking, suggesting pizza?" Merlin asked, his eyes crinkling faintly in amusement, the corner of his mouth pulling in mockery. "That sort of thing would upset your delicate stomach."

"That's right, Merlin," Arthur said. "And don't you forget it. Nothing but the absolute best for me."

"What if you were lost in the African jungle and had to subsist on grubs and worms?" Merlin asked, his hands automatically making the gesture for Africa, his fingers spelling out grubs and worms, contorting his fingers to mimic a myriad of bugs -- cockroaches, crickets, centipedes. Arthur grinned at the sight. He couldn't help himself. Merlin's fingers -- Arthur wanted to kiss them and lick them for every detail they gave him.

"I happen to like grubs and worms. Provided that they're served with truffle sauce," Arthur said. He was rewarded with a twinkle in Merlin's eyes and a big smile.

Arthur found his car keys. "I'll drive."

Arthur didn't like to drive with passengers in the car, not after a near-miss as a teenager where he paid too much attention to the conversation with his friend than to the road, Arthur usually handed the keys to someone else. This once, though, Arthur sat behind the wheel to see what Merlin would do, and relaxed when it turned out that Merlin was content to sit in silence, even reaching for the radio to turn it off.

"It was loud," Merlin signed where Arthur could see and only when they were stopped at a red light, and left it at that.

"People always turn on the radio when they get in the car," Arthur said. "They leave it on, too. I can't tell you how many times I've given someone a ride, and have them start to wonder if I've been faking all along when they see that the radio's on."

He glanced at Merlin and saw him chuckle. He turned his attention back to the road. It wasn't so late that the streets were deserted, but the traffic was sparse enough that Arthur helped himself to a glance or two in Merlin's direction.

"Or, worse, they leave it on a horribly embarrassing station. Gwen's the worst offender. She doesn't know that I know, but she listens to the sex talk shows. One day I was picking up one of the division heads at the airport, and he wouldn't talk to me all weekend. Apparently they were talking about BDSM on air that day."

Arthur slowed to a stop at a red light and glanced at Merlin. He was laughing, his eyes crinkling up, his mouth open in a big smile, dimples and all. Merlin caught him looking, and quickly signed, "That must have been interesting."
That wasn't the worst part. It was when my dad came into the office and told me about it. Suggested I might want to turn off the radio next time," Arthur said, a small smile on his lips. He remembered how awkward and aloof his father had been broaching the subject in the first place, from the curious *did you know the radio was on to the just to be clear, you're not into that sort of thing at all, right?* that had ended with Arthur laughing so hard that his sides hurt and telling his stoically embarrassed father, *oh my God, I can't believe you -- I'm a little old for the sex talk, dad. Not that it's any of your business, but no, definitely not my thing.*

Uther had looked very stern and serious in that moment, had stammered, "Yes, well. Yes. Good. Don't tell your mother we had this chat," and walked out of the office without another word.

Arthur hadn't been able to look his father in the eye for nearly a week without bursting into spontaneous giggles. Arthur's smile faded, and he swallowed. He blinked hard to keep his eyes from watering. He took a deep breath and felt a comforting hand squeeze his shoulder.

There was a stony, distant look in Merlin's eyes, as if he were holding himself in check, too, probably haunted by memories of his own. The hand drifted away when the light changed to green, and Arthur turned left and down the road.

Arthur missed his parents. All the moments, good and bad, he missed all of it. He wanted them back more than he could say. If he could turn back time, if he could stop his parents from going on that spontaneous trip, he would have done it by now.

He pulled into a parking spot along the road. "It's just up here."

The Touché Restaurant and Martini Lounge was a little gem tucked away in Little Italy, the outer décor subtle against the ostentatious lights and overhead neon signs from the other nearby restaurants. An elegant wrought iron barrier led them up the stretched stairs to the restaurant, the name of the restaurant in cherry-red and elegant script over the entrance. Arthur had discovered this place by accident several years ago. He and his friends had gone through the extensive martini menu not once, but twice, and had woken up the next morning to regret it for days afterward.

Arthur held the door open for Merlin, getting a raised brow and bemused expression in return, but he went through without comment. That tiny arch returned a few seconds later when Arthur pressed a hand to the small of Merlin's back and guided him past the wide-open lounge with sprawling chairs and polished walnut tables and plush couches with low tables, toward the stairs leading down to the basement. The crowd was thin; a young couple sat close together on the navy blue couch; a middle-aged couple with awkward first-date vibes were at one of the tables; a few people socialized with martini glasses in hand, chatting and laughing.

The lighting was a subdued ochre, the furniture and decorative accents highlighting the red brick and thickening the sombre mood. Arthur assumed -- he always assumed -- that there was music piped through the speakers subtly wedged in the corners of the lounge. Arthur didn't like the main floor because it was too dark for lip-reading and too loud for him to be heard without shouting, always attracting attention when there was a lull in both music and general conversation because he hadn't known it had quieted down.

"Arthur Pendragon. We have reservations," Arthur said to the hostess standing by the dais. She smiled at them both.

"We've been expecting you," she said, picking up two menus before leading the way down the stairs.
Every step down was greeted by a gradient shift in lighting and design until they were in a completely different world. The restaurant portion of the club was a vibrant contrast to the lounge, with bright whites against the rustic red brick and the silver glint of glass and mirrors. A full wall was dedicated to a wine rack, another was the permanent residence of the most talented bartender in Toronto. The remainder of the room was a criss-cross of booths and tables with white tablecloths and red napkins and gleaming silverware.

Merlin made a gesture that Arthur didn't miss, asking him to pick his seat first, and Arthur was grateful for the consideration. He hated having his back to the rest of the room -- as much because he couldn't see what was going on as because he hated being surprised when the servers came up behind him. They both sat; the hostess handed them their menus and said something -- Arthur guessed it was the usual spiel of your waiter will be with you shortly, and nodded in automatic response.

"I feel bad," Merlin signed, opening his menu without really looking at it. Arthur followed his gaze around the room, already knowing what Merlin was seeing -- the restaurant was empty, the tables mostly cleared, with only a few stragglers lingering over a second or third or fourth digestif or coffee or dessert. "The kitchen must be closed by now. Are you sure I can't convince your pampered stomach to settle for a nice slice of pizza?"

"No," Arthur said firmly. "It'll be fine, Merlin."

When Arthur had calmed down after reading Agravaine's speech -- something that had taken three days, and he wasn't exactly over it yet -- he had casually asked Gwen if she'd offered Merlin the job.

"No, God. This is what happened," Gwen signed, getting up from her desk to follow Arthur into his office, shutting the door behind her. "I don't have his phone number. I looked everywhere but I don't think I ever got it from him. So I called Lance --"

From the stammered pause, Arthur gave even odds that Gwen might have spent more time making cooing sounds at Lance than discussing Merlin. "And?"

"Lance only has his hard line, and Merlin's out working, and --" Gwen's hands dropped and Arthur caught her mumble something that looked suspiciously like Iinvitedthembothtothebanquet. Arthur sighed.

"A little slower this time, please," Arthur said.

Gwen took a deep breath before signing, "I might have invited them both to the banquet tonight. As. Um. Our dates?"

When Arthur answered with a grin, Gwen plopped down in one of the office chairs with no small amount of relief. "Oh, good. I thought I'd messed up. I mean, I know that you like him --"

It might have been Gwen's idea to invite Merlin to the dinner, but Arthur preferred to think that Gwen had subconsciously acted on Arthur's private desires like she so often did. It also meant that Arthur spent the remainder of the afternoon skimming the information in the thumb drive that Leon had given him, running vanity searches on "Merlin Emrys" to see if there was anything new, and reading as many articles as he could get away with while he was supposed to be reviewing the quarterly report summaries from the company's divisions.

Arthur had been looking forward to spending time with Merlin, even if it was going to be in a crowded, noisy environment. But the banquet had come and gone in favour of salvaging what had been one of his father's pet projects, and Arthur was damned if he was going to miss out on an
opportunity to have Merlin to himself.

The man was kind, compassionate, intriguing, mysterious. The history that Leon had managed to compile on Merlin revealed that he had gone through several levels of Hell and should, by rights, be a recluse who never saw the light of day. And yet, here he was, helping Arthur when there had been no real obligation, and he had done it not once, but twice. Arthur wanted to get to know the man outside of all the details that Leon had unearthed about him.

They could get pizza anytime. In fact, Arthur had already decided that they would get pizza at some point. Later.

The tenth or twelfth date. Arthur was planning on many more of these.

The waitress came over, a friendly smile on her lips, a bit of long night weighing down her gaze. Arthur missed what she’d said, but a quick glance at Merlin -- who had subtly made the sign for drinks -- was all that he needed.


"Just water, please."

"Very good. I'll give you a chance to review the menu," the waitress said, leaving them.

"You can order wine, you know. Anything you want, really," Arthur said.

Merlin's smile was weak, forced, embarrassed. He leaned back in his seat -- away from Arthur -- and pressed his lips together before he said, "I don't drink."

"You said that before," Arthur said, not liking how Merlin had immediately withdrawn. "I thought it was just that you didn't drink on the job -- "

"I don't," Merlin said, flashing Arthur a grin. "How would it look if I was drunk? Drunken signing is bad. Dangerous, actually. I might accidentally take out someone's eye."

"Who says that won't happen anyway. Almost took out that big guy at the show, you remember the one? He was taller than you, hands the size of shovels, easily weighed more than the two of us combined?"

"The geologist?" Merlin grimaced. "The one with the wild hair?"

"That's the one. I thought he was going to club you," Arthur chuckled. He remembered Merlin's profuse apologies and attempts to duck the man's reflexive swat. "You're not working now, you know."

"I know," Merlin said. He shrugged a shoulder, looking down at the menu, but his eyes were unfocused. When he looked up finally, he said, "I just don't drink. Not anymore. It's not that I'm alcoholic or anything. I'm just -- I've lost my taste for it."

Merlin's opera friend, Freya, had hinted to Leon that Merlin had gone on binges after successful shows. Arthur wished Merlin would trust him enough to tell the truth instead of giving some contrived excuse. Arthur nodded, leaving it alone for now. "All right."

There must have been something in his tone, because Merlin's shoulders slumped and he put down the menu. He chewed at his lower lip -- Arthur tried not to stare -- and said, "I used to... I used to go out a lot when I was younger. And I mean, a lot. Sometimes I'd drink too much, and... I wouldn't remember how I got back to... or really, anything that happened. I'm a bit surprised I'm
still alive, to be honest."

"And you're such a lightweight that a glass of wine will affect you that much?" Arthur asked. He saw Merlin mistake his curiosity for accusation, and quickly added, "I mean, fair enough, if that's true, I appreciate the warning. For example, I'd much rather have your virtue on my own merits, not because a drink lowered your inhibitions."

Merlin snorted with amusement. A moment later, he stilled. He gave Arthur an "Um" look that was, Arthur noted, distinctly different from his "Hm" look, and his cheeks reddened as he ducked down to stare blindly at the menu again.

Arthur saw Merlin's lips move and was pretty sure that Merlin had said not much virtue left to take. He felt a surge of sadness that Merlin thought so little of himself. Whatever he had gone through -- whoever he'd been with? Arthur didn't care.

The waitress came to the table, delivered their drinks, and this time, Arthur was ready for her when she asked, "Are you ready to order?"

"Why don't we make it simple? Can you find out what the kitchen has available? I'm assuming that they've nearly closed it down, and I'd hate to ask for something that they would have to prepare from scratch."

The waitress flashed him a small, thankful smile. "I'll do that right now. The chef will appreciate your thoughtfulness."

Arthur waited until she was gone before turning to Merlin. "I hope that was all right."

"That was actually really nice," Merlin said. He closed his menu and left it on the edge of the table, and leaned forward, narrowing his eyes. "You were joking about the virtue thing, right? Because, I work for you, yeah? This isn't a date, is it? First, Lance's telling me that you wanted me out for a date. Then Gwen's recruiting me for a job. And I worked for you earlier, but now... I don't know, Arthur. I just need to know. I mean, if you wanted me to work for you, you didn't have to buy me a fancy dinner to get me to agree. I just need to be clear on what this is."

There was pain in Merlin's eyes that Arthur couldn't interpret.

Arthur clenched his jaw. He wanted to say of course, it's a date. He wanted to tell Merlin that he was sorry that business got in the way, that he had to ruin the evening with hours of trying to fix Agravaine's bullshit, that he'd make it up to him. Instead, he swallowed the lump in his throat, ignored the dull ache in his chest, and wondered when, exactly, the evening had gone down the toilet.

Had it been Cedric? Had it been the Romãos? When was it that Merlin got it in his head that this wasn't a date? Because it was.

It was.

But what if Merlin had only shown up for the banquet because he wanted a job?

Arthur shoved his emotions deep down. He raised a brow and smirked. "I take Gwen out for dinner when she's stayed late with me to complete portfolios or finish reviewing reports. Why should I treat you any differently?"

"Oh. Okay," Merlin said. Arthur hoped that was disappointment in Merlin's expression, that maybe, just maybe, Merlin had wanted this to be a date after all. Arthur immediately cursed himself for not risking it anyway, but there was no salvaging it now.
Or perhaps there was.

"Tell me, Merlin," Arthur said, hoping that the question sounded as seductive as it did in his head, "If this were a date, what would you have said?"

Merlin's eyes were big and round. "Oh, um."

Arthur cursed the waitress for coming back so quickly. She fired off the options from the kitchen so quickly that Arthur winced and glanced at Merlin, who mouthed *house salad starters, steak, salmon, bass*. Arthur made his choices; Merlin did the same, and they were left alone again.

He considered prompting Merlin for an answer to his question, but Merlin wasn't making eye contact. After a silence that lasted long enough to become uncomfortable, Merlin asked, "So what is the job going to involve, exactly? Gwen said I'd be on a schedule, but that there would be on-call work?"

"That's essentially it," Arthur said, sipping the wine.

"So, it'll be like, maybe two hours a day? A week?" Merlin asked.

Arthur hesitated. "Not at first. Cedric -- the interpreter you saw -- is booked for a while longer, and once those are done with, you'll take over for him. But you're on the job as of today."

Merlin mulled that over. "So you're basically paying me to sit around doing nothing?"


"I'll have to drop everything and come running?" Merlin was indignant.

"Yes," Arthur said.

"But I can't do that. What if I'm working at the time?"

Arthur frowned. "What do you mean, if you're working at the time?"

"I have other jobs!"

Arthur knew that, but he let his brow furrow in deepened confusion. "Why would you work other jobs when you're working for me?"

"You just said working for you isn't even steady work!" Merlin's brows pinched in frustration. "Nobody's going to keep me on if I run out in the middle of a shift just because you're whistling for me like I'm a dog!"

"I don't know how to whistle," Arthur pointed out.

"You know what I mean," Merlin said.

"Well, of course I know it's not steady work," Arthur said, acting as if he finally understood what Merlin was getting at when he knew perfectly well. "That's why you'll be drawing a salary, to ensure that you're available when I need you. You can quit those other jobs. In fact, you should that first thing in the morning."

Merlin stared at him. "You're an ass, you know."
"We established that, yes," Arthur said, amused. The waitress delivered two plates of the house salad -- dark greens, roasted red peppers, crumbled goat cheese and the fragrant smell of freshly-toasted pine nuts. He picked up his fork. "Go ahead. Eat. Stop staring at me like that."

They were halfway through their starters when Merlin put down his fork and signed, "What am I even supposed to do all day? Sit around twiddling my thumbs?"

"If that's what you enjoy doing, yes. Watch television, maybe? No, never mind. I've heard daytime TV is pretty bad. You could read books," Arthur said, narrowly avoiding specifying romance books, though he was tempted. He looked pointedly at his salad as he continued, "You could get a hobby. Build model planes, write a blog, learn how to play the piano, start a band."

Arthur ignored how Merlin went very, very still in that instant. Arthur glanced up now and then but continued to eat until he finished his salad. He pretended not to notice Merlin succumb perilously close to a panic attack. He was relieved when Merlin took a deep breath and caught himself from the brink. Arthur didn't let his concern show, but if the mere mention of music in any shape or form affected Merlin like this...

To Arthur, it was such a waste. Talent like Merlin's? Merlin should be on the stage, not hiding under the wreckage that agent had made of his. Merlin had freed himself from a veritable dragon lady's clutches -- but instead of taking control of his own life, Merlin had done the complete opposite.

"Something wrong with the salad?" Arthur asked. The question snapped Merlin out of his Mobius loop of thought, and he resumed eating until he had claimed every last pine nut. When the waitress came by to take away their plates, Merlin leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table. He looked at Arthur for a long time. Maybe it was meant to make Arthur uncomfortable, but it didn't work. Slowly, Merlin unfolded his hands, and signed, "You looked me up, didn't you?"

"I wasn't going to offer you a job without knowing anything about you," Arthur said. "Gwen did try to ask Lance, but Lance was shockingly vague."

"I didn't expect to find much with a web search --", Arthur waved his fork in the air dismissively, as if he hadn't spent hours reading about Merlin, "-- and I was pleasantly surprised."

Merlin's expression clouded. He folded his arms on the table. He pressed his lips together, chewing, biting, twisting. Arthur could only imagine what he wasn't saying, what he was holding back. Merlin leaned away from the table, his lips pursed. He took the napkin from his lap and put it on the table.

"Don't leave," Arthur said. His voice felt thick, hoarse, crackly. He wasn't sure if Merlin had heard him, so he said it again. "Please don't leave."

Merlin was angry -- so, so angry, that Arthur didn't know what Merlin would do, but Arthur's greatest nightmare was to be left alone, not knowing what was wrong, not knowing how to fix it. Maybe having Leon look into Merlin's background had been a gross invasion of privacy, maybe reading every article he could find online about Merlin had bordered on obsession, but Arthur justified it as protecting himself. He hadn't expected to become so fascinated with Merlin, or so attracted to him.

Arthur desperately searched Merlin's expression for a glimmer of an emotion that wasn't outrage.
It was an eternity before Merlin stopped squirming, before he stopped biting at his lower lip, before his fingers stopped pulling at his jacket and pinching at his arms and scratching away at the demons that were haunting him. But he didn't twist out of his chair or jump to his feet or stalk off, and Arthur counted that a minor victory.

The waitress chose that moment to arrive with their meals. Arthur barely looked down at the Black Angus steak with garlic mashed potatoes, steamed vegetables, and mushroom sauce, but Merlin took his napkin to make room for his grilled sea bass. The waitress lingered -- Arthur had eaten out enough to know the rite and ritual involved, and assumed that she was asking if they wanted anything else.

Merlin licked his lips and leaned back in his chair a little more, looking up at the waitress. "If I could have a glass of wine after all?"

"Can you bring the bottle, please?" Arthur asked. He didn't know how the waitress responded, but it had to be along the lines of of course or certainly, because it made no sense not to serve customers when a big tip might be on the horizon. He looked at Merlin; Merlin didn't look at him, and after a moment, they both started on their dinners. The wine arrived; the waitress filled Merlin's glass and topped up Arthur's.

Arthur looked up when Merlin put down his fork. Merlin rubbed his face with one hand and signed with the other, "You could've asked me."

"Would you have answered?" Arthur asked softly, silenced by the dark in Merlin's eyes when Merlin snapped his head up to look at him. "I couldn't get a straight answer out of you at the show. You ducked every question like you run from paparazzo for a living. If I asked you for your life story, would have told me? Would you tell me now?"

Merlin looked away sharply. He picked up his fork, moving the sliced carrots around his plate and flaking off bits of his fish.

"Merlin." When Merlin didn't answer, Arthur leaned over the table and plucked the fork out of Merlin's hand. "Look at me. I'm not going to tell you what you do -- well, I am, because you're working for me now, but that's not the point. The point is, you're being an idiot."

Arthur pulled out his phone, pointedly ignoring Merlin's attempts to get his attention. He flipped through the photographs he'd taken from the web -- all right, so maybe he really was obsessed with Merlin if he had saved those images -- and pulled up his favourite.

He slid his phone over to Merlin, tapping a finger on the table until Merlin glanced at it. The photograph wasn't the best. It was old, taken nearly ten years ago. The background was busy, the resolution low and grainy, but the lighting had been perfect, catching in the curls of his unruly hair, leaving a golden gleam in his blue eyes. His cheeks were highlighted by faint shadows, his mouth was parted around a sound, and there was such serenity and joy in Merlin's expression that it had nearly brought tears to Arthur's eyes.

It was ridiculous to be overwhelmed by a picture, but Arthur wanted nothing more to be affected like that by Merlin. In person. He might not be able to hear, but that emotion --

Arthur wanted it. He craved it. Most people hid their feelings or masked them or denied them. Merlin -- Arthur could read him so easily, it was as if they were bound by a shared soul.

"You loved to sing, once. To perform. It didn't matter what you sang or where as long as you could sing," Arthur said. The cloud of emotions in Merlin's face twisted like a tornado, swirling
madly, collecting new ones along the path of its rampage. There was sadness, guilt, shame. There was anger, dismay, embarrassment. "As long as you bury that part of you, it behoves me to take advantage of your other talents. I need you, Merlin."

Arthur hated admitting he needed help, and he hated even more having to ask for that help. His throat was tight around the words I need you. But it wasn't Merlin's help he needed. He needed Merlin.

He thought for certain that Merlin would stand up and leave. Merlin was coiled so tightly, he was a bedspring about to break through, a rubber band ready to snap.

Instead, Merlin heaved a deep breath and picked up the phone. He touched the screen to bring it to life and stared at the image for a long moment before abruptly turning the phone upside down.

"You take being an ass to an entirely new level," Merlin signed.

Arthur bowed his head in acknowledgement. "I have it down to a new art form. Try to keep up."

There was the tiniest pull of a smile to the corner of Merlin's mouth, but his eyes were hard when he looked at Arthur and pointed a finger at him.

"You don't mention this to anyone. You don't bring it up at all. If I want to talk about it, then I'll talk about it, but otherwise, you leave it alone."

"Whatever you say, Merlin," Arthur said, bringing his wine to his lips, hoping that Merlin wouldn't notice that Arthur wasn't making any promises. "While you've got my phone, why don't you put in your number and email address?"

ooOOoo

Quitting his jobs was surprisingly easy. Gail at the T&T gave him big round eyes, a big smile, and a big bye-bye bonus on top of the paycheck she already owed him when he told her that he wouldn't be coming back. The owner at the record store shrugged as if he'd fully expected Merlin to go on to better things a long time ago. He didn't ask Merlin why he'd stayed as long as he had, but he did mumble something about his last check being in the mail. Merlin felt bad about quitting the inventory job, because he genuinely liked Henry and hated the idea of leaving him in the lurch, but the company was in a slow season and there wasn't enough work to go around.

So it all worked out.

At least, it had worked out until Merlin revealed what Gwen apparently hadn't shared with Arthur.

"I don't have a cell phone. I don't have an email address -- why are you looking at me like that?" Merlin asked.

"What do you mean you don't -- Merlin, you realize that we're in the twenty-first century?" Arthur shot him a disapproving look and shook his head. "Never mind. I'll take care of it."

Merlin wanted to ask what Arthur was going to do, but the waitress showed up with dessert, and that was that -- until several days later when Arthur showed up on Merlin's doorstep, his arms loaded with boxes.

"I have an iPhone for you. And a laptop. The cable guy is on his way to set you up with wireless," Arthur said.
That was when they had their first fight. That was, if it could be called a fight. It had lasted as long as it took for Arthur to show Merlin how to use the text messaging and FaceTime options on the iPhone, and to install MSN Messenger and Skype on the Macbook.

"I don't really need all this garbage," Merlin complained. The technician had taken thirty minutes to install the DSL and wireless router before escaping for his life -- Merlin envied him.

"Yes, you do," Arthur said.

"No, I don't. I mean, what am I going to do with this --" Merlin dangled the extra cable for a non-existent television in front of Arthur's face.

Arthur snatched it out of Merlin's hand. "Do whatever you want with it, but you need everything else."

"You're taking over my life," Merlin accused.

"No, Merlin, I'm not. I swear --"

"If I'd known you'd be taking over my life, I wouldn't have agreed to the job," Merlin said.

Arthur grabbed Merlin by the shoulders, shook Merlin until his head bobbed, and said, "I'm not taking over your life, for fuck's sake. This is part of your job. I need to communicate with you. How else did you think I'd manage it? Telepathy?"

Merlin stared at Arthur for a long moment, then said, "That would be a hell of a lot better than having to carry around all this crap!"

Arthur and Merlin ended up getting delivery pizza and watching a downloaded movie on the laptop, still bickering when Merlin shut the door on Arthur's spoilt backside.

The worst was having too much time on his hands.

After one week of sitting at home twiddling his thumbs waiting for work to come, Merlin was ready to pitch himself off the CN Tower out of boredom. Two weeks in, Merlin had taken up running again. Three weeks in, he had too many books and a new television set to keep him entertained.

In the month since accepting the job interpreting for Arthur, he'd been called in for eight meetings that were less than an hour long each, none of them at the company headquarters, and all for random, non-critical purposes.

Merlin didn't remember negotiating a salary, but he couldn't complain when he checked his bank account and realized that he was being very well compensated for this whole "on-call" bullshit. That was the only perk to a job where his boss had taken over his life, just like Merlin had predicted -- and as much as he complained, he found that he didn't mind at all.

Once Merlin got past the cutthroat businessman armour that Arthur wore, he realized that Arthur wasn't like Nimueh at all. He might do anything and everything in order to get what he wanted, but he did them because it was the right thing to do. He fought tooth and nail to preserve jobs, to give people a better quality of life, to give them opportunities -- even if it was at the company's expense. Arthur was sensitive to other people needs and desires, mortified at the thought that he might hurt someone's feelings, and, as much as he pushed Merlin's patience and limits, he knew where to stop, switching tactics so suddenly and sweetly that Merlin fell all the more heads over heels in love with him.
Merlin hated not being with Arthur all the time. He struggled to find ways to distract himself.

It hadn't taken long for Merlin to finish all of the books in his to-be-read pile, to play two computer games all the way to the end, to read all the news that the Internet had to offer, and to get himself addicted to College Humour dot com. A moment of weakness introduced him to the concept of streamed-online television shows and iTunes.

For the first time in over a year, Merlin owned music again. Granted, it was only a hundred dollars worth of singles that were all electronic and ephemeral, and he didn't have the satisfaction of holding CDs or records in his hands, but now, he could legally claim that he had a music collection.

It made him a little giddy.

Every day when he wasn't working for Arthur, Merlin went to the Royal Conservatory to sing. Every day, Merlin was turned away because they were booked full. Having to wait his turn for access to a private voice studio at the Royal Conservatory when he'd never had to wait before grated at his patience. He caught himself nearly throwing a Prima Dona fit when he was told that there were no studios available, the phrase, "Don't you know who I am" on his lips. It was so ridiculous that Merlin turned on his heels and walked out.

He wanted to sing. He needed to sing. And singing in the shower just wasn't doing it for him. If he couldn't rent a studio at the Royal Conservatory, that left St Michael's.

Except Merlin had been avoiding St Michael's ever since he had been recognized. He hadn't returned Father Gaius' calls -- phone calls that were a regular, twice-weekly event ever since that night. If Merlin showed up on St Michael's doorsteps now, well, he didn't know what he would be in for.

At the very least, he was guaranteed to get the raised brow.

It took nearly a month before Merlin swallowed his pride, pulled himself together and went to St Michael's.

It was early enough in the day that the students would be in the classroom rather than in one of the many voice studios. Merlin had a good idea of the daily schedules, and he knew when the studios would be free. It was with no small measure of trepidation that Merlin walked up the steps to the oratory. He signed in with the day steward -- an older student who was charged as custodian to the keys for the voice studios during his class breaks, and who barely looked up from his homework to verify his ID before passing Merlin the keys -- and walked through the empty hallways.

He rounded a corner and promptly bumped into Father Gaius.

They caught each other before anything critical could drop to the floor. For all that Gaius' smile was warm, his hand was firm around Merlin's wrist and there was no sign that he would let go anytime soon.

It was just as well. Merlin nearly spooked.

"Merlin. I haven't seen you in a while. The students in residence have been asking after you ever since you sang in the theatre."

"Oh, shit. They heard me, too?" Merlin ducked his head, feeling a flush of embarrassment and shame. "I'm sorry, Father. I haven't. I haven't been coming here because --"
Gaius took his arm, but thankfully spared Merlin the frown that Merlin remembered from childhood, the one that could make him feel guilty for even thinking of sneaking into the kitchen late at night to steal a cookie or two, and walked him down the corridor. "It is quite all right. Mister Sullivan is certainly... enthusiastic. I am not surprised that he scared you off."

Merlin chuckled faintly. "I wasn't scared, Gaius. I didn't expect to be recognized, that's all. It threw me."

Gaius took a step back, looking Merlin up and down in the way he'd done ever since Merlin was a child. Merlin remembered all those times in Montréal when he was sent to Gaius' office for reprimands. Gaius would look at him like this, trying to divine what Merlin might have done now on appearance alone, and most of the time he was on the mark. Merlin wondered what he saw now.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Gaius asked, and it was a question that did not warrant any answer other than "yes", because Gaius turned and led the way to his office without waiting for Merlin.

There was a moment of déjà-vu when Merlin saw the heavy oak door with the brass nameplate at adult eye level, when it creaked open to wood paneling and wood flooring and wood furniture all stained in varying shades of a burnt auburn. It was almost as if every church oratory school shared design plans and building materials between them regardless of the year of their institution. The childhood nerves of walking into his mentor's office didn't change, not even when Gaius bade him to sit and puttered around the kettle tucked in the corner.

Merlin dropped his backpack at his side and sunk in the chair with dark foreboding. Gaius sat in the chair next to him, and offered him a heavy mug of strong black tea generously lightened with cream until it was almost beige. Merlin smiled involuntarily, knowing that the tea was sweetened with honey, and that Gaius always served tea to his students this way, as a bribe after a fashion.

The honey, Gaius had always claimed, was to help soothe the throat after a long day of singing, and had nothing to do with making children more at ease. Surely the boys were comfortable with him regardless...

They sipped their teas in silence, and it was only then that Gaius said, "Je me souviens de l'entrevue quand vous n'étiez qu'un petit garçon avec une grosse voix."

I remember the interview we had when you were a little boy with a big voice.

Gaius continued in French, "I remember when we were done, I asked what you wanted to be when you grew up."

"I wanted to sing," Merlin said, answering in French.

"Yes," Gaius said. His smile was faint, distant, like the memory. "And I asked you, but where do you want to sing?"

Merlin lowered his head and stared into his tea.

"What did you tell me then, Merlin?" Gaius asked, his voice gentle.

A clink of china. An echoing bell. The distant footfalls of boys of nearly every grade rushing from one class to the next. The sounds rose to a crescendo before finally fading to silence.

"The stage," Merlin said finally.

Gaius reached over and put a hand on Merlin's shoulder. "You're still that little boy, still bright
with excitement when you sing. Your voice needs a theatre to free it, people to hear it. It shouldn't be kept a prisoner in a tiny little room."

Merlin didn't answer.

"It's plain to see for anyone who looks, Merlin. You need the stage. It's where you come alive."

"But --" Singing ruined everyone's life. Look what it turned me into. I hated myself. I hated everyone. I was angry all the time. I was sick. I betrayed my friends. I hurt the people I loved.

Merlin couldn't say all that. The words strangled in his throat.

Gaius heard him anyway, the way he always seemed to hear what Merlin wasn't saying, and said, "That time is past. You have learned, you have grown. Don't you think it is time that you move on? That you use this talent of yours for a greater purpose?"

"Le quel?" Merlin asked, lowering his eyes. Which one?

Gaius knew -- of course Gaius knew about Merlin's magic, and had known about it since Hunith brought Merlin to him for the evaluation part of the entrance interviews at Les Petits Chanteurs. Gaius had confided in Merlin of his own ability -- not only with his deep baritone, but with his magic, a magic that he had given up in his service to God.

"Les deux," Gaius said. Both. "Either of your gifts are a miracle to witness, Merlin, but both together? You come alive when your magic weaves with your music. Your voice guides it, and your magic slips under the surface and makes people feel like nothing before. Your music. Your magic. They are one and the same, and I have not heard you sing in that perfect harmony in a very long --"

"-- long time," Merlin finished. He stared at the rippling eddies on the surface of his tea. "I know, Gaius."

There was a long, companionable silence. Gaius sipped his tea. Merlin did the same.

"Nearly twenty years ago, a lanky little boy stood up in front of me. He was brave and fearless. Nothing held him back. After he sang everything that was required for the testing, I asked him to sing me a song." Merlin tried to pretend he didn't know where Gaius was going with this, but Gaius had that spark in his eye. "How did that song go?"

"I have no idea," Merlin mumbled, sipping his tea again.

"Tis the last rose of summer
Left blooming alone;"

Gaius raised his brow in invitation.

"All her lovely companions
Are faded and gone;"

The brow became a warning.

"No flower of her kindred,
No rosebud is nigh,
To reflect back her blushes,
To give sigh for sigh."
There was no missing the threat in that last, arched millimetre. Merlin took a resigned breath and joined in.

"I'll not leave thee, thou lone one!
To pine on the stem;
Since the lovely are sleeping,
Go, sleep thou with them."

Merlin's voice was a light, crisp contrast to Gaius' sonorous baritone, wrapping around the notes and giving them an ethereal dimension. Merlin sighed inwardly as Gaius nodded in approval and leaned back to let Merlin finish on his own. He was almost tempted to let the song die there, but his shoulders sank and he sang on.

"Thus kindly I scatter,
Thy leaves o'er the bed,
Where thy mates of the garden
Lie scentless and dead.

"So soon may I follow,
When friendships decay,
From Love's shining circle
The gems drop away.

"When true hearts lie withered
And fond ones are flown,
Oh! Who would inhabit,
This bleak world alone?"

Merlin was conscious of the way he'd sat up straighter and how he'd lifted his chin to sing. He was aware of how his magic had rippled over his skin, eager to dance with the music. He'd kept his voice soft, but there had been that tiny little twang deep inside of him that ached to fill the room. The only thing that stopped him from taking a deep breath and giving the song full voice was the awareness that Gaius' office wasn't soundproofed and that there were still classes being held.

Gaius smiled in smug self-satisfaction. Merlin rolled his eyes.

"This doesn't prove anything," Merlin said sullenly.

Gaius chuckled knowingly. He reached over and patted Merlin's arm. "It wasn't that long ago, on our very stage, that I saw a glimmer of the boy who had once captivated three thousand people with the first line of Beethoven's First Rose of Summer."

Merlin didn't answer. He finished his tea and put the mug on Gaius' desk.

"Where did he go?" Gaius asked gently. "All these months since you fled the stage, Merlin, I've watched you struggle."

Merlin closed his eyes at the pain in Gaius' tone. He didn't need reminding of the weeks that he spent sitting in the quiet studio, unable to bring himself to even perform the exercises to keep his voice limber. Weeks more had been spent fighting to even hold a note without their shattering under the weight of his tears. Merlin had grieved -- for his mother, for his friends, for his life. He'd screamed and cried and hunkered in the corner, combating the shade of all of his fears.

"It was a battle I saw you losing -- until recently. I don't know how, but you found a reason to let
your soul heal, my boy," Gaius said.

Merlin shut his eyes against the pinprick of tears.

Arthur.

He wanted to be better for Arthur.

When he had interpreted for Arthur that night of their first meeting, when he had watched Arthur on that stage -- it was as if everything had started to make sense for Merlin. Arthur was a brilliant, warming, grounding force, a bright sun, a guiding light. He was drawing Merlin out of the chaos that had been the wreck of the life he'd left behind.

Half of Merlin railed against Arthur, against his tendency to take over, to sort things out to his liking, to take what he wanted, what he needed.

The other half craved more.

Arthur wanted him. He needed Merlin. Even if it was only to interpret for him -- in that, Merlin had found a reason to keep going.

It didn't help that, now and again, Arthur would drop hints that perhaps Merlin should consider singing again.

"I've met someone," Merlin admitted in a tiny whisper. He's gorgeous and perfect and he doesn't know I'm in love with him.

Gaius tilted his head in an attempt to catch Merlin's eyes. "You'll bring him by, won't you?"

Merlin smiled faintly, trying to hold back his misery. He didn't even know if Arthur returned his feelings. The date that hadn't been a date, but a courting for a job offer. The outings where it was just the two of them. The times when Arthur would come to his apartment to claim the futon in the living room and idly flip through the channels and ask Merlin to order pizza. They were employer and employee. Sometimes they were friends.

Other times, it felt like more, and it left Merlin so confused for days afterwards.

"Maybe."

"Good." Gaius stood up and picked up Merlin's cup. "More tea?"

"I need to practice," Merlin said. He reached for his backpack and stood up.

He froze where he was when Gaius turned around and gave him a look. "You need something altogether different. Do you remember that gentleman who chased you around the theatre?"

"Oh, please, Gaius. Don't--"

"Gwaine Sullivan is one of St Michael's brightest stars, although, admittedly, he is from before my time," Gaius said. He had been appointed the Director of St Michael's school three years ago. "He came to see me for help."

Gaius returned to the chairs and handed Merlin a refreshed cup of tea. Merlin took it grudgingly. "That's nice," he said, nearly dropping his cup when Gaius cuffed him lightly on the back of his head.

"He's putting together an opera. A new version of Midsummer Night's Dream. I've listened to
some of it; it's quite lovely, not at all like Britten's version, modernized without losing any of the Bard's vision."

Merlin sank in his seat, knowing where Gaius was going with this.

"He has almost all of his cast together. He has the funding from the Canadian Arts Council. He's on the board of the Canadian Opera Council and has a tentative booking to open at the Four Seasons by the end of the year," Gaius said.

"Sounds like he has everything lined up for him," Merlin said. He hated his bitterness, this deep, self-directed hatred, this insane jealousy that someone as young as Gwaine -- though he was just over Merlin's age -- had achieved so much in his short career, and Merlin had fallen so far.

"Not everything," Gaius said. He started to say something more when Merlin interrupted him.

"No. I'm sorry, no. I'm not. I can't. I'm not ready for an opera. I haven't sung theatre in a year, Gaius. I can't go on the stage. I'm not prepared, I'm... I just. I can't. I can't go through that again."

Merlin put his second cup down untouched and would have gotten to his feet if Gaius hadn't put a gentle hand on his arm. "Gaius. Please. I lost everything."

He wiped his tears with the back of his sleeve, but it was fruitless, because the tears kept coming and the front of his shirt was soon soaked through. He was dimly aware of Gaius getting up, of returning, of putting a cloth handkerchief in his hand, of putting a glass of water on the nearby desk, of pulling his chair closer and rubbing soothing circles on his back.

There was a distant bell. The muffled echo of retreating feet. A knock on the door. Gaius getting up, speaking in hushed whispers, sending whoever it was away. "I'm sorry," Merlin whispered when Gaius sat next to him again. "I'm sorry."

"Merlin, oh, Merlin," Gaius said, and there was such kindness in his words that Merlin thought he would burst into tears again. "There is nothing to be sorry for."

There was a long pause. Then, unexpectedly, another smack on the back of his head. Merlin gasped a small, choking laugh of disbelief. "Why... what --"

"You did not lose everything. You chose to give it all up," Gaius said. "You realized that the life you were living was turning you from the path that you should be on, and you cast it away. But have you not thought that you cast too much aside, and that in doing so, you are letting the devil win?"

Merlin wrung his hands together, over and over. He snorted softly. "The devil."

"I believe her name was Ms. Blake," Gaius said.

Merlin could have laughed. He did. It was choked out of his chest in a rattling cough.

"Do you want to sing again, Merlin?" Gaius asked.

I do. His voice failed him, so Merlin nodded instead.

"Then, we will start you on something small," Gaius said.

Merlin nodded. He stopped himself. "Wait. What?"

"The choir has been asked to perform for a fundraiser," Gaius said. "And I believe it would
benefit if you should make your first appearance in nearly a year singing *Ode to St Cecilia*.

"Gaius --" Merlin shut his eyes tight. His old mentor was playing dirty. He knew the Ode was his mother's favourite song. He sang it every year for her birthday without fail -- until... until Nimueh started booking him on the other side of the world on that date. "The Ode? God. That's not small. I don't. I don't know about this."

Gaius rose to his feet and put a hand on Merlin's shoulder. "I went to a great deal of trouble to dissuade Mr. Sullivan from chasing after you. Did you not think that I wouldn't ask for a favour in return? Of course, I could always call him and say I have changed my mind about putting him in touch with you."

Merlin gaped at him. "This is blackmail. You're a priest. You're not supposed to stoop to blackmail. That's against the rules or something. Isn't it?"

Gaius smiled. "How do you think I managed to get you to do your homework instead of spending all your time singing, Merlin? Now, wash yourself up and we will go to the theatre. I believe the director needs to hear you sing before he decides."

Merlin stared at him, aghast. "You mean I have to *audition*?"

Tracking down the estate lawyer took a lot of doing and far too much waiting for Arthur's liking, but at least Leon had been keeping Arthur apprised of the progress of his investigation. It was slow going, with none of the sixty-minute quick resolution of television crime dramas. Arthur understood the need to build a paper trail, to establish precedence and premeditation, to go back through all the files and determine the very moment that Agravaine had put his plan into action, and to identify the aspects of the company had been impacted without Arthur's knowledge.

There were other, trusted people involved in the investigation. Leon's brother, Owain, had immediate access to all the files in several different divisions; Leon didn't need to wait for Arthur to gather the intel. Gwen did what she could without arousing suspicion, but she wasn't particularly adept at guile, and Leon preferred to keep her out of it as much as they could afford. There were several people in different satellite offices who reported directly to Arthur, who were his *friends* -- Pellinor in the London office, Neidi in South Africa, Galahad in Australia, even Bohrs in Belgium.

There were so many people doing the footwork, and yet, the investigation was still at a frustratingly slow crawl. Leon had told him that they would reach the point when it would speed up, that they would have to act quickly and decisively, but for now it was a waiting game.

Arthur did not like waiting. He especially did not like waiting for his parents' estate lawyer, who had gone on a three month vacation in the Bahamas as a precursor to his eventual retirement. It was only because Leon had tracked him down and confirmed a return date that they had even known that Monmouth was now in Toronto.

And now they were waiting. Still waiting. Their appointment was scheduled for a half-hour ago.

Monmouth's secretary glanced at them as she hung up and offered an apologetic smile. Arthur turned around with a huff and resumed pacing; he didn't see what she said to Leon. Leon caught his attention and signed, "He's on his way."

"He was on his way thirty minutes ago," Arthur signed back, unable to contain his irritation. He continued to pace, wishing he'd thought of asking Merlin to come to interpret for him. It wasn't that he didn't trust Merlin -- Merlin was just so impossibly *open* and honest, that it was difficult not
to put all faith in him. It was that Arthur wasn't wholly certain that this meeting was too personal, too private. It was also that he didn't want to get Merlin embroiled in this entire mess.

He didn't want to spoil the one good thing that he had going for him.

They were spending more and more time together -- both at work and outside of it. Merlin had stopped being surprised when Arthur dragged him out to random events and kept threatening to cut a copy of the apartment key for Arthur just so that Merlin wouldn't have to get up off his couch to let him in. It was a slow, slow courtship that Merlin was completely oblivious to, but Arthur had no intention of giving up.

"Be patient," Leon signed.

Arthur snorted. For Merlin, he would be as patient as he needed to.

Arthur continued to pace. He was facing the front door when the glass door opened and shut.

Geoffrey Monmouth had been his family's lawyer for what had to have been Arthur's entire lifetime, if not longer, but he couldn't remember when the other man hadn't been a little bowed in the shoulder, weighed down by his suit jacket, his hair and beard a crisp snow-white, his face surprisingly unmarred by wrinkles. He had always worn a three-piece suit in varying shades of grey, and today was no different; the only splash of colour were the thin purple pinstripes of his tie.

It wasn't until Arthur saw Monmouth's thick beard that he remembered how difficult the man was to lip-read even at the best of times, and he wondered if it was too late to call Merlin. Merlin was on-call and they weren't far from the downtown where Merlin lived. He had time to get here. If Monmouth was going to make them wait, then it was only fair that they wait for Merlin --

Monmouth's lips moved; Arthur caught the words "apologies", "late", "traffic", "a moment", and "right with you".

It was enough for Arthur to piece together, "My apologies for being late, the traffic was horrible. If you'll give me a moment, I'll be right with you."

Arthur let Leon respond and flipped open his phone. He texted Merlin.

911. Need u now. He added the address.

When he looked up, Monmouth had disappeared. Leon was looking at him curiously.


The secretary glanced in his direction with a disapproving frown, but Arthur ignored her.

"If he doesn't make it in time, I'll --" Leon began, but Arthur startled when his phone buzzed.

Svng me frm f8 wrse than death. Am 3 blks away. B there in 10.

Arthur exhaled in relief. He nodded to himself before turning to Leon, showing him the text.
"He'll be here."

"Three blocks away?" Leon signed. "That puts him at St Michael's."

Arthur felt guilty for having pulled Merlin from his singing practice -- the one he wasn't supposed to know anything about. Merlin still wasn't talking about his singing, but at least he'd been slowly
opening up.

Monmouth hadn't emerged from his cocoon of an office by the time that Merlin stumbled out of the elevator and joined them in the waiting room. He was a little dishevelled -- his hair was mussed, his jacket askew, his button-down shirt open at the throat to reveal a white Tee underneath. He had a backpack on his shoulder, and he put it down to tuck his shirt into his jeans and make himself halfway presentable.

Arthur followed the quick slide of Merlin's hands under the hem of his jeans, drawing his eyes away with difficulty.

Merlin glanced at both of them and quickly signed as he spoke, "Sorry for how I look. I didn't expect to have to work today."

"You do know what on-call means?" Arthur asked curtly. Leon frowned at him. Arthur signed an apologetic, *Thanks* quickly and furtively when Leon wasn't looking. Merlin caught the gesture and smiled, and Arthur felt some of his tension sliding away. "It means that if I call you in the middle of the night wanting a bucket of maple swirl ice cream, you roll out of bed and bring it to me."

"What are you, pregnant?" Merlin signed.

Arthur saw Leon bark an abrupt, sudden laugh. He ignored Leon and turned to Merlin. "So what was this fate I saved you from?"

Merlin smiled again, thin and strained, and combed through his hair with his fingers. "I'll tell you about it later, yeah?"

"We have time," Arthur said.

Merlin opened his mouth to speak, his hands hanging in the air, but Arthur's curiosity was foiled when Monmouth opened the door to his office and waved them in.

"Arthur," Monmouth said, smiling. He extended his hand; Arthur shook it. "Who are these people with you?"

"This is my colleague, Leon --"

"Ah, yes, you're the one who called me while I was on my vacation," Merlin interpreted as Monmouth forgot -- for what was not the first time -- that Arthur couldn't hear, and turned away from Arthur. Monmouth shook hands with Leon before turning expectantly to Merlin. "And this is?"

Merlin glanced toward Arthur, raising a brow in question. Arthur was too irritated with Monmouth to answer, and nodded. "You do realize, sir, that Arthur would be able to answer your questions if you faced him when you asked them?"

Arthur gave Merlin a sharp look. That wasn't what he had expected Merlin to say -- he'd thought that Merlin would introduce himself, not give a reprimand. Monmouth's body stiffened, shoulders back, spine ramrod-straight, and abruptly, he turned away from Merlin to look at Arthur. "Yes, yes, quite correct. I apologize, Arthur."

"It's all right, Geoffrey," Arthur said. "This is my interpreter, Merlin."

Unlike with Leon, Monmouth didn't offer to shake Merlin's hand. It was a small, petty gesture typical of Geoffrey but Merlin didn't seem bothered. "Why don't you have a seat?"
Monmouth was walking toward his desk, his back to them, when he began to talk. Merlin spread his hands and rolled his eyes, hastily signing Sorry, I tried with one hand before interpreting Monmouth's words with the other, "So what is this about, Arthur? Leon mentioned something about your parents' wills?"

"That's correct," Arthur said. He waited for a moment while Monmouth sat down; Merlin shrugged out of his coat, smoothed down his shirt, and positioned himself behind Monmouth's desk in perfect line of sight. Monmouth twisted around to look at Merlin suspiciously, but Merlin’s expression, for once, was perfectly neutral and focused on Arthur.

"I'm not sure what I can tell you, Arthur," Monmouth said. "We've been over the will at the estate reading. You know all that I know. In any case, I'm not inclined to discuss your parent's affairs in front of others."

"Geoffrey, you've been a good friend of the family. I know my father relied on your advice for his personal affairs," Arthur said, seeing the exact moment that Geoffrey's ego made his chest puff out. "And until you retire, you're my lawyer as well. Leon and Merlin are here at my invitation. I trust them implicitly. I want them to hear what you have to say, and, please, don't hold anything back."

Monmouth spread his hands. "What do you want to know?"

Arthur had carefully rehearsed the questions that Leon wanted him to ask Monmouth, but for a moment, his mind went blank, and all that came to mind was the furious urge to demand, What did Agravaine want?. He cleared his throat and asked instead, "Has anyone made any inquiries about my parents' wills?"

Monmouth was taken aback. "Are you insinuating that I would divulge private information? Surely you are aware that there are laws that I must follow to protect the confidentiality of my clients --"

"I'm not questioning your professional integrity," Arthur said impatiently. "I'm asking if anyone has come to you and asked questions about my father's will or about my mother's will."

Monmouth hesitated. Merlin glanced sideways at Monmouth, his brow pinching in a frown. "Well, in the beginning, certainly there had been the occasional inquiry. From the press and from investors who wanted to know the state of the company following your parents'... deaths."

"Anyone else?" Like my traitorous uncle, Agravaine. Leon had told Arthur not to drop names, to let Monmouth answer on his own, but it was difficult, very difficult, not to make direct accusations.

"Now that I think about it, yes. Mr. DuBois dropped by often. I haven't seen him in quite some time, however, but of course, I have been on vacation." Monmouth gave Leon a pointed glare.

"What did my uncle want?"

"Oh, I can't discuss that," Monmouth said. Arthur saw Merlin's hands confirm what he'd understood.

"I wasn't aware that Agravaine was your client --"

"He's not," Monmouth said.

"In that case, if Agravaine, who is not your client, asked you about my parents' wills, you
shouldn't have any issue with discussing the matter with me, given that I'm still your client, and I was the sole inheritor," Arthur said.

Monmouth grimaced, and Arthur wondered if Monmouth was thinking about the many thousands of dollars that Agravaine had given him which had paid for his vacation in the Bahamas. After what seemed to be a too-long stalemate, Monmouth leaned back in his seat and reached for his mouse. He entered a few commands.


Leon remained expressionless, but Arthur had no doubt that he had caught what Merlin had signed.

After a moment of reading, Monmouth turned to Arthur. "From my notes, I can tell you that he asked some pointed questions about the wills. He asked to view them for himself. I, of course, refused."

Merlin made a subtle sign to indicate that Monmouth's voice was trembling slightly.

"What kind of questions did he ask?" Arthur asked.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Not at first. He asked for the dates that the wills were written and notarized. He wanted to know how many times that the wills were revised in the last few years. He wanted to know what changes were made, if his name had ever been mentioned in them." Monmouth paused for several long seconds. "He did strike me as quite put out that Ygraine did not name him in his will. In fact, he was rather upset. He gave me the impression that he was quite close to his sister, and mortified that she didn't even mention him. He made several..."

Merlin's hands dropped and Merlin turned to look at Monmouth, his brow furrowing. He glanced at Arthur, and signed again when Monmouth resumed talking.

"... unflattering remarks about your father, implying that Uther may have influenced Ygraine into changing her will, to cut Agravaine out entirely. As I understand it, when your grandparents passed away, Arthur, Ygraine was made the custodian of the family fortune, while Agravaine received only a pittance. Agravaine expressed a great deal of concern that Uther forced Ygraine to name someone of Uther's choosing as the sole heir to the DuBois fortune."

There was another, hesitating pause.

"He also asked me some very... unfortunate questions about you, Arthur. Please understand that I in no way condone his inquiries and did my best to dissuade him from the topic --"

"What did he ask?" Arthur's voice felt sharp, and he saw Monmouth flinch.

"He wanted to know if your parents ever discussed you with me. If they might have, in any way, implied that you were unfit to run the company. Of course, they hadn't -- your parents believed in you. There was never any doubt that you would inherit and would take over the family business -- "

Arthur missed what else Monmouth said. His vision blurred with rage. Arthur's hands clenched the arms of his chair, his fingernails digging into the wood.

Merlin gestured toward Leon. "Are you quite certain, Mr. Monmouth, that Agravaine did not view the wills himself?"
Merlin pointed at Monmouth. "Insofar as being Ygraine's brother, he was present at the reading of the wills, and he did see them at the time, but beyond that, no."

"Did you retain the previous versions of the wills?" Leon asked.

"Of course," Monmouth said.

"Was Agravaine aware of the previous versions?" Leon asked.

"He was very specific when he made his inquiries, so, yes, I assume he was aware, to some extent, of their existence," Monmouth said.

There was a pause, and Leon asked, "Do you have the copies here?"

"Yes, of course."

"Can you check them?" Leon asked.

Monmouth's bushy brows pinched, his lips formed an unspoken question, and he spread his hands helplessly. "I assure you, my files are secure."

"Humour me, Geoffrey. Check them," Arthur said.

Monmouth grumbled, but he went to the wide, elaborate wood-carved filing cabinet, opened several drawers, and hunkered down to find the file he was looking for. It took a while, but Arthur wasn't watching him. He was watching Merlin.

Merlin's expression was weighed and full of concern. He was having trouble hiding his emotions and Arthur knew that Merlin didn't like what he was hearing. Abruptly, Merlin pointed at Monmouth and signed, "Well, this is irregular."

He signed again to indicate that Monmouth's tone had been quiet, almost to himself. Leon turned around and watched Monmouth. "Is there a problem?"

Monmouth returned to his desk with a thick file; he had it open in his hands but now he left it open on his desk, staring at the paperwork in consternation. He flipped through the file, shaking his head.

"The papers aren't in order." Monmouth reached for his phone and dialled an extension. "Estelle? Were you in the Pendragon file while I was away? The file is out of sequence -- no? Are you certain? Yes, Estelle. No, Estelle."

He hung up on his secretary and went through the bound papers again.

"Is anything missing?" Leon asked.

It was a while before Monmouth responded. "No, no. As far as I can tell, everything's here. Horribly disorganized, I'm afraid. I have no idea what happened."

"Are you sure about that?" Leon asked.

Monmouth gave Leon a look over his glasses. "Of course I am."

"Before you sort through the papers, would you mind if I had a look?" Arthur asked. He didn't give Monmouth a chance to refuse and flipped the file around. There were file folders within the file itself, and although he couldn't fathom Monmouth's system, he knew that the wills wouldn't be with the most recent property purchases. The first will was dated over twenty years ago.
He flipped through it and read. He was aware of Leon talking to Monmouth, of Merlin standing by if he was needed, but Arthur focused on the contents of the wills. The oldest will -- the one that was right on top of all the others -- was the only one that had a very clear stipulation: that, until Arthur came of age, if something should happen to both Ygraine and Uther, Agravaine would head the company. A second will, dated six months after the first and taking precedence, struck this stipulation entirely. There was no further mention of Agravaine in any of the other wills.

"I want copies of these," Arthur said abruptly. He looked up to see Monmouth begin a protest, and firmly said, "Now."

Monmouth pressed his lips together tightly, collected the paperwork, and left the office.

"What is it? Leon signed.

It was a while before Arthur could answer. He was shaking too much. Not trusting his voice, he signed instead, too fast and too sloppy for Leon to understand. He didn't do it on purpose. He wanted Leon to know. But he was too shaken to slow down. "He wanted proof that my parents didn't think I could run the company. Any kind of proof. Even if it's something in my mom's will from when I was barely five years old --"

Leon stared at him with wide eyes, and turned to look at Merlin, who stepped close and interpreted, his voice low, never taking his eyes off of Arthur the entire time. Leon watched Arthur, listening to Merlin, his expression becoming more and more grave.

"-- but she changed it six months later. Six months. What happened then to make her change her mind so fast? I mean -- this is enough, you know, I can see him showing the senior board members this, and they won't care about the date on it or the fact that there were new wills written up right after. They'll just care that for a second, my parents thought I couldn't do it --"

"You were five years old," Leon said, holding up his hands in what was supposed to be a placating gesture, but only made Arthur turn away in frustration.

"I'd just lost my hearing then --"

Monmouth picked that moment to come in with the copies. Arthur took them with a nod, said his thank-yous, tried for more small talk but was no longer in the mood. All he wanted to do was to get out, to get away, to hole up somewhere, anywhere, where he could be alone to drown in his misery. He didn't listen to Leon handle the remainder of the questions. He barely paid attention as Merlin continued to interpret, though he was fairly certain Merlin had figured out that Arthur wasn't listening anymore, and hadn't been for some time.

They left the building. They stood in the parking lot while Leon outlined his plan for the next few days. Arthur nodded dumbly but didn't answer when Leon said, "Don't do anything stupid. Be patient for a while longer. Let me gather more evidence against Agravaine, all right? We don't have nearly enough to go on just yet."

Leon got into his car and left.

It was a long time before Arthur realized that Merlin was still there. Arthur groaned to himself and turned away. He shouldn't have called Merlin -- now Merlin was feeling sorry for him. Arthur didn't want to hear Merlin trying to cheer him up. He didn't want to hear any kind of platitudes --

"I know where to get the best caramel swirl ice cream in town," Merlin signed suddenly. Arthur didn't want to smile. But he did.
Chapter 3

ACT THREE

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Things changed after the meeting with the estate lawyer.

For one, Merlin couldn't help the overwhelming sense of protectiveness he felt toward Arthur, even though he suspected that Arthur would bristle if he ever found out. Merlin wanted to do something. Anything. He was tempted to track down Agravaine, to show him what might happen if he continued with his traitorous machinations, to have him know a taste of what it was like to be helpless, to be powerless.

Merlin was so angry that even his magic was reacting.

Merlin knew that feeling too well. He had made himself a promise of never again. He would never suffer it, and he would never allow it to happen to someone else. He hated seeing Arthur like this, stressed, strained, at wit's end, his sense of self slowly eroding.

Sometimes, when Arthur thought Merlin wasn't looking, defeat ate at the edges of Arthur's courage. Merlin saw loneliness and isolation even when Arthur was in a room full of people. He saw exhaustion and weariness from all the fighting Arthur had to do in order to be seen, to understand, to be understood. He saw stubbornness and pride in Arthur's unwillingness to ask for help.

It was maddening to be pushed away, but all that Merlin could do was be there when Arthur needed him to interpret. Merlin didn't know everything that was going on, but if the information Leon was sending Arthur's way was any indication, the situation was under control.

Merlin suspected that a great deal of his own frustrations were in wishing that Arthur would hurry up and do something about Agravaine already. He didn't know what Arthur was waiting for.

There were more meetings. Short meetings after normal business hours. Meetings with Leon. More meetings away from the company. Meetings with Arthur's trusted employees at coffee shops or restaurants. Some of those meetings were intelligence-gathering sessions or teleconferences with the worldwide branches of Pendragon Incorporated. Some of them were for regular day-to-day business.

It was from all this that Merlin was able to understand why Arthur was stopping by the apartment more frequently, why he was asking Merlin to join him at random events where, surely, Arthur's presence wasn't needed, why they ignored the movie playing on the television in favour of long conversations about nothing.

Arthur needed something else to focus on, and Merlin was more than happy to provide.

As had become their habit, they'd overstayed their welcome at the restaurant following a meeting, and there was no missing the heavy sighs of the waiting staff who wanted them to go away.

"There must be a lot going on," Merlin signed. "I mean, at the company. Why don't you have me interpret the meetings there?"

"I have Cedric for that," Arthur said.
"Oh. Right. You mean the guy who can't interpret his way out of a wet paper bag." Merlin looked away from Arthur then, hurt in an inexplicable, jealous, possessive way that he had no right to feel. He nodded and shrugged nonchalantly, picking up his coat to get ready to go.

"Merlin," Arthur said, and Merlin turned around to see Arthur tilt his head and raise a brow. "Cedric's working with Agravaine."

"Oh," Merlin said, because it was the only thing he could say. He hadn't known that, and now it seemed as if the last of the puzzle pieces were falling into place.

"Believe me when I say that I want nothing more to have you with me. All the time." A weary weight fell on Arthur's shoulders, but the look he gave Merlin was... inscrutable.

Something warmed in Merlin's belly, and he pushed the feeling away, ignoring it. "It's all right, Arthur. I understand. You don't want Agravaine to know what you're up to."

"Yeah," Arthur said slowly, his brow pinching in a frown. He turned away, putting the papers in his briefcase. That was the cold, cutting end of the conversation, but they left the restaurant together, their shoulders brushing.

In some ways, Merlin wished that Arthur had fired Cedric so that Merlin had at least an excuse not to go to choir practice. The show's director hadn't only been pleased to have Merlin, but he'd absolutely refused to hide him among the crowd of young boys, older boys and alumni singers like Merlin had begged. Instead, Merlin found himself spotlighted as the biggest draw of the show, singing one song and only one, to be performed at the very end.

He couldn't really fault the director for setting the schedule this way. It was a fundraiser, and "the return of Merlin Emrys to the stage" would attract more attention to the charity. The thought of being on the stage once more filled him with all sorts of unspeakable joy with occasional bouts of paralyzing panic. He was leaving the practices feeling more like himself than he had been in a very, very long time, despite the armpit-soaked shirts and sweat-slippery palms.

Still, Merlin wished that it wasn't happening. The timing was bad. He wanted to be there to help Arthur. He wished that Gaius wasn't so conniving and manipulative and evil. He wished he hadn't succumbed to wanting to do one thing for his mother that he had been unable to give her toward the end. He wanted everything to go away. Everything except Arthur.

When Arthur didn't need him, Merlin sang. When Arthur needed him, Merlin went to him, and Merlin was damned if his magic wasn't singing under his skin. He was calmer and more at ease on the stage after having been with Arthur. When he wasn't singing or signing, Merlin's skin itched with the discomfort of magic that had nowhere to go.

Time passed, and there were more meetings to attend. They went to the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines to speak with the Chief Gemmologist to discuss the grading system of Canadian diamonds. They met with the assistant deputy minister in charge of the Far North enterprises to go over the agreements with the First Nations. They went to endless meetings with hoity-toity self-important people that Arthur had managed to tolerate only because Merlin poked fun at their snotty tones.

There was more singing. More choir practice. More music. Merlin helped the young boys find the right keys, taught them how to sustain a note, lent an ear to the young orchestra when they couldn't quite pick up which instrument was out of tune.

There were events -- small events of some importance, filled with businessmen and businesswomen in their finest three-piece suits, all of them pompous and loud and narcissistic.
They circled each other like sharks, nibbled at their prey, and tested the waters to determine their position in the hierarchy and to learn whose asses they needed to kiss in order to advance. Arthur watched it all with amusement while Merlin could only shake his head, because this wasn't as bad as the theatre. In some ways, it was worse.

Merlin only ever saw the world with Arthur, because all his free time was spent in the theatre, trying not to make a fool of himself alone on the stage. In the month since Merlin's audition, the orchestra had learned and polished the *Ode* and was playing it flawlessly now, which was more than anyone could say for Merlin's singing. In frustration, he tried harder, and harder, only to falter and falter each time. And once, when he thought he saw Gwaine Sullivan observing from the upper rows, Merlin couldn't sing at all.

There were other affairs -- large gatherings at fancy places with smart tuxedos and glittering gala gowns and big name people and red carpets and reporters for which Merlin could see no real reason for his presence other than the occasional interpreting. It occurred to Merlin after the fifth or sixth time that Arthur shook his head when Merlin raised a brow to ask if he should get on with the interpreting, that maybe, just maybe, some of these events were *dates*.

Like tonight.

Arthur had once again smiled in that inscrutable way of his and shaken his head before frowning at Merlin, as if he should know better than to even offer, and Merlin was confused.

"You'll be OK for a minute? I need to make a call," Merlin signed, and of course Arthur nodded and smiled that small smile that Merlin decided might be described as *fond* and returned to his conversation with an actress that Merlin recognized from three of the movies Lance had made him watch recently.

He phoned Lance.

"What was her name again? They're all starting to blur," Merlin asked when Lance picked up the phone, sounding distracted.

"What was whose name again?"

"The woman in the movie with the gun and the things," Merlin said, ignoring the knot tightening in his stomach. He glanced over his shoulder. Arthur was speaking; the actress laughed and smiled, placing a hand on Arthur's arm. Merlin's eyes narrowed with jealousy, but the actress shot a look in Merlin's direction, and her smile was *knowing*.

"Um. I have no idea what you're talking about," Lance said. There was a sound on the line that Merlin could barely make out over the cacophony of the crowd, but he was pretty sure it was a feminine murmur and the creak of the living room couch shifting.

"Shit. You're not alone are you?"

"Gwen's over at mine," Lance said, and there was a disgustingly sweet tone to his voice that would have alarmed Merlin at any other time and made him beat a hasty retreat. "Aren't you working tonight?"

"I think it's a date," Merlin blurted out. He glanced toward Arthur, who was holding his own with several screen goddesses who no doubt heard *Arthur Pendragon* and were instantly taken by his charm. Merlin told himself he was not jealous. Not. At. All.

Lance choked on the other end of the line. "What makes you think that?"
"Oh, I don't know," Merlin said, turning away from Arthur and wandering out of direct line of sight, because Arthur had this uncanny ability to read lips from a fucking kilometre away, and there was no keeping secrets from him. "Maybe the fact that he picked me up tonight, that it's been an hour since we got here and he hasn't asked me to interpret anything yet, and every time I try, he waves me away?"

"Um. Did Arthur say it was a date?" Lance asked uncertainly, and Merlin wasn't sure who Lance was asking -- him or Gwen.

"No! Not exactly, no. He asked if I was free tonight, and I assumed it was for work --"

"Hold on," Lance interrupted. There was a muffled conversation on the other end of the line, and Merlin squawked helplessly when he realized that Lance might be asking Gwen. Merlin definitely didn't want Gwen to know that he was having a bit of a panic, because then it would get back to Arthur, and if he was wrong, he wouldn't hear the end of it.

"Gwen says it's a date," Lance said somberly.

"Oh, God," Merlin said, covering his eyes with his free hand. "Oh, shit. I -- I can't do this, he's my boss -- why -- ah, fuck. This. I'm at a gala. What do I do? I'm in Hell --"

Lance put on his fatherly-serious tone and said, "You tell him that I expect him to bring you home at a decent time, and if he must keep you out all hours of the night, to at least treat you in the manner you're accustomed to. Oh, and use condoms."

"Oh, fuck off," Merlin hissed. Several people glanced in his direction with disapproval; Merlin smiled tightly in apology.

Lance was laughing. So was Gwen. He hung up on them.

"I hate my life," Merlin said. He gripped his cell phone as if it was a lifeline, tapped it against his forehead, and startled when he felt a light touch on his arm.

"Is everything all right?" Arthur asked.

"Um." Merlin bit his lower lip. He saw how Arthur's eyes trailed to his mouth -- to read his lips, not for any other reason, he reminded himself sternly, but it didn't stop him from smiling nervously and running his tongue over his lips. Arthur's eyes widened ever so slightly, and Merlin hastily added, "Um. Yes. Um. Arthur, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course," Arthur said. His brow furrowed in concern.

"Is this a date?" Merlin asked, signing the words as well so that there could be absolutely no confusion. He immediately regretted asking -- he should have just gone with it, enjoyed the evening, seen where it would've gone -- when he saw Arthur's expression shutter, growing distant and guarded. He remembered the last time he asked this question, the way Arthur didn't answer, the way his expression had shuttered the way it was doing now. "It's just. I assumed you wanted me here for work."

"I apologize," Arthur said after a long pause, his tone stiff and formal and monotone in a way that Merlin had never heard him speak before. "I should have been clear when I asked you to come out tonight. Of course it's for work."

He looked away, not meeting Merlin's eyes, not waiting for Merlin's answer. Arthur's lips were pressed together tightly and his eyes narrowed as he surveyed the crowd, looking for the same escape route Merlin had been looking for when he called Lance.
Merlin wanted to bang his head on the wall. It was a date. A date that he'd desperately wanted. He'd dreamed of asking Arthur out, or maybe that Arthur would have asked him out, but had ruled it out from ever happening because he was Arthur's employee, and, besides, he hadn't even been -- and still wasn't -- entirely certain that Arthur was interested in him that way. If he was, Merlin had never noticed. He hadn't even allowed himself entertain the possibility that Arthur might like him. And now it sounded like, yes, Arthur did like him. In that way.

"I have a charity gala tonight. Do you want to come?" Arthur had asked him, and Merlin hadn't thought. Or he should have, because at any other time, Arthur would have ordered Merlin there.

If it was a date, why hadn't Arthur said yes? Why would he lie and say it wasn't?

Unless -- unless Arthur was as unsure about their relationship as Merlin was, and had lied to prevent himself from looking like a fool? Merlin wouldn't blame him, because he sure felt like a fool right now.

It was a date, and he'd just messed it up.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," Merlin said under his breath. He could leave it like this, in the anonymity of uncertain intentions and misinterpretations, and they could get on with the whole work relationship that they'd been enjoying for the last two months. Or they could -- he could reach out and tell Arthur how he felt.

A server in a white tuxedo weaved through the crowd toward them, and Merlin took two champagne flutes. If he wasn't working, then there was no reason why he couldn't drink. Or at least pretend to, though God knew that he needed some sort of fortification right now. He closed the distance between himself and Arthur, and elbowed him gently to get his attention.

Before Arthur could say something else dismissive, or do anything frustrating like leaving Merlin standing by himself like an idiot -- which he'd done, once, when Merlin had refused to interpret his rather rude words to a poor businessman out of his depths, Merlin thrust the champagne into his hand. Arthur startled, but Merlin waited patiently, knowing that Arthur would take in the situation the way he always did, observing every detail from the matching glass in Merlin's hand to the way that Merlin dipped his chin to try to catch his eye.

"If it was a date, I would've said yes," Merlin signed one-handed, not bothering to speak because he knew if he tried he would be stammering nervously, and that wouldn't help matters at all. "I would also have spent more time on my hair."

Arthur's lips quirked and his glance drifted to Merlin's hair. He sipped his champagne to hide his smile, never taking his eyes from Merlin. He didn't speak, but signed, "I happen to like the just-rolled-out-of-bed look."

It was Merlin's turn to fight his smile, and he signed, "I did hear from one of the fashionistas that it was the in-look this season, so I suppose I'm ahead of the trends."

"Only by accident. You can't take credit for that," Arthur signed. He glanced down and took a step closer to Merlin until there was barely any space between them to sign. "If I changed my mind, if I said this was a date after all, would it bother you if I introduced you as my boyfriend?"

He spoke without wavering, with such firm determination, that Merlin felt his knees quail feebly, and thought that he was going to die; his heart was pounding too fast and surely that was a bad sign. "Is that what I am, then?"

"It's what I'd like you to be," Arthur said, direct, straight to the point. Lightly, as if trying to defuse
some of the tension, he said, "Also, it might work out in my favour. Some of these women might leave me alone."

"But you love the attention," Merlin said.

"Not that sort of attention. And certainly not from women," Arthur said.

"From men?"

"From you," Arthur specified, tilting his head. Merlin stumbled over his retort when Arthur's fingers wrapped around his hand. They were close, very close, now, breathing the same air, sharing nearly the same space. Arthur was fit and gorgeous in his tuxedo, radiating a heat that threatened to sear the clothes from Merlin's body.

Not that Merlin would mind, but they were in public, and some people might have issues if their clothes spontaneously disappeared.

His magic inched out as if it wanted to do just that, and Merlin lowered his eyes before Arthur could see the damning evidence and wonder why his blue eyes had suddenly turned gold. Merlin swallowed hard, breathed slowly and evenly, and the tingle of magic on his skin finally skittered beneath the surface, reluctant, petulant, wanting to play.

Arthur's fingers loosened around Merlin's hand and Merlin looked up with a start. Arthur's uncertainty was hidden away behind that damnable wall of his, the public face he showed everyone when he didn't want them to see him. Merlin grasped for Arthur's hand, twining their fingers together, holding him in place. He willed for Arthur to come back out to him.

Arthur's smile didn't return quickly. He was dubious, questioning, wondering.

"How long have we been dating?" Merlin asked. "Since I'm oblivious."

Arthur frowned slightly.

"Oblivious," Merlin repeated again, and when there was no understanding in Arthur's eyes.

A server walked past. Merlin deftly put the champagne flute on the tray, still untouched, and turned to Arthur to fingerspell oblivious and to gesture to himself.

"That was your drink," Arthur said, watching the tray disappear into the crowd.

"I can get another one," Merlin said. "I'd rather talk to you."

"You have two hands, Merlin," Arthur said, glancing down at their clasped hands.

Merlin gave Arthur a shy smile when he looked up again. "I'd rather not let go."

Arthur half-closed his eyes, lowered his chin, and smiled that smile, the smile he couldn't hold back, the smile that made his eyes sparkle and betrayed delight.

If Merlin hadn't fallen in love with Arthur on the stage of the Diamond Show, he was definitely done for now.

Merlin let Arthur tug him through the crowd to mingle. He turned to Arthur when Arthur said, "Two months."

"Two months?" Merlin asked, raising a brow.
"We've been dating for two months," Arthur clarified.

"We... we have?" Merlin frowned, trying to remember any particular occasion that might have marked something remotely resembling a date. Never mind the first date. "The banquet?"

"Yes," Arthur said, his tone somewhere between mildly amused and pleased that Merlin remembered.

"But the banquet -- that was you trying to court me into taking the job --"

"There definitely was courting involved," Arthur said firmly. "But apparently someone is oblivious."

"That can't count," Merlin said "We were working."

"And what did we do afterwards?"

Merlin chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully, trying to remember. Tristan and Isolde -- they were a vivid couple, difficult to forget, both for their thick accents and foreign mannerisms, but particularly for their passion and keen minds. Negotiating with them had been downright exhausting, but Arthur had revelled in every minute of it. They'd ended up missing the banquet entirely, and -- "Oh. We went for dinner."

"Yes, Merlin. We went to dinner."

Merlin huffed. Arthur squeezed his hand. Merlin muttered to himself before turning to Arthur. "Okay. So this makes the second date?"

Arthur shrugged a shoulder. "Not exactly."

Merlin struggled to come up with another time that might be one of those "dates". "That dinner business meeting at the Hilton? That can't possibly have been -- just because the guy didn't show up and you didn't want to waste the reservation, that doesn't make it a date."

"It does when there was no business meeting in the first place," Arthur said.

"What?" Merlin gave Arthur a hard look. "You planned that?"

Arthur had the good grace to be embarrassed, though not enough for Merlin's tastes. Merlin's annoyance that he hadn't known about the dates -- at the thought of so much wasted time -- faded at Arthur's sheepish "Yes."

"So this is the third date?" Merlin frowned. He tried to remember how many occasions could count as dates.

Arthur grimaced.

"Fourth?" Merlin asked, holding up four fingers. He added his thumb to make five. When Arthur failed to make eye contact, he held up the number six -- thumb touching little finger. He dropped his hand when Arthur lowered his head and smirked, then tried again with the number seven -- thumb touching ring finger. He wasn't sure if he was more horrified to know that he really was that oblivious not to have noticed that they'd been dating or incensed that Arthur was teasing him, because he abruptly gestured, "What? How many?"

"I haven't really kept track." Arthur looked at him evenly. "Honestly, Merlin. You shouldn't be surprised. We've seen each other pretty steadily for the last two months."
"Yeah, but I was working." At Arthur's raised brow, Merlin reluctantly added, "Most of the time."

Arthur raised the second brow and bit his lower lip.

"Because right afterward we'd go for lunch. Or dinner," Merlin finished, feeling rather dumb. Granted, he might be a little new to the whole relationship game, given that most of his past "relationships" involved hand jobs or one-night stands and not actual dating, but he couldn't possibly be this thick. The evidence proved otherwise.

"We went to the movies once," Arthur said.

"Yeah," Merlin said. "I thought... Hell, I don't know what I thought."

"I took you to the ROM," Arthur added. The trip to the Royal Ontario Museum had been sudden, spur of the moment event, with Arthur texting Merlin first thing in the morning and saying to be ready for ten o'clock without any warning of where they were going or why. They'd spent all day on a Saturday wandering around, looking at the displays, and although Arthur had insisted on giving Merlin one of those walk-and-listen tour guides, he hadn't been all that interested in Merlin interpreting the non-stop dialogue.

"But that was --" Merlin frowned.

"We went shopping," Arthur said, elbowing him.

"You brought me that shirt. You made me try ten different purple shirts under some stupid pretence of finding the right colour --"

Arthur smirked.

"Oh, my God." Merlin pulled Arthur to a stop. "I really am oblivious."

Arthur nodded in companionable agreement. Merlin swatted his arm.

"Wait. Hold on." Merlin glanced around, and lowered his voice to a whisper, knowing that Arthur would be able to read his lips anyway. "We haven't even..."

A terribly over-done gorgeous woman in a sequinned navy-blue gown with a daring cut down the front of the bodice that went all the way to her navel stepped between them. Their hands broke apart. Merlin lowered his head and grit his teeth. Some people had the most annoyingly impeccable timing.

"Hi, I heard that you're Arthur Pendragon," the woman said.

"Of the Diamond Pendragons?"

"Yes," Arthur said quietly, and Merlin wasn't sure how he managed to tint his tone with inflections of both how can I help you and please go away. The woman's smile went bigger, as if she saw Arthur as a challenge.

"Oh, this is amazing. I have one of your necklaces but I'm obviously not wearing it today. My name's --" Merlin fingerspelled Bryn Loizeaux -- "-- and I was wondering if I could buy you a drink?"

The woman -- Bryn -- squeezed her arms close to her chest and Merlin feared that her unsecured
breasts would slip out of what definitely was dubious support and even less coverage. He supposed her manoeuvre was intended to be a tactic to seduce Arthur into agreeing with whatever she asked, including signing a marriage contract with no prenup.

"I'm flattered," Arthur said, and the look he was giving Merlin was enough for Merlin to want to pull Arthur somewhere nice and private to finish their conversation. "But I'm with my date."

"A date," Bryn said. She looked around with exaggeration and shook her head. "She seems to have abandoned you."

"My date is the gentleman that you rudely interrupted," Arthur said, matching Bryn's disdain with condescension. He held out his hand for Merlin, and Merlin, not knowing what else to do, took it. Arthur pulled him close, and said, "Merlin Emrys, I'd like you to meet..."

Arthur paused.

"I'm sorry. What was your name?"

"Bryn Loizeaux," the woman said, sniffing a little as she offered Merlin a limp handshake. "Of the Loizeaux radio empire."

Arthur quirked a brow, not having understood; Merlin quickly translated for him and turned to the woman. "Ah, yes. The Loizeaux radio dynasty. That was back in the 1950s, wasn't it? Good wine, cheap furniture. The current emperor is terrible, isn't he? Single-handedly killing sports broadcasting. No wonder the Leafs have boycotted Loizeaux and refuse to give your reporters any interviews --"

The woman stalked off, an angry flounce in her step.

Merlin pretended he didn't know what happened and turned to Arthur. "Well. How rude is that? I wasn't finished talking."

When Arthur laughed, most of the time it was in silence. His eyes lit up and crinkled in the corner, his mouth spread in a broad smile, and he made tiny, breathless huffs. But now, he laughed, in deep, full-chested, rib-aching laugher, his mouth open, his eyes glistening slits. It was gorgeous to see, beautiful to hear, and Merlin's only regret was that he had to share this laugh with everyone else who was near.

Arthur struggled to contain himself, coughing to cover his amusement, and gave Merlin a frown and a shake of his head. But he smiled and took Merlin's hand. "So what were you saying? Something that we haven't even...?"

Merlin leaned in only a little, emboldened by Arthur's laugh, his smile, the squeeze of his hand. "Kissed."

Arthur's eyes lingered on Merlin's lips for so long that a flush of heat rose up under Merlin's collar. It made him think of all the times that Arthur listened to him when Merlin interpreted, how sometimes Merlin thought Arthur wasn't paying attention and was watching him instead. Arthur finally looked up and said, "Easily solved."

He didn't lean in, and neither did Merlin, though Merlin ducked his gaze and felt the blush creep to the very tips of his ears.

"You know, I think you need to work on how you ask people out," Merlin said. "We could've been kissing two months ago."
"And here I thought you were being a shy maiden wanting a long courtship," Arthur said, giving him a raised brow. He moved closer. "When, really, you'd do anything I asked, wouldn't you?"

Merlin shivered at the low, seductive heat in Arthur's voice. He cleared his throat and licked his lips. "So. Um. How is this supposed to work? You're my boss --"

"Didn't you read your contract, Merlin? I pay you a salary for interpreting. You're not interpreting for me now, are you?"

"Oh. Oh!" Merlin shot Arthur a strange look as all the times Arthur told him to stop interpreting came flooding in. There were a lot of those times. There were also a lot of times when Arthur had been too close, his hand brushing Merlin's, fingers picking at an imaginary piece of lint, touching everything he could reach -- arms, back, shoulders. Merlin delighted in the sensation, but he pressed his hand to his forehead, trying to ease a sudden pain.

Arthur nudged his arm. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm an idiot," Merlin said.

"Besides that." Arthur's lips twitched.

Merlin gave him a long look. "You are also an idiot."

"Me? Why?"

"You're the one dating me for two months but haven't made a move," Merlin said.

"Like I said, easily solved." Arthur pulled at Merlin's hand, tilting his head, raising a meaningful brow. He led the way through the crowd as casually as possible, and Merlin tapped his finger on Arthur's wrist, trying to get his attention. He stopped tapping when he saw where Arthur was bringing him -- a somewhat-deserted side corridor in the conference hall that led to far more private avenues.

Merlin's heart beat faster, and he hurried to keep in step with Arthur.

They didn't make it -- not even close -- before they were ambushed by several people wanting to speak to Arthur. Arthur gave Merlin an apologetic glance and a quickly-signed later before exchanging small talk and answering questions, rarely, if ever, looking toward Merlin for clarification.

And when he did, Merlin decided that this wasn't interpreting for work. He was helping out his boyfriend in a social setting.

Boyfriend.

The thought made him ridiculously happy until someone touched his arm and asked, "I'm sorry, but someone pointed you out to me. Are you the opera singer? Merlin Emrys?"

"Um." Merlin bowed his head.

"I'm just -- you look a bit familiar, but it's been a long time, and I wasn't sure. Then I overheard someone say that you were here," the woman said. Merlin looked her up and down and realized that she was a reporter, albeit one wearing a glamorous off-the-shoulder gown that she likely had to return to the wardrobe department at her station by the end of the night. She sized him up, her eyes trailing down to where his hand was entwined with Arthur's, and her brow rose with interest.
Merlin grimaced and loosened his grasp on Arthur's hand; Arthur tightened his hold and turned to glance at him. Whatever he saw caused him to cut his conversation short and slide over to stand next to Merlin.

"I am Merlin Emrys," Merlin finally admitted.

The reporter brightened and asked, "And you two are a couple?"

"We are," Arthur said.

"I'd love to have an interview with you. Both of you," the woman said. "I mean, everyone wondered what happened to Merlin over a year ago. He was one of the big names on stage, and his disappearance really caused a ripple in the waters. And you, Mr. Pendragon -- I've been trying to get an interview with you for ages. For the two of you to be together, here -- would you mind if I ask a few questions?"

"We're just here to enjoy the evening," Arthur said firmly.

"If you change your mind --" The woman cracked open her clutch and handed Arthur her card. Arthur glanced at the name on it -- Morgause Gorlois. She drifted away with a backward glance. Merlin wanted to crawl under a rock to hide from all the fuss she was raising.

Once Arthur had gotten rid of her, Arthur turned to Merlin. "I thought you were accustomed to dealing with the press?"

"No, my agent took care of that," Merlin admitted. He clarified, "My ex-agent."

Arthur gave him a long, strange look. "Well, now you have me."

Merlin's smile was forced. He was about to shake his head and say, no, this was a fluke, I'm not doing this scene again, but that was a lie, since he was going to sing on the stage in a few weeks. He still hadn't told Arthur about the show.

Merlin bowed his head and grimaced. This beautiful man -- his boyfriend -- was more than he deserved. He understood when to back off, when the subject was too sensitive to press, he waited patiently for two months until Merlin clued in on the fact that Arthur liked him.

And Merlin couldn't tell him about the Ode or the show he would be singing in. He told himself that Arthur didn't need to deal with more problems -- Merlin's problems -- and bit his lower lip in apprehension.

"You'll have nothing to worry about," Arthur said, misinterpreting Merlin's expression. Merlin almost burst into tears -- the guilt was suffocating.


Morgana was wearing what had to be the most eye-catching gown of the evening -- a pale blue wrap-around with skirts in alternating shades of sea foam white all the way to the deepest Atlantic blue, tinged with light lavenders. She was wearing a metallic necklace -- possibly silver or platinum; Merlin had no eye for these things -- that twirled around a long circular strand of pebbled diamonds that was wrapped around her throat and shoulders.

She looked about as calm as one-hundred year old sticks of dynamite weeping TNT onto the ground. Leon, behind her, signed quickly, "Run while you can."

Merlin tried, but Arthur wouldn't let him go.
"Voice lessons?" Morgana signed and said, her expression thunderous. She'd locked onto Merlin.

"It's not exactly a lie," Arthur said.

Morgana rounded on him and jabbed a frighteningly sharp fingernail in his direction. "You knew about this?"

"Of course I did." Arthur scowled at Morgana, affronted.

"And you didn't see fit to tell me?"

Arthur smiled that infuriating smile of his, the one he used when he knew something he wasn't supposed to know that the other person should, and yet didn't -- Merlin remarked to himself that he knew far too much about each and every one of Arthur's smiles -- and said, "And how are you this evening, Morgana? You're looking more and more like a shrieking banshee very day."

"Don't think I'm done with you, Arthur," Morgana signed, her signs whip-crack sharp.

"How did you even find out?" Arthur asked, looking around. Merlin followed his gaze when he paused and spotted Bryn Loizeaux, casting dark looks over her shoulder while gossiping with a few local celebrities, including a Maple Leafs hockey player. Arthur signed, "And why are you wearing that Cartier rubbish?"

He reached for her necklace; Morgana swatted his hand away.

"Well, when the whispers made the rounds I had no idea why your Merlin was so important," Morgana said, emphasizing your with a raised brow and a quick glance toward their still-clasped hands. Merlin's cheeks reddened. "But my new friend was happy to provide the details."

"You have friends?" Arthur signed, amused.

Morgana turned to the side, and while she was distracted, Leon mouthed an apology.

Merlin froze when Morgana twined her arm through another man's and pulled him close. "This is my cousin, Arthur Pendragon, and his boyfriend, Merlin Emrys. Have you met Gwaine Sullivan?"

Gwaine nodded a polite greeting to Arthur, reaching out to shake his hand, and the warm brown eyes and small smile ripped Merlin from his paralysis.

Merlin pulled his hand free of Arthur's grasp with a violent jerk and walked away.

"Merlin," he heard Arthur say, confused and hurt, but he kept walking.

He felt a hand on his arm; he wrenched loose.

"Mr. Emrys. Please. Mr. Emrys. Merlin --"

Merlin stopped and turned around, aware that they were causing a scene. He pressed his lips together, biting back everything that he wanted to say, because all of it was likely undeserved by this man, who had never done anything to Merlin.

Gwaine Sullivan was almost of an even height with Merlin, seeming a little shorter because of his broad shoulders and solid frame. He wore his tuxedo with the grace of someone who had just thrown this old thing on, run his hands through his curly brown hair, and called it good enough for the red carpet.
Sadly, it was.

Gwaine was good-looking in the way that men should be good looking, with a scruffy cheek and a roughshod set of his jaw and a crinkle to his eyes when he smiled. It was a tentative smile that he was giving Merlin now, holding a hand out to appease Merlin the way someone might try to calm an angry dog about to go for the throat.

"What do you want?" Merlin asked. He kept his tone low, under the tumultuous chatter of the crowd, but people were edging closer, trying to eavesdrop.

That damned reporter from earlier was among them.

"For you to hear me out. Please. Just a minute of your time. Two minutes. Or as long as it takes to convince you --"

"Not here," Merlin said abruptly, stalking in a completely different direction. His magic, agitated to the point of disconsolation, glued the reporter's shoes to the floor in retaliation for the shark's smile she cast their way.

It wasn't until they were well in the backlit shadow of the semi-private corridor that Merlin flushed. It was the very same one that Arthur had been trying to lead Merlin into earlier for a private moment that was meant to be filled full of kissing. He rounded on Gwaine, aware that they were still in full view of the crowd.

He glanced over, tensing when he saw Arthur frowning at them, trying his best to disentangle himself from Morgana and failing.

"If this is about your opera, the answer is no," Merlin said. "I'm done with the stage. I'm finished --"

"That's not what I've heard --"

"I don't care what you've heard," Merlin snapped, wanting to lash out at Gwaine, at the way he was holding up his hands in the air, half to defend himself, half to calm Merlin down. He didn't want to see the concern in Gwaine's eyes, the determined set of his mouth.

"Look, I'm really sorry about what happened with you and your agent, but I don't give a shit about that. I want you as my Oberon."

Merlin scoffed. "It's all about what you want, yeah? What other people want. Nobody cares about what I want as long as you get to suck my life out of me --"

"Fucking hell. That bitch really did a number on you --"

"That's none of your business --"

"Isn't it? I've got the world's best in front of me, I'm ready to go down on my knees to beg him to sing in my opera, and he's telling me no? That he's finished? You know what? I don't believe it for one minute. Not one. You can't tell me that the man I heard singing on the stage at my old school is finished -- not when he sings like that. You can't tell me that someone who's going to sing the full score of Purcell's _Ode_ by himself is finished --"

Merlin bristled. "Don't you fucking dare bring that up --"

Gwaine started, looking at him in confusion. His expression changed as he understood. "You don't want people to know. Unbelievable. Don't you get it? People have been waiting for you to come back for a long time. If you want to stay in hiding -- well, it's too late for that. The flyers are out, your name is on the marquee, everyone's talking about it, the show's sold out --"
Merlin covered his eyes and turned away. "Jesus Christ."

"Merlin. Merlin. Listen to me." Gwaine put a hand on Merlin's shoulder in a proprietary touch; Merlin glared until Gwaine's arm dropped. They stared at each other for a long moment, and Gwaine took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I want you as Oberon. I'll do anything. I'll agree to whatever you want as long as you agree to play Oberon."

Merlin scoffed. He'd heard that before.

"Hear me out," Gwaine said, holding up a finger. "I'm based out of Toronto. I'm not making this a travelling show. My name's got enough pull -- I don't need your name on the board, too. I can leave it out entirely if that's what you want. You'd have your choice of an understudy, if I approve, of course. I'm not going to lock you to the play. We'll have an open contract. You dictate the terms. Put it through your lawyer. We don't need to involve agents unless you want to -- but if you do, I have one rule. Your ex-agent? I'm not talking to her."

Merlin rubbed his face.

"She's fucking poison, Merlin. She had her claws in a few good singers before and she has her claws in some good ones now. She ruined them; but she didn't ruin you. You fought back. You can --"

Merlin walked into the men's bathroom, shutting the door. His magic flared, sealing it shut even as he leaned against the door and sank to the floor.

ooOOoo

Arthur started after Merlin, but Morgana's fingernails clawed through his tuxedo sleeve and nearly drew blood. Too many emotions -- confusion, anger, even jealousy -- overtook him when Gwaine brushed past, wove through the crowd with the ease of long habit, and caught Merlin some distance away.

*What do you want?* Merlin asked, his expression closed. His jaw was clenched, his eyes burning with disbelief, indignation, tears.

Arthur couldn't see Gwaine's response, but whatever it was, it must have been effective, because something like despair settled on Merlin's shoulders and he said, *Not here."

Merlin led Gwaine through the crowd, going the other way, disappearing in the shadows of the side corridor. Arthur dragged the dead weight on his arm around, intent on following them, but he stopped short when he saw Merlin halt in the middle of the hallway, too far for him to lip-read, too far for anyone to overhear.

As long as they didn't go anywhere private, Arthur reasoned. He trusted Merlin -- he didn't trust the other man. He didn't know what Merlin's relationship with this man was, but he was not going to lose Merlin when he'd only just won him. Right now, all he cared about was that Merlin was all right.

He turned on Morgana, looming over her, closing in the empty space between them. "What have you done?"

"I haven't done anything," Morgana signed. There was a stutter to her fingers, as if she was slowly becoming aware of having made a mistake. "You're the one keeping information from me. Why didn't you tell me Merlin was an opera singer?"
"He didn't want anyone to know," Arthur snapped. "I was respecting his wishes. And if you'd mind your own fucking business every now and then, maybe he would've told you himself."

"Why are you angry with me? You're the one who hates it when people keep secrets from you --"

"Does it look like Merlin's keeping secrets from me? Let go of me, Morgana. Now," Arthur snarled. He caught a glimpse of Merlin walking away from Gwaine and shot a dark look at Leon. He signed, "Don't you have any police tricks for handling crazy psychopaths?" and gestured at Morgana.

"Leave me out of it. She might hurt me," Leon signed back. He shrugged in a what-do-you-want-me-to-do gesture and moved closer, ostensibly to block them from anyone's view. Arthur supposed they were drawing unwanted attention, but he didn't care.


"Now who has secrets?" Morgana signed primly.

"This isn't funny, Morgana. Who is he?"

Something caused Morgana to let him go -- the look on his face, the tone of his voice. Whatever it was, she took an uneasy step back. Leon touched Arthur's arm.

"He said he was a composer," Leon said, and trust Leon to know the details, because he glanced at his phone and added, "He works for the Canadian Opera Company."

Leon fingerspelled the acronyms C-O-C and mouthed it so that Arthur would have a frame of reference if it ever came up in conversation.

Arthur took a deep breath and looked toward Merlin and Gwaine. Gwaine followed Merlin toward a side room -- Arthur's chest tightened -- and was stopped short when Merlin shut the door behind him, right in Gwaine's face. He pushed on it; he banged on the door, but it wouldn't open.

Somehow, that made Arthur feel marginally better.

"He said he'd only met Merlin once, briefly," Leon went on, "He's been wanting to talk to him, but that's the extent of their relationship."

"Are you sure?" Relief bloomed in Arthur's chest. If this Gwaine had been one of Merlin's past boyfriends, he wasn't entirely sure what he would have done.

"It's all I know right now," Leon signed.

Arthur glared at Morgana; she raised an imperious brow at him. "I am angry with you."

"Well, I'm angry with you, so we're even," Morgana said. She crossed her arms and raising her chin as if she were the one slighted here. "You didn't tell me you were dating."

"Oh, shut up, Morgana," Arthur said. He glanced at Leon, who didn't hide his smirk of amusement fast enough. Arthur shook his head and headed down the hallway.

He came up to Gwaine, who was talking at the door to the Men's room. Arthur didn't know what he was saying, but it was obvious from his increasing agitation that he wasn't getting any response from Merlin. Arthur tapped Gwaine's arm, raised his brow, and gestured for Gwaine to follow him.
Arthur led the way deeper into the hallway, heading to a spot where there was enough light to lip-read by. "Clearly, Merlin doesn't want to talk to you."

Gwaine said something; he turned away and walked a few steps before coming back. Arthur gave him a long, aggravated look. He thought about letting it go, about scowling angrily until Gwaine left, but this was important, and for once he swallowed his pride.

"Mr. Sullivan. I'm deaf. In order for us to communicate, I need to be able to read your lips, which I can't do when you're muttering to yourself and walking away like the economics professor I absolutely loathed in university." Arthur knew he didn't have Merlin's finesse when it came to gently educating people on how to have a conversation with him, and he frankly didn't care. He wanted to know what was going on, and he wanted to know now.

Gwaine hesitated. He looked between the closed bathroom door and Arthur.

Before he could speak, Arthur said, and not very kindly, "Yes, I know. You're sorry, you didn't realize, or you knew and you forgot. Yes, Merlin and I are together, and Merlin is aware that I can't hear. Yes, I know what Merlin can do and what he's been through. Now, very quickly now, get over the fact that I can't hear and explain to me what the fuck you want with him and what you said to make him so upset."

Gwaine looked back and forth between the distant Men's room and Arthur a few times before giving Arthur a long, measured look. Arthur had to give him credit; he didn't make fumbled apologies and try for a quick escape. Instead, said, "How well do you --"

He waved his fingers toward his mouth.

"Very well, Mr. Sullivan. Speak normally and enunciate, and answer me. What did you say to Merlin?"

Gwaine raised a brow. There was a pause and an awkward chuckle. "All right."

But he stopped there, and looked back at the washroom. Merlin hadn't emerged, and Arthur was concerned. Merlin shouldn't be alone.

"I have an opera that I'm putting on. It's going to be big. It's going to be --" Gwaine caught himself from the beginnings of a sales pitch, for which Arthur was grateful, and he said, "I want Merlin in it. I want him as the lead. I've been looking for someone to play --"

Arthur didn't understand the name, but he didn't interrupt either.

"-- for a long time, and I've just about given up on finding the right person. I'm running out of time. So I went to my old school to beg the director to go through his files to see if there was anyone, anyone at all who could pull it off. We're in his office, going through all files on the kids who ever attended, who have the right vocal range, and out of the blue I hear him."

Gwaine waved a hand toward the bathroom. The door was still shut.

"I've never heard him before, you know. I mean, I've listened to recordings and I've seen him on YouTube. He's good, but --"

He shook his head, chuckling to himself.

"It's nothing like hearing him in person. I mean, people told me. He was great years and years ago when he first started, but everyone said he'd lost his spark towards the end of his career, but... whatever it was, he has it back, because --" Gwaine trailed off. "I got choked up listening to him
That doesn't happen. That never happens. I've been in the business too long, I've heard everything. Nothing fucking moves me, but him --"

Gwaine swung a hand toward the bathroom again.

"Him? He sings a fucking church song, and I can't move. I can't move. You can't tell me that someone who can do that shouldn't be on the stage --" Gwaine faltered, as if realizing who he was talking to, as if it sank in at right this moment that Arthur would never know what it was like to be able to hear Merlin sing. "God. I'm sorry, I'm an insensitive bastard --"

"I'm sure that's true," Arthur said, sharp, cutting, not wanting to hear apologies, because he'd made his peace with never being able to hear a long time ago, and it was the sympathies he received that stung more than anything. "But if Merlin says he's not ready, if he doesn't want to do it, then you should respect his decision --"

"That's just it," Gwaine said, and Arthur, patiently, waited for Gwaine to finish running his hands through his hair in frustration and figure out what it was that he was trying to say. "He says he's finished. If he were finished the way he says he is, why is he going to be singing at a charity recital?"

Arthur blinked and reeled in surprise. He wanted to ask, he is?, where?, why didn't he tell me?, but the words didn't come. He didn't even know if he had enough air in his lungs to speak out loud. He barely had enough strength in his legs to stay upright, helpless, listening as Gwaine went on.

"I don't believe it. Not for one second. That man wants to sing. He should sing. He needs to be on the stage. But he's afraid. And you know something? After everything that his agent put him through? I don't blame him for one second for being gun shy, but I promise -- I promise that I'd never do that to him."

Arthur swallowed back the bitterness that Merlin had kept something from him and focused on Gwaine. "How do you mean?"

Either Gwaine sensed he had a potential ally in Arthur, or he really was so eager to have Merlin in his opera he was willing to grasp at each and every straw he had, because he looked at Arthur as if he was the last chance Gwaine had.

He said a name Arthur didn't understand, "-- that's his agent --"

Arthur used the context provided to fill in the blank: Nimueh Blake.

"-- she never gave him a chance to settle down in any one place. I mean, there were dozens of opera houses that would have fallen over backwards to have him as part of the permanent performing troupe, but the rumour is that she turned them all down, and that Merlin didn't know about them. She kept moving him around, sending him all over the world, performing this piece at that place, performing that piece at this place. I'd be surprised if he even knew where he was half the time."

That wasn't any different than what Arthur had already found out through Leon, but it was all the more jarring, learning it for himself.

"If he agreed to take the role, he'd be here," Gwaine said, pointing a finger down to the floor. "His choice. His terms. If he wanted to go somewhere else to sing -- if he wanted to go to Timbuktu, I wouldn't stop him --"

I would. The thought made Arthur's heart ache. He would miss Merlin too much. But at the same
time, if it was what Merlin wanted, he knew that he wouldn't stop Merlin. If Merlin was singing again, if he was ready to go on the stage --

Arthur bit back the bile in his throat. It stung that Merlin hadn't mentioned the concert to him.

"I can't force him," Gwaine said. "But I can beg him. I would do anything to get Merlin as --"

Arthur pieced together the syllables in his head. Oberon. Oberon from Shakespeare. A small smile touched his lips. He'd always liked that play, all the fantastic images that the script brought to mind, the guile and the plots and the ephemeral and the tangled love stories.

It made Arthur think of all the romance novels that Leon had told Arthur he'd seen in Merlin's apartment -- novels that Arthur had seen for himself when he stopped by for a visit. Merlin had hastily hidden the books, but Arthur had teased him mercilessly.

Was Merlin ashamed to be singing? Maybe he didn't tell Arthur about it because he didn't want Arthur to crow about being right, or to tease him? Arthur ignored his rising guilt, because it really was his fault. He'd been dropping hints for Merlin to sing again after Merlin had asked him not to even bring it up, but...

Arthur wanted to see Merlin on the stage, and suddenly, he wanted to see Merlin as Oberon. He looked at the Men's washroom for a long moment before turning to Gwaine. "You'd do anything?"

"Ah. Um." Gwaine's mouth dropped open into an O, as if he'd been caught out, and he smiled, but there was hint of a grimace to that smile. "Almost anything."

"I have a charity geared toward providing aid for those whose lives were destroyed by the wars funded by blood diamonds," Arthur said. "And you want me to direct a show," Gwaine said, catching on, but not quite. "I want you to put together and direct a show," Arthur specified. "I'll put you in touch with the person who is running the charity. He can assist you with the details."

Gwaine ran a hand through his hair, and Arthur wondered for a brief moment if Merlin thought this man was attractive. Because he was -- that long, wavy hair, that heavy scruff along a strong jaw, the gleam in his dark brown eyes, his easy smile and roguish air. Arthur suppressed the jealous rise that choked him.

"Get Merlin as my Oberon, and I'll think about it." Gwaine held up a finger and pointed it at Arthur. "If Merlin sings in the show, too, I'll strongly consider it."

"If I convince Merlin to be your Oberon, and ask him to sing in the fundraiser, you'll not only do the show, but you'll make it an annual thing."

Gwaine shook his head and turned away, dropping his hand. Arthur caught him mouthing *fuck* just before he smiled again, this time with a more pronounced grimace. Finally, he reached into his tuxedo and pulled out a card, offering it to Arthur. "I have to turn in the list with the final cast to the COC --"

He pronounced it cee-oh-cee, and Arthur was grateful that Leon had given him a heads-up on the acronym, or he wouldn't have picked up on it.

"-- by the end of the month, or I lose both my funding and my slot," Gwaine said. "Can you have him call me?"
Arthur reached into an inside pocket and flipped through several versions of his business cards until he found one with a direct line to Gwen and his own text number. He gave it to Gwaine.

Gwaine took it and wagged it in the air at Arthur. "You drive a hard bargain. I'm not sure if I want you to convince him now."

"Yes, you do."

Gwaine exhaled in a sigh, and nodded. "Yes, I do. Look, I didn't mean to make him upset. I just want him so badly --"

So do I. Arthur looked away briefly.

"-- not in that way, you understand. I wouldn't get between you two. I don't think I have a chance, anyway. I saw the way he looks at you." Gwaine held out his hand. Arthur shook it. "You're a lucky bastard. But I'm going to be even luckier if you can change his mind. Call me."

Arthur nodded and watched Gwaine return to the party before approaching the Men's room, Gwaine's card safely pocketed away. He hesitated in front of the door and gave it a tentative push. It didn't budge.

He knocked lightly. He knocked again. "Merlin. Love. Can you let me in, please?"

He felt stupid talking to a door when he couldn't hear a response. But no one was near enough to overhear him or see him, so he tried again.

"Merlin. I don't know if you can hear me. I'd really rather be able to see you, love --"

The door bounced visibly, as if it had been held shut by a great weight, but that weight had moved and the hinges were groaning in relief. Arthur put a tentative hand on the door, and it opened without resistance. He walked in, expecting Merlin to be nearby, but instead found him on the other side of the privacy wall. Merlin was leaning over the sink, his hands grasping the marble, his head down, his back hunched.

Merlin shifted as Arthur approached; he loosed one hand from the white-knuckle grip and his back straightened slightly, but he didn't look up.

"I'm sorry," Merlin signed. "I panicked."

"And left me thinking he was an ex-boyfriend of yours. Or maybe not so ex as that," Arthur said. He knew it was a cruel thing to say, but he was trying to get a reaction out of Merlin.

Merlin's eyes snapped up and Arthur locked onto them, reflected in the mirror, bright blue and red-rimmed, his face pale. "God. No, no. I've only met him once, he --"

"I know who he is," Arthur said, coming closer. He put a hand on Merlin's shoulder. He squeezed, and ran his hand down Merlin's back, rubbing small, reassuring circles. "I know what he wants. I spoke to him."

Merlin ducked his head down. His Adam's apple bobbed in a thick, heavy swallow. He pressed his lips together and took a deep, shaky breath.

"What do you want, Merlin?"

Merlin reached up and rubbed his face with one hand, licking dry lips and looking so, so tired. He shook his head and signed, "I don't know."
"Do you want to go?"

Merlin sighed and nodded. He straightened and shook his head. "What about the party?"

"What party? That one?" Arthur asked, gesturing over his shoulder at nothing in particular. "It's kind of a bust, isn't it? I mean, if the height of it is getting hit on by that unappealing radio heiress trying to snag herself a rich boyfriend, it's really not that much of a party, is it?"

A small, faint smile touched Merlin's lips, but it faded nearly as soon as it appeared. "I'm sorry. I don't want to take you away from --"

"The only person that I want to be with is you. Come on. I'll take you home."

Merlin tried to make himself presentable but gave up; there was no rinsing away the red in his eyes. Arthur knew the hotel well enough to lead them away from the party, away from the reporter who was lingering at the end of the corridor, chatting with someone, holding a champagne glass in hand, casting a predatory glance in their direction. Arthur held Merlin's hand all the way through the hotel, in the elevator, across the parking level to his car. He opened the door for Merlin, but Merlin gave him a strange look.

"I'm not a girl, you know."

"Thank God," Arthur said, and at the quirk of a smile on Merlin's lips, leaned in to kiss his cheek. Merlin relaxed against him for one glorious moment that Arthur didn't want to end, but he knew they needed to leave before someone came across them. "Let's go."

Merlin started to climb into the passenger side, pausing only long enough to stare over Arthur's shoulder, scowling. It was the reporter.

Like a bloodhound, she'd tracked them down.

Arthur rolled his eyes and signed, "Get in the car.". He hurried around the front and slid in the driver's seat, turning the key in the ignition. They were on the ramp leading up to the street level before the reporter made it close enough to corner them.

They didn't speak during the drive; Arthur couldn't anyway, not without taking his eyes from the road. Merlin's face was turned to stare out the window, his head back against the rest, expression lost and far away.

It was a long, slow drive down Yonge. The traffic didn't cooperate. There was an accident up ahead, narrowing the road down to barely a lane. A crowd of kids rushed from one side of the road and back again for no other reason than to annoy the drivers trying to get through. Arthur kept his hands on the wheel, forced himself to relax, because they would get to Merlin's apartment soon, where he could get Merlin to calm down.

And maybe talk. Arthur really wanted to talk. He wanted to know more about this side of Merlin, the one that he kept tucked out of sight. He wanted to know about the charity recital that Merlin was doing that he hadn't been told about. He wanted to --

He wanted to kiss Merlin. That had been on his mind ever since Merlin pointed out that they hadn't kissed yet. The quick peck in the parking garage had been a frustrating tease.

They'd barely held hands -- they hadn't held hands until a few hours ago, and Arthur couldn't get enough of it. He knew it would be much the same if he started kissing Merlin.
He wouldn't stop.

He turned right an intersection early and made up the difference by way of side streets, lucking out by finding a parking spot right in front of the building. He followed Merlin inside -- there was an awkward pause where Merlin hesitated, his hands frozen in want to come in question, only to drop them a moment later when Arthur raised a brow in obviously I do answer. The elevator was waiting for them, and they rode to the seventh floor in silence. Merlin fumbled with his keys, and Arthur took them from him.

"How you can sign as beautifully as you do, but be fumble-fingered with your keys --" Arthur shook his head and held up what he guessed was the house key, unlocking the door when Merlin nodded to confirm.

Arthur followed Merlin inside and shut the door.

It wasn't a big apartment. It was clean and neat and sparse except for the pile of books in the corner and the new television set on the stand recently vacated by the potted plant and the laptop that Arthur had given Merlin. The kitchen was pristine -- no dishes in the sink, a few apples and bananas in a bowl. The couch in the living room was partially covered by a blanket that Merlin picked up, folded, and tossed onto a chair, in part from nerves, in part to distract himself.

"Do you want a drink?" Merlin asked.

"Whatever you're having." Arthur knew Merlin didn't drink, that he wouldn't have anything in the apartment anyway, and he said yes only because he wanted Merlin to stop spooking, to come closer.

"Tea or coffee," Merlin signed. He looked a little embarrassed. "I guess I wasn't expecting company."

"Tea is fine." Arthur followed Merlin into the narrow kitchen, blocking his escape. He watched Merlin add water to the kettle, flick on the burner, take out two heavy, hand-made ceramic mugs, and plop a bag of Earl Grey in each. He didn't turn to look at Arthur, the line of his shoulders plank-stiff, strained, raised nearly to his ears. "Merlin?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Merlin signed, not turning around.

Arthur dropped his head and sighed. He walked up behind Merlin. "Okay."

He put his hands on Merlin's arms. He trailed them down to his wrists, his fingers. He moved his hands to Merlin's hips and added just enough pressure to turn him around.

"We won't talk about it. But let me make one thing very clear," Arthur said, tilting his head to catch Merlin's eyes. "I'm not after your fame or your fortune. I have that in spades. The only thing I'm after is you."

Merlin steadied himself on the counter behind him, his hands clutching the edges. Arthur reached up and undid Merlin's bow tie.

"The only person who's allowed to bully you is me. Don't let Sullivan push you around. If he bothers you, I want you to tell me, all right? And for the time being, I want you to think about what he offered you."

He unfastened the top three buttons of Merlin's shirt. Merlin's chest rose and fell heavily.

"You're afraid what happened to you before will happen again, but we both know that neither one
of us will let it get that far. I certainly won't. Don't base your decision on what happened in the past."

Arthur continued to unbutton Merlin's shirt until the cummerbund got in the way. Merlin's stomach sucked in when Arthur's thumb ran over the thin, light line of hair leading the way down, hiding underneath the satiny fabric.

"If it's what you want to do, I will support you. If you want to go somewhere else, I will follow you. I can do that, you know. We have offices in some of the most beautiful cities around the world."

He reached under Merlin's jacket and around Merlin's waist and unfastened the cummerbund, rolling it up and putting it to the side. He tugged Merlin's shirt out of his trousers and finished unbuttoning it.

"If you don't want to do any of it, if you're happy working for me, well, who am I to complain? I rather like it when you're with me all the time."

Arthur pushed the jacket out of the way. He slid his hands under Merlin's shirt. He'd fantasized about doing this, of touching Merlin everywhere. His skin was smooth and soft, stretched over lean muscle and bone. All Arthur could think of was how much he wanted to mark this skin with his lips, with his tongue.

"Whatever you decide, I will be with you. My seduction technique might need work. I might be slow. I might take my time. But I'm not going to leave you."

Arthur's eyes trailed up Merlin's chest, over those delicious collarbones. Up that neck that had been made for nibbling, that jaw that screamed to be licked. He stared at those beautiful lips quirked in a little shy smile, and looked up into Merlin's eyes. They were still a little red, still a little raw. There was a dampness giving them a glittery sheen, but there was no hiding Merlin's emotion.

It was Merlin who leaned in first, who pressed his lips against Arthur's, light and soft and tentative. He broke contact to run his tongue over his lips, to stare down at Arthur's mouth. Merlin's shoulders eased, but he didn't move his hands from where they grasped the counter, and Arthur didn't know if it was because he was afraid to fall, or if he was afraid to move forward.

Merlin's warm breath against his cheek was driving Arthur mad. He wanted to lean against Merlin, to feel his body, to lick and suck and kiss every square millimetre of him, starting with those soft lips, with those long fingers.

But he waited. It was Merlin's choice.

He ran his hands up and down Merlin's sides, relishing in every single tremor that his touch was drawing from Merlin, trying to be patient.

He didn't have to wait long. The blast of hot steam from the kettle startled them both. Merlin reached out removed it from the hot burner. He glanced out the corner of his eye and turned the stove off. When he was finished, he didn't grab the counter again.

Merlin put his hand on Arthur's arm. They were gentle movements at first, grasping and stroking. Arthur closed his eyes, holding his breath, letting it out heavily the more Merlin's touch climbed up to finally settle on his shoulder.

His other hand let go of the counter and made the journey to Arthur's other shoulder faster than the first, but didn't stop there. Fingertips danced along the side of Arthur's neck, hooking under his
ear, behind his jaw, his thumb stroking Arthur’s skin.

Merlin's lips nuzzled his cheek in teasing kisses. Arthur released a held breath and let himself lean against Merlin a little, feeling weak in the knees.

And finally, finally, Merlin kissed him again. It was a sweet kiss, slow and measuring, breaking only to try a different angle, then another. Those lips tested, teased, tasted, taking a moment to savour each and every kiss.

It was bliss. Arthur could spend the entire night kissing Merlin like this. Merlin broke, a puff of air like a gasp cooling Arthur’s wet lips, and returned, his lips parted, pressing first at Arthur's lower lip, then at his upper lip, and again, and Arthur redefined his definition of bliss as anything that Merlin could do with those lips, with that mouth.

Merlin's fingers drifted behind Arthur's head, tangling in his hair. Arthur's hands slid behind Merlin's waist to stroke at the small of his back.

It was there that Arthur found Merlin's skin sensitive to the slightest touch, because Merlin jerked against him. For a delicious, torturous moment, their cocks brushed together through too much fabric, hard, solid, wanting.


Merlin moved him until Arthur's back hit the refrigerator; the silent hum vibrated through Arthur's body, conflicting with the rumble he could feel from Merlin's chest as he groaned, a tremble that was interrupted when their lips crashed together in a frantic, filthy kiss of wrestling lips and questing tongues. Arthur tasted Merlin's mouth; he traced each tooth; he tangled with Merlin's tongue and was rewarded with a full-body shudder. Merlin pulled away to kiss his cheek, to run his tongue along his jaw, to nuzzle under his ear and down his throat where the collar of his shirt kept him from going further.

"You're gorgeous," Merlin said, his lips red and perfect. He leaned in to kiss Arthur's throat and Arthur felt Merlin's lips move and his chest vibrate again.

"I don't -- I don't know -- what you're ... what you're saying," Arthur whispered, and something broke inside of him, really broke, because he would never know what Merlin was saying, not now, not ever. He had lived a long life full of silence, and it had never bothered him before. It bothered him now.

His eyes stung with tears as Merlin pulled away far enough for Arthur to see him -- but more, Merlin saw him, and his expression, already malleable with lust and want, softened with a completely different emotion that Arthur feared to give a name.

"Seeing you in a tuxedo does me in. Every time." Merlin tugged at Arthur's bow tie; it unravelled under his fingertips. Merlin's lips were at Arthur's cheek, and his chest vibrated, low and deep and wonderful.

Arthur had only just absorbed the implications of Merlin's words -- how many times had Merlin seen him in tuxedo? There was this evening, there was that event some weeks before, there was
the Diamond Show -- when Merlin leaned back, studying Arthur with warm, unguarded eyes. His fingers tugged at Arthur's shirt, unbuttoning it just as Arthur had unbuttoned Merlin's.

"You're amazing. You're so... You're so... I don't know anyone else like you. I can't get you out of my head."

Arthur's fingers wrapped on the edges of Merlin's shirt, tugging him close, but Merlin resisted. He wasn't finished.

"You're all I think about when I sing." Merlin's fingers stopped with the buttons. His fingers stroked Arthur's chest through the fabric, as if afraid to touch bare skin. "I've... I'm..."

His hand dropped and moved in tiny, fragile signs. "I've never been in love before. I think I'm in love with you."

His hand tightened in a fist and he shook his head. He put a hand on Arthur's chest where it almost hurt to breathe.

"I am in love with you."

Arthur's heart pounded. "Merlin."

"I just wanted you to know," Merlin signed, but Arthur only caught half of it and guessed the rest. Arthur leaned in to smother those lips, those kiss-bruised, perfect lips, in one kiss after another until they were both gasping for air.

"... don't leave me. Please don't --" Arthur saw Merlin say, felt Merlin say, heard Merlin say, low and beautiful and resonating, and he shivered. Before he could think about it, before he could wonder at the frisson on his skin, at the golden gleam slivering through Merlin's shuttered eyes, Merlin's fingers pulled away the cummerbund from around Arthur's waist and had finished off the rest of the buttons on his shirt.

"Won't. Never. I won't," Arthur promised in-between frantic kisses, his hands pulling at Merlin's shirt, at his jacket, pushing it from his shoulders, trapping his arms behind his back for a glorious moment before his hands were freed.

They left a trail of clothing from the kitchen to the bedroom, Arthur leading the way. They paused in the short corridor to struggle out of the rest of their clothes, Arthur palming Merlin's erection -- oh, God -- through his boxer briefs before Merlin tugged at Arthur's and dragged them all the way down.

There wasn't any finesse in the way they tumbled on Merlin's bed, in the tangle of arms and legs as they rearranged each other and tried for the initiative. Each wanted the upper hand, each wanted to touch and kiss and lick and take command. Arthur felt everything inside him go messy and fond and overwhelmed with emotion the instant that he felt Merlin relax under him, freely handing over the reins.

"I'm not going to... God, I want to --" be inside you, want to feel you, want to -- Arthur started to say, but couldn't, because speaking took him away from Merlin for too long when all he wanted to do was taste.

Merlin shifted under him. He twisted his long lean body -- Arthur's lips followed the curve of his muscles as he turned -- and reached into the dresser drawer. It took too long, and Arthur looked up to see a bottle of lube on the bed, and nothing else.

"I haven't anything," Merlin said, looking miserable and feral at the same time, the disappointment
pulling at his mouth even as desire glowed in his eyes.

Arthur wavered between relief -- to know that Merlin didn't have anything, that he hadn't been with anyone for some time -- and disappointment, but it was short-lived. He hooked his arms under Merlin's legs, dragging him back on the bed fully and straddled his hips to keep him from getting away. Their cocks brushed together; Arthur felt, rather than saw, Merlin's sharp intake of breath.

Merlin rocked his hips under Arthur, aching for more contact; Arthur gave it to him until he couldn't stand the electrifying sensation of their hard cocks rubbing together for much longer. He grabbed the bottle of lube and poured some in his palm -- too much, and it slipped and slid all over their cocks when he took them both in hand.

"Oh, fuck," Arthur saw Merlin say, and he would have echoed the sentiment if he wasn't trying to keep from coming right then and there.

He stroked them both together, looking down to watch their cockheads slip through his fist, at Merlin, enraptured by his expression. Merlin reached for him, pulled him down chest-to-chest, lips-to-lips, and delicious vibrations rumbled in Merlin's chest, passing into Arthur. Arthur braced himself on an elbow, wrapping his hand around their cocks again, squeezing with sure fingers, brushing his thumb over their slits to mix their pre-come together.

Merlin wrapped his hand around Arthur's, hurrying the rhythm, and Arthur bit his lip and groaned to feel Merlin come in pulsing throbs, following a bare few strokes after.

They lay on top of the covers like that, Arthur on Merlin's chest, nestled between Merlin's legs, their bodies sticky and hot, their hearts pounding at a rapid pace before finally calming and quieting.

Merlin kissed him gently; the kisses were soft and languid and Arthur decided that this was it -- if he couldn't get enough of these kisses now, he would die if he had to go without them for the rest of his life.

It was Merlin who got out of bed some time later, who came back with a warm, wet terry-cloth, who washed them both. It was Merlin who dragged the blankets out from under Arthur, who covered him up, who nestled against Arthur until they were nice and comfortable against each other, Arthur wrapped around Merlin, his chin on Merlin's shoulder.

"I love you too," he whispered into Merlin's ear, barely breathing life into the words. Merlin's body stilled against him, and the tiny smile on Merlin's lips and golden gleam in his eyes were the most beautiful things that Arthur had ever seen.
Unfamiliar bed and blankets. Unfamiliar lighting -- it was far too dark. Unfamiliar smells. There were faint vibrations, like the thump-whoosh of a building's furnace turning on, heavy trucks driving by. The only thing that was remotely familiar -- comfortable -- was the warm body next to him. Long, lean, fitting against him like the missing piece to a complicated jigsaw puzzle.

Merlin.

His eyes were closed, his eyelashes long and curled, his expression in serene repose. His breathing was slow and regular, his heartbeat calm, lost in deep, deep slumber.

Arthur was tempted to stay, to watch Merlin as he stirred and woke on his own, to draw him close and pull him down for gentle good mornings and a lazy Sunday where they stayed in bed until noon.

But he had to go.

He craned his neck until he spotted the alarm clock on the dresser across the room, red letters glaring at him in the cloudy, overcast gloom of an early dawn. It was just before eight, and he had barely enough time to go home, shower and change, and arrive at the Pendragon Incorporated building for a little bit of espionage on his own company.

He looked at Merlin again, at the way his hair curled over his forehead and stuck up at the sides, at the perfect cupid's bow of his lips, at the faint stubble along his jaw.

Arthur didn't want to leave. He slipped from under Merlin's arm and heaved himself out of bed as quietly as possible. He couldn't find his boxers, he wasn't sure if those were his socks, and it was only after trying on one pair and picking up the other that he found his trousers. His shirt and jacket and bow tie and cummerbund were somewhere in the corridor, but he paused to look at Merlin one last time before he left.

He was a little startled to see that Merlin was awake and watching him, hurt and confusion barely hidden behind a mask of sleepiness. He turned onto his back, the blankets tangling in his legs, drawn down around his waist in an accidentally seductive way that made Arthur's mouth go dry.

"I was hoping you'd stay," Merlin signed, and Arthur was grateful, because it was still too dark to read lips.

"Believe me, I want to." Arthur sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for Merlin, combing
his fingers through that raised gnarl of hair. Merlin caught his wrist, but it was Arthur who leaned in for the kiss this time, fairly certain that he didn't need permission now. "Agravaine's out of town. Leon, Owain and Gwen are helping me root through the archives. Leon thinks Agravaine has left a paper trail, but it won't be obvious or easy to find."

"I could come and help," Merlin signed one-handed, staying close, his lips brushing Arthur's cheek, his free hand running down Arthur's back.

"If you come, I don't think I'll get any work done," Arthur said, jerking involuntarily when Merlin's fingers trailed over a ticklish spot. The truth was, he knew that Merlin went to St Michael's on Sundays, spending hours there, and now with the charity recital --

It stung that Merlin still hadn't mentioned it.

-- he probably had to put in more time to practice. He didn't want to take that away from Merlin. "Dinner?"

"Yes," Merlin signed, and did something with his teeth and his tongue along Arthur's earlobe that promised to keep him there all day no matter how much he wanted to dig and find the dirt on Agravaine.

"God, I'm not going to go at this rate," Arthur said, but he pulled away, standing up. "Go back to sleep."

Merlin looked adorable when he was sleep-rumpled. Arthur told himself firmly to turn around and walk out. He was at the bedroom's doorway when something occurred to him.

"If you go out today, maybe you could... stock up? You seem to be out of certain important supplies." Arthur doubted that he would have lasted long enough to even put up a condom, but he didn't want that to hold them back next time.

Merlin plopped back on the bed. He gave Arthur an embarrassed grin before dragging a pillow over his face. "I will," he signed.

Arthur chuckled. He found his shirt and his jacket, both still together from where Merlin had pulled both off simultaneously, and pulled on his shirt. He was tucking his bowtie into his pocket and folding up his cummerbund when he spotted a colourful flyer tucked under a short stack of mail on the kitchen counter. He glanced toward the bedroom Merlin had turned over on the bed.

Arthur tugged the flyer out from under the pile and read it.

_The Toronto Boy's Choir presents an evening of choral chants in conjunction with the St Michael's Boy's Choir and the Toronto Orchestra with a special appearance by renowned countertenor Merlin Emrys, originally from the Montréal Les Petits Chanteurs du Mont-Royal, in a charity fundraiser for the newly-founded Ethereal Boy's Choir for talented boys of all ages._

There was a date. Less than two weeks from now. A Friday night.

Arthur took out his iPhone, took a photograph of the flyer, and tucked it back the way it was. He took his jacket, left the apartment, shut the door behind him and tested to make sure it locked.

He turned around and froze.

Not ten feet away was Gwen, coat and purse in her hands, quietly shutting the door behind her. She turned around, saw him, and they shared a wide-eyed deer-in-the-headlights look. They burst into a fit of quiet, hiccupping giggles a second later.
"Oh, Jesus," Gwen said, holding a finger to her lips. "Shush. Lance is still sleeping --"

"Then this is a Walk of Shame?" Arthur asked, and Gwen wrapped her arm around his and dragged him down the stairs.

"Look who's talking," Gwen signed. "One second, Merlin is calling Lance, confused as hell, trying to figure out if he's out on a date with you, and the next you're sneaking out of his apartment --"

"I'm not sneaking out. I told him where I was going before telling him to go back to sleep," Arthur protested.

"Aw, that's sweet," Gwen said, tilting her head, giving him a soft-eyed look. A moment later, her expression changed and she said, "What a coincidence, bumping into you here. I was about to call for a cab."

Arthur exhaled in a quiet sigh. "Dear Gwen, can I give you a ride home, where you can shower and change at your leisure before I come back to pick you up to go to the office?"

"Why, Arthur, that's so generous of you. Yes, I would very much appreciate that," Gwen signed, fishing through her purse for her phone. She brought it to her ear a moment later, turning to look up at the apartment building. She waved. "I'm sorry for sneaking out, I didn't want to be late -- yes, that's Arthur with me. Bumped into him right outside Merlin's apartment --"

Arthur rolled his eyes when she flashed a glance in his direction and mouthed Lance. He shooed her toward his car, thumbing the key fob to disarm the alarm and unlock the doors.

They didn't speak on the drive over to Gwen's apartment building, but once he slowed down to a stop at the front entrance, he said, "Wait."

He fished his phone out of his pocket and forwarded her the picture he took of the flyer on Merlin's counter. "Can you get me a ticket to that? I'm not sure, it might be sold out, but --"

He'd known Gwen to get tickets to virtually everything. He knew better than to ask how, for fear of jinxing the results, but he was sure that she could get him in, somehow.

Gwen glanced at it, started to say, "Yeah, sure, but why --" and brought the phone closer to study the photo a little closer, using a pinch-finger to zoom in. Her eyes snapped at him. "Merlin is in it? Oh, my God. Why didn't Lance tell me about this? I am getting tickets."

Arthur winced a little. If Merlin wanted a quiet little show where he could feel out the waters -- if this was what that was -- Arthur was spoiling it just by letting Gwen know. He caught Gwen’s hand before she got out of the car. "Gwen, Merlin doesn't know I know about it. Can you... Can you keep it quiet? Tell Lance not to mention it to Merlin?"

Gwen's brow furrowed, and her lips pursed in a question that she didn't ask. "I'll keep it secret, I promise."

"Okay. Thank you. I'll be back in forty minutes," Arthur said. He waited until Gwen had walked through the security doors of her building before driving over to his place. He showered and changed and stared at the flyer in his phone while drinking his coffee and inhaling a bagel smothered in peanut butter. He wished Merlin would tell him about this show. He didn't want to surprise Merlin, to impose, but -- he felt a little uneasy. Maybe Merlin had a reason for not wanting him to know. Maybe he was nervous enough as it was. But, still, Arthur felt almost like a stalker.
He packed his laptop and a few file folders, drove to Gwen's, picked her up and drove to Pendragon Incorporated. Leon and Owain lingered on the sidewalk, sipping at their Timmy's coffee, and climbed into the back seat.

It wasn't unusual for Arthur to come to the office on the weekend, to spend all day in the workshop sketching new designs or dealing with the paperwork he didn't get to during the week. If Agravaine checked -- which he most certainly would, if the information from the security chief was any indication -- the only access pass that would come up on the logs would be Arthur's. The intent was to keep any of Agravaine's suspicions defrayed until they had all the information they could get about Agravaine's actions -- not just his attempts to discredit Arthur to the board, but the illicit activities that Leon had uncovered late during the last week.

Leon had kept mum on those, not wanting to anger Arthur. Arthur, for his part, had managed not to dwell on the possibilities too much, patiently waiting for Leon to tell him.

Which he would. Once they were inside.

Arthur parked in a different spot than usual, away from the cameras, and although Arthur went inside on his own, the others hurried after him when the sweep surveillance was pointed the other way. They took the elevator up to the top levels, and waited in the corridor while Leon checked Arthur's office and the meeting room for bugs.

Gwen touched his arm and signed. "Lance didn't know about the show, but he's keen to go."

Arthur nodded. He felt absurdly relieved to know that Merlin's closest friend hadn't been aware about Merlin's upcoming performance. Vindicated, somehow. "You have the tickets already?"

Gwen made a face and held up her phone. "I have to wait until the offices open."

"Tickets to what?" Owain asked, raising an interested brow. He brought his coffee to his lips.

"An opera," Arthur said, and smirked when Owain made a face.

"A hockey game, yeah. The movies, yeah. I'll even go to Cirque du Soleil. But an opera? Not if you paid me," Owain said. He signed hockey game, movies, and circus clumsily.

Owain might be Leon's younger brother, but the relationship was buried deep in a mess of genetics. Where Leon had inherited his father's good Irish looks and reddish-brown hair, Owain was of darker stock, with his mother's exotic mix of Native American and French features, darker colouring and straight brown hair.

"Why do you want to go to an opera anyway? Are there naked people?"

"There certainly might be heaving bosoms," Arthur said seriously, and Owain gave him a long, long look before shaking his head and grinning.

"Now you're just mocking me."

"You're a walking please-mock-me target," Leon said, sticking his head out of the meeting room. He tilted his head and invited them in. He walked around the long meeting table to sit at the other end, opening his briefcase and removing a portfolio. He turned it around until he had it right-side up, and flipped through the papers before looking at each of them with a grim expression that Arthur immediately knew spelled problem, with a capital P.

Arthur sat down heavily in his usual chair, not entirely certain that he wanted to hear what Leon had to say after all. Wasn't everything that Agravaine had already done bad enough?
He already knew that Agravaine was attempting to secretly take ownership of the company from Arthur. Leon had given him a list of senior board members who had accepted payment from Agravaine, and who had already signed promissory agreements to pursue a change in the company. There wasn't anything directly damning except for the money trail -- the one that led right into Agravaine's accounts, illegally diverted from Pendragon Incorporated.

The list of traitorous board members were all senior members handpicked by Uther himself. One or two had refused outright, but they also hadn't come to Arthur to let him know what was going on. Leon had discovered that the holdouts were either waiting for more money from Agravaine, or were too close to retirement to care what happened to the company otherwise as long as their pensions were secure.

The old copy of Ygraine's will had been used completely out of context on more than one occasion to convince the recalcitrant. There were signs that a secret meeting was going to be held within the next few weeks where the board members would hold a vote for the company's leadership. All that was missing was the date and the time, and Arthur felt as if things were spiralling out of control fast, just like Leon had predicted at the beginning of this mess.

He had allies, he knew that. Owain and Gwen were but a few of them. There was Pellinor in the London offices, Einoch in South Africa, Bohrs over in Belgium, Lamorak in the legal department, any number of juniors in different divisions who were unhappy with the heads of their departments and tired of kowtowing to board members without vision or sense of moral responsibility or willingness to adapt to changing times.

Agravaine might have banded the heads together, he might have bribed the board members, and he might be ready for a run at the throne, but it didn't mean that Arthur was alone.

His uncle operated from the luxurious comforts of his corner office and burned his expense account on frivolous dinners with stockholders and investors who had no stake in the company beyond making a substantial profit margin. He surrounded himself with yes-men and people who would do his bidding without question. These people worked under the impression that they would receive vast rewards for small efforts, that they would be elevated above their station, and that they would gain ownership of one of the divisions that Agravaine was planning on selling off, or that they'd become executives in the new ventures that Agravaine intended to drive Pendragon Incorporated toward.

No one seemed to catch on to the very important detail that Agravaine's future plans would drive -- the company into the ground. He was chasing some sort of myth of untold oil reserves in the Canadian Arctic, and he was willing to give up the profitable precious metals and minerals aspect of the business to do it. Any man with sense would simply invest in the companies who were already in the petroleum business -- and leave the exploration to the experts.

Arthur planned on doing the same -- but with his company, with his experts. Precious metals, minerals, diamonds. Forget about petroleum. That wasn't the mainstay of Pendragon Incorporated. It never would be. The mines, the gems, the people, that was what mattered.

That was what Agravaine didn't understand. The business was built up from people, not resources. Arthur had worked alongside everyone, from out in the mines to the stockrooms, from the cutting room to the design level, from the mailroom to the filing room to the archives. He'd spent long nights sitting security and reading long legal treatises between countries and hammering out agreements for mine and mineral rights. He'd negotiated contractual agreements with the other big names in the diamond business, he'd stood toe-to-toe against the most hard-nosed politicians in the world and convinced them to accept the new certification processes, and he had, single-handedly -- with Merlin's help -- resurrected not only his father's pet project with the Romão
family, but had saved more than one deal that Agravaine had attempted to destroy.

This was his company. He was damned if he was going to let his bigoted, narrow-minded, greedy bastard of an uncle take it away from him.

Arthur saw a flash of Leon's uncertainty and sat forward, elbows on the table. He cleared his throat.

"Everyone knows what they're looking for, yes?" He looked at Gwen and Owain and Leon. "Anything that's to do with Agravaine, starting from roughly twenty years ago."

The date he gave roughly coincided with the time frame when his mother revised her will to cut Agravaine out entirely.

"Contracts. Associates, past and present. Any deal that he's been involved with, all the departments he's ever worked in --" which was easy, since Agravaine had squatted in one division and never showed any interest in the others. "-- anything that looks off or wrong, especially from the last six months to a year."

It was unfathomable, and Leon had not found evidence to the contrary, but it was just too much of a coincidence that Agravaine had set up an appointment with the legal department regarding controllership of Pendragon Incorporated just as Uther and Ygraine's private plane was in the air, and had met with them right before it crashed. Arthur didn't know what to think about that.

Actually, he did.

It made him sick to his stomach to suspect his uncle capable of scheming to kill someone else, never mind his own sister and brother-in-law.

And as Leon unhelpfully pointed out in a quiet conversation in his office, late at night when it was the two of them reviewing Agravaine's financial records, "If he was involved in that -- however he was involved in it -- there's still the slim chance that he might do something to you. You should let me hire you a bodyguard --"

Arthur had vehemently refused, but that didn't mean Leon hadn't gone ahead and done it anyway. The investigation into any association Agravaine had with the plane crash had been inconclusive.

The financial records hadn't proven anything; there were too many transactions to numbered accounts in countries that wouldn't easily give up the owner, if at all. Questioning the airport staff didn't turn up anything useful -- Agravaine used the private jet himself on many occasions, no one remembered seeing anyone unusual and that was hardly a surprise considering the layout of the hangar and airport -- and their background checks were returned clean. Even the commission who had investigated the crash hadn't been able to pin the cause as anything other than some sort of mechanical failure, based on what they could tell from the plane’s black box.

While they would be paying particular attention to the last year in the hopes of finding any indication that Agravaine had done something to Arthur's parents, Leon had advised that it would be far, far easier to prosecute Agravaine for white collar crimes. Also, it would be far, far easier to fire him.

Arthur's fingers itched for a piece of pink paper that he could give Agravaine right now.

They would be looking for any illegal activity, any paperwork associated with a actions not in keeping with Pendragon's practices, any sign or hint that Agravaine didn't just cross the line -- he'd tap-danced all over it until it was all but invisible, then taken a big shit on top.
The last six months in particular would prove telling. Leon had several file boxes worth of proof that Agravaine had approached board members with the intent on removing Arthur from his position as owner, president and CEO of the company. He had recordings of two of those meetings -- Arthur didn't want to know how Leon had obtained them -- where Agravaine explicitly stated that Arthur's disability was a liability to the company.

Arthur hadn't been able to see straight for days after he'd read the transcript. He'd been angry, insulted, even darkly depressed that someone would think that of him after everything he'd ever done, everything he'd achieved.

He still was.

"Lucky for us, Agravaine's technologically-incompetent. He's got a paper trail a mile long. Unfortunately, that means a lot of time going through dusty boxes trying to make associations. Owain, I want you to focus on the contracts. Gwen, I'd like you to go through the personal expenses, travel details, appointments and general administration. I'll handle the finances --"

He saw Owain's mouth move, and it looked like you poor bastard.

"-- and we'll filter everything through Leon. He'll fit everything together, let us know if we're missing any evidence so that we can look for it."

He glanced around the room. He could see that Owain was eager to get started -- there was nothing that Owain liked more than taking someone down. Gwen stood up a little straighter, her lips set in a determined line -- she was like a Valkyrie, full of righteous fury. But Leon, as intent as he was on seeing this through, was holding himself back.

So, very carefully, Arthur turned to him to ask, "I think that's everything, unless there's new information?"

Leon gave him an odd look -- the same look he always gave Arthur when he swore up and down that there was no way Arthur could possibly know something -- and said, "Yeah. One more thing. O, when you look at the contracts, especially international ones, I want you to keep an eye out for communications outside the realm of the contract scope. Gwen, I'd like you to see if you can correlate any unwarranted travel with those communications. If Agravaine's been out of the country on some sort of a deal that's been closed for months, can you let me know?"

"Yes, absolutely," Gwen said.

"That's all I've got," Leon said.

Arthur stared at Leon for a while longer, feeling his blood run cold. He cleared his throat to snap out of it, and said, "You know where the files are. I'll start in Agravaine's office."

Owain and Gwen left at the same time, taking Arthur's access card -- and one of the mailroom delivery carts -- with them. Arthur turned to look at Leon and asked, "What haven't you told me yet?"

Leon glared. "Why is it that you always know when I'm holding something back?"

"You play poker. Of course you always hold something back. It's either the absolute best fucking hand in the history of power, or the worst possible hand, but you'll bluff anyway. From the look on your face, I'm guessing the prize is behind door number one," Arthur said. Leon had specified international contracts and travel, which, to Arthur, elevated the situation from run-of-the-mill white-collar antitrust issues to outright organized transnational crimes. The only international business that would delve in that territory were blood diamonds. Arthur's stomach felt like a heavy
boulder. "Don't tell me. It's the diamond origin certifications."

"How do you --" Leon's eyes bugged out. "How do you do that?"

Arthur sat back heavily in his chair, elbow on the armrest, hand over his mouth, trying and likely failing to cover up the pain he was feeling right now. His mind whirled in a mad circle of cause and effect and repercussions, and if he felt sick before at the mere thought of Agravaine's possible involvement in his parents' deaths, he was sick now, bile rising up in the back of his throat, at the knowledge that Agravaine was driving his family's legacy to the ground.

"-- a friend of mine at Interpol seized a shipment of blood diamonds two months ago in Surinam. If the authorities hadn't been tracking the movement from the very beginning they wouldn't have known where the diamonds came from in the first place. There were certification papers so good that the agents thought they were forgeries. The only thing that was off about the papers was the signature," Leon was saying. "It didn't match."

Arthur closed his eyes. He ran his hands through his hair, grabbed fistfuls, and pulled, grateful for the momentary pain. The more Leon investigated Agravaine, the more they looked at Pendragon Incorporated, the more in the pitch they were, covered with hot slime and struggling to get out.

"Did Interpol contact the Diamond Commission?" Arthur asked quietly.

"They did."

"And who were the certificate serial numbers issued to?" All of the certificates had imprinted, unique serial numbers in the watermark, recorded by the Diamond Commission as they were distributed to the purchasing mining body worldwide -- provided, of course, that those mining bodies agreed to the auditing process and could prove that they were assigning the certificates to diamonds, and not acting as intermediaries to supply them to blood diamond smugglers.

Leon hesitated. "He wouldn't say. But when I told him that you hired me to investigate fishy things in Pendragon, he was very interested. He started asking questions about Uther until I told him that your father's movements didn't mesh with the diamond movements, even before he died. But when I mentioned Agravaine and told him to talk to Bohrs --"

Leon spread his hands.

Arthur let his hand drop down onto the table, his fist making a loud thudding sound against the surface. "Well. We've been wondering how he's been financing most of his operations, and where he thinks he's going to get the money for a full-scale petroleum exploration in the Arctic. This answers a lot of questions."

As far as Arthur could tell -- and a forensic accountant would be able to do a far better job than he could -- Agravaine had been funnelling money out of the division budgets and into his pocket, but that was hardly enough to cover the bribes to the board members. Agravaine's secret reports for department divestments still wouldn't amount the money that would be needed to even start up the business avenues Agravaine was so keen to pursue. There just wasn't enough.

First the missing certificates, the Diamond Council's concerns, and now this. It all made a sick sort of sense. Agravaine had been selling certification certificates and pocketing the money for God only knew how long. No wonder he'd been so opposed to Bohrs being named to the Diamond Commission. The new laser-imprinting scheme to track diamonds would cut off his cash flow.

"Shit," Arthur said, standing up. "I'll start with the certificates."

His thumb hovered over the SEND button with apprehension. Arthur didn't want Merlin to think that he was blowing Merlin off, especially not considering that he *finally* had Merlin. This beginning was just too fragile.

Arthur wondered if maybe he should have waited until this mess with Agravaine had been dealt with, but he had a feeling that wouldn't happen for a very long time. He'd been having nightmares of being trapped in courtrooms until he was old and grey.

And alone. Without Merlin.

He stretched his back and looked around the board room. The table and the chairs were piled high with filing boxes and paperwork. It had been slow going at first, but it didn't take long for Gwen and Owain to start making connections and for Leon to direct their research more and more specifically; while they worked, Arthur continued to go through the certificates and Agravaine's office.

He'd found a lot more that he had expected, and the more he found, the angrier he got.

There was still a lot to go through. The cleaning crew would be in sometime after midnight; they had until then to finish going through the twenty years of paperwork, to piece together the rest of the puzzle, and to disappear without being seen.

Sometime around the late afternoon, Leon had received more information from his contact in the police; video of Agravaine with a known go-between for blood diamond smugglers that they were getting transcribed. The worst part was that the video was from the night before, when Agravaine had just arrived at his destination.

Arthur was sick of this. He wanted Agravaine gone. He hit the SEND button and waved for Leon's attention.

"Is this enough?" To nail the bastard to the wall. To get him up on charges. To send him away for a very, very long time.

"More than, but let's keep going. We're going to have to involve the police in this, get a crown prosecutor read in. It's going to take time to get them up to speed." Leon leaned forward, knuckles on the table. "Arthur. You should get a lawyer. For yourself. I mean, we've got Geraint in legal working behind Cenred's back, so Pendragon's lawyers won't be caught with their pants down. But this is important. You need someone else outside the company -- and not Monmouth."

Arthur was lucky -- nothing directly implicated Arthur, but plausible deniability, even if it were true, only went so far with the court. He nodded numbly, but he already had someone in mind -- a cutthroat corporate attorney so sweet and lovely that no one would suspect her of being out for blood. The bonus was that Mithian also knew sign language. "I'll contact Mithian. I want you to talk to her, send her everything we have."

He glanced at his phone. There was a text from Merlin.

*Sucks but its OK. U want me to bring takeout over there?*

He smiled faintly and took a moment to send Mithian's contact information to Leon. "I'm done. All this with Agravaine. Can I be done? I want to fire Cedric, bring Merlin in --"

Arthur saw Gwen talking out of the corner of his eye and looked over in time to see her say, "-- fuck, yes, please, let's get rid of him."
"It's one thing for me to rely on the voice recognition software, but it's something else altogether to actually understand what's really going on, without a doubt, and you know that's --" Arthur had been holding his own at the meetings by secretly using a new software that could record voices and output text in real-time. The software wasn't ideal -- it still needed to be trained to deal with certain accents and volumes, and he needed a better microphone than the tiny version hardwired into his laptop -- but it was miles better than the piss-poor job Cedric had been doing. "-- because from this point forward, I need to know exactly what is being said. That means Merlin."

Leon and Gwen glanced at Owain, but Arthur didn't catch what he said. He figured it was along the lines of "Who's Merlin?" because Leon said, "Arthur's interpreter from the Diamond Show. Remember him?"

"No," Owain said.

"Your loss. He's really cute," Gwen said and signed, glancing at Arthur with a raised brow.

"Merlin's mine. Stop it," Arthur signed back at her.

"How cute?" Owain asked, suddenly interested in the conversation.

"Really, really, really cute. The sort of cute that would leave you more clueless than usual," Leon said, rolling his eyes. "Get your stupid head out of your ass, O. He's also Arthur's boyfriend."

"Damn it," Owain said.

Leon said, "If you fire Cedric now, Agravaine will suspect something."

"Cedric is always late. I'm tired of it, and that's nothing new. Everyone's heard me bitch about it," Arthur said. "What could he possibly suspect? And even if he did, we're photocopying everything, and we'll get digital copies and we'll make sure the police have it before he can destroy any of the evidence."

Leon nodded thoughtfully. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure," Arthur confirmed, and distantly, he wondered if he really was. He knew Merlin's schedule, the concert that was coming up in two weeks. He hesitated, because he didn't have the right to pull Merlin from his practice right before the show -- *God, Merlin must be a wreck over it if he can't remember to even mention it to anyone, least of all me.*, he decided -- but, damn it, he wanted Agravaine gone. He wanted to reclaim his company. And for that, he needed Merlin.

Leon nodded curtly.

Arthur turned to Gwen. "We're firing Cedric tomorrow."

Her answering smile was brilliant -- just another sign that Arthur was doing the right thing. He sent Merlin another text.

*No tks. Lunch tmrw instead? Have mtng @ 9. R u free?*

A response came less than a minute later.

*Im free. Also. Since when do u ask?*

Arthur smirked. He put his phone away and saw Leon looking at him speculatively. "It'll be fine, Leon. Agravaine won't suspect anything."
The previous night's practice had drained all of Merlin's energy. The orchestra was still stumbling over the music, but it was so subtle that Merlin doubted that anyone but the most exacting of audience members would notice -- if Merlin let them notice in the first place. He could mask mistakes with his magic -- he'd done it before, in a long-ago time that was almost forgotten, but he wasn't sure if he dared to take Gaius' persistent advice and to let his magic flow.

The more he practiced the Ode, the more Merlin's magic settled on his skin like a comfortable blanket, wrapping and swaddling him up until he felt a little euphoric. His magic burned under his skin, it throbbed in rhythm with his heart, it nestled in the pits of his belly like a slumbering dragon stirring from its sleep and stretching out its wings. It was calm and cool and quiet when Merlin sang, reaching out as far as Merlin allowed it to, returning to its roost in a curling coil that felt like home.

But when Merlin thought about Arthur, when Merlin was with Arthur, his magic swirled and swam like an energetic swarm, making Merlin's skin buzz, his stomach flutter as the dragon inside struggled against its chains, and tighter and tighter wrapped that swaddling blanket until Merlin felt he would burst. It wasn't painful -- far from it; it was perfection, full of emotion that Merlin thought he would never feel.

It was with that quiet, electrifying pulse of magic rippling over his skin, swirling around him in ephemeral, silvery sparks in the early morning light, that Merlin shut his apartment door -- his magic reaching out to lock it behind him -- and trotted down the stairs. It was with that yawning dragon chewing half-heartedly at a leash, flapping its wings with anticipation at being released that Merlin opened the door to the building and stepped outside into the misty haze that smelled faintly of wet grass and automobile exhaust. It was the racing throb of heartbeat and helpless anxiety that caused Merlin's magic to wrap itself around him in a vain attempt to hold back an unspoken excitement at seeing Arthur.

He would be interpreting for Arthur at the Pendragon Incorporated offices for the first time since he started this job. The details that Gwen sent him were sparse, with more to come when he arrived at the offices. It was a nine o'clock meeting for which Merlin intended on being early for, but he was looking forward to lunch already. Merlin ached to spend more time in Arthur's company.

Still, that Arthur was choosing to bring Merlin in for the boardroom meetings now hinted that Arthur had found something important in the company's archives during his search the day before. Merlin suspected that something was happening, and he couldn't help but worry. Arthur took things far too personally; he took on too much on himself; he tried to do the right thing even if it meant getting hurt in the process. Arthur was the most determined, cocksure, certain person that Merlin had ever known, but there were times when he held himself back because he didn't know how to handle his own helplessness.

He wished... He wished he had someone to talk to. Gaius was sympathetic, but he couldn't understand; he was too happy that Merlin was on the stage at all. The show's director only sighed in exasperation and muttered under his breath about regretting casting Merlin in the first place. Lance wasn't even an option, not anymore, because then he might mention something to Gwen who might mention something to Arthur --

And he wanted to talk to Arthur. He wanted to tell Arthur about the show. He wanted someone to have faith in him, to tell him that it would be all right, that he wouldn't make a fool of himself, and Merlin knew that Arthur would reassure him with a mocking tease and a greedy, distracting kiss.
But at the same time, he knew if Arthur found out about the concert, he would move heaven and earth until he got tickets and sat in the audience. Merlin couldn't risk it -- not with his magic barely held in check, humming under his skin. He had no idea what would happen if he sang in the audience and his magic broke free.

Will had always been able to hear him sing. That little girl had been able to hear him sing. And Arthur --

*Oh, God.* Arthur didn't know about the show. He didn't know about Merlin's magic.

Merlin had so many secrets from Arthur, and he hated keeping them. Arthur would hate him even more.

He took a deep, heaving breath. He couldn't think about that. He was working himself up uselessly. He needed to focus. And what was important right now was Arthur.

Merlin shouldered his backpack and headed for Yonge; he could take the bus up to Pendragon Incorporated. He was halfway there when he heard a sharp whistle. "Merlin!"

Merlin turned around and saw Leon leaning against a black Honda Civic, his hands in his pockets. He was alone.

Merlin crossed the road, hurrying across before someone ran him down. "Is everything all right? Is Arthur okay?"

"Good morning to you too," Leon said, bemused. "Everything's fine. Arthur's fine. Can I give you a ride?"

"I was going to take the bus --" Merlin glanced around and frowned more. "I didn't realize you lived around here."

"I don't," Leon said. "I want to talk to you. Get in, I'll drop you off at the company."

Merlin gave Leon a long, hard look of appraisal before deciding that this wasn't some spurious kidnap attempt, and that whatever was hidden behind the invitation, it wasn't -- or was probably not -- anything evil and nefarious. He paused a moment longer to remind himself to quit watching spy and suspense movies right before bed and gave Leon a guileless nod. "Appreciate it. The bus can be a pain first thing in the morning."

He rounded the front of the car and settled himself in the passenger seat, leaving his backpack between his legs.

Leon didn't say anything -- he scanned the area before getting into the car himself -- until he'd merged with traffic.

Merlin noted right from the very first turn that they were taking the scenic route to their destination. His personal alarm system rang like the bells at Notre Dame, but before he could voice a protest, Leon asked, "How much has Arthur told you about his uncle and what's going on at the company?"

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Leon slowed down for traffic, stopped at a red light, and glanced at Merlin.

"I mean, I know you've been there at a few meetings, that you've seen some of the fuck-ups Arthur has had to clean up. But how much do you really know?"

"Um." Merlin glanced between Leon and the car ahead of them. "Not everything, I guess. Enough. I know his uncle fucked up a lot of deals. I know he's trying to take the company away from Arthur. I know he's a giant class-A bigoted asshole who should be ejected from the human
Leon's attention was fixed on the traffic ahead of him, but Merlin spotted the tiniest curl of a smirk. "Yeah, that's about it in a nutshell. But any specifics?"

"Is this about last night? Did you find something in the archives?"

Leon was silent for a moment. "Then you know more than I thought."

"Not that much." At Leon's glance, Merlin added, "Arthur told me what he was doing yesterday. I offered to help, but I wouldn't really have known what I'm supposed to be looking for anyway."

Leon took a left, cutting off a transport that had no business being in the narrow downtown streets, and it wasn't until Leon had stopped again at a traffic snarl that he spoke again. "I need you to do me a favour."

"Okay," Merlin said, holding his breath. "What?"

Leon hesitated. "Keep an eye out for Arthur."

Merlin fixed Leon with a hard stare that had the other man squirming in his seat. "You say that like --"

"Like I expect something to happen?" Leon's sidelong glance was sharp; both of his hands were on the wheel, and he jerked to the right to avoid an asshole trying to merge through two lanes of opposing traffic. "Of course I do. When the stakes are this high --"

Leon manoeuvred the car into a wedge that only served to lock them into an immovable snake's tail of traffic, and he raised a hand to rub his brow in frustration that had less to do with the morning rush hour and everything to do with a disquieting worry that was filling the car. Merlin's magic flared to the surface, unbidden, crackling on his skin. Merlin fought to hold it back, but it was hard when his guts were tangled in an anxious knot and he was worried about Arthur.

"Did Arthur tell you about his parents? That they died in a plane crash?" Leon plucked his sunglasses from the holder clipped to the overhead visor. He put them on distractedly. "The Transport Safety Board of Canada's investigators are about ready to chalk it up to a combination of pilot error and mechanical failure."

So? Merlin wanted to ask, but he was afraid to break Leon's train of thought.

"I haven't been able to find anything conclusive --"

"Oh, shit," Merlin whispered, loud enough to interrupt Leon, who pressed his lips together. "You think Agravaine did --"

Leon didn't answer.

"Oh, shit," Merlin said, sinking in his seat.

"Arthur's the one who made the connection. He found a few inconsistencies in Agravaine's stories, backed up by appointment books and missing money, but there's no actual paper trail or witnesses that I've been able to find just yet --"

Leon kept talking, but Merlin was stuck on one particular phrase. Arthur's the one who made the connection.
Merlin hadn't known. Arthur had never said. *God, this must be killing him.*

"--I'm pretty sure that if Agravaine figures out that Arthur suspects *anything* -- that he had any involvement in Arthur's parents' deaths, that he's working to push Arthur out of the company, that he's setting Arthur up for criminal charges for the forgery of certificates for Blood Diamond trade--"

Merlin's eyes widened. The more he listened, the more dire the situation, and the angrier he became. Why wouldn't Arthur tell him any of this?

Just as quickly as the flash of rage came, it was redirected toward Agravaine. *The son of a bitch is taking advantage of Arthur, he doesn't care what he does to the company or Arthur or anyone else--*

It hit him deeply, tugging at the spot where his own battle wounds were scarred over. He'd sworn he'd never let someone take advantage of him again, that he'd never let it happen to someone else--and here it was happening to Arthur, to someone he cared about, to someone he loved--

Leon was still talking.

"--I have a bodyguard on Arthur. Arthur didn't want one, so he doesn't know, and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell him, but my guy has to stay in the background or he'll be found out, and we really don't need Arthur distracted right now--"

"Wait. What do you want me to do, exactly?" Merlin asked, shifting in his seat. "I'm not exactly Jet Li in disguise--"

Leon shot him a measuring look. "Too bad. Wish you were, that would make things a lot easier. No, just, if you can, stay with Arthur as much as possible. It's too easy for people to sneak up on him, to eavesdrop, to--"

He trailed off with such weight to his tone that Merlin's imagination went wild. Arthur wasn't exactly defenceless -- he was fit, he worked out, he even let it slip that his parents sent him to martial arts classes when he was younger, when they had found out that he'd been the target of a bully in school -- but he couldn't protect himself if he didn't know something was there. And, unfortunately, there were too many frightening circumstances in which *something* could happen.

"--I don't think Agravaine will do anything to Arthur if someone else is around. He's been careful about witnesses so far, and I don't think that's going to change."

"All right, fine," Merlin said, nodding. "I can do that. Arthur wants me to stick around anyway -- I got an email from Gwen with my schedule for the week and it looks like he wants me to work at the company from now on. I guess he's tired of the other interpreter."

Leon took a deep breath, and Merlin tensed, because there was a *look* on his face. "That's another thing. Cedric's working for Agravaine--"

"I know. Arthur told me. And you know what? It's about fucking time," Merlin blurted out. His hands clenched into tight fists. "I fucking well knew something was up. Lance wouldn't have an idiot interpreter on his staff--"

"Merlin!"

"What!"

"Listen to me. Arthur's getting rid of Cedric *today.* In public. In front of Agravaine." Leon gave
Merlin a pointed look, and Merlin had performed in enough dramatic plays to know that there were plots afoot. "There's a chance that Agravaine might try something against you. Or at you. He might bribe you --"

"Shit. Shit. Okay, what do you want me to do?" Merlin rubbed his face. "Do you want me to play along? Because if you do, we have to make sure Arthur knows about this. I'm not doing anything behind his back --"

Even if he already was, by agreeing to stay with Arthur as much as was humanely possible, just to protect him and keep an eye out. He was already frantically trying to figure out how he was going to manage his practice schedule and his performance in two weeks while making sure Arthur wouldn't be alone. He didn't want to make things worse by playing games, without Arthur knowing what was going on.

"If you don't think you can --"

The short, choking laugh that escaped Merlin's mouth had nothing to do with anything but pride, because he hadn't spent his entire operatic career fooling people on the stage in one play or another. He restrained himself from blurt out exactly that and instead said, "Oh, believe me, it won't be a problem."

Something in Merlin's voice must have silenced Leon's doubts, because he didn't say anything for far too long. Merlin could see the Pendragon building in the distance, looming large against the Toronto landscape.

"Actually," Leon said slowly, thoughtfully, "If he approaches you, it might be best if you blow him off. Otherwise he might suspect something. Unless it's a really attractive offer --"

Merlin couldn't think of a more attractive offer than the one he had right now -- Arthur. He didn't need money; he had enough and could make do even if his finances tanked. The more he thought about it, the more he decided that the only thing that would make him even consider a bribe of any sort was if Agravaine would drop off the face of the planet entirely in payment.

"Even if it's a seven-figure amount, my own personal private island in the Bahamas, and scores of Arthur clones in feather boas cooling me off with fans and serving me fruity drinks, I'm going to tell him to shove it so far up his ass, he'll be tasting piña coladas on the back of his tongue for the rest of his fucking life," Merlin snapped.

Leon shot him a raised brow. He barely returned his attention to his driving in time to slam on the brakes at a red light.

"I'm not doing anything unless Arthur knows about it. And you'd better tell him about the bodyguard you've got dogging his steps before the end of the day, or I will. He hates not knowing what's going on -- and worse? You're his best friend, and you should know that." Merlin unbuckled his seat belt, took his backpack, and thumbed the passenger side lock so that he could get out. "I'll walk from here. Thanks for the ride."

He shouldered the door open and stepped to the curb.

"Merlin?"

"What?" Merlin bent down to look through the open door. He was irritated, upset, furious, and his magic was tingling under his skin. He needed to get out of there before his magic did something stupid.

"Arthur-clones?" Leon barely held back the tiniest bit of a smirk. "You've got some warped
"Oh, fuck off." Merlin coloured, took a step back, and slammed the door shut. He waved a goodbye, hunkered against the sharp wind winding its way through the buildings, and headed toward Pendragon Incorporated.

There was a package waiting for Merlin at the reception desk -- security access tag with photo ID (Merlin didn't want to know where they found that picture), a small keychain for the Executive floor, and his own personal security codes for several of the mag-locked areas. "Go on upstairs, Mr. Emrys. I've texted Mr. Pendragon's assistant to expect you," said the cheerful receptionist in the stylish three-piece business suit, but Merlin wasn't fooled. He'd glimpsed the gun on her hip and knew she was with security.

Once on the right floor, he signed in again and followed the directions of the receptionist -- this time, a real one, matronly in a flowery dress and a blazer that reminded him of his mother and made him suffer a pang of grief -- and found not only Gwen waiting for him, but Arthur. Their strained expressions -- no doubt a carry-over of the evidence they'd found in their archive search, if Leon's paranoia had been anything to go by -- lightened at once, but Merlin had eyes only for Arthur's smile.

"Missed you," Arthur signed when Gwen wasn't looking, and Merlin's smile only grew broader.

"Me, too," Merlin signed back, his gestures small and fast, too quick for Gwen to catch or follow, but Arthur, who always watched Merlin with a hunger to know everything, caught it. Arthur smiled and ducked his head and looked away in a shy movement that was completely endearing and made Merlin want to take Arthur home right now.

The shyness made sense when Arthur quickly signed, "Gwen caught me sneaking out of your apartment yesterday."

"Oh," Merlin said, because now he understood the colour rising in Arthur's cheeks. If Gwen had caught Arthur, that could only mean one thing -- and Merlin gave Gwen a guileless smile and signed his words so that Arthur could understand, "Good morning, Gwen. How's Lance? Considering the racket on Saturday night, I wasn't sure if he was alive yesterday. He is, isn't he?"

"He's fine," Gwen said, a little strained; Merlin thought he saw a bit of a blush rise up. She ignored his grin and Arthur's barked laugh and straightened her spine to business proper, pushing around the file folders on her desk. She shoved two sheets of paper, stapled together, at him. "This is the agenda for today's meeting."

Merlin repeated what Gwen said in sign for Arthur's benefit, and took a second pile of papers -- this one more substantial -- as she signed, but did not speak out loud, "And this is the real agenda that we took off Agravaine's computer. Fuck him up."

"I'll try," Merlin said, glancing at Arthur to make sure he'd understood. Merlin couldn't sign with his hands full of paper, but Arthur nodded. After the conversation with Leon, Merlin was feeling particularly vengeful. He would have rubbed his hands in anticipation if he could.

"You can leave your things in my office," Arthur said. "I don't have a place for you yet, but --"

"If you don't mind me staying in your office, then I don't mind making myself comfortable on the couch. I brought books," Merlin signed one-handed.

"As long as you keep the volume down when you start working," Gwen signed suggestively, her fingers in quotation marks over the last sign.
Arthur gave her a rude gesture, pulled Merlin into his office, and shut the door. There were two glorious, glorious minutes of kissing before Arthur pulled away with a reluctant gasp, pressing his lips together. "You should read the schedules. Meeting's soon," he signed.

"One more kiss?" Merlin asked, doing his best to look hopeful. He grabbed Arthur's suit jacket.

Arthur swatted at Merlin's hands and walked away, but not before casting a hooded glance full of promises in Merlin's direction. He pointed meaningfully toward the papers. "Study. There will be a quiz."

That Arthur was signing and not speaking was a hint to how nervous he really was; Merlin followed him over to the desk, stopping to drop his backpack beside one of the fancy chairs. He waved his hand to get Arthur's attention, and signed, "I'll take the F. Now come here and kiss me."

"Quit trying to distract me," Arthur signed, reaching for his keyboard and pointedly turning away. Merlin sighed and sat down on one of the two guest chairs, knocking on the desk with a knuckle. Arthur couldn't ignore the vibrations for long and finally looked up, exasperated. "I'm trying to work."

Merlin raised both brows and waited.

"What?" Arthur finally said.

"Come here and kiss me," Merlin signed.

"Merlin."

"Kiss me, and I promise to really fuck with Agravaine at the meeting. He'll never even notice. He'll be sputtering and stumbling over everything he tries to say."

Arthur's lips pressed together in an expression that Merlin had come to recognize as half-irritation, half-amusement, and not knowing which one was more appropriate for the situation. He settled on sighing heavily and sinking back in his chair.

There were signs of exhaustion around Arthur's eyes, in the set of his shoulders, in the faint tremble of his fingers as he rubbed his forehead. When he dropped his hand, Merlin followed it as it fell and caught the fragments of several small, subtle signs. "Not sure about this."

"What aren't you sure about?" Merlin asked, putting the papers down on the chair next to him.

"This. I just. Arthur shook his head and sat up straight.

"Are you worried about bringing me in now?" Merlin asked.

"No. I need... I need you there. I'm... I'm really tired of the games he's playing. This is my company. I need to know what's going on," Arthur said.

"Better now than later. Or never," Merlin signed. He saw Arthur's distant look, his slow nod, and leaned forward. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Yeah," Arthur said. Merlin raised a doubtful brow, and Arthur caved almost at once, shaking his head. "No. I just want to get this over with."

"We'll get it over with. Then we'll take the afternoon off and you'll get some sleep, yeah?" Merlin signed, getting up. He walked around the desk.
"We have a lunch date," Arthur said.

"We'll have other lunch dates," Merlin signed.

"I was looking forward to lunch," Arthur said, turning in his chair to follow Merlin.

Merlin didn't say anything. He got down to his knees in front of Arthur, put his hands on Arthur's thighs to push them out of the way, and pulled the chair closer. Arthur frowned but gave him a bemused smile, his legs squeezing Merlin's ribs.

"What are you doing?"


"God, no. Merlin, no. I want -- fuck. Gwen's right outside that door." Arthur glanced over to make sure it was shut. "The meeting's going to start soon."

Merlin let his gaze flick down to Arthur's crotch -- if he wasn't mistaken, there was a very distinct sign of interest tenting Arthur's trousers. Merlin raised one hand to sign. "How about, instead of lunch..."

"Oh, God. Fuck. Yes," Arthur said, moving quick, his lips crashing against Merlin's in a hungry kiss that left him breathless and wobbly, even on his knees.

"And there's my kiss," Merlin signed. His hands were as shaky as he felt, and, fuck, but lunch couldn't get there soon enough.

For want of seeing Merlin's lips around his cock, Arthur nearly missed the expression on Agravaine's face when he entered the boardroom and found Arthur already there. It wasn't unusual that Arthur would be among the first to these meetings, but it was not tradition for Arthur to be in the company of an interpreter.

For months now, Cedric had arrived at the meetings later and later, mumbling hasty apologies; some meetings, he never showed up at all. But now Merlin was in Cedric's place -- actually, not in the position that Cedric always took, somewhere behind Aulfric where his hands were often masked by Aulfric's big head, but where Arthur had unrestricted line of sight -- and Merlin's mere presence disrupted Agravaine's otherwise placid expression. Arthur watched Agravaine's spine straighten, his plastic smile droop, his dark eyes narrow and dart to the side in confusion and hasty rearrangement of battle tactics. He watched Agravaine shake off the surprise, clap several men on the shoulder as he bent down to whisper words in their ear and share a laugh, and finally walk around the table to his seat in the corner, where everyone would have to turn to look at him.

Arthur twirled a little in his chair, elbow on the armrest, finger over his lips, watching, studying, wishing that things were different. Maybe it was the optimism that his mother ingrained in him, maybe it was the never-give-up mindset he'd inherited from his father, but Arthur struggled with accepting that his uncle was the bastard that Arthur knew he was.

Agravaine was family. Family didn't betray family. The concept sat in Arthur's belly, heavy like a rock, sour and bitter bile trying to dissolve it and failing.

Last night, alone in his penthouse, Arthur had almost talked himself into giving Agravaine another chance, just like he'd given Agravaine another chance every time he'd learned something else that Agravaine had done, convinced that if he only had the courage to confront Agravaine, there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for what he was doing. But how many chances could
Arthur give? How many chances had Arthur given? Already, he could feel the company slipping out of his grasp, that he was barely hanging onto it with his fingertips.

He'd thought about calling it off even as he drove to the office that morning, but the hard look on Gwen's face stopped him before he even voiced his doubts. He'd thought about missing the meeting and letting it pass him by when he saw Merlin arrive, because spending time with Merlin was as perfect an excuse as he could ever want, and to hell with the fake agenda he'd received and the real agenda with items that Arthur couldn't allow to stand unchallenged.

Then Merlin had knelt between his legs and watched him with those stormy, tempestuous eyes, full of fight and unbridled challenge. Here was a man who would take up arms at Arthur's command -- and only at his command -- to fight this battle at Arthur's side. Here was a man who had watched his own life torn away piece by piece until there was hardly anything left, who had performed the ultimate sacrifice in order to survive.

If anyone could understand what it was like to lose everything he'd built for himself before he'd even begun to shine, it was Merlin.

For that moment, a very brief moment before Arthur's mind had gone sideways with dizzying arousal to see Merlin on his knees, Arthur had found the courage to take up the banner and lead the fight to defend what was his.

It was courage that came to him again when he glanced in Merlin's direction and saw the slightest widening of his eyes, the faintest raise of a brow. At your command, my lord, Merlin seemed to say, and Arthur felt adrenaline rush through his blood in anticipation of striking the first blow.

Arthur should be chairing this meeting; it was a board-mandated meeting and he was its head. But as had been going on for far too long, Agravaine called it to order, someone shut the door, and people settled in their seats.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Agravaine said, and Arthur heard the pompous in his tone from the way Merlin signed his words. "We have a full agenda this morning and many items to go through. Let's get started, shall we?"

Merlin's hands dropped for a beat to indicate a pause, and raised again to continue signing. He was interpreting orally as well, and Arthur had the full effect of not only the concepts in Merlin's signs, but a word-for-word translation of what Agravaine was saying.

Arthur didn't bother to turn on the voice-recognition software on his laptop to help him keep track of the discussion. The software might be better than trying to follow Cedric's interpreting, but Merlin was better than Cedric and the software combined.

"Before we begin," Agravaine was saying, and Merlin mimicked Agravaine's hemming and hawing and signed subtly that Agravaine appeared to be stalling for time, "Perhaps we should get some of the more minor items on the agenda out of the way. Why don't we begin with the last item on the agenda, an update for the current promotions campaign for next year's designs? Jacobs?"

Arthur shook his head faintly. Merlin quirked a brow, but didn't miss a beat when Jacobs flustered and hastily thumbed through his papers, looking for a detail that he should know by rote. The room waited, there were quiet murmurs all around, and Merlin pointed here and there and summarized what few random conversations he could hear in a few words. Agravaine had touched on the single topic that the two agendas -- the fake one that he'd received and the real one that the rest of the board members undoubtedly were following -- in the hopes of... what? Arthur's brows furrowed slightly, only lightly paying attention to the topic until it became clear that the
conversation was going around in circles.

Arthur cleared his throat and interrupted, "I've heard enough."

Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at him suddenly. His voice had probably been too loud -- Merlin shook his head at Arthur's quick glance and subtly gave him the thumbs-up sign to say his volume was fine. All eyes were on him, waiting to see if there was more.

Arthur leaned forward slightly. "It appears, Mr. Jacobs, that you haven't discussed the many designs that are currently being considered with your head designer. You've only named four of the possible collections -- I'm aware of at least twelve, including sketches from our newest artist -- and you haven't shown us any of the promotions mock-ups. For the moment, let's defer the matter. I'll expect you tomorrow morning in my office with the posterboards, and we'll make a decision then."

Arthur would have the head designer there as well. He had made plans weeks ago to change the board members -- a quick glance in Merlin's direction only solidified his decision -- and it was time to shake things up. Jacobs would learn his fate at the end of the next day. Arthur's father had always said that Jacobs should have retired ten years ago; Arthur was only hastening things along.

He turned to Agravaine. "I believe you mentioned a long agenda. Shall we move on?"

"Yes, um." Merlin signed more of Agravaine's hesitation, and it was almost comical to watch the way that Merlin's shoulders slumped to mimic Agravaine's body language. Then, as if matching Agravaine's tone, Merlin straightened as Agravaine went on, "Let's discuss the divestment of the South African mines --"

Arthur recognized the item as the first on the real agenda, the one that Agravaine had taken great pains to ensure he wouldn't receive. He glanced at Merlin again, and Merlin nodded encouragingly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dubois," Arthur said stiffly, distancing himself of any blood relationship with this man, "But I don't appear to have this item in the paperwork that you sent me. Shouldn't this fall under other business? Regardless, there is no divestment of any mines anywhere in the world on the books at this current time, so it shouldn't even be on the agenda --"

"Arthur. Arthur," Agravaine said, and Arthur saw a flash of irritation in Merlin's expression before he got himself under control and allowed Arthur to see the tone of condescension in Agravaine's tone. "I've sent you everything that everyone else has. I believe your interpreter is mistaken. That's understandable, considering that he's new and isn't familiar with the terms that we use. Perhaps we should wait for your usual interpreter to arrive -- ah, here he is --"

Cedric entered the board room with his usual bustle, shutting the door behind him with a little slam that vibrated through the table. Cedric signed his usual throw-away apology without making eye-contact with Arthur, taking his usual spot behind Aulfric. He appeared not to have noticed Merlin.

"Actually," another board member said, and Merlin pointed him out. It was Olaf, one of his father's oldest and stoutest supporters -- and one of the few who hadn't fallen like a domino behind Agravaine. "I believe Arthur's new interpreter is correct."


"Olaf," Agravaine said, his thick eyebrows raised in a meaningful look that no one could miss, not even Arthur, "Are you using today's agenda, or have you printed out last year's copy? It wouldn't
be the first time that has happened, old boy --"

"It wouldn't be the first time that you sent out the wrong agenda," Olaf shot back. There was a smile on his face that didn't quite soften the bite that had come with his tone, if Merlin's expression was to be believed. And Arthur believed it. Olaf pulled his laptop closer and moved his finger around the track pad, making a point of looking toward Arthur and nodding. "Here, I'll send you my copy."

"Thank you," Arthur said, just as Agravaine paled and leaned forward.

"Surely you wouldn't send Arthur the wrong information?" Agravaine asked. Olaf tilted his chin up, reading the computer screen through his bifocals. He sucked in his cheeks, pursed his lips, and moved his head from side to side as he read the screen.

"Surely not," Olaf said, not bothering to look up from his laptop. "It's the agenda that you sent out on the fifteenth. Is that what everyone else has?"

There was a chorus of agreement. Merlin signed that Olaf was humming. Agravaine's cheeks went from white to red when he realized that Olaf was ignoring him.

"There," Olaf said, removing his glasses to look down the table's length at Arthur. Arthur maximized his email client, and along with several emails from other departments that had come in as the meeting started, there was Olaf's email with an attachment and a message.

*Are you finally going to nail this bastard to the wall? He's been pulling this crap for months. I've been thinking of taking an early retirement, but I might change my mind now.*

Olaf was watching him expectantly, and Arthur gave him a short, sharp nod. He'd remember later to ask Olaf why he never confided in Arthur if he knew what had been going on, and opened the attachment. Sure enough, it was the *real* agenda that he already had a copy of.

Under the pretence of reading the contents, Arthur dragged out a long silence, aware that no one dared move while he wasn't paying attention. Agravaine tried to continue despite the torpedo that had been shot across his bow, but Arthur saw out of the corner of his eye as Merlin interrupted him.

Arthur didn't know what Merlin said, but it silenced Agravaine and forced him to wait.

"All right," Arthur said finally, not bothering to hide how very clearly displeased he was by this turn of events, deciding to deal with one other matter first before he dealt with Agravaine. He turned to Cedric and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to interpret," Cedric signed, but from the way that squirrelly moustache wriggled across Cedric's upper lip, Arthur guessed that he'd spoken out loud as well. Merlin struggled to hide his smirk, and also interpreted for Cedric.

Arthur thought that was brilliant. He focused on Merlin each time Cedric spoke.

"Gwen cancelled your services for the foreseeable future," Arthur said, scrolling absentmindedly through the document Olaf sent him before glancing toward Merlin, expecting Cedric's answer.

"I didn't receive any message from Gwen," Cedric said.

"That's strange. She contacted you yesterday and included your supervisor in the communication. Perhaps you should check your messages on a more regular basis," Arthur said. He glanced at Cedric in time to see him bristle and glance toward Agravaine, looking for help.
Finding none, Cedric shrugged. "Maybe you're right. In any case, I'm here now, so I may as well stay for the meeting --"

"You are not required," Arthur cut off. He said, "I've made alternate arrangements," but he signed, "I have a new interpreter."

Merlin voiced the signs. Cedric startled and turned to look at Merlin, his expression twisting into a scowl. "Well, congratulations, but I should stay for the more intricate discussions, in case he can't handle it --" He noticed that Arthur's attention was diverted and saw that Merlin was interpreting for him. He turned, red-faced, to Merlin and said -- but did not sign, "I can sign for myself, thanks."

"I see that. And what a dramatic improvement in quality that is. I guess you're only really bad at this when you're interpreting for other people," Merlin said, and Arthur caught more than one person at the table frown in confusion. Olaf smirked, and Agravaine studied a spot on his papers as if he hoped it would catch on fire and take the entire room with it. Adding insult to injury, Merlin leaned in and said, "You're actually quite awful at it. Maybe you should look for work that's more suited to your talents? Maybe you could be a mime."

Arthur snorted a little too loudly and caught himself. He cleared his throat. "I believe Merlin is more than capable of keeping up with the intricate business discussion. After all, if you had no difficulties... In any case, Cedric, thank you for your time and your service. Good day."

He gave Cedric a long, long look that couldn't be mistaken as anything other than absolute dismissal, brokering no argument whatsoever, and watched Cedric fidget uncertainly before stalking out of the meeting room without another word.

There was one rude gesture directed toward Merlin, though. Merlin smiled in answer and waved Cedric good-bye.

"Now that that has been taken care of," Arthur said, allowing his gaze to settle on Agravaine just long enough for his uncle to squirm uncomfortably and offer a plastic smile in a feeble attempt to recover his footing, "Let me address a few of the matters on the agenda. We'll be able to take care of the majority of these items in short order and finish well within our allotted time.

"First, with regards to the divestment of the African mines, there has never been and will never be any such occurrence. If there is paperwork under way for exactly this purpose, that paperwork is to be turned into my office for review, whereupon they will be destroyed. If any of the South African offices have been contacted to prepare themselves for this eventuality, they are to be informed that someone gave them false information and that it won't be happening again. To those of you who seem to have forgotten one important detail, as both the owner and the CEO of Pendragon Incorporated, one person, and one person alone, has legal signatory for final approval on all matters of ownership within the company, and I am that person."

Arthur paused for a long time. He didn't say that he already had copies of those documents, or that he'd seen his signature forged on them. "This is my company. No one else's. If I catch wind of more similar actions, the person or persons will be summarily dismissed. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Olaf said with a self-satisfied smirk as he leaned back. Arthur nodded at him and looked around the table, seeing the stunned smirk as he leaned back. Arthur nodded at him and looked around the table, seeing the stunned look of more than one of Agravaine's "associates". Some of them looked shrewd and thoughtful, but the majority had just received a shock.

Arthur hoped it was the sort of shock where they realized that Arthur wasn't the incompetent idiot that Agravaine had no doubt painted him to be.
He waited until everyone made eye contact to nod -- everyone except Agravaine, who muttered under his breath, "Right, whatever," according to an unimpressed Merlin -- before continuing. "To that end, the four following agenda items are cancelled."

"Arthur, it's important that we inform the board of the changes in our international contracts --" Agravaine began, but Arthur silenced him with a cutting motion of his hand.

"If you mean the agreement with the Romão family in South America for mining rights on their lands? Don't worry about it. I took the liberty of sitting down with Tristan and Isolde; we have renegotiated the contract, come to an agreement, and have signed the paperwork. I have given my approval for the construction to begin shortly after the environmental assessment, which is scheduled for early September. We should be in the initial stages of production by Christmas --"

"What? But that's impossible, I saw the cancelled contract myself --"

"If you mean you spoke to Isolde at the Diamond Show, thoroughly insulted her intelligence, and set me up to look like a fool, yes, you did," Arthur said mildly, and gestured toward Merlin. "But once I acquired the services of a competent interpreter, all that changed."

He gave a sputtering Agravaine just enough time to realize that Merlin had been working for Arthur for that long and to mentally calculate the number of possible contracts that might not have been altered or cancelled after all. Arthur didn't realize that Agravaine could turn that pale, or that his expression could contort into a frozen rictus of fuck me and how do I salvage this.

"As those four agenda items all had the commonality of cancelled contracts, allow me to assure the board that not only have these contracts not been cancelled, but they have been renewed and extended for an eleven-year period with first rights for renegotiation on expiration. This includes the high-yield gold, silver, and palladium mine in Québec."

Agravaine started to say something, but clamped his mouth shut.

The board members collectively raised a brow and one or two typed a few entries into their laptops, calculating future trend projections. They must have liked what they saw, because they nodded to themselves.

Arthur yanked final control of the meeting from Agravaine when he continued, "As for the next few items discussing the dissolution of our association with the Near-North exploration ventures, access to the Ring of Fire mines, and for the Diamond Recovery in conjunction with the Tribal bands, I suggest that those of you responsible for these projects contact my personal assistant to arrange a meeting with me so that I can update each of you as to the progress I have made in my discussions with the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines."

"You what?" One of those men said, sitting up. "You've met with the Ministry task force? What for? That's our responsibility --"

"This is my project, you have no reason to interfere --"

"What do you think you're doing? I'm carefully cultivating my contacts --"

Arthur let his eyes slide from Merlin to glare at each of the men who had spoken until they shut up. "Gentlemen, I will make myself plain. If you have not contacted Gwen to make an appointment with me by the end of the day, you're fired."

He waited a beat, glanced at Merlin to steady his courage, and looked around the table. It was a frozen tableau, with everyone staring at him with wide, round, stunned eyes.
"If any of you feel that you are so incapable of performing your jobs with the same prompt attention to detail that it must fall to me to pick up the slack, then I strongly suggest turning in your resignations as soon as possible with a recommendation for your replacement. Not that I'll consider them. I already have your replacements in mind."

Arthur's heart pounded in his ears.

"Does anyone have an issue with this?"

There was a long silence. No one made eye contact. Merlin glanced around the room, then pinched the forefinger and thumb of both hands together, kissing them in a light touch, and drawing a line in the air.

Muted. No sound. No one said anything.

Agravaine cleared his throat. Arthur looked at him when Merlin pointed in his direction, interrupting whatever his uncle had to say with a stiff, "Yes? You have something to add, Mr. DuBois?"

Agravaine opened his mouth and closed it. He opened it and closed it again. On the third attempt, Merlin's hands jumped to action. "Aren't you being a little --"

"If anything, I'm not being enough," Arthur said, and he said it as sweetly as he could manage, smiling thinly.

"Arthur --"

"Agravaine."

The colour returned to Agravaine's cheeks slowly. Instead of corpse-pale, Agravaine's skin flushed a ruddy colour full with too-dark blood and too much iron. His mouth was set in that rubbery grin that Arthur hadn't realized how much he'd hated until that very moment. Agravaine tilted his head in a slight, mocking incline, and magnanimously gestured with his hand.

Do continue, Arthur read in that gesture. There was smugness in Agravaine's rheumy eyes, the surety of someone who knew what a misstep a child was about to make, but allowing it to happen for no other reason than to allow a lesson to be learned. A cold, harsh lesson. Agravaine had something up his sleeve, and Arthur didn't know what it was.

Arthur's ears were ringing -- not literally, because it had been years since he'd been able to hear anything -- with the flush of roaring blood and pounding heart and thrumming adrenaline. He could feel the sweat trickle down his back, cold and uncomfortable.

He took a deep breath and looked at Merlin. Merlin, who gave him a small, encouraging nod. Merlin, who was looking at him with such faith that Arthur wished he could be worthy of it.

"Good," he said finally, his voice rough in his chest. He looked at his laptop's screen, his eyes blurring a little, but he didn't need to read it to know what to do next. It was time to throw his board members a bone, to show that he still needed them, that he could lead and direct the company in the direction that he needed to go. Arthur shifted in his seat and leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped together. "The World Diamond Council is asking if we're on track to implement the new certification scheme. Where are we on this?"

There was another long silence. No one moved. More than one person glanced in Agravaine's direction. Agravaine sat back in his seat, his stupid, plastic smile broadening.
Arthur waited. He was good at waiting.

Finally, someone broke rank and pointedly turned his body away from Agravaine to answer, "There's been a delay. We estimate at least another quarter before we can go through the certificates we currently have and begin the switch to the new system."

"Has the equipment been installed?" Olaf asked.

"In the primary processing facilities at our main locations, yes," the man said. "We're waiting on the Council to send us the final certification chips, and they're waiting on us to tell them when."

"Considering that we're the ones to present the new technique to the Council, I think we'd best get on it," Odinson said. "The longer we delay, the less faith other companies will have in making the switch."

"Do it now, then," Olaf suggested. "Destroy all the existing certificates --"

"The cost would be horrendous," said Aglain.

"Not once we use the laser process to tag the diamonds themselves," Olaf said. "How many people would be willing to pay a premium for the privilege of having the first completely traceable diamond? The one that can without a doubt be proven to be completely free of any blood diamond debt?"

"We could auction it off," another board member said, picking up on Olaf's reasoning and glancing at Arthur as if looking for approval. "Recoup our losses and then some. The rest could go to the Fund."

"I like that idea," Arthur said with a nod. "Do a cost analysis and see what we can do to balance the books. Get someone from public relations to mock up a press release. Can the new system be implemented by the end of this quarter?"

There was an exchange of glances, a synchronicity of bowed heads, and finally, a slow nod. "I think so. Let me do a Gantt diagram, estimate timelines and manpower. If we focus on the Canadian enterprise first --"

"Which the Minister's going to love, since it'll push him into the political forefront," Olaf said.

"-- then, yes, definitely."

Arthur nodded again. "Let's get it done, then. Send everything to my office. We'll have a meeting mid-week to finalize, and I want an internal memo sent out by the end of the week to begin preparing for the changes. Legal should already have the necessary documents in place, and if not, well, someone can draw the short straw of stirring up that hornet's nest."

There was some chuckling, but Arthur saw it as a success.

"Let's move to the next item on the agenda," Arthur said. Agravaine sunk back in his seat with disgust, but it wasn't half as satisfying as Merlin's quick, pleased smile and sultry wink.

Merlin caught Arthur's eye in the corridor after the meeting and subtly signed, "You have no idea how hot that was or hard I am for you right now."

Arthur cleared his throat, cut his conversation with Olaf short, and used something to the effect of "... a pressing meeting to attend..." to defer everyone else to Gwen.
He crooked a finger for Merlin. They barely made it out of the office, narrowly escaping more people trying to get his attention. Arthur made Merlin drive because he didn't trust himself. Merlin ignored Arthur's directions to the penthouse, explaining with abrupt signs, "It's too far away," and turned down his own street. Merlin scored a parking spot with miraculous speed, and hastened out of the car.

"You realize my place is five minutes away?" Arthur said, lingering by the car, a hand on the open door.

"You realize that's five minutes during which I'm not sucking your cock?" Merlin signed, walking backward toward the building, wriggling his fingers at Arthur in invitation.

When Merlin had Arthur pinned against the inside of his apartment door, Arthur's belted trousers pooled around his ankles, his once-pressed, now-wrinkled shirt shoved up his waist, his tie thrown over one shoulder, Arthur conceded that Merlin had a perfectly valid point. Merlin's mouth was a searing heat around him, and it was only Arthur's firm grip around the doorknob and the frantic grasp at the doorframe that kept him in a position resembling "upright".

Arthur squeezed his eyes shut tight. He didn't want this to be over too quickly.

He was glad for the firm grip of Merlin's hands on his hips, because Arthur couldn't resist the instinctive urge to thrust, to pump his hips deeper into that warm, moist mouth, seeking the soft of the back of Merlin's throat with a desperation born out of wanting to come right now. There was a swirling tongue around his sensitive cockhead, lapping at the dribbling pre-come. There was a sucking sensation that took him in, inch by inch, and pulled away too soon. There was a tongue tracing his length, a nose burying itself into his crotch, a mouth at his balls.

"Oh, Fu-- fuck. Sh... AHH. Mer -- Merlin!"

It surprised Arthur to realize that he was talking, that he was being loud. More than one of his past lovers had complained how they had never known if Arthur liked something, because he was always so silent during the act. The truth was, Arthur had always felt embarrassed by his own noises, had always bitten his lip to keep any of them from spilling out, never knowing if they were the right ones, if his partner would be repulsed or encouraged by them.

He let go of the doorjamb and jammed his fist into his mouth, biting down.

Fingers wrapped around his spit-slick cock, lightly stroking. It was a feather-touch that was neither ticklish nor enticing, and Arthur bucked his hips until he had friction against Merlin's palm, just enough to temper the edge but not enough to get him off. There was a soft bite on the inside of his thigh.

Arthur clamped down harder on his hand, leaving teeth marks on his knuckle, and he thought he tasted blood.

Merlin's hand twisted around his cock, and it was the perfect amount of pressure, exactly the right movement to make. Arthur couldn't suppress the moan building up in his chest, and could only hope that he managed to muffle it.

His balls were suckled and nibbled until he thought he would crest and come, and he let go of his hand to stutter a warning, "Mer -- I'm... God --"

Merlin grasped the base of his cock and held him, and the assault on his privates lessened a precious fraction -- long enough for Arthur to gasp and blink his eyes open, his vision bright and clear in the dim corridor of Merlin's apartment, everything muddled and ghosted and intangible.
"Shit. Merlin. I can't --" Arthur glanced down and watched Merlin, taking in the hollow of those perfect, sharp cheekbones, the raised mess of soft black hair, the red, sex-flushed mouth popping off of his balls in a lewd trail of spit that should be disgusting, but instead sent a thrill of holyfucksohot down Arthur's spine.

He didn't have time to absorb the heavy-lashed blown-pupil look that Merlin cast in his direction, to consider the meaning hidden behind it, because those lips wrapped around his cock, sucking at the head while Merlin stroked his own.

"Fuck," Arthur said, his head rolling back and knocking hard against the door in a hollow thunk that vibrated through his entire body. It felt so loud that Arthur was sure the entire building had heard it and knew that he was being completely taken apart right now.

Merlin's hands grasped Arthur's hips, holding him down, and Arthur struggled weakly to thrust, to fuck that mouth -- that beautiful mouth -- that took in more and more in every long, slow suck. He felt a faint bit of resistance against his cockhead; it happened and again. Arthur gasped each time, and when he looked down, his already-ragged breath hitched to realize that the little bit of pressure was the back of Merlin's throat.


Arthur never begged like this. He never asked for anything. He'd been content to let others do whatever they wanted with little direction.

But Merlin. He wanted Merlin so fucking badly that his entire body trembled with want.

Merlin understood, but Arthur didn't notice that one had at his hips had gone until he noticed Merlin fumbling taking his cock out of his trousers to stroke himself. Arthur died at the erotic vision, not sure what he wanted to watch more -- his cock slipping into Merlin's mouth, or the cock in Merlin's hand.

Arthur watched -- he couldn't not -- as his cock disappeared into Merlin's mouth, the dribble of spit and pre-come on Merlin's lips, on his cheeks, down his chin. He let go of the doorknob, his hand aching with numbness, and reached to wipe Merlin's face, coating his fingers, sliding one, two into Merlin's mouth --

It was too much. Merlin's tongue teased his fingers even as Arthur fucked into Merlin's mouth. Arthur pulled his fingers out, held Merlin in place, and managed a string of sounds that he hoped were coherent before he stilled with a shout, pulsing come into Merlin's mouth.

"Merlin," Arthur whispered, sagging back against the door, letting him go. Merlin sucked some more, drawing out every drop of come, milking Arthur of everything he had, and finally pulled off as Arthur was wavering on the cusp of too sensitive and getting hard again and lay sprawled on his ass on the floor in front of Arthur.

Merlin looked as debauched as Arthur felt. Merlin's legs were splayed wide, his pants down just enough to show that gorgeous cock still in his hand, his wrist and forearm and shirt coated with his own come. The sex-flush made him all the more appealing; the half-sleepy, completely-sated look in his eyes drew a soft moan from Arthur. He was lost in the way Merlin's mouth hung open, gasping for breath, his lips red and bruised and delicious and the way Merlin looked at him as if Arthur was the only thing in the world for him that made Arthur wish that he had the strength for another round.

"God. I love the sounds you make," Merlin signed with a shaky hand, the same hand that had
been around his cock a second ago.

He was flattered, flushed, relieved. No one had ever told him that before. No one had ever made him so damn noisy before. Seeing those words gestured with fingers covered in come -- Arthur closed his eyes and groaned.

"Yes. Like that. Fuck. I could come just listening to you --"

Arthur felt his cheeks burn, made self-conscious with the awareness that he hadn't been able to shut himself up, that Merlin had heard him make every horrible, horrible sound in the universe. And, for once, he didn't feel self-conscious about it. He raked his eyes over Merlin's languid, relaxed body, and --

Arthur fell to his knees between Merlin's legs. He planted his hands on either side of Merlin's hips. He leaned in to taste himself on Merlin's lips, in his mouth. He took Merlin's wrist -- the hand that was still suspended in the air, in mid-sentence -- and brought it to his tongue to lick it clean.

Merlin's head rolled back, and Arthur felt Merlin's moan vibrate through him. It was such an overwhelming, potent reaction that Arthur chased after it, licking down Merlin's throat, only to be frustrated by the flimsy but effective barrier of clothes.

"Bed," Arthur gasped, already reaching to pull off his jacket, to yank his shirt and tie over his head.

Merlin scrambled backward in a frantic rush to comply, struggling between getting there quickly and removing his shirt at the same time. The movement trapped his wrists together behind him, and Arthur took advantage, crawling over Merlin to bite and nibble and lick and suck bruises on his bare chest, to nuzzle at the line of dark hair against fair skin. Merlin's stomach hollowed and his body shuddered in a gasp. There was a faint tingle on Merlin's skin that tickled Arthur's lips, and Merlin stumbled backward, suddenly, impossibly free of his shirt.

Merlin grinned at him -- Arthur thought he saw a flash of gold in those teasing blue eyes -- and crooked a finger as he crab-crawled backward, pausing to wriggle out of his pants. Arthur paused to watch him. There was something absurdly seductive in the way Merlin awkwardly snaked out of his dark navy-blue trousers, the way the silver flash of his belt buckle settled against his thigh for one brief moment before being pushed away, at the inevitable awkward tangle of feet and pant legs and socks and shoes.

Then, just as the clouds cleared the sky and a nearby building reflected the early afternoon sunlight into the small apartment, Merlin was bathed in an angelic glow of perfection, ephemeral and intangible, fragile yet clear and crisp and heavenly. For a fearful moment, Arthur thought Merlin would disappear, that his salvation would fade from sight -- that all these months of mingled grief and frustration and pain, of struggle and helpless fight with only one bright, soothing presence to center him -- that Merlin had only been a dream.

But the clouds passed over and they left Merlin behind, like a gift to ease his suffering, to keep the darkness and the doubt welling in his soul forever at bay.

Arthur did not want to lose him.

He crawled over to Merlin, crushed him in a rough, claiming kiss. He held Merlin tightly, his fingers leaving bruises on that perfect skin, afraid to let him go, and when he finally broke the kiss to gasp breath on Merlin's face, he saw the awe and the surrender in his eyes.

Mineminemine
He wasn't sure who dragged whom to their feet, how they ended up in the bedroom with all their clothes left behind, or how he ended up on his back on the bed, being laved with affection over every inch of his body. He was hard again, his cock heavy on his belly, mad with desire and electrified with every brush of Merlin's erection when Merlin leaned over Arthur to tease a kiss from his gasping lips.

Arthur rolled them both, and smiled to feel Merlin's laugh in a puff of air against his cheek, in a jerky hitch of his chest. Arthur leaned back on his knees, his hands brushing the outside of Merlin's thighs, and looked down at Merlin, pliant and lovely against the pillows.

He loved the sight of him, the capitulating defiance, the courage that glowed brightly despite all that he'd been through. He loved the eternal patience, the unselfish heart, the fierce protectiveness.

He loved Merlin.

It didn't come as a surprise. How could he be surprised to learn that he loved Merlin when Arthur would tense with anticipation every time that he knew he would be seeing Merlin? When his last thought before falling asleep and his first as he woke was a whisper of Merlin's name? When he turned his head in a crowd whenever he saw a tall black-haired man, hoping it was Merlin. Aching for him. Loving him.

Arthur wanted to say it, but his chest was too tight, and he gasped for air. Arthur didn't know what Merlin saw in Arthur's expression, but it made Merlin's smile turn into something small and shy. Merlin reached for him with those gentle fingers, luring him down until they were close enough to kiss, and Arthur pressed their lips together, soft and chaste.

If he couldn't say the words, he would show Merlin he loved him.

Arthur bowed his head and licked Merlin's lips. He kissed along the line of his jaw, nudging him to turning his head, and pressed kisses down Merlin's throat, pausing each and every time he felt vibrations, knowing then that he was clawing sounds out of Merlin just as Merlin had done to him. Arthur trailed along the collarbone, down one arm. He took Merlin's fingers -- those long, elegant fingers that spoke so much to him -- into his mouth and sucked them one by one.

Merlin's body jerked as if Arthur had electrified him.

Arthur did the same on the other hand. Merlin gasped, his hips searching for something to rub his cock against, thrusting in time with each long slow suck from fingertip to webbing and back.

Arthur would never again be able to look at these fingers without remembering how sensitive they were, how responsive. He wanted to see if he could make Merlin come just by licking and sucking every part of his hands, but that was for later, at another time.

He turned his attention to take in Merlin's chest, lovely and lean; pristine skin and a light peppering of fine hair across his chest that trailed down and faded only to pick up again just below his belly-button. The edges of his ribs showing through his skin. The ripple of abdominal muscle along his sides. The clench of a six-pack faintly visible along his stomach. The protrusion of hipbones, the long, smooth muscles of his legs.

Arthur tasted Merlin from the spot of pre-come on his belly; took Merlin in his mouth a moment later, swallowing him as deeply as he could, burying his nose in the small thatch of black hair that left him light-headed with the scent of musk and Merlin. He sucked Merlin and didn't bother to hold him down; Merlin had better self-control than Arthur, because his hips jerked only in tiny
hitches and his hands grasped at the comforter under him with enough strength to rip it to shreds. Arthur could feel a sobbing shudder through Merlin's body, and finally gave him respite.

Arthur could read cursing on Merlin's lips, stammered words and gasped syllables of pleasure and frustration. Merlin's hands tore at the comforter before he reached up to rub his hands over his eyes and wipe the tortured tears from the corners. He reached up for Arthur and Arthur obliged him in a breathy kiss full of tangled tongues.

Merlin's lips moved against his in a pattern, forming words. Arthur didn't have to pull back to look, to listen. His skin tingled, and it was almost as if he could hear again.

_Fuck me. God. Please fuck me._

"Not yet," Arthur said, pushing Merlin down with his lips alone. He sat back and ran his hands down Merlin's thighs, hooking his fingers behind Merlin's legs, and rolled those long legs up until Merlin's knees nearly touched his chest, exposing him.

Arthur slid further down onto the bed, bending down to lick around Merlin's hole. Merlin jerked away in a tiny squirm that was somewhere between disbelief and delight. Arthur pressed his tongue against the muscle; Merlin pushed back as much as he could without leverage, but it was all the permission that Arthur would ever need.

He licked with the tip of his tongue. He laid his tongue flat against Merlin’s hole. He drew letters on that spot until he'd spelled out a hundred filthy words.

Then he pushed in. He thrust with his tongue. He let go of one of Merlin's legs to use his thumb to massage around the area before slicking up his middle finger and sliding it in. He saw Merlin's cock twitch, felt Merlin's balls draw up even more. Arthur shifted his hips on the bed, trying for friction, for some sort of texture against his own cock, but it wasn't enough.

Arthur pulled his tongue out and slid in a second finger, watching his digits disappear into the firm muscle for one, two, three pumps before he slowly worked Merlin open.

He slid in a third finger and got on his knees again, looming over Merlin. Merlin's mouth open in a moan, his eyes glazed. He was completely undone.

_Now,_ Merlin's hand gestured, the sign both feeble and desperate at the same time. Arthur saw the bottle of lube on the bed, the condoms -- he hadn't noticed Merlin reach for them, but then again, he hadn't noticed the bedside table being knocked over, either, the lamp, the alarm clock, all of the contents in the open drawer scattered across the floor.

Arthur rolled on a condom, gritting his teeth at the contact. He poured lube on his hand and stroked himself before using the rest to slick Merlin's entrance. He held himself firmly, looked at Merlin for confirmation that was answered with _oh my God fuck me already_ on his lips, and pushed in.

It was tight -- so tight. So hot. And when he was seated all the way in, Arthur had to pause. It was perfect -- too perfect, like Merlin had been made for him in this way, just as he was perfect for Arthur in every other way.

He thrust in and out slowly, never looking away from Merlin, leaning down to steal a kiss, then another, and yet a third. The need became too great and he couldn't kiss anymore, breathing heat against Merlin's mouth instead, inhaling Merlin's soft gasps as he fucked harder, faster. Merlin's legs tightened around him, urging him on. Arthur reached for Merlin's cock but Merlin's hand was already there, stroking himself, coming undone a few pulls later. Come roped on Merlin's belly,
his hole squeezed around Arthur's cock, and Arthur saw stars, his vision whiting out with one last, hard thrust as he pulsed and came.

Arthur's arms ached, his thighs trembled. He collapsed on top of Merlin, kissing him messily, panting for breath, and spoke silently as he kissed his way down Merlin's throat.

*I love you. I love you.*

They laid like that for a while, lightly touching each other, trading tiny kisses and gentle kisses and light kisses that left them drowsy and heavy-limbed. Arthur pulled out, whispering an apology at Merlin's faint wince. They curled together under the blankets with Arthur around Merlin, his arm twined around Merlin's waist, his knee tucked between Merlin's legs. Merlin turned his head and kissed him.

Arthur fell asleep like that, to the soft sensation of Merlin's deep breathing, the tickle of Merlin's hair on his nose, the gentle stroke of Merlin's fingers along his arms. He didn't remember drifting off, but he woke hours later, fully rested but bereft.

The bed beside him was empty and cool.

It was dark in the room. The streetlights flickered on outside, filtering through the window blinds. There was a pale glow from the kitchen, another in the living room.

Arthur rubbed the sleep from his eyes and rolled out of bed. His eyes adjusted to the dim light and saw the bedside table had been straightened up, the lamp gone -- probably broken, though he couldn't remember how or why. He saw his suit hanging in the closet and some clothes laid out on the dresser. He picked them up -- and a note fluttered to the ground.

"Merlin?" Arthur called out. He stepped out of the bedroom with the note in his hands, but Merlin wasn't there.

*Went to pick up dinner. Left just before five. Back soon. Love you.*

Arthur smiled and picked up the clothes Merlin left for him. There was a large red University of Toronto hoodie and a pair of grey sweatpants. He put both on -- they fit neatly where they must have been too large on Merlin, or he had brought them especially for Arthur.

The thought made Arthur smile even more.

He retrieved his cell phone and skimmed through all the emails he'd missed during the day. He found not a single one from Agravaine -- no surprise -- but several dozen from board members who were hurrying up and following through with the items Arthur had assigned them. He read through a quarter of his inbox, answered several texts from Gwen and a frantic text from Gwaine Sullivan asking for an update on whether Merlin would agree to be in his opera or not before sitting down on the couch to read Leon's latest message.

*I knw u didnt agree 2 this but shld tell u nw. Perce has been tailng u snce this bgn. 4 ur safety.*

The flash of irritation shooting through Arthur nearly had him texting back right away to say *call him off right fucking now*, but he saw the slow swing of light streaming into the corridor, disappearing with the open and shut of the front door, and instead answered with, *We'll tlk about this tmorrw.*

He straightened up and called out, "Merlin, is that you?"

Merlin emerged from the corridor, putting his keys down. He paused to kick off his shoes, his
smile growing wider.

"You found my note?" Merlin signed, leaving two large bags of Chinese take-out on the kitchen counter. He came into the living room and leaned down to give Arthur a kiss. Arthur pulled him down and Merlin collapsed into his lap with a laugh.

It was a long, blissful moment of gentle kisses and affectionate touches before Merlin squirmed out of Arthur's lap. "Dinner's getting cold."

"You could've ordered delivery." Arthur followed him to the kitchen, watching the wriggle of Merlin's bum the entire way there.

"They're right around the corner but they take forever to deliver here," Merlin signed, and then his hands were full of containers. "Did you sleep well?"

"Better than I have in some time," Arthur admitted, opening a carton square, plucking a strip of Ginger Beef with his fingers. "I'm considering making this whole skipping-work thing a regular thing."

Merlin's slow grin was beautiful. Arthur wanted to kiss it.

"Where'd you find that bed?" he said instead.

"Oh, so you're only with me for my bed?" Merlin asked. He turned away to pull a couple of plates out of the cabinet.

"Yes, Merlin. I've been trying to get to it ever since I spotted it months ago," Arthur said. He took the plate from Merlin, but Merlin snatched the Ginger Beef out of his hand. "Hey --"

"You're here for my bed, not my food," Merlin said, but handed him the Kung Pao instead. Arthur looked for a spot to put it down when he saw the flyer advertising Merlin's recital, still half-hidden under a pile of mail where he'd last seen it.

He subtly knocked over the mail. Merlin didn't notice. Merlin was obviously not hiding it from him, or he would have reacted by now. Bolstered by that, Arthur tugged the flyer out into the open. Merlin licked his fingers of sauce and opened a drawer, rummaging around for another spoon.

He picked up the flyer and held it up to read it. Merlin turned to him, his cheek bulging out with a piece of stir-fried broccoli, and signed, "Want anything to drink?"

"Water's fine," Arthur said. After waiting a heartbeat that stopped in his chest because he was almost terrified to ask -- he had wanted Merlin to tell him about the concert, and he felt as if he were pushing -- Arthur caught Merlin's attention with a wave of the flyer his hand. "Merlin, what's this?"

He wasn't sure if Merlin could tell that Arthur already knew all about it -- he hoped not -- but Merlin turned around with a curious *Hm?* expression and followed Arthur's finger pointing to the flyer in his other hand. Arthur watched him carefully, not sure what he was going to see, but Merlin flinched as if the sight of the paper alone gave him physical pain. He put down the glasses of water in his hands, sliding one over to Arthur, and signed, "It's for a fundraiser for the St Michael's Boy's Choir."

"Your name's on it," Arthur said.

Merlin nodded, looking glum. "Yeah."
Arthur put the paper down, waiting to see if Merlin would add any more, but he looked like he was going to be physically ill.

"I -- um." Merlin shook his head, pressed his lips together, glanced down at the fried rice on his plate. He looked up to make eye contact and said, "I sang for a boy's choir in Montréal when I was a kid. My old teacher -- he's the director at St Michael's now. He asked me to sing, because, well, it would help with the fundraising."

He waved a hand in the air like he was trying to make it go away.

"Apparently a big-name associated with the show..." Merlin sighed. He grimaced and shook his head. "I swear I told him no. Somehow it turned into yes. I don't want to do it. It's going to be a disaster."

Arthur didn't say anything for a moment. "It's next Friday," he said quietly.

Merlin nodded again, dejected, miserable. "Yeah."

Arthur felt so badly for asking that he let the subject drop. He took the last of the fried rice and took some of the Kung Pao. There was still some Ginger Beef, but Merlin pushed the stir-fried vegetables at him with a pointed look. "It's good for you," he signed.

Arthur smiled wanly and picked at the contents of the container before putting it down. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Merlin's head dropped. He stared at the plate in front of him, chewed the corner of his bottom lip, and grasped the edges of the counters with trembling fingers. His chest swelled and sank under the heave of a deep breath, and when he looked at Arthur again, it was with regret and guilt. "Because I'm a massive drama queen. If I think about the concert, I freak out. There's lots of flailing and panicking. I even start sobbing. And, anyway, you're in the middle trying to stop Agravaine. You're under enough stress, and I don't want to add to it."

There was something else that Merlin wasn't telling him. Arthur didn't want to think that maybe it was that Merlin didn't want him there. Instead of asking, he leaned back slightly and said, "Actually, I'd like to see that. The flailing and sobbing. It'll be entertaining. Might even take my mind off things."

"Fuck off," Merlin signed, but there wasn't any heat behind it. A faint smile touched his lips.

"But, seriously, Merlin," Arthur said, reaching for Merlin's hand. "What am I for, then? You're supposed to be telling me stuff like this. I mean, I've been unloading on you about my uncle's bullshit for how long? I think I can listen to you have a meltdown about your concert."

"I know," Merlin said, heaving a sigh. His fingers tightened around Arthur's. Neither one of them said anything, until Merlin nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I didn't even know you started singing again," Arthur said, lying a tiny little bit. He didn't want to make Merlin feel worse than he did, but he couldn't help to drive the point home, either. He didn't like secrets, and he liked it less when Merlin was the one keeping them from him.

"You told me I should have a hobby," Merlin said. Arthur rolled his eyes and pulled at Merlin's hand until Merlin leaned over the counter, coming into range for a kiss.

Merlin's lips moved against Arthur's. It felt like he was saying, I'm sorry again.
They ate in silence for a minute before Arthur decided that, maybe, he shouldn't have secrets of his own. As predicted, it had taken Gwen no time whatsoever to secure tickets, and Arthur wanted to see how Merlin felt about it. "I'd like to go," he said.

Merlin jerked back as if struck. "God, no. Don't. Didn't you get the part where I said it was going to be a disaster? I can sing it, no problem. In private. When I'm alone in the studio. Throw in the orchestra and I start sounding like Darth Vader --"

Leon had explained to Arthur, once, that Darth Vader had a deep, wheezy breath, so he at least understood that reference.

"-- and I get the conductor looking at me like he's wondering who the fuck I am and how he got conned into letting me audition when I'm a washout and why he even asked me to sing in the show in the first place. And you know what's worse? The closer I get to the show, the more I can't. I can't sing. I know this song inside and out. I sang it at my first ever appearance, you know? And I can't even remember half the words --" Frustrated tears welled up in Merlin's eyes, and Arthur dropped everything to walk around the counter and wrap his arms around Merlin.

"Merlin. Merlin," Arthur murmured, not knowing what to say. Merlin was trembling in his arms. He felt Merlin's forehead against his shoulder, and a heavy, shuddering breath. They stayed like that for a while, the food getting cold, and when Merlin pulled away, he wiped his eyes and shook his head.

"Sorry," Merlin said again, flushing. "I warned you. The freaking and the flailing and the panicking."

Arthur caught his hands. "No. Don't be. Love -- Love. This is the first time you're going to sing in public since you quit, isn't it?"

Merlin nodded.

"Are you afraid of singing in front of people?"

Merlin's answer didn't come right away, but he shook his head. "No. Not really, no. It's not that."

"Then what --" Arthur didn't know how to ask, but Merlin closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and squeezed Arthur's hands before shaking free.

"I'm afraid of fucking up, all right? Everyone expects me to sing the way I used to, but I haven't been able to for a long time. I'm going to look like an idiot. I'm going to sound like an idiot."

Merlin exhaled in frustration.

"Is that why you didn't tell me you were doing this concert?" Arthur asked, his voice low.

"Can we not talk about this?" Merlin turned away.

"No." Arthur turned him around. "Because if that's the reason, that's a really stupid reason. Your old teacher must have faith in you if he's making you sing. I don't even know what you sound like, and I have faith in you."

"You wouldn't if you'd seen me practice the other day," Merlin muttered, and Arthur probably hadn't been meant to understand. He closed the distance between them and carded his fingers through Merlin's hair until Merlin swatted his hands away, a small, annoyed, but indulgent smile touching his lips. "Look. I'm doing it because I said I would and it's going to be horrible. I didn't tell anyone. I'm not telling anyone. I don't want any of my friends there seeing what an asshole I am. Yeah? I really don't want you to see me throw up on stage. I don't want you to see people
laughing at me. I don't want you to see me when I fuck it all up. Please."

Arthur nodded slowly. "All right. But do me a favour."

"What?"

Arthur hesitated. "Do you remember at the Diamond Show? When you interpreted my speech? You were looking at me, weren't you? Not at the crowd, not at anyone else. You were all right then, weren't you?"

Merlin started to say That was -- but Arthur shook his head before he could finish with -- different, because it wasn't different at all.

"When you get on that stage, Merlin, why don't you pretend it's just you and me? That I'm giving you the words, and you're singing for me?"

Merlin's eyes welled up with tears again, his lips twisted into words that he didn't speak, and he swallowed heavily. "Arthur --"  

"Just try. Please?" Arthur said.

Merlin's shoulders slumped, defeated. He nodded. "I'll try."

He gave Arthur a quick kiss that tasted like the salt of tears that he swallowed down, and pulled away. "Supper's getting cold."

ooOOoo

The times alone in his apartment with nothing to do but watch television or listen to music or to read a book -- those were the worst. Merlin couldn't stand being away from Arthur.

Every day, Merlin went to Pendragon Incorporated and made himself comfortable on the couch in Arthur's office, reading a book or watching a video on his laptop, sneaking glances in Arthur's direction while Arthur worked over this report or that design. Merlin stepped in on more than one impromptu visit from his employees and his division heads and even two board members, all of whom shut the office door and spoke in quiet, anxious tones, making Arthur aware of all the issues that he hadn't known of before. Merlin attended meetings with Arthur, interpreted telephone conversations, and let Arthur know when he heard people speaking in the corridor and what they said. And when people would look between Merlin and Arthur, never sure to whom they should be speaking, Merlin would subtly direct them toward Arthur and stand off to the side, making himself as invisible as possible to everyone but Arthur.

All through the week, Arthur would set his jaw and dive into his work. He would encourage the younger staff, treat his division heads with respect, and come down harshly on board members who had betrayed him to Agravaine only to come crawling back.

Arthur was far more generous than Merlin would have been. It took all of Merlin's self-restraint to keep from snapping at these people, from demanding, "How could you ever doubt him?"

Sometimes, Arthur would look at Merlin with an expression that Merlin couldn't identify. It happened often; when he considered what he'd been told, while considering future implications, or right before he made a decision.

It didn't dawn on Merlin until much later that every time Arthur looked at him like that, Merlin would raise his eyebrows or dip his chin or even nod, all in encouragement to waylay the niggling
doubts that ate at Arthur every day.

And every day, Merlin watched Arthur's confidence grow. Those little glances Arthur cast his way weren't searching for reassurance nearly as often as in the beginning. They were just *fond* in a soft, sweet way that rattled Merlin down to his very core.

Some evenings, they never made it back to Merlin's apartment, never mind to the restaurant where they were meant to go on for a date. They'd sucked each other off in Arthur's office at least twice so far, and on one very memorable occasion, Arthur had fucked Merlin over his desk.

They'd pointedly not looked at each other when one of the IT personnel came up to replace the cracked flatscreen monitor. When the man asked Arthur what happened, Arthur had, very evenly, said, "I have no idea. It was like that when I came in this morning. Maybe the cleaning staff shifted it on the edge of the desk, and it fell?"

Gwen had picked that moment to walk in with file folders for Arthur, and, having heard Arthur, had promptly turned around, a hand on her mouth to keep from bursting out with laughter. Merlin had bitten his lower lip and hoped that he hadn't been as red-faced as he'd felt, burying his face in a book before casting a sly look in Arthur's direction.

"We'll put the monitor on the floor next time," Arthur had signed after the IT guy had left. It hadn't been fair -- not one second of it fair -- that Arthur was the one who could keep his expression from showing anything, and Merlin, with all his theatre experience had heat flushing in his cheeks. It was the next time and all the promise behind it that had thrown him. Merlin very much wanted the next time. And the one after that.

It wasn't all business. Well, there was business and then there was *business*. There were multiple meetings with Leon and a lovely lawyer named Mithian who knew sign language but insisted that Merlin interpret to make sure there were no misunderstandings. There was one long meeting at the Ministry of the Solicitor General to go over the case against Agravaine. There were late-night phone calls via speakerphone in Arthur's office with the international branches, tying up loose ends and cutting off any and every avenue that Agravaine might pursue to put a wedge between Arthur and his company.

Luckily, there hadn't been any sign of Agravaine except at the mandatory meetings, where he sat sullen and morose, and made a few barbs here and there whenever his attempts to wrest control failed. Agravaine's protracted absences only set them all on edge, waiting for the next bomb to fall.

Then what Leon had predicted happened: Merlin was running late for a meeting, and he literally ran into Agravaine.

"You're Arthur's interpreter, aren't you?" Agravaine said, using his broad frame to block the doorway, trapping Merlin. His voice was slimy sweet with a condescending tone, and Merlin was creeped out by the man's stretchy smile.

Merlin's magic chose that moment to misbehave, and Agravaine's belt snapped. His pants fell around his ankles, and Agravaine yelped.

"I am, but it looks like you need a tailor," Merlin said, using the opportunity to escape. He made his meeting with two minutes to spare, and Arthur had mouthed *Cedric? Is that you?* at him.

"I don't know how, but his pants just dropped --," Merlin had signed, telling Arthur the story later over kebabs and falafel, and Arthur had nearly choked with laughter. When Arthur sobered, the amused tears still in his eyes, he was distant and thoughtful until Merlin signed, "I'll be careful."
It hadn't been until much later that Merlin learned -- from Leon -- that Arthur had secured a bodyguard for him.

There was one awkward conversation with Olaf, who had apologized for not speaking up sooner and had offered his early retirement -- an early retirement that Arthur had taken on the condition that Olaf convince several other board members to do the same. Arthur already had several promotions lined up on his desk -- Gwen was impressively efficient.

There were take-out dinners and cold café sandwiches and a late-night tub of ice cream. There were quiet moments on Merlin's couch that devolved into not-so-quiet moments. There were minutes right before Merlin fell asleep late at night, listening to Arthur's breathing even and feeling his body slack. There were times when Arthur would pick up his car keys, gesture for Merlin to get up, and drive to the theatre so that Merlin could practice. Arthur was there when practice let out, too, though he never came inside.

It was a busy, suffocating week where they spent nearly every single second together and it still didn't feel like enough.

There was that time when Merlin tried to focus on the music sheets for the Friday show while listening to one of his old recordings of the Ode. Arthur got up from behind his desk, shut the door to his office, took the papers out of Merlin's hands and the buds out of his ears. Arthur sat on the couch next to Merlin, pulled Merlin until his back was flush against Arthur's chest, and held him until Merlin's hands stopped shaking.

"Just pretend it's the two of us, Merlin. That you're singing to me," Arthur said, his voice soft against Merlin's ear. They stayed like that for what had felt like hours, but only really been a few bare minutes, because there'd been a knock on the door and it was time to get back to work.

Merlin clung to that memory as he paced up and down the length of his apartment, tripping every so often on the rug under the coffee table, wringing his hands nervously, trying not to think about disappointing Gaius by not showing up, or of standing in the middle of the theatre stage in front of an audience, or even of the words to the song he was supposed to sing.

He plopped down heavily on his futon. He flipped through every channel in his cable package and considered calling the company to order more. He picked up one of his romance novels and flipped through it, trying very hard to focus on the words.


Merlin gasped with relief at the distraction and texted back. Bossy much?


Why after 6 if mtng at 2 AM, Merlin texted back. He was already on his feet and packing an overnight bag.

For dinner, u idiot, Arthur replied.

Merlin snorted. For all that Arthur claimed that he wasn't telling Merlin what to do, he ordered Merlin around as much as he thought he could get away with. Merlin found that he didn't mind because it was different with Arthur. They would argue; they would bicker; they would throw things and wrestle and kiss until one of them said "Never mind" and found a compromise. Afterwards, Arthur would smile at him with a guileless, open smile, and Merlin couldn't help but
smile back and forget that he hated Arthur's stupid face in the first place.

He really didn't.

Merlin wasn't fooled, though. Dinner -- Thai was Arthur's choice, even though it was one of Merlin's favourites -- and staying over at Arthur's place? That was either the next step in their relationship, or Arthur's way of distracting Merlin from his upcoming performance.

_OK. Will b there soonish._

He dashed to the bedroom to see if he had any clean clothes. If they were staying in for a teleconference, there was no need for dress pants or shirt and tie, he reasoned. He changed out of his track pants and three-day-old shirt and into jeans and a button down, found a pair of pyjama pants, and packed a change of clothing.

And extra supplies.

His bag was bulging with more items than he thought he'd need. He was locking up when he heard footfalls trotting up the stairs.

"Heading out or just getting in?" Lance asked.

"Out," Merlin said. He pocketed his keys and paused when he saw Lance's expression. Lance was frowning with genuine concern. "What?"

"Are you all right?" Lance asked.

"I'm..." Merlin paused, glancing down at himself, and frowned. "I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You haven't forgotten your keys in your lock in a couple of weeks," Lance said. He wore a bemused expression. "Also. You're smiling. I haven't seen you smile in a while. Actually. Ever."

"Can't I be in a good mood?" Merlin complained. He tried to frown but he found his grin in the way. God. No wonder Lance noticed -- he must look like an idiot.

"Yeah, absolutely, you can," Lance said. He smirked. "How's Arthur?"

"Oh, shut up," Merlin muttered, turning to stomp down the stairs. Lance's laughter followed him down, and Merlin paused halfway there before running back up to his floor. "Wait. Hold on. Just. I have to ask you something."

Lance paused in his doorway, grinning teasingly, but fortunately he didn't say anything. Merlin put on his sweetest, most disarming clueless look.

"How's Gwen?"

"Get lost." Lance mock-glared at him. "Weren't you heading out?"

"Wha?" The shoulder strap of his overnighter dug in his shoulder, reminding him that, yes, he had been on his way out, that he had a job to get to, that he had _Arthur_ to go see. Abruptly, one of his other fantasies -- one of those completely inappropriate ones that involved Merlin sweeping into Arthur's apartment andcornering Arthur against the wall before the door even swung short, bruising his knees in his rush to suck the other man's cock -- came to the fore, and Merlin was suddenly _very uncomfortable_. "Um. Yeah. I'll see you later."
"Goodnight, Merlin," Lance said, winking. He disappeared from the railing a moment later, and Merlin heard his apartment door open and shut.

It was probably safe to move now, Merlin decided, willing his erection to go down already -- though that mental order made the part of his brain still stuck in his early teens giggle madly as more fantasies of being on his knees in front of Arthur came to the fore. He had the misfortune of trying to walk down the stairs in a pair of jeans that used to be roomier than this, adjusting himself just as the lady who lived above him came walking up the stairs.

Her eyes followed the motion of his hand to his groin.

"Hi!" Merlin said awkwardly, and rushed down the stairs.

Merlin made it out of the building and walked over to Yonge Street, where it would be easier to hail a taxi. He nearly walked the entire way to Arthur's until he managed to flag one down.

Arthur's harbourfront penthouse wasn't far -- Merlin could fast-walk it in thirty minutes and change -- but Merlin really wanted to see Arthur. Now.

The driver dropped him off right at the front door. Merlin paid, left enough for a tip, and texted Arthur while he lingered in the lobby.

'M here

A text came in almost right away. Picking up dinner. Talk to Geraint.


The guard.

Merlin looked around. There was a man in a dark suit behind the front desk, but he was shorter than Merlin and, if at all possible, slighter. "Hi. Are you Geraint?"

"Yes," the man said. He looked up from his newspaper, eyeing Merlin curiously.

"Er. I'm Merlin? Arthur told me to talk to you. Arthur Pendragon."

This time, Geraint stood up. "Can I see your ID?"

Merlin walked over to the front desk and handed over his license. There was a bank of surveillance monitors tucked in the recessed grove, just out of sight. There was an emergency panic button tucked in the corner of the marble desk, too.

Up close, the concièrge-cum-security guard was in a muted navy blue three-piece suit that either came with the job, or hinted that the job paid far more than normal. Geraint was broad-shouldered and fit in a way that most doormen and concièrges normally weren't.

Between the gun that was most probably definitely highly likely to be in the drawer that Merlin could just barely make out, the security console that kept him entertained, and the physical grace with which he rose to greet Merlin, Merlin was fairly certain that the man was either a former soldier or policeman.

Geraint handed Merlin his ID.

"Mr. Emrys. Mr. Pendragon asked me to give you this," Geraint said, sliding an envelope over the smooth marble surface of his desk. Merlin suspected that when he said that Arthur had asked,
what he really meant was that Arthur had either emailed or texted him; and if his disapproving tone was anything to go by, the contents of the envelope were highly suspect. "He also said for you to make yourself comfortable."

"Uh. Thanks," Merlin said. He tore open the envelope. It was empty except for a key.

"I've called the elevator down for you. The key will activate it. Mr. Pendragon indicated that he would send you the security code to the inner door."

Merlin glanced down at his phone just as it chimed an alert. Sure enough, there was the access code. The timing was freakishly perfect; Merlin glanced around, wondering if he were being watched. He hurried into the elevator before the doors closed on the off-chance that Geraint wouldn't be inclined to calling the elevator for him a second time.

The doors shut behind him, nearly catching on his overnight bag, and Merlin stared at the key in his hand and at the panel where there should be at least twenty buttons for every floor. Instead, there was a stop button, a start button, an alarm button, a telephone box that looked as if it had been reconverted to include a TTY, and exactly one keyhole, right in the middle of the larger panel.

Merlin put the key in and twisted. The elevator rumbled and began to move.

It was disconcerting to feel motion and not have a frame of reference, not even the flicker of floor numbers, so it was jarring when the doors finally slid open and Merlin realized he hadn't felt the elevator stop. He stepped out to a short corridor; there were three doors, two of them on either side of him with regular locks, the third with a punch code. Merlin checked the number on the text message, entered it in, and the door opened with a click.

Although the rest of the apartment was dark, a motion detector lit up the corridor. Merlin kicked his shoes off on the mat, shrugged out of his coat and hung it up in a closet and wandered into the penthouse, clutching his overnight bag and unsure of where to put it.

He found light switches under a home security alarm display box that read: Alarm disabled 6:11 PM by Merlin Emrys. Merlin grinned -- Arthur must have programmed a code just for him, and it made him feel warm all over.

The house -- penthouse, Merlin reminded himself -- was designed in an open-layout concept with direct line of sight all the way from the kitchen to the living room to the patio in one direction to a corridor with mysterious doors leading to other rooms in another. The line of sight extended to the glass-and-wood staircase that spiralled to the second level, which was as wide open as the main floor, and it looked as if Arthur's master bedroom was located up there.

When Merlin made sure that nothing was going to jump out at him -- he wouldn't put it past Arthur to have a guard dog that Arthur had forgotten to tell Merlin about, he left the key on the kitchen counter and moved into the apartment.

A good half of the outer walls were glass and nothing but glass, and the early sunset cast the city of Toronto in an ephemeral ring of dark pinks and purples and the glimmer of gold that would last until the night chased daytime away with a blanket of night, smeared with clouds and glistening with stars that were out-matched by the golds and reds and whites of the city proper.

Merlin left his bag next to the sofa, ignoring the opulent sixty-something inch thinscreen television and the dual-screen computer setup in the home office in favour of watching the sunset.

"What a view," Merlin whispered. It had been a long time since such a sight could awe him. He'd
seen sunsets all over the world, from the top floors of a hotel in Barcelona to the Ritz in Sydney where the light glinted off the Opera House. He'd seen sunrises too, but he'd been too exhausted after a long performance or too pissed out of his skull to appreciate the sight.

He didn't turn away until the sun had completely disappeared and only a thin orange glow stubbornly clinging to the distant haze remained. He took in the loft-style design, the expensive art pieces on the wall, the mirrors and mirrored surfaces strategically placed in scattered patterns.

"Narcissistic ass," Merlin muttered at all the mirrors, because of course someone like Arthur would check himself out at every opportunity, and God forbid that there wasn't a mirror for him to use. It didn't occur to him until he moved just so that he realized that there was rhyme and reason for the mirrors, for all the glass, for the solid wood floor that looked as if it had been unrolled from a single tree.

Merlin could see himself in every direction, could follow his own movement as he walked past, and no matter where he looked, he could see behind him, into the kitchen, even -- because of the way the overhead skylights were angled on the ceiling -- into the loft above. It made sense, all of a sudden -- this way, Arthur would always know what was around him by how the shadows and the light shifted. If someone spoke behind him, he would know -- and possibly even be able to lip read them using the mirrors.

Will had been able to do that, too. Merlin wondered if he still could.

He glanced down at the floors and stomped a foot on the wood; the sound transmitted in faint vibrations.

"Genius," Merlin said suddenly. Either it was serendipity that had designed the perfect apartment for Arthur, or Arthur had designed it for himself.

He heard the front door open and shut, the jangle of keys clinking against the wall hook by the door. Merlin went over to find Arthur with a briefcase in one hand, two large white bags of take-out in the other.

The smile on Arthur's face to see Merlin just about made Merlin's heart stop. "Been here long?"

Merlin waited until Arthur put the bags on the kitchen counter and turned to look at him before answering. "Maybe ten minutes? Watched the sun set."

Arthur glanced at the windows. "I always miss it. Not the sunrise, though. I'm always awake for that."

"Oh, geez, you really are one of those disgusting, filthy, should-be-shot-on-sight morning people," Merlin signed, and was rewarded by Arthur's broad smile again.

"It sounds to me as if I'll have the privilege of throwing a bucket of cold water over your head in the morning," Arthur said.

"Don't count on it," Merlin signed, wincing inwardly.

Arthur smiled softly the way children smile, mischievous and guilty all at the same time, because they were thinking of doing something that they knew could only get them punished, and weighing to see if it was worth it. Arthur's expression erred toward totally worth it. He tapped the aluminum containers in the plastic bag. "Can you take care of this? I want to get changed. Plates are in the cabinet. Get whatever you want to drink."

"Where do you want to eat?" Merlin asked. He looked pointedly toward the dining room table -- it
was cluttered with several piles of assorted paperwork, legal books, two three-inch-thick binders, and enough junk mail to reconstruct a small forest.

Arthur glanced followed his gaze, raised a I'd forgotten about that brow, and said, "In front of the TV. I haven't eaten at the table in months."

Arthur left his briefcase next to the workstation in the corner before heading up the stairs, shrugging out of his suit jacket and loosening his tie along the way. Merlin caught glimpses of Arthur moving around the second level, and forced himself to concentrate on the task when Arthur pulled off his shirt before moving out of sight. Merlin blew out breath half in relief, half in disappointment.

By the time Arthur came downstairs, Merlin had transferred all of the containers to the large square coffee table, brought over two glasses of water and plates, and was staring at the intimidating array of remotes that were lined up along the edge. Arthur snorted at him, picked up one of the four, and turned on the TV. For a long time there was nothing but moving pictures on a startlingly high-definition screen, the commercial break ending to give way to CityTV news. A square block of closed captioning appeared at the bottom of the screen, scrolling the newscast's dialogue. There was no sound, and Merlin didn't mind; he remembered doing this with Will, sitting up late at night, past their bedtimes, watching a forbidden movie set on mute and reading the captioning, and the only reason they'd been caught was the too-loud crinkle of the bags of potato chips and crunch of chocolate chip cookies over their muffled giggles.

"Oh, shit. Here," Arthur said, after ten minutes of watching local news and the weather report and the segue into sports, the majority of the take-out plundered, with no container left un-pillaged. Arthur handed him the remote. "I always forget about the sound."

"It's all right," Merlin signed, because he'd taken a mouthful of something sweet and sour, using one hand to talk while he tried not to wave the other too much and send food flying across the loft.

"Don't talk with your hands full," Arthur scolded. He shoved the remote into Merlin's free hand.

Merlin rolled his eyes, put down his chopsticks, finished chewing, and dutifully increased the volume from a flat zero to a respectable ten.

"Is that loud enough?" Arthur asked, frowning. "Morgana always puts it higher."

"That's because she's loud," Merlin signed.

"Leon puts it on eighteen, I think."

"Leon's here a lot?" Merlin asked, and he knew, suddenly, that he hadn't been subtle. Arthur gave him a long, bemused look before shaking his head.

"Only when I have beer. He's like a bloodhound, that one. Knows right down to the minute when I put the beer in the fridge and it's chilled to perfection."

"Oh," Merlin said. He glanced at the television, searching for a topic changer, and waved haphazardly. "It's loud enough."

Arthur looked at him in suspicion, but whether he believed Merlin or had seen something in his expression, Merlin wasn't sure. Either way, he hurried through the rest of his plate, and by the time the news rolled into Wheel of Fortune and to Coronation Street, they'd polished off nearly everything.

"Do you think any of that will stick?" Arthur asked critically as Merlin patted his belly.
"Probably not," Merlin said.

The take-out containers were put in the bin, the plates and utensils went into the dishwasher, and there was nothing to do until two in the morning.

"They couldn't schedule it for a more reasonable time?" Merlin groused.

"It's the Australian mine," Arthur said, picking up his briefcase. He opened it and pulled out several files.

"What's it about then? Is there an agenda?"

Arthur hesitated, then shook his head. "Um. I'm sure they'll send it at some point."

Merlin raised a brow, but said nothing.

Arthur brought his laptop to the couch and propped his feet up on the coffee table, gesturing, "I need to review some files before the meeting. Why don't you relax until then? Watch TV, have a nap, read a book? You won't be bothering me."

"You sure?"

"Positive," Arthur said, already bowing his head down to focus on the laptop screen, his finger moving over the touchpad. He picked up the remote and handed it to Merlin.

Merlin took it before gingerly sitting down on the other side of the couch, collecting the pillows around him. A hard corner stabbed him in the kidneys, and he reached under the pile until he came up for air with a book in his hand.

Read a book, my ass, Merlin thought, glancing at Arthur, whose brow was furrowed in concentration, his eyes fixed on the laptop. Merlin looked at the title and nearly suffocated from the wave of emotions that surged at him from nowhere.

Anger, irritation, paranoia, betrayal, flattery, embarrassment, shame.

Opera in the Twenty-First Century by Salvatore Della Villa Nova.

Merlin shoved the book at Arthur, the edge catching him in the thigh, and when Arthur looked at him, startled, Merlin signed, "We had an agreement --"

Only to have the rest of his argument ignored as Arthur picked up the hardcover. "Yeah. We had an agreement. We don't talk about it. This isn't talking about it. This is me being interested and reading about it, since you're being an idiot about all this, remember?"

"But --"

"And we're still not talking about it. This is me working quietly while you throw books at me. Now, will you sit down and stop squirming? I can't concentrate. Don't make me work at my desk."

Arthur put the book on the cushions next to him and went back to work. Merlin glared at Arthur before sliding as far away from the book as was physically possible, because it was radioactive and a ticking bomb and deadly poison and a bloody murder weapon all wrapped up in one, capable of making him suffer until he exploded and all of his different body parts died a slow death while being sentenced to ten lifetimes in prison as someone's bitch.
Merlin sat through another episode of *Coronation Street*, another game show, *Big Bang Theory* and another sitcom that was a laugh track wrapped around medieval torture before he relaxed enough to pick up the remote. He flipped through the channels, but there was nothing on.

He put the remote down. He picked up the book.

It was out of habit, really, to have a book in his hands at this hour of the night, stretched out on the couch to read for a couple of hours before he went to bed. Merlin told himself that was the only reason why he opened the book and flipped through it in a vain attempt to locate the bookmark he'd left before, only, this wasn't his book at all.

"Page one hundred ninety-three," Arthur said.

Merlin cast him a sharp look, but Arthur was typing something in a document. Merlin avoided page one hundred ninety-three.

Or at least, he tried. Every time he flipped through the book, stopping here and there when he recognized a familiar face -- Freya, gorgeous in a silky white dress on a dark stage; Vivian, head-to-toe in so much flash and bling that she probably strained the stage's weight capacity; Gilli, looking dour and severe as he intoned a low note -- the book flipped a few pages over to a well-worn spot where it had been left open for too long, where the spine had been cracked.

To a three-page section, the fourth a full page colour photograph, of Merlin Emrys, countertenor.

Merlin slammed the book shut. He reached for the remote and channel-surfed some more. Arthur got up, left his laptop on the coffee table -- he had a spreadsheet open, covered in colourful charts, and several windows cluttering the backdrop -- and headed for his desk.

Merlin heard Arthur -- watched him in the reflections -- open his briefcase, pull out several spiral-bound reports and file folders, and return to the couch. He sat closer this time, spreading all of his paperwork on either side of him -- file folders on the right, spiral binders on the left, opened to specific sections -- before picking up his laptop again.

Merlin had paused on another sitcom. Arthur glanced at the screen as he picked up a file folder. "I'm told that the actress in this is awful."

Merlin watched it for a while before tapping Arthur's arm. "She has a very high-pitched, nasal voice. Delivers her lines in monotone. Probably fucked the producer or something to get the role." It was uncharitable, even nasty, but Merlin was feeling absurdly angry and he had no outlet. It wasn't fair to rage at Arthur -- he was right, they had only agreed not to talk about it, not that Arthur didn't try anyway -- so the actress, who was also a little buck-toothed, but otherwise quite pretty, got the brunt of his vile humour.

Arthur chuckled faintly and went back to his work, not saying a word.

Merlin changed the channel. There were a lot of channels -- a whole lot more than he'd known about before, since Merlin only had the basic package plus the sports channel combo plus Space, but it looked as if Arthur had sprung for everything, and that everything included the porno channel. Merlin let the television on the gay sex channel until Arthur nudged him and muttered, "Trying to concentrate here."

Except there was no such thing as safe territory where Merlin was concerned, because he'd tripped and fallen into the black vat of blank-screen, music-only channels, and soft rock piped through the speakers at low volume, faint and tantalizing and whisper-sweet, a woman's voice from a band Merlin didn't know, singing about shattered dreams and picking up the pieces came through the speakers, vibrant against a backdrop of bass guitar and subtle drumming.
And it hurt. It hurt a lot.

Merlin’s throat swelled up, his eyes watered, and he sniffled.

He missed it. He loved and missed it. Here he was about to step on a stage again, but he was a nervous wreck each and every time. He knew it was because everything he’d ever loved in his life had been broken and destroyed and torn apart by his passion, and he didn't think he could look it in the eye again. He might step up to the stage, he might try to sing, but what came out -- it wasn't him. Not by far.

He rubbed his forefinger and thumb over his eyes, his hand coming away saltwater-slick.

Merlin reached for the remote -- it had been there a minute ago, on the pillow next to him. He shifted, and the book -- the damned book -- slid out of his lap and landed on the floor. Merlin picked it up, his fingers curling around smooth pages rather than a grainy hardcover, and when he sat back again to look at it, the book had fallen open on page one hundred and ninety-three.

Merlin Emrys, countertenor

He grit his teeth so hard that he was sure he felt a molar crack. His eyes drifted down the text, lured in by the perfect spacing of Times New Roman.

The budding genius of a talented countertenor made his professional debut at the age of sixteen on the London stage, singing Trinculo in the Tempest under opera master Jonas Taliesin. Despite demonstrating an unparalleled range and pitch previously believed attainable only by the famed Italian castrati of the 18th and 19th centuries, Merlin Emrys surpassed expectations of even his famed voice coach, Father Gaius Masterson by maintaining and even expanding his vocal repertoire as he matured. Known for his roles as Tamerleno in Britt's Oberon, Mephistopheles in Baptiste's Faust, and Julius Caesar in Handel's Julius Caesar, and equally renowned for his choral version of Ode to St Cecilia --

Merlin leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling, swallowing hard. His mother had loved hearing him sing the Ode. He'd come home every year -- nearly every year, except for the last four, because Nimueh said that they didn't book you early enough to sing the Ode with the Montréal Choir.

Every year, for her birthday.

Merlin didn't catch the tear that trailed down his cheek in time. He started to stand up, to get away, to pull himself together, but he couldn't move.

Arthur was holding his hand.

Arthur didn't look at him. He had a file folder open on the keyboard. One of the spiral notebooks had been flipped open about midway, the page dog-eared and labelled with about a million coloured post-it notes. He kept his head down, pretending to be working.

The bastard had promised that he wouldn't talk about it. Wouldn't even raise the topic in conversation. But nothing kept Arthur from reading about Merlin. His career. His successes. His failures.

Merlin gasped for breath, trying to hold back the tidal wave of emotion rushing to drown him. The television remote slipped out of Merlin’s hand; he looked up in time to see Arthur put it out of reach on the other side of the couch, leaving it on the overstuffed arm.
Merlin couldn't contain his grief anymore. A strangled sob burst out of his chest. Gentle hands pulled at him, keeping him from running away. He was enfolded in warm arms, and he wept.

Arthur ran his fingers through Merlin's hair. After a moment, he waved his hand in front of Merlin's face to see if he was awake; Merlin grabbed his hand, pulled it close, and kissed his fingers.

Arthur shivered involuntarily.

They stayed like that for a long time -- Arthur with his feet up on the coffee table, Merlin's head pillowed in Arthur's lap, his legs stretched out over the couch -- before the need to fill the silence overwhelmed Arthur.

It was a weird sensation only because Arthur liked the silence. Most of the time. Sometimes he needed bustle and conversation and companionship, but right now, the silence was uncomfortable, uncertain, unknown. He had the urge to make Merlin feel better, somehow, any way that he could.

"I was thirteen when my father first told me that he was proud of me. Left me dumbstruck for weeks. I don't even remember what I did. Just that he was proud," Arthur said.

He glanced down at Merlin. He could only see his profile, all sharp cheekbones and edges, the black of his hair and eyelashes framing his features, the pale blue-grey of his eyes adding a faint glint that reminded Arthur of a raw diamond freshly pulled from the mines. Arthur could tell from the way that Merlin lowered his eyes that he was listening.

"Went to my mom every night and asked her if that was really my dad, that he hadn't been replaced by an alien or something." A crime drama was flashing on the television screen, but Arthur wasn't paying attention. He had, just barely, managed to calm Merlin's tears, to soothe the sobs that had wracked through Merlin's lean frame, and he found himself completely unwilling to let him go.

"I was seventeen when I got myself roaring drunk, stole one of the company Jeeps at a quarter past midnight, and nearly broke my neck when I drove too fast on a gravel road --" Arthur paused. "Actually, I don't even think I was on the road --"

There was a faint movement in his lap. A small, concerned smile curved on Merlin's lips.

"-- went clean off the cliff and into a pond. If it hadn't been winter, it would've been dry and I would've probably died in a big ball of flames, you know the fake ones they do in the movies? One of those. Always thought that would be a cool way to go. Anyway, it was winter, so there was plenty of water in the pond and the Jeep sank all the way to the bottom. Then there's me, spluttering and screaming something like the sharks are going to get me and trying not to drown."

Merlin shifted in Arthur's lap, twisting around despite the pressure of Arthur's hand on his side and his fingers running through his hair, and looked at Arthur with narrowed eyes. "If you're telling me this near-death story to make me feel better, it's not working," he signed.

"I'm not done, damn it," Arthur said, and manhandled Merlin back into place. He didn't know what it was going to take to convince Merlin that Arthur cared about him, and if he didn't clue in on the very simple fact that Arthur wanted him in his lap soon, Arthur was going to have to spell it out for him.

His father had taught him that it was better to ask forgiveness than permission. It was forgiveness
that he asked for now, for having pushed Merlin so far.

Merlin scowled, but he pulled a pillow into Arthur's lap and laid down again without too much complaining. The way he wrapped an arm around Arthur's leg, his tough light, uncertain, almost made up for the pillow.

"I don't know how I made it to shore, or why I'd been so angry as to steal a car and nearly kill myself, but when I limped back home, my dad...?" Arthur paused. "Well. I'd expected to be yelled at. I thought I'd have to duck flying objects. I didn't know how my dad would react. I mean, I stole a company car. I sank it. It was unrecoverable -- at least until the water levels went down low enough again for a little fishing. I thought I'd be disinherited, thrown out on the streets. I was terrified."

Arthur took a deep breath, his eyes stinging a little to remember the look on his father's face when he had walked through the door, clothes dirty and torn and tattered in places, smeared with mud and blood and other things that Arthur still didn't want to think about. He'd been lucky, walking away from the accident with only a sprained ankle, a bruised knee, a gash on his thigh and a motley collection of bumps and bruises. His father had gone pale to see him -- his miner's tan washing clean out of his face, his hands trembling too hard to even form the signs for are you all right and I'm taking you to the hospital and a whole string of other things that ultimately added up to you're in trouble, young man and I love you and don't you ever do something stupid like this again.

"That was when I was convinced my dad was an alien. Oh, I got grounded to within an inch of my life. Lost my car privileges for a year. But he hugged me -- and boy, if that wasn't awkward, I don't know what would've been," Arthur said.

There was a rumbling vibration under Arthur's hand where it was resting on Merlin's side, a slight shaking of Merlin's body.

Merlin was laughing.

Arthur smiled. He watched Merlin fondly for a moment, pleased that he was able to pull Merlin out of his pain. He wished he could always be the one -- the only one -- to put that smile there.

It was loneliness, sadness, solitude that made him think these things. Arthur's parents were gone. Neither were there to touch his shoulder, to ruffle his hair, to kiss his cheek (his mother) or squeeze his shoulder (his father). He missed the dinnertime conversations, the midday breaks, the shared stories and hostile arguments. Arthur needed this contact with someone else just as much as Merlin did.

Maybe more. Arthur resisted the urge to comb his fingers through Merlin's hair, to manoeuvre him into another position, to press against him, to kiss him. Merlin might have struggled with his pain, but he didn't hide it. The depth of Merlin's emotions took Arthur's breath away.

There had been too many times where Arthur didn't know what another person was thinking, what they were feeling, and he hated it. He hated the isolation, the silent buffer lingering between him and someone else. There was no buffer between him and Merlin. It was so easy, too easy, to adore someone who let Arthur in. Merlin had; and Arthur loved him for it.

Merlin's private fortress, the one he hid inside, was crumbling before Arthur's eyes.

"Oh, shut up," Arthur said, because Merlin was still laughing.
Merlin rolled onto his back -- Arthur lifted his hand out of the way and set it down on Merlin's chest instead, half-expecting Merlin to still be angry about the book. He watched for any sign that his touch wasn't welcome. There wasn't any. Merlin tucked an arm behind his head, his hair mussed up in a way that triggered intense want in Arthur. Merlin looked better now. Calmer. The line of tension that had clung to him since Arthur had asked him about the concert faded, and his blue eyes were made all the brighter by the lingering redness of raw tears.

Merlin took a deep breath and signed with his free hand. "Why are you telling me this? Are you trying to make me feel better for --"

"For crying like a big old sap?" Arthur asked, anticipating Merlin's words.

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Just when I thought you were actually not as big of an ass as I'd thought you were --"

"I am the biggest ass on the planet, Merlin, and don't you forget it," Arthur said. He softened and added, "I told you the story for a reason. I mean, I had a point, and my point is, you need someone to tell you that everything's all right. You made mistakes. You're not going to do them again, yeah? All you can do is fix it. Get back into it. No matter what you do, no matter how much of a diva you might turn into, I'm still going to be here."

Merlin's smile faded. He turned his head away and sat up, and this time, Arthur let him, watchful and wary, feeling his stomach clench with the fear that he had pushed too hard this time and that Merlin was going to leave.

Merlin sat on the edge of the couch, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped, his head down. Arthur was afraid to move in case Merlin would spook and flee. Arthur fancied himself in decent physical shape, but Merlin was lean and wiry and there was no telling how fast he was. Arthur might not be able to catch him.

It was a while before Merlin tilted his head in Arthur's direction, unclasping his hands from their white-knuckled clench. He didn't speak, only signing, "So what did you do to fix it when you drove the Jeep into the pond?"

"Went and replaced the three kilometres of fencing that I'd driven through when I was off-roading," Arthur said, staring at his hands briefly. He thought he could still see the calluses from all the cutting and hammering. "Put up a new chain link fence on the company property where I veered off. Planted new trees. Apologized to everyone. Spent my winter vacation there, waiting for the water to go down enough to fish the Jeep out of the water."

It could have been worse. The police could have arrested him and thrown him in jail. He could've hurt or killed someone, the way he'd been driving. He could have had destroyed something that was valuable to the community, like the deep groundwater well. The story about his teenage stupidity spread like wildfire, though, and it wasn't long before he had an audience supervising him while he worked on the fencing. Even the police had come out to watch him, smiling big smiles.

The worst part was everyone thinking that Uther had put Arthur up to it, when it really had been his idea. Hurting, hungover, soaked to the bone on the walk back to his house, Arthur had seen every single piece of destruction his temper tantrum had caused, and had made himself two promises -- that he'd never get this angry or this drunk ever again, and that he would always try to repair the damage if he did.

"I wish it were that easy for me," Merlin signed.
"It can be," Arthur said. He shifted in his seat, coming closer, putting a hand on Merlin's back. "The hardest part is forgiving yourself."

Merlin glanced at him sharply, and just as quickly, he looked away, covering his eyes with his hands. His long fingers pressed into his forehead, rubbing circles.

"Whatever happened," Arthur said, "Whoever got hurt, whatever you did? They'll forgive you, but until you get over yourself, you're not the only one suffering."

Merlin dropped his hands and gave him a considering look.

"I mean, I can't imagine why, but apparently people liked watching you prance on a stage in awful makeup and frilly costumes. For some unfathomable reason, they liked listening to you screech --"

Merlin's expression twisted into an insulted scoff and he shoved at Arthur. Arthur was grateful that Merlin wasn't particularly heavy, because the force behind his lunge hinted at unspoken strength.

"-- but you know, whatever turns people on, I can't really judge. Hell, I can't judge at all --"

Arthur broke free of Merlin's grasp. He turned the tables on Merlin, using his weight to shove him back until he was leaning over him. Merlin pushed at him, but Arthur grabbed his wrists and held them over his head.

"-- and --"

Arthur's voice strangled in his throat when he looked down on Merlin, his hair a curly mess, stark against the light-coloured couch, his cheeks flushed from exertion, his mouth open in laughter and protest and something else, an emotion Arthur hadn't seen before, something that Merlin had kept hidden deep, deep down, and maybe, maybe, it was a little bit of joy.

Merlin realized that Arthur wasn't fighting him, only holding him down; that Arthur wasn't teasing him, either, that Arthur was just looking at him. His smile faded a little, and so did the joy, disappearing somewhere behind Merlin's fortress walls, closely, carefully guarded. Arthur wanted to see it again. He was desperate to see it again.

"And?" There was uncertainty in Merlin's expression.

Arthur swallowed, trying to find the words. "And I want to see you on the stage, Merlin."

Merlin looked away. The resistance in his arms eased. He softened under Arthur, pliant, defeated, unsure, reluctant, considering, wanting, and when he turned his eyes to Arthur again, his mouth parted, stopping in mid-word, afraid to hurt him by saying the wrong thing.

Arthur said it for him. "I know I can't hear you, Merlin. I'll never be able to hear you. Not with my ears, anyway. But I want to watch you. I want to see you tell the story on the stage. I want to see you wearing your heart on your sleeve. I want to see you love what you do. I want to hear you, Merlin. In my own way."

Neither of them said anything. They stared at each other for a long time -- Arthur wished he knew what Merlin saw when Merlin looked at him, but he was entranced by the vision he saw. Ruffled, flushed, pale, every emotion laid bare, from sadness and grief and pain to uncertainty and doubt and fear. But the most beautiful of all was the faintest spark of want and hope.

Arthur never wanted to kiss someone more than in this moment.
Instead, he pulled away slowly, letting his touch linger. Arthur relaxed his grip from around Merlin's wrist before sliding his hands down Merlin's arms. He leaned back to sit on his heels, aware of the compromising position they were in: Arthur kneeling between Merlin's legs, Merlin beneath him.

Arthur left his hands on Merlin's thighs. "When you stop being an idiot... Whatever you do, whatever you decide -- do it for you, not for me, not for anyone else. I don't care if you only do it in the shower or on a street corner or on the stage at the Toronto Opera House, as long as you do what you love again.

"I can see it's killing you, Merlin." Arthur watched the clench of Merlin's jaw. It was a tiny little wince, an admission of truth. Arthur wanted to push. He wanted to hear Merlin say he would do it. He wanted Merlin to go up on stage and wow the crowds. He wanted to -- quite selfishly -- elbow the person next to him in the audience and point and say, *That's my boyfriend.* Instead, he said, "Just think about it."

Arthur moved away, gathering up all the papers that spilled to the floor. Beside him, Merlin shifted and sat up, leaning to help him. The book was last, still open on the page with Merlin's entry, and Merlin stared down at the photographs, his fingers twitching over the glossy colours.

"Why don't you get some rest?" Arthur suggested, standing up. He tucked his laptop under his arm. "Stretch out, watch some TV."

"But --" Merlin started to stand up, to make a gesture toward the couch, that he could move to the chair instead. Arthur waved him off.

"I work better at my desk, anyway," Arthur said. He saw a flicker of suspicion in Merlin's eyes, an understanding that, yes, maybe Arthur had planned to talk to Merlin about singing again.

Arthur didn't give Merlin a chance to ask questions, to start lobbing accusations, to yell at him for being an ass, again. He went to his desk, laid out his papers, opened his laptop, transferred the documents he'd been working on to the desktop.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, in the reflection of the glass on the cabinet, and traced it back to the living room, where Merlin was waving an arm in the air. Once Merlin had his attention, he signed as crudely as he could, "You really are an ass."

"We established that, Merlin," Arthur said with a sigh. He clicked on the synched folder and opened the latest document, muttering under his breath, "But you love me anyway."

He didn't realize he'd spoken loud enough for his voice to carry across the room until he noticed that Merlin was looking at him, his arms crossed on top of the back of the couch, his chin resting on the back of his hands.

"I do love you," Merlin signed. He smiled and didn't wait for an answer, sitting down to stretch across the couch.

It was some time before Arthur could focus on his work. He waited until he had his thoughts in order before logging into the inter-office chat.

One AM came and went by the time the online meeting was finished, and Arthur was exhausted. It wasn't only that he'd caught up on all of his paperwork, finished reading the contracts, studying the accounts, evaluating the gemologist reports. It was keeping up with all the side-chat windows that had opened up, with listening to the heads of each of the offices worldwide as they told him what they had found in their own internal audits to uncover what Agravaine had been doing.
behind their backs. By the time the meeting was finished, Arthur had several files worth of information for the Crown Prosecutor.

Arthur leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his eyes. He felt impossible knots in his shoulders, a heavy weight pulling him down.

Arthur turned off the computer decisively, to force himself to quit working, and went to the kitchen. He checked on Merlin -- the TV was on black, again, and there was bouncing text in the corner, advising of the radio channel and the song playing and by which artist -- and found him sleeping, the opera book open on his chest. It was on a different page -- a soprano named Freya; Arthur remembered from Leon's investigation that Merlin and Freya had been friends. Between the music playing on the TV and the very simple fact that Merlin hadn't chucked the book, Arthur was reassured that at least Merlin was thinking about what Arthur had said.

He indulged there for a moment longer, watching a sleeping Merlin, remarking how different he looked then, unguarded and calm. There was lingering strain to his features, a pinch of the brow, a tightening of his mouth.

Arthur wanted to brush it all away, to smooth it out, but he kept his hands to himself except to tug at Merlin's shirt to see if it would wake him up. Merlin rolled away, swatting the air absentmindedly in a go away, 'm sleeping gesture, and the book slid from his chest to the ground beside him with a faint thump.

Merlin jerked awake. He blinked, glanced up at Arthur, and sat up suddenly. "What time is it?" he signed, yawning.

"Just past one," Arthur said. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Merlin yawned and waved his hand in an insouciant gesture. "It's all right. I should get some coffee and wake up for the meeting. You want a cup?"

"We won't need it, but, go ahead," Arthur said, turning away, pretending he didn't see Merlin's What do you mean, why not?

He followed Merlin to the kitchen and watched as Merlin handled the complicated coffee maker like a pro, finding everything that he needed with some help from Arthur in cupboard and drawers to prepare the perfect cup. Arthur was distracted by Merlin's hands. The grace of his fingers, the quick, fluttering movements, the precision of his fingertips, his touches. It was rare that Arthur would know someone who captivated his attention with signs alone, and rarer still that he could watch someone's movements just for the pleasure of it. The way Merlin signed, the way he touched objects, the way he touched Arthur -- Arthur wanted those hands on him. So much.

"Do you play the piano?" Arthur asked, because he couldn't help wondering.

"Yeah. Years ago," Merlin signed with one hand, his head turned away as he opened a drawer, then another, until Arthur tapped his arm and pointed to a different one. Merlin flashed him a small smile, taking out a couple of spoons, and took the carafe to the sink, rinsing it out and filling it up.

"Are we all right?" Arthur asked, coming between Merlin and the coffee maker. "I mean. You're not still mad at me? For earlier?"

Merlin leaned his hands on the counter, his shoulders rising and slumping in a sigh. He straightened, and signed, "No. I'm not mad. Tired, I guess. It hurt, but I guess I needed to hear what you said."
"And?"

"And." Merlin shrugged. He rubbed his forehead. "And, I don't know what I'm going to do. I mean, I haven't sung on the stage in over a year. My practices keep getting worse and worse -- when I'm not reaching for a bucket to throw up into, I sound like a squeaky hinge.'

"You'd still sound better than me," Arthur said. Merlin gave him a weak smile and wagged his hands in a *I'm not sure about that* gesture. "But you're still singing at the charity, right? If you can do that, what about afterward?"

"I don't know. We'll see. I just... Let me just get past the show next Friday, yeah?"

Arthur nodded. He put his hand on Merlin's shoulder, squeezed, and let his palm slide down Merlin's spine. "You'll be fine, Merlin."

"Ten to one odds that someone will have to call an ambulance when I pass out," Merlin signed, looking a little ill. He gave Arthur a weak smile and shrugged. He poured the water from the carafe into the coffee maker. "Are you going to tell me about this meeting?"

Arthur took the hint and let the subject drop for now, happy that at least Merlin was opening up a little, but he winced inwardly at the question, feeling for a brief moment the same discomfort Merlin must have felt when Arthur broached the subject of his music. "Well. To start with, there's no meeting."

Merlin stilled right before turning the coffee maker on. "Sorry? What?"

Arthur shrugged, shoulders rising to his ears before slumping down. "Did they cancel?"

Arthur shoved his hands in his pockets and shook his head. He broke eye contact. He reached for the spoons and moved them around. Merlin's long fingers wrapped around his wrist.

"There's no meeting because... there's no meeting," Merlin signed. "There never was a meeting in the first place, was there?"

"Uh." Arthur shook his head again. "No. There was never a meeting. Well, there was a meeting. Earlier. While you were sleeping. With the heads of all of the international offices, but we did it by chat."

"Arthur -- you sneaky ba --" Merlin's expression changed from confused to annoyed to angry and back again in an instant. Arthur had no idea what Merlin was thinking right now -- it could be anything from being furious for no reason to believing that Arthur had invited him over just to push him about the opera singing. Whatever it was, Merlin took a deep breath, lightly touched Arthur's arm, and signed, "Why did you --"

Merlin's hands fell. The rising anger in his expression tapered off into one of concern. "What's wrong?"

Arthur shook his head. "Nothing. Everything's fine --"

"Really?" Merlin signed.

Arthur's shoulders slumped. He rubbed his face. He sagged against the kitchen counter. "I'm so tired, Merlin. All the... All the problems. All the rumours. The investigations. Agravaine's plots
and everything. The board members' games. I can't take it anymore. I mean, they all used to be my
dad's men, you know. They've known me my whole life. They've taken orders from me right up
until my parents died. And now? They should know better. They should know that I know what
I'm doing. They still treat me like a kid. I've been trying not to let it get to me, but --"

There was a warm hand on his back, and Arthur leaned into it. He closed his eyes, licked his lips,
and tried to contain the sob building up in his chest.

"I can't believe they'd try to push me out of the company," Arthur said, but his voice felt whispery
in his chest. He didn't even know if he'd spoken loud enough until Merlin stepped closer, his body
warming Arthur where Arthur felt impossibly cold. "They don't think I can do it. I know what
Agravaine's told them. He's said that even my parents didn't think I could do it, that's why they
changed the will to include him in the company, and never mind that they changed it back a few
months later to cut him out. My parents believed in me. They pushed me. But everyone else?

"It's like they don't remember everything I've ever done. Like everything Agravaine's told them
about me? It's gospel. So they think I can't lead the company because I can't hear. Just because of
that. I live and breathe the company, do you know that? I was born into it. I know everything
about it. And they think I can't run it. They can't see past --"

He choked.

Merlin held him. Arthur wrapped his arms around Merlin as tightly as he could. "I never knew
what a bunch of fucking assholes they were. Always smiling at me when I was growing up.
Telling me how the company worked, showing me things. I should have known it was because
they wanted to look good in my father's eyes. Treat the cripple nice, they might get a bonus at
Christmas. Say one thing about me in front of my parents, say something else now that they're
gone.

"I.." Arthur trailed off. His throat was too constricted to speak. He sniffed. He broke from Merlin,
shoving him away. "I'm just... I'm just so tired. I just wanted you here with me."

Merlin closed the space between them, his thumb wiping Arthur's cheeks, brushing away the tears
that Arthur hadn't known had trailed down his face. Arthur had an idle thought -- that this was a
rough night for both of them. They were a matched pair, broken, but healing.

"You want to know what I think?" Merlin signed one-handed, his gestures very small. Arthur
rested his forehead on Merlin's shoulder and heaved a heavy sigh.

"You're going to tell me I'm being stupid and overly-sensitive," Arthur muttered.

"No. I was going to say everyone's an asshole and you should fire them all."

Arthur stared at Merlin's hands. His elegant, long fingers. The short, trimmed fingernails. The
rough of his knuckles and his palms where he must have cut and scraped his skin.

*Everyone's an asshole and you should fire them all.*

Arthur found that abruptly, ridiculously funny in a perfectly logical way that he wished he'd
thought of himself a long time ago.

*Fire them all.*

They had once been his father's men. Now they were Agravaine's, poisoned and twisted against
Arthur. That wasn't whom he wanted, what he needed to run the company.
And whom he wanted, what he needed -- Arthur was holding him right now.

Arthur took a deep, steeling breath, inhaling Merlin's scent, sucking in his body heat. He closed his eyes and took a tiny step closer until there was no space between him and Merlin at all.

He didn't know how long they stood there, holding each other. How long Merlin held him with ever-tightening arms that never loosened, not for a second. How long Merlin's lips were pressed against the crook of Arthur's neck, how long Merlin's breath tickled his skin. But when he pulled away, finally, it was to see eyes wide with undisguised emotion, with concern and anger and love.

Arthur knew in this moment that he would marry this man.

"Bed?" Arthur asked. The concern pinching Merlin's brow melted away, and Merlin's eyes sparkled along with his soft smile.

Merlin woke up to three things: a faint tremor underneath him as Arthur curled closer and his knee bumped Merlin's leg, a flash of light as a helicopter flew past, and something else.

Sleepily, Merlin grumbled under his breath and shifted slightly -- a minuscule fraction that would settle his body more evenly against Arthur. The movement was enough to trigger a tightening of Arthur's grasp, and for a second, Merlin thought Arthur was awake.

He lifted his head from Arthur's shoulder, but Arthur's eyes were closed, all of his stress and worries gone for the moment, casting him in calm repose. His breathing was deep and even and slow, his body relaxed except for where it had reflexively clenched around Merlin to keep him close, his lips parted ever so slightly in an exhalation that was soft against Merlin's cheek.

As much as Merlin had complained about the lack of absolute darkness in the loft bedroom, now, Merlin understood why Arthur liked his penthouse so much. The uncovered windows allowed in enough of the twinkling city lights that Arthur would still be able to see clearly enough to read lips, even in the dark, but there was an unexpected benefit for Merlin, too, because the diffused, distant glow was a burnished orange-gold, and it cast Arthur in a kingly aura, regal and noble and stoic, even in sleep.

A wave of contentment washed over Merlin, and for once, he let it carry him. Merlin didn't think about the trickery that Arthur used to get him to come over -- an international late-night meeting, my ass. Merlin didn't think about the way that Arthur had pushed him -- gently, but firmly -- into accepting what it was that Merlin really wanted to do -- what Arthur wanted him to do. To sing on the stage.

He thought at length about the slow, slow lovemaking, both of them with their walls down, every ugly bruise and insecurity on display. Merlin didn't know what Arthur had thought to see him like that, every bit of him worn raw, like a festering scab had been torn open and the weeping cut had been scrubbed clean, but he knew what he felt to have seen Arthur with every defence broken down.

It wasn't to see shattered battlements or a derelict, condemned building. It was to see a castle's ruins, the stone washed clean by rain and bleached white by the sun. It was to see the moss growing in the cracks and wildflowers blooming around the edges. It was to see the grass lining the old stone path to the open portcullis, the towers standing tall and proud and welcoming.

The ancient castle had warded off attacks. It had protected its charges. And now it was time to protect the castle, that it might endure through time, beautiful and valiant.
Merlin saw the rest of his life when he looked at Arthur. He saw an eternity that could only be survived if he had Arthur with him.

Merlin rested his head against Arthur's shoulder and closed his eyes. Arthur's arm around him relaxed, but Merlin held him tight.

He drifted off for seconds, minutes, hours -- he wasn't sure -- before he was startled awake by a repeat of that third thing that had awakened him earlier.

A sound.

Merlin lifted his head to listen. It wasn't the shushing noise of the computer fan. It wasn't the muted beep coming from the stereo system -- someday soon, Merlin was going to silence that even if he had to resort to his unreliable magic. It was --

His eyes narrowed.

Footsteps.

Arthur's finger tapped on his arm. He blinked his eyes into focus, but the dazed, sleep-mussed expression remained, darkened by a faint frown across his brow. Arthur didn't need to ask the question; Merlin could see it in his eyes. What's wrong?

"Sorry. I thought I heard something --" Merlin stopped signing and turned his head. He reached up and lightly put his hand on Arthur's mouth when he felt Arthur shift under him. "I hear it again. Someone's downstairs."

Arthur froze.

There was a faint clatter. Papers being shuffled, a pile landing on the floor with a muffled thump. The muted scrape of a chair being moved aside. The click of the keyboard and the higher-frequency hum of the computer as it was woken from its sleep. Whispered voices -- two distinct low tones.

A surge of adrenaline was matched by a furious ripple of magic questing out defensively.

Merlin held up two fingers. "Sounds like they're moving things around."

"I set the alarm. I know I did," Arthur signed. He reached for the nightstand, using the faint light to navigate through the debris of condoms and lube until he found his phone.

Thank fuck Arthur was never far from his phone.

Merlin slid from the bed very carefully, his magic reacting unconsciously to mute the sound. He stayed low, found a pair of Arthur's sleep-pants, and put them on.

Arthur used the sheets to hide the glow of his phone's screen, thumbing over several keys. Merlin didn't know what he was doing -- remotely checking the alarm, texting someone, calling the police -- until Arthur reached for his boxer-briefs and shirt, pausing to sign, "Alarm's been bypassed. I triggered the silent alarm. Texted Perce."

Perce. Merlin didn't know who -- oh. The bodyguard that Leon had put on Arthur. Merlin hoped that Perce -- or at least the other bodyguard that Leon had put on Merlin -- was right outside the penthouse door right now with a big-ass gun, because he was scared to death. Arthur's hands shook slightly in a sure sign that he wasn't doing much better.
"Is there another way downstairs?" Merlin asked. They were sitting ducks up in the bedroom.

Arthur pointed. Merlin took his hand, pulling him down to the floor. The loft was wide open; the dull city light was coming in from every direction, and he didn't want to add to the shadows and give away their position. They crept past the bathroom, down the corridor with the walk-in closet and the private gym, past the storage area to the door at the very end. Merlin reached for the doorknob and stopped when he saw it was turning on its own.

Arthur reacted first. He pulled Merlin into the storage room. He had them both inside, the door nearly shut, before Merlin could blink.

Merlin's heart was hammering in his chest. Arthur looked this side shy of panic, barely holding it together. Merlin didn't want to think what it was like for Arthur right now -- not knowing what was going on. Arthur couldn't hear the stairwell's door open and close. He couldn't hear the footsteps walking past slowly. He couldn't hear the intruder pause some distance away -- checking the bathroom? -- before continuing on, the sound retreating.

Arthur watched from his spot next to the door, limited to seeing the passing shadow. He signed, "Should we go now?"

Merlin held up a finger to wait. He couldn't be sure, but after almost a minute, he thought he heard the intruder heading down the other set of stairs. Merlin gestured, and opened the door slowly, happy that his magic was cooperating the way it always seemed to cooperate when Arthur was around, muting the sound of the doorknob turning, the squeak of the hinges, their footsteps down the corridor and to the staircase, down the stairs.

Merlin reached for Arthur's hand; Arthur held it tight. But once they were on the staircase, it was pitch black and disorienting. Merlin paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

This was Arthur's home; Merlin didn't doubt that he could navigate it blindfolded. Arthur took the lead, moving slow, step by step, pausing now and then to glance over his shoulder at Merlin, raising his brow to see if it was all right to continue.

Merlin could hear more distant thunks and thuds and clatters and clunks. He heard raised voices -- a more conversational volume -- but they didn't come closer. Merlin signed what he heard to Arthur, and Arthur nodded, a muscle clenching in his jaw, before he kept going.

They reached the main floor, and it was there that Merlin could make out the voices. He squeezed Arthur's hand involuntarily.

"What?" Arthur signed.

Merlin held up a finger again. Arthur was distracted when his phone vibrated. Arthur showed him the screen.

_Nrly there. How many? Armd?

"I hear two," Merlin signed, but he saw Arthur text, _2. 1 armd._

Merlin's eyes widened. Arthur signed, "Saw the gun in the crack when he walked by."

_Shit_, Merlin mouthed.

The voices were louder. There was a crash of furniture. Merlin jumped, glancing over his shoulder.
"What do you mean, he's not there?"

"The bed's empty." Merlin didn't know who the second man was, but he recognized the first. Agravaine.

"He has to be here. I know he's here. His car is in the parking garage. The alarm was set to in-residence. He's here. Find him."

Arthur pulled on his arm. "What is it? What do you hear?"

Merlin stared at Arthur with wide, round eyes, unsure what to tell him. His fingers moved of their own volition. "Agravaine. They're looking for you."

Arthur's body tensed. His jaw clenched. His expression clouded over, the invisible traces of fear fading, and indecision made his lips twitch.

"I've gone through the place. It's not that big, you know. He's not here. Besides, you said he was deaf. There's no way he could know we're here."

"I don't care. Find him," Agravaine snarled. There was a loud smash, glass breaking.

"Get what you came for, and I'll do him another time," the second man said.

"You're not getting paid until you kill him."

"We have to go. Now. Where's the back way out?" Merlin signed. He grabbed Arthur's arm and pulled.

Arthur didn't move. He pulled his arm loose and pointed toward the main areas. "I want to know what's going on, why he's --"

Merlin could hear footsteps walking from the living room to the kitchen.


"Hey. Are you sure he's alone?"

"What's going on?" Arthur asked, refusing to move.

"Yes." Agravaine paused. "Why?"

"There's two sets of dishes in the sink."

"Fucking hell," Agravaine nearly shouted. "Find them!"


Merlin didn't know where he was going. There had to be another way out. A fancy building like this had to have an emergency exit somewhere. It had to.

They rounded the corner just as Merlin heard the second man enter the corridor behind them, and thank fuck, there was a solid steel door with a copy of the alarm keypad that was at the front of the penthouse, because that was as sure an indication that this was the way out. Merlin reached for the doorknob. His fingers were a fraction of a millimetre from touching it when the door yanked open wide and the biggest fucking man Merlin had ever seen in his whole life came barging through.
Merlin got a flash of black leather, of big arms, of a serious, stern expression, of the silver-plate of a gun -- and took a step back, shoving Arthur against the wall, covering him with his body --

"Put it down!" the man shouted. "Put it down or I'll shoot!"

Merlin had a bewildered moment of put what down before realizing that the man's wasn't yelling at him or at Arthur and that the intruder sent to hunt Arthur down was coming at them with his gun raised, that --

The air cracked with a single gunshot and the acrid metallic smell of gunpowder. The echo jarred Merlin against Arthur, and there was a resisting tension behind him. Merlin screwed his eyes shut, holding Arthur tightly, afraid to let him go -- an eternity could have passed and he wouldn't have noticed -- and when he finally dared open an eyelid to take a look, it was to see that the big man with the leather jacket and the gun had walked past them, his gun trained on a body-shaped lump on the floor.

For a moment -- a precious moment, Merlin had the feeling that they were safe, that the crisis was over.

There was a distant slam of a door crashing open, a confused shout of "Police!" and "Get your hands up" and "Get down on the floor" almost simultaneously, a mad chaos of shouting and yelling and too many people in uniform. The lights flashed on, there was more shouting and more yelling. There was a struggle, a scuffle, the sound of something soft and fleshy landing on the floor. There were officers pulling Arthur away from Merlin --

Pure, sheer panic shot through Merlin; he saw the same reflected in Arthur's eyes as Arthur fought and struggled to stay close to Merlin. There was a terrible moment where Merlin reached out for Arthur, where Merlin's magic reached out for Arthur, wanting nothing more than to protect him and keep him safe. Merlin was hauled off his feet by a man larger than he was, pushed down onto the floor --

That man -- the big man with the military-style buzz-cut hairdo and the impossibly large arms flashed his identification and barked, "Let them go! If you separate them again, I'm going to fucking thump you."

It was warning enough, because it seemed that they were both released at the same time. They crossed the few feet of space between them to wrap arms against each other in a never-letting-go squeeze. There was sweat down the small of Arthur's back, at the base of his neck, a tremor rushing through his body.

Merlin didn't think he was in much better shape. He buried his nose in Arthur's neck. Arthur's lips were against Merlin's ear, and he hugged tighter when he felt, rather than heard, a shaky sob.

The intruder was yanked out of the penthouse, his arms zip-tied behind his back. The bodyguard -- Perce, Merlin guessed -- must not have wounded him too badly.

Not badly enough, in Merlin's estimation.

They watched in silence as Agravaine was hauled to his feet by two policemen, his clothing in disarray, his hair a shaggy mess, his seemingly-permanent plastic smile finally gone from his face. There was a second when Agravaine had clear line of sight in their direction, and the small-eyed, completely venomous glare he sent them rattled Merlin. He shifted, wanting to move Arthur away from Agravaine, to guard him, but Arthur only stood straighter, his chin up, his body tense with anger instead of fear.
In the end, Merlin didn't need to shield Arthur from Agravaine. He held Arthur back before he surged at his uncle and beat him to a bloody pulp.

Perce -- who was a soft-spoken man when he wanted to be -- made arrangements for both of them to get dressed. Merlin kept Arthur's pants, but he scavenged his shirt from where it had been haphazardly thrown over the couch only a few hours ago. Arthur pulled on a pair of jeans, staying close to Merlin.

The policemen tried to separate them again. "We need to take your statements," the officer said. He paused when he saw Merlin sign. "Wait. Are you deaf?"

"No, but Arthur is," Merlin said.

"Shit. All right. I'll radio in to get an interpreter in --"

Arthur's jaw clenched, and even before the police officer had finished speaking, even before Merlin had finished signing what the man had said, Arthur said, very firmly, "That won't be necessary. Merlin can interpret for me."

"Oh." There was a flicker of discomfort in the man's expression. "What's your relationship to --"

Merlin's "I'm his interpreter" was squashed under Arthur's "He's my boyfriend."

Merlin smiled. Arthur reached over and squeezed his hand. They sat down on the couch across from the officer, Merlin angling away so that Arthur could keep him and the policeman in his line of sight.

They gave their side of things, from Merlin waking up to a noise to Arthur triggering the alarm to alert the police to trying to sneak out the back way when Merlin overheard Agravaine's kill order and Perce arriving just in time.

"And Perce is --" The officer, who was a kind-faced young man who had quickly become more comfortable now that they were following procedures and upon discovering that he could still communicate with Arthur, turned to point in Perce's direction, who was giving his statement to another officer. "That man there?"

"Perceval St-Louis," Arthur said. "Yes. He's an off-duty RCMP officer who moonlights for my private investigator. His current assignment is to be my bodyguard."

The policeman paused. "And you have a bodyguard because...?"

Arthur raised a brow and gestured with his hand. The living room was a mess. His briefcase was on the floor, there were papers everywhere, his laptop had a cracked screen, there was an external drive that didn't belong to him on which Agravaine was presumably copying files while deleting them from Arthur's desktop. "Clearly, my uncle was frustrated with my successful attempts to prevent him from taking over my company, and obviously harboured the suspicion that I knew more about his criminal dealings than I let on."

"Er." The officer cleared his throat. He glanced at his notes and sat up straight. "I'm going to bring in a detective."

"Yes, you do that," Arthur said. "And while you're at it, contact my lawyer, the Crown Prosecutor, my private investigator, the RCMP, CSIS, and Interpol, all of whom can confirm Agravaine's motives and activities. I'm sure they'll be happy to roll in the additional charges of breaking and entering, conspiring to cause bodily harm, and attempted murder into the long list of pending charges."
The officer blinked, looking out of his depth. "I'm going to call a detective in right now."

Arthur exchanged a glance with Merlin. Merlin knew what that look meant -- it was going to be a long night. Arthur sighed. "Please do."

By the time the detective sat down on the chair across from them, Leon had arrived and had taken charge, getting rid of all the extra police officers who didn't need to be there. Mithian was perched on a chair appropriated from the dining room, somehow looking done-up for a court case in the designer-chic of her jeans and button-down shirt, hair tied back in a messy bun. Perceval stood off to the side, his leather jacket draped on the kitchen counter, the gun harness stretching under the squeeze of improbably large muscles.

The smell of strong coffee filled the penthouse, and this time, Arthur went through the full story from start to finish. It was a long, long story that began with the first hints of Agravaine's illegal dealings, leading up to the suspicious plane crash, detailed all the thefts and embezzlement and criminal associations, and ended with the break-in. Leon provided more details; Mithian added supporting evidence, and Detective Anhora -- an older man with slicked-back brown hair heavily peppered with white, his chest big and broad, his belly trying to slide away to fat -- gave up trying to take notes and took out a digital recorder instead.

The sun was rising by the time Arthur trailed off, his voice heavy and drowsy, monotonous in his exhaustion, thick with the flatness of too many emotions and not enough energy to sort them through right now. Merlin jumped in when Arthur rubbed his eyes and signed one-handed, trying to add more information. He took Arthur's hand, stopping him.

"Do you have enough for now? Can we finish this another time? It's been a long night. Arthur's shattered," Merlin signed and said.

Detective Anhora glanced between the two of them, opening his mouth to protest, because there was still a lot more than he needed to know. It must have sunk in who he was talking to and the enormity of the situation, because he exhaled heavily, nodded curtly, and left his card behind.

Mithian dithered, collecting her notes before kissing Arthur on the cheek and left with a stern order to let Merlin take care of him. Leon lingered long enough to talk to Perceval, who said that he would stay until Merlin's bodyguard -- Kay -- showed up. Merlin imagined that if the RCMP was involved, Perceval was likely to figure highly in the investigation, now.

They were gone, finally, and there was a moment of blissful silence until Arthur got up and started to straighten the mess, picking up a pile of papers and leaving it on the table. He shook his head and went to set the alarm, standing there for a long time, pushing buttons, entering commands.

"What are you doing?" Merlin signed. He ran his hand up Arthur's arm, over his shoulder, down his back, in small circles, hoping to relax some of the tense muscles.

"Taking out everyone's codes except yours and mine," Arthur signed. He stared at the small display, checking again and again to confirm. Merlin stood behind Arthur, wrapping his arm around Arthur's waist, watching Arthur pause while the settings changed and requested confirmation, accept the results, then return through the menu to read the list of codes to make sure there were only two.

After the fourth check, Merlin pressed a kiss to the back of Arthur's neck. Arthur's motions stilled and he sagged against Merlin.
"If there's one good thing that came out of Agravaine trying to kill me," Arthur said, his tone annoyingly pragmatic, "It's that you haven't had the time to be nervous about tonight."

Merlin paced back and forth between his suitcase -- still sprawled on the floor in Arthur's bedroom -- and the dresser where most of his clothes had ended up. Arthur hadn't wanted to be alone after the attack, even though Perceval continued to bodyguard, and Merlin hadn't wanted to leave Arthur alone, either. Merlin had packed his backpack and Arthur packed Merlin's largest suitcase and neither had returned to Merlin's apartment except to pick up a few odds and ends, including his clothes for the evening's show.

"Oh, I'm plenty nervous," Merlin signed, turning away almost at once. He'd packed deodorant. He knew he had. He'd used it that morning --

Merlin jerked up when the deodorant landed in his bag. Arthur was holding up a comb. "Do you want this, too?"

"Yes, please," Merlin said, jumping over his bag. He tripped.

Arthur caught him before he did something stupid, like knock himself out against the dresser, or, worse, show up at the theatre with a black eye. There was never enough makeup in the world to hide black eyes.

"Merlin," Arthur said softly, a small, indulging smile on his lips. "Calm down. Take a deep breath. That's good. Take another -- For God's sake, Merlin, stop holding your breath, you're turning blue --"

Merlin gasped in a helpless little chuckle, leaning against Arthur. His heart was still racing and he thought he would pass out, but at least the tight constriction in his chest unfurled, finally. The way Arthur was kissing the side of his neck and running his hands down Merlin's back might have had something to do with it.

He felt only marginally better when he pulled away.

"I'm... Shit." Merlin rubbed his face. He knew that the only reason why he wasn't going out of his mind right now was because Arthur was keeping him on track. "I wish there were extra tickets. I tried to get some, but the show's sold out."

"I wish you had, too. It's all right, Merlin," Arthur said, giving him a light, light kiss on the lips before throwing himself onto the bed. There was something just perfect about the way Arthur was splayed out on top of the comforter wearing nothing but plaid pyjama pants, his blond hair mussed and ruffled and sex-tousled (largely because sex had been used recently in a temporarily successful attempt to distract him), his gaze calm and secure in a way that it hadn't been since before...

Before everything with Agravaine.

Merlin stared at Arthur for a long time, memorizing the sight. He didn't realize Arthur was talking until a pillow smacked him in the face. "What?"

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you to the Four Seasons?"

"No, it's all right. The Director's sending a car. It's almost as if they think I won't show up or something," Merlin said, though he was seriously considering it right now, particularly since Arthur was presenting a convincing argument. He frowned. "Will you be all right? I mean, I could
"always cancel and stay --"

"Merlin," Arthur said, his expression inscrutable, "I'll be fine. Go, or you'll be late."

Merlin exhaled heavily, but nodded. He jumped when he heard the buzzer. "He's downstairs," he explained with a hasty sign, shouldering his backpack and hurrying to the bed. He slid a hand between Arthur's head and the pillow, meeting his lips in a soft kiss, and darted for the stairs.

"Merlin!"

Merlin tripped two steps before coming to a stop. He turned around. "Yeah?"

Arthur held up his garment bag. "Forgetting something?"

"Oh, God." Merlin stumbled up the stairs, took the garment bag in trade for another kiss. "I'd forget my head --"

"Go," Arthur said, his tone bemused.

Merlin went, locking the door behind him. The elevator ride down was nerve-wracking, and he was a mess by the time the driver shut the rear passenger side door behind him. It clicked like a casket lid falling closed.

_God._

Merlin rubbed his hands over his face. He was shaking. What was he doing -- this was stupid. It wasn't too late to cancel --

His cell phone chimed with an incoming text, and Merlin glanced at it. It was Arthur.

_Sing to me tonight._

Merlin smiled despite himself.

The instant that Arthur was certain that Merlin was gone, Arthur jumped into the shower. He tried to take his time, because he couldn't go to the theatre for another couple of hours, but he was still ready far, far too early.

Arthur distracted himself with television. When that didn't work, he checked his emails. When he ran out of emails, he did a bit of work, but he couldn't concentrate.

The foremost worry on Arthur's mind this week hadn't been the possibility of Agravaine trying something against him, losing his company, or getting thrown under the bus by the Crown Prosecutors who were very interested in the case. It had been in keeping Merlin safe from Agravaine, from his anxieties, and to make sure he made his practices on time. It had amused Arthur to squeeze out the details of those practices from Merlin, but he'd elected not to tell Merlin that he already had tickets to the show -- that Gwen and Lance would be there, too -- because there was no need to make him more of a basket case than he already was.

Arthur glanced at the clock and decided that he would be arriving fashionably early. He shut down his computer, pulled on his jacket, and checked his phone before pocketing it. He'd sent Merlin a text hours ago, and he'd been checking his cell phone ever since. He hadn't expected a reply from Merlin; if anything, Merlin had probably turned his phone off, or had forgotten his phone altogether. Arthur wished that he'd gone with Merlin after all, but it would be hard to explain why he had tickets when the show was supposedly sold out.
It was a good thing that he'd left when he had. The traffic had slowed him down considerably; now, he was just in time. He parked his car in nearby lot, glanced down the road where Perceval was pulling up, and headed inside.

There was a nice-sized crowd milling into the Four Seasons. There were many older people, dressed to the nines; what looked to be family members of the boys singing in the choir; and there was a healthy population of people Arthur's age. If Arthur wasn't mistaken, there were a fair few members of the media in attendance as well. He thought he saw a too-familiar reporter in the crowd, the annoying one who could latch onto the tiniest wind of a scoop and not let go until she had her story in press, but it was dark, and he couldn't really tell.

He handed his ticket to a young man in tuxedo, and was directed to his seat with a series of vague hand signals that were more suited to guide him through a labyrinth than a theatre. Lance and Gwen were already there; he sat next to Gwen.

"I'm excited," Gwen signed. She was smiling, her fingers fretting with the fringe of her shawl. "But why couldn't we tell Merlin that we're here?"

Lance shot Arthur a concerned look. "Merlin doesn't know that we're here? He doesn't know that you're here?"

"I didn't want to make him nervous," Arthur said, unbuttoning his suit jacket, settling in his seat. He flipped through the programme, and sighed inwardly to realize that he'd have to wait until the very end to see Merlin on the stage. He glanced over to Gwen to say something along those lines, and frowned when he caught Lance say, "Oh, shit." He asked instead, "Is there something wrong?"

Lance shook his head, but Arthur thought he looked a little wide-eyed and pale. "Oh, no. Nothing. Everything's fine." He signed "Fine" with a shaky hand.

The lights flashed once and dimmed fractionally; more and more people drifted in, hurriedly seeking their seats. In the dark, Lance's cell phone was like a flashlight when it was flipped open, and Arthur raised a brow when he realized that Lance was sending a text.

Lance put the phone away. He was inexplicably grim and anxious. He leaned in to say something in Gwen's ear and started to stand up, but the lights went dark, and Gwen pulled him back down. The two whispered furiously, and Arthur cast a few curious, concerned glances in their direction. It didn't appear to be serious -- no one else was looking at them, so their voices weren't raising much over a whisper. Before Arthur could decide to meddle and ask if everything was all right, a spotlight turned onto the stage, and a stately older man with white hair, a dark suit, and a white collar walked across the stage.

Arthur recognized him from Leon's description of the initial surveillance he'd put on Merlin, back when they'd first met all those months ago and weren't sure if they could trust the lucky coincidence that had brought Merlin to Arthur. It was Father Gaius Masterson, the director of the school, Merlin's former mentor, and, according to Merlin, the most conniving, manipulative, blackmailing man on the planet. You'd like him. Somehow, the thought of knowing someone else could push Merlin to do things he wanted to do filled Arthur with jealousy -- a jealousy that was somewhat mollified by the fact that Father Gaius was an old man, a priest, and not competition for Merlin's affections.

In any case, not those sorts of affection.

Gwen used her cell phone to type out, Do u want me to tell u what he's saying?
Arthur gave her a soft smile, shaking his head. There was no point. As much as he appreciated Gwen's offer, loving her for it, her notetaking skills were about as good as her interpreting abilities -- that was to say, sloppy and capable, but not much beyond what Arthur could deduce of the speech on his own.

He imagined Gaius was thanking everyone for being there this night, for the support given to the Boy's Choir, for generously contributing to the charity that was meant to not only support the St Michael's oratory, but allow them to sustain outreach programs in the more impoverished areas of the city, so that young boys with the talent would have the talent to resources their abilities.

Arthur had learned that much from Merlin, from the flyer and from the programme that had been passed out.

As Gaius continued to speak, Arthur supposed he was waxing philosophical about the future of this new generation of singers, maybe even touching on St Michael's former students -- at least, that's what Arthur assumed when he saw several teenagers and young men stand up in the crowd, and as the audience clapped politely.

Gaius paused for a moment, waited for the men to sit down, and said something else that had the audience applauding again. Arthur glanced around; the spotlight on Gaius gave just enough illumination that he recognized Gwaine Sullivan, who was standing a couple of rows down.

Once the applause died down -- Arthur saw a few people still clapping, but the intensity had slowed -- and Gwaine had sat down, Gaius spoke again. This time, the applause was even more enthusiastic, but no one stood up this time.

Gwaine must have spotted him, because a few seconds later, Arthur's cell phone buzzed with a text from him.

_Has Merlin decided yet? Clock's ticking. Need to know now._

Arthur didn't bother answering. He would talk to Gwaine later, when the show was over.

Gwen was typing on her phone. When she was done, she nudged Arthur with a sharp elbow and he read, _He just said that although Merlin wasn't a student at St Michael's, he was Gaius' student from Montréal, and that tonight is his first public appearance in over a year._

Arthur nodded in thanks, smiling to see everyone's reaction at this announcement. Gwen put her phone away.

As Arthur watched, Gaius went through his speech -- it looked to be flawless, though with the stern authority of a man who was accustomed to speaking to large crowds of unruly children and keeping their attention. Arthur imagined that the audience was enraptured because of their memories of their own principals, bigger than life when they themselves had been children, waiting with held breath for the speech to end so that they could be released from the hall. Gaius' spoke for several long minutes more -- Gwen might have secured seats in the middle of the theatre, close to the front, but it was still too far for Arthur to lip-read -- before ending with what was most likely a summary of the programme and the standard _enjoy your evening_ before the spotlight faded. Gaius walked off the stage, the curtains falling shut behind him.

There were ten seconds of darkness -- Arthur counted -- before a faint light grew in the alcove with the orchestra and the main curtains spread wide. Arthur could see that the musicians were only lightly playing, offering background music to what was the star of the show -- a group of boys arranged in a crescent moon, three tiered style. The boys couldn't be more than ten years old; they were all wearing red robes over shirts with very white collars buttoned up all the way, their
hair parted and slicked back by parents a little too enthusiastic with the comb and hairspray. They all stood immobile and still except for heaving chests and open mouths.

Arthur saw the small smile on Gwen's lips; he saw other people nearby with the same, _aw, that's so sweet_ look on their faces. He glanced at the programme, using the light from the stage to make out the name of the song they were singing. It was _Now is the Hour._

It didn't mean anything to Arthur. He'd have to Google the lyrics later. He imagined he could do it now, but he hadn't missed the dirty looks shot in their direction when Gwen had typed out that single sentence from Gaius' speech on her Blackberry.

He glanced at the programme again. There were more songs like the first. There was a song title in German -- it was too dim for Arthur to try to translate it. A few in Latin, including _Ave Maria._ At least one in Italian -- Arthur cringed at a typo. The remainder were in English, and it was a laundry list of Church songs that Arthur only recognized because he remembered reading about them at some point or another in his life.

Merlin's song was _Ode to St Cecilia._ Arthur had badgered that little bit of information out of Merlin two days ago, and had read the lyrics, over and over, while pretending to be working.

It was going to be a long, boring evening full of silence and spontaneous applause until Merlin took the stage.

Arthur smiled to himself. He couldn't wait.

---

_Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus --_

Merlin aborted his frantic, desperate prayer for the earth to open up beneath his feet and swallow him whole when a heavy weight slapped on his shoulder. He dropped his hands from his face and looked into the mirror to see Gaius behind him with an expression of grave concern.

"I'm fine," Merlin said. His dressing room wasn't anything fancy -- a small room just big enough for several costume changes, a mirror, a chair. In his list of demands when he realized he'd been hoodwinked into doing the show, he'd told Gaius that he wanted a bucket in his dressing room, but there wasn't one in sight now.

He desperately needed it.

"You're not fine," Gaius said. "Tommy has been knocking on your door for the last ten minutes."

Merlin glanced past Gaius and saw the boy -- thirteen years old and already threatening to be taller than Gaius within the next few weeks -- fidgeting in the doorway. "Sorry, Tommy. I'm just --"

"It's all right," the boy said, giving Merlin a big, reassuring smile that was sure to belong to a heartbreaker when Tommy grew up. "I freaked out a lot when I had my first solo, too. You'll be fine, sir. Just think of naked people."

He left without waiting for an answer, and Gaius frowned. "I am going to speak to that boy about that."

Merlin exhaled a choking laugh. Not only was this not his first solo -- but thinking about naked people when one was a young teenager battling hormones, never mind when one was a grown man, _still_ battling hormones -- was a formidably bad idea. The audience didn't need to be wondering if the soloist was really happy to see them because they were there to hear him sing, or for some other reason entirely.
"Yes, tell him that I don't recommend it," Merlin said. He leaned back in his chair, but his shoulders barely brushed the solid wood before Gaius pulled him to his feet. "Gaius, wha--"


"I'm warmed up --" Merlin's mouth snapped shut when Gaius' eyebrow rose a fraction of a millimetre. It ended up being surprisingly difficult to run through even the most basic of exercises considering that his chest was already rising and falling with the staccato rhythm of a woman in labour, puffing out her cheeks in Lamaze. By the time he reached a point where Gaius nodded at him to stop, he was feeling more relaxed, but only because he was exhausted. He felt as if he'd just run a race.

He ran a hand over his forehead and found it covered with sweat. Gaius handed him a towel.

"How much time --"

"A few minutes," Gaius said. "The orchestra still has to be reorganized, so that gives you fifteen minutes at least."

Merlin fretted. He glanced at himself in the mirror; he was a wreck. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled off his under-shirt, glad that he'd brought spares, but he towelled off the embarrassing amount of sweat and waited for his skin to dry before he put on fresh clothes.

Gaius handed him a bottle of water wordlessly.

"Can't you tell them I'm sick or something?" Merlin blurted out.

The eyebrow rose a fraction higher.

Merlin groaned in defeat. He pulled on his clothes and leaned down to use the mirror in a hapless attempt to do something about his hair before giving up entirely. He buttoned the cuffs at his wrists and felt suffocated when he tied the button at his throat.

A moment later, he undid that button and rolled up his sleeves instead, ignoring Gaius' disapproval.

"You always told me to be comfortable if I'm going to be on the stage --"

"Yes, but you're not going to be wearing a robe to hide the Spider-Man pyjamas this time," Gaius said.

Merlin turned around to look at him; their eyes met, and they broke into giggles. "I would've gotten away with it too, if I hadn't worn those slippers."

"Yes, I did think that the pink bunnies clashed with your robe," Gaius said. He smiled, and stood up with a slow, stooped gesture that did nothing to mask the years that had crept up on him. "Shall we go? You'll feel better when you see the stage."

"Right," Merlin said doubtfully, but he followed Gaius.

There was the usual bustle of people -- performers, stage hands, directors, managers, maestros, conductors, musicians. The youngest children were being ushered out of the way by the older boys who were already old hands at performing while the crew was dismantling the large tiered crescent that had been constructed for the full assembly. There was a change-up at the orchestra level as well -- the instruments moved aside, rearranged, regrouped, the conductor for Merlin's
piece stomping past with wild-haired and wide-armed gestures while shooting your best performance or else glares toward the musicians.

Merlin fidgeted uncomfortably when it was aimed in his direction. It was a warning, a personal message. Do not fuck up. Merlin couldn't blame the director, really. Merlin's last few practices had been dismal. Instead of his usual crisp contralto, Merlin had struggled through a head voice falsetto; when the lyrics required a booming baritone, his voice had dipped into a raspy bass with all the quality of crumpled foil.

Despair settled over him as the last of the props had been dragged behind the curtain and as the curtain fell. The mad swirl of activity slowly petered out to a light, teasing breeze as the instruments pieces were picked up and as the musicians marched down the stairs to the orchestra level, none of them making eye contact with Merlin. Maybe they did it so that Merlin wouldn't be more nervous. Maybe it was so they wouldn't be anxious about the performance. Whatever the reason, in the end, it felt as if Merlin had been shunned.

"Shit," Merlin said, exhaling a heavy breath. He rubbed his face and turned around, planning on a new argument to convince Gaius to call it all off. His plans included tripping and falling on his face and breaking his nose; getting in the stage hands' way and breaking his arm; suffering a heart attack and being whisked away by ambulance.

Anything.

Except Gaius wasn't there. Merlin spotted him speaking to the show's director some distance away.

The heart attack was looking more and more likely.

"I hate these fucking shows," someone said nearby. Merlin turned around and saw the St. Michael's school janitor, Kilgarrah. "All these fucking people with their fancy shoes scuffing up the floor. I'll be cleaning the theatre all weekend and waxing the floors all week just to get the marks off."

"Er. You work here, too?"

"No, boy. I'm independently wealthy, but I can't bear to part with my coveralls. Are you daft? Of course I'm working."

Involuntarily, Merlin glanced down at his dress shoes. "Sorry."

"Should be, boy," Kilgarrah said, giving him a hard, critical look. "Wouldn't have a quarter of these people if the show weren't banking on your name. The director had the fucking nerve to tell me to clean up the upper mezzanine. Then he comes to tell me that I've got to do even more work. Did you know they oversold tickets? Do I look like I'm supposed to be doing heavy work? Huh? Do I?"

"Sorry?" Merlin asked, unsure.

"You could've done this the easy way, but no, you never do, do you? You run into things without thinking them through. You don't think about the consequences. How people are gonna get hurt. See this? Pinched my finger seventeen times -- seventeen. This could've been an easy show for me to set up, you know. The odd parent here and there. A few family members. Not this... This fucking circus show."

The curtains shifted just enough for Merlin to see the crowd. It was too dark to make out any particular face, but he could see physical shapes and forms.
"I heard them talking, you know. Gaius and that asshole of a Director. If this works out, they're going to get you to do this again. Thank fuck they're going to see if they can get more staff next year. Fuck. If I never have to go to that damn mezzanine again for the rest of my life, it'll be too soon. Fuck it all. Goddamn mezzanine. Do you know how many stairs there are up there?"

Kilgarrah drifted into silence, studying Merlin. Merlin shuffled his feet nervously, stopping when Kilgarrah's eyes went hard.

Then the man's voice grew soft, if a little gruff. "But this. It's a good thing that you're doing. The outreach program, I mean. It could use the cash. Lots of kids out there with the talent, but there's not so many places that'll take them in to teach them. 'Course, that goes all to shit if you can barely squeak out a 'G' note, yeah? It'll look bad on the school. Make that lot of hoity-toities out there think all we're good for is churning out the next generation of Justin Biebers."

Merlin tensed involuntarily. "Yeah, thanks for that. Like I need any more pressure on me right now."

He was hit on the back of his head. Merlin turned around wildly. "Hey!"

"What the fuck are you so worried about?" Kilgarrah asked, scoffing. "You're only singing for one person, aren't you?"

Then, without another word, the janitor walked away. Merlin watched him go, shaking his head. That was one odd, odd man.

Except for that last bit.

*You're only singing for one person.*

Merlin took a deep breath, bowing his head down. He wished -- oh, he didn't know what he wished. He wished Arthur was here. Even if his magic didn't respond to his singing, if he couldn't charm it the way he had been able to do lately, just knowing that Arthur was in the audience would make him feel better.

*Sing to me tonight,* Arthur had texted him. Merlin swallowed an unexpected lump in his throat.

"Maybe I will," Merlin whispered under his breath, and then he chuckled to himself, because he was being ridiculous. His magic didn't appear to think so, because it tingled under his skin like a kitten waking up, stretching its paws out in a sharp yawn, its claws dragging across the air.

Even if his magic behaved, Merlin wasn't sure what it would do. Would it be like it had been with Will? With that little girl he'd interpreted for more than a year ago? Would Arthur be able to hear the music? Would he... Would he even like it? God. He had to tell Arthur about his magic. He had to tell him everything. He needed to.

Gaius touched his arm and nodded. "Everyone's ready. Go ahead."

Merlin bit back all of the *we could still cancel* and *isn't there someone else* that he wanted to blurt out. Instead, he nodded firmly, rolled his shoulders back, and walked onto the stage. He'd already picked the best spot for the acoustics and that was where he stood now. He was looking down at the floor when the curtains swept open.

Merlin's heart raced. His magic jumped and startled and lashed out. Merlin grimaced, focusing on his breathing, willing his heart to ease and his magic to settle *the fuck down* before something disastrous happened.
Like a chandelier overhead snapping its chain and crushing audience members. He shut his eyes tight, hoping that didn't happen.

The spotlight brightened on him as the orchestra began to play the overture. He kept his head down, ignoring the applause building up. He concentrated on the slow adagio drifting up into an allegro. It was gorgeous music that sounded like a battlefield. Noisy trumpets wrestled with kettle drums, a bass flute struggled against an oboe, a cello versus a harp.

His magic settled, slowly, slowly, lazily pulsing in time with the music, falling into a rhythm as the overture repeated itself. Merlin relaxed, feeling better now that he knew his magic wasn't going to do something stupid, and he raised his chin and looked out into the crowd.

He felt a flash of panic.

_You're only singing for one person, aren't you?_

Merlin took a steadying breath. His magic drifted from him, filling the hall, seeking, searching, questing.

_Sing to me tonight._

Merlin closed his eyes. The music stopped abruptly, and in the clearest, highest tone that Merlin could manage, he sang.

"Hail! Bright Cecilia, Hail! Fill ev'ry heart!"

His voice dropped low, and he opened his eyes, imagining he was at the Diamond Show again, in the dark where Arthur was in the light.

"With Love of thee and thy Celestial Art;
That thine and Musick's Sacred Love
May make the British Forest prove
As Famous as Dodona's Vocal Grove."

Bit by bit the music picked up again, and Merlin's magic echoed a deeper tone when Merlin lightened his voice to sing the next part.

"Hark! hark! each Tree its silence breaks,
The Box and Fir to talk begin!
This is the sprightly Violin
That in the Flute distinctly speaks!
'Twas Sympathy their list'ning Brethren drew,
When to the Thracian Lyre with leafy Wings they flew."

This was the music that could never be replicated no matter how many recordings were made of Merlin in concert or in the studio. It was the echo of the magic, the ethereal dimension, the emotion stirred up and given invisible weight and form.

There was ease in Merlin's heart to hear himself fill the theatre, to feel the echo ripple back at him. This was how it had been, once, when he was a child, singing without care, singing for his mother on Christmas morning or to Gaius when Gaius shrugged off the teacher's mantle, or even to a Church full of worshippers on Easter Sunday. They had never demanded anything from Merlin beyond what Merlin was able to give, but it was for Arthur that he sang now. Arthur, who demanded everything, who made Merlin want to give.
Something clicked; his magic, restless until this moment, seemed to have found what it was looking for, and Merlin's voice rose to the very top of his range as he sang the next part.

"Tis Nature's Voice; thro' all the moving Wood
Of Creatures understood:
The Universal Tongue to none
Of all her num'rous Race unknown!
From her it learnt the mighty Art --"

Arthur fidgeted in his seat, feeling stupidly anxious. He could tell everyone was restless, waiting for the finale. Those nearest to him were whispering; some people leaned down to talk to others, while others twisted around to speak to people behind them.

There was enough of a break if anyone wanted to drift away, but it seemed everyone was rooted to their seat, even Lance, who had tried to dart off four times during the other pauses, only to be foiled three times by Gwen. The one time he made it with whatever excuse he had given Gwen, Lance had come back chagrined and checked his cell phone before sending another message.

But no one left, not even Gwaine, who had looked around during the first intermission to see who else was there. Gwaine had raised a brow when he recognized Arthur and nodded a hello and raised an inquisitive brow. Arthur had anticipated his question and answered it with a shrug and a shake of his head -- no, nothing's changed since the last time you texted me. Gwaine had sighed and nodded before both speaking and gesturing in something overcomplicated that might have been I'll talk to you later. He tapped his watch impatiently to drive the point home.

"Merlin's next," Gwen signed unnecessarily. Twice. Both times, Arthur nodded, biting back his nervous I know. He'd been following along, counting down every performance until they reached the last one.

Lance looked a little ill. Arthur wanted to ask if he was all right, but the lights dimmed and everything went dark. A muted glow reappeared in the orchestra pit, and Arthur could tell that the configuration had changed slightly; there were more instruments, different musicians.

There was movement on the stage; the curtains parted. The spotlight took its' damn time to come to full brightness on Merlin, who stood in the centre, dressed in black trousers and a white shirt, looking drawn and thin and petrified. His head was bowed, his chest was heaving, and Arthur wasn't sure if anyone else noticed, but Merlin's fingers were twitching as if he were fingerspelling something to himself. Arthur wished he were closer so that he could make out what Merlin was saying.

Fuck that.

Arthur wanted to run down the aisle to wrap his arms around him.

For the longest time, Merlin didn't do anything. He stood there frozen. Arthur knew that there was a musical introduction, but it was interminable. Arthur didn't realize his hands were clenched or that he was holding his breath until Merlin raised his chin.

And still, nothing. Merlin was pale under the harsh spotlight, almost as white as the shirt he wore. Abruptly, he screwed his eyes shut.

Come on, love. You can do it. Forget everyone else. Sing to me.

Arthur shifted in his seat. The orchestra abruptly came to a stop and Merlin opened his mouth to
sing a line.

A delicious frisson ran through Arthur's body and didn't quite leave.

Merlin paused, his chin dipped down slightly, and he sang some more. Arthur found himself looking toward Gwaine -- Gwen and Lance weren't into the opera, not like Gwaine Sullivan, the famous composer was, and they wouldn't be a good gauge of Merlin's talent. Arthur knew that Merlin had to be good -- he would have to be, to be on the receiving end of so much praise if all the articles he'd read on Google was anything to go by. Gwaine was watching intently, but there was a strange set to his expression, as if he expected more.

Arthur grimaced inwardly, hoping that Merlin's nerves weren't ruining his voice. He rubbed his arm absentmindedly, shaking out the strange tingling sensation.

The orchestra started playing again, piece by piece. Merlin was singing the next part. Gwaine's eyebrows rose, and his lips parted to mouth a single word. Yes.

Arthur relaxed and turned to watch Merlin again. Merlin's shoulders were down, there was some colour to him again, and it seemed as if Arthur was watching him come to life before his very eyes. Arthur shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The feeling of being caressed enfolded him. Arthur thought something stroked the back of his head and glanced over his shoulder, but the older couple seated behind him were far more interested in Merlin than in him.

Arthur shook his head and turned to watch Merlin.

His ears started to ring. There was a buzzing in his head. He felt lightheaded, nauseous. He rubbed his forehead with his fingers, shaking his head from side to side, trying to clear it.

"Th -- vrsal -- gue -- ne
-- all her num-- Race -- nown!
From her it -- the mighty Art --"

Something warm and comfortable settled on his shoulders, curled tightly around him, wrapped him in such peace and love that Arthur relaxed despite the strange, strange things he swore he was hearing in his head.

Then all at once it rang crystal clear. It was a strong, masculine voice, rich and melodic, full and harmonious, lovely, oh, so lovely, but so, so impossible.

"To court the Ear or strike the Heart:
At once the Passions to express and move;
We hear, and straight we grieve or hate, rejoice or love:
In unseen Chains it does the Fancy bind;
At once it charms the Sense and captivates the Mind."

Arthur sat up straight. Merlin.

Those were the words in the Ode that Merlin was singing. This was Merlin singing. It was Merlin's voice he was hearing.

"Oh, my God," Arthur whispered. He was conscious of someone shifting in their seat nearby, of looking at him, but he shook his head in apology, thinking that he had spoken too loud and someone was telling him to shush.

There was rippling, echoing, multi-tonal singing as Merlin went on,
"Soul of the World! Inspir'd by thee,
The jarring Seeds of Matter did agree,
Thou didst the scatter'd Atoms bind,
Which, by thy Laws of true proportion join'd,
Made up of various Parts one perfect Harmony."

"Thou tun'st this World below, the Spheres above,
Who in the Heavenly Round to their own Music move."

It was impossible, Arthur thought. He hadn't been able to hear since he was a child. Try as he might -- and his private demons knew how much he had wished it possible -- Arthur couldn't remember sound. He could feel vibration, he could identify a deep bass and a high pitch, he could tell the difference between too loud and just right and too quiet.

And Merlin, his Merlin -- Arthur was hearing him.

The voice in his head deepened and lilting though three ranges before falling into a deep, reverberating tone.

"With that sublime Celestial Lay
Can any Earthly Sounds compare?
If any Earthly Music dare,
The noble Organ may.
From Heav'n its wondrous Notes were giv'n,
(Cecilia oft convers'd with Heaven,)
Some Angel of the Sacred Choir
Did with his Breath the Pipes inspire;
And of their Notes above the just Resemblance gave,
Brisk without Lightness, without Dulness Grave."

"Wondrous Machine!

"To thee the Warbling Lute,
Though us'd to Conquest, must be forc'd to yield:
With thee unable to dispute."

No, it had to be wishful thinking. It was his imagination. He'd studied the Ode so intently that he had it stuck in his head, and he was fooling himself into thinking that he was hearing Merlin sing.

But that didn't explain why his heart hurt under the pressure of so much joy at being able to hear. Not so much just to hear, but to be able to hear Merlin.

It was beautiful. Merlin was beautiful.

Merlin's voice rose to such a height that it left Arthur breathless as he continued,

"The Airy Violin
And lofty Viol quit the Field;
In vain they tune their speaking Strings
To court the cruel Fair, or praise Victorious Kings.
Whilst all thy consecrated Lays
Are to more noble Uses bent;
And every grateful Note to Heav'n repays
The Melody it lent."
"In vain the Am'rous Flute and soft Guitar,  
Jointly labour to inspire  
Wanton Heat and loose Desire;  
Whilst thy chaste Airs do gentle move  
Seraphic Flames and Heav'nly Love."

"The Fife and all the Harmony of War,  
In vain attempt the Passions to alarm,  
Which thy commanding Sounds compose and charm."

Arthur's arm clenched the armrest of his seat in frustration. He didn't know what he wanted to listen to, what he needed to listen to. He was overwhelmed. He was suffocating. He was drowning. He was grasping for an extra moment, an extra lifetime, in which he could revel in this music.

How did people listen to music? Were they mesmerized by the melody? Were they captured by the lyrics? Was it the voice that enthralled them? Was it all three? How did a normal person listen to music like this? How could they do it time after time and not want to curl into the sound and lose themselves forever? How could they return to their lives, to the mundane quality of it all, when they could just as easily lock themselves away and spend all their time listening to music, again and again?

Arthur wiped the tears from his face. He didn't want Merlin to stop singing. He didn't know what particular set of circumstances had made it possible for him to be able to hear Merlin -- not the orchestra playing, not the people murmuring around him, not anything else but Merlin -- but he didn't want it to end. He was desperate that it shouldn't end.

Merlin's voice dropped down suddenly, severely, a serious tone weighing it down as he sang,

"Let these amongst themselves contest,  
Which can discharge its single Duty best.  
Thou summ'st their differ'ning Graces up in One,  
And art a Consort of them All within thy Self alone."

There was such a poignant pause at this moment that Arthur gasped, his hand pressed against his chest. He couldn't breathe. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to know that Merlin was nearing the end of the song, that this thing that he had never desired in his entire life, this ability to hear again, this thing that would never happen because all the doctors said that it wouldn't ever be possible, not if he wanted to survive the operation --

God. What could he do? What was doing this? How could he replicate this supernatural set of conditions that was allowing him to hear again? And not just that, but allowing him to hear Merlin?

Arthur knew that he would easily give up his fortune for the mere chance of hearing Merlin sing just one more time.

Arthur didn't know what it was. The lighting had shifted somehow. It was tinted a beautiful, golden shade, and every photon that struck dust motes in the air glittered like every star in the sky. It was as if Merlin truly was an angel come down from Heaven in that moment. His chin was lifted to the sky, his expression full of clear, crisp emotion --

It was so much like that photograph that Arthur had found, the Merlin who had sung on the stage years and years ago, that Arthur gasped a quiet sob.
Gwen squeezed his arm reassuringly, but she couldn't know what Arthur was feeling now. She wouldn't understand.

"Hail! Bright Cecilia, Hail to thee!
Great Patroness of Us and Harmony!
Who, whilst among the Choir above
Thou dost thy former Skill improve,
With Rapture of Delight dost see
Thy Favourite Art
Make up a Part
Of infinite Felicity."

Merlin's voice reached a high, rich note, full and pregnant of emotion, a salutation of music that was matched by the raising sweep of his hand as he finished with the chorus,

"Hail! Bright Cecilia, Hail to thee!
Great Patroness of Us and Harmony!"

The last few notes lingered, and Arthur clung to them, trying to commit them to memory. There was clarity in this, in his need to fill in every lost memory of sound, but the music drifted through his fingers and left him to sit and grieve.

He was the last to stand up. The last to clap. He was bursting with a maddening, chaotic swirl of emotion that was a mixture of sadness at his own loss, and his absolute joy to see the love of his life smiling shyly and waving at the crowd as he took several steps back and waved at someone backstage, encouraging them to come out. It wasn't long until the entire evening’s cast of singers surrounded Merlin in waves of red robes, mimicking him and waving at the audience just as Merlin had done a moment ago.

Arthur glanced down the rows toward Gwaine Sullivan and saw the man not only applauding, but pausing every now and then to stick his fingers in his mouth to whistle. Gwaine wore an expression of certainty, one that Arthur knew meant, *Yes. Him. I definitely, absolutely, one-hundred-per cent want him in my opera.*

Gwen touched his arm, and Arthur turned to her, watching her smile fade as she signed, "Why are you crying?"

He shook his head and wiped his cheeks dry, wishing he could tell her what had happened and not knowing if she'd believe him.

Then he caught the look on Lance's face and his world came crashing down.

Lance knew.

Lance *knew* that Arthur had heard the music. And in a convoluted, twisted, instinctive leap of logic that made no sense whatsoever, Arthur understood.

It hadn't been the position of his seat in the theatre, the very spot Merlin had stood on the stage. It hadn't been some sort of mystical technological nonsense resulting in the perfect synchronicity of sound frequency that had struck on the exact pitch needed for some sort of perfect storm of music. The stars hadn't aligned, a meteor shower hadn't coursed through the night sky, the end of the time hadn't come.

It hadn't been some mysterious supernatural force that had tortured him with the reality of hearing sound for the first time in nearly thirty years.
It had been Merlin.

The euphoria lasted for a long time. Merlin didn't remember what he did after he finished the song. His skin tingled with magic, his chest ached from filling the theatre with nothing but his voice, and his head buzzed with adrenaline. He remembered waving to the crowd. He remembered calling out all the St Michael's performers to join him, because the applause shouldn't -- couldn't -- belong to him alone. He remembered the calls for an encore and slipping out when the Boy's Choir nearly simultaneously picked a song to sing.

He didn't remember how he found his way back to the dressing room. He sat heavily in his chair, covered his face with shaking hands, too busy shaking with disbelief to let himself even think, I've done it.

But he had.

Merlin listened to the thump of departing footfalls, the loud, laughing chatter of young boys, the loving praise of their parents, the too-excited delight of the show's director. The dressing room was hardly soundproof, and he drank it in, letting their pleasure sink into his bones and soothe his soul.

It had been so long. He had missed the stage. His very being had ached to fill the universe with music, and that deep hurt had finally been eased.

Merlin lowered his hands and stared at his reflection in the mirror. He was sweaty, but it was the sweat of exertion, not nerves. There were bags under his eyes, shadows under his cheekbones, a sunken shade to his skin. Despite his exhaustion, Merlin hadn't felt this alive in years.

The beginning hadn't been smooth. A rough start with nerves gnawing at him. A shaky beginning with tempestuous magic determined to lash out mindlessly, squirming free of Merlin's control.

He'd had two choices then -- to let himself stumble to a stammer in an attempt to rein in his magic, or to let it go and hope that the aftermath of destruction was minimal.

Then, perfection. He'd reached a moment when everything had finally felt right. The electrified jerk of his magic smoothed until it was satiny soft, like a ribbon fluttering and twisting in a light wind.

Merlin had risked a glance over the audience when the music came to a natural pause and had seen the golden threads of his magic spreading through the crowd like the eddies of an ocean tide, funnelled and focused on a single point. Merlin had seen it before -- the way his magic would automatically pool around one person, a person that he cared about, who had wanted to be in the audience for no other reason than to support Merlin. But he hadn't seen Will in years -- he didn't even think Will wanted to talk to him ever again, and --

He hadn't had the time to think of what that had meant, of what it was before there was a knock on the door. Merlin had exactly one third of a second to pull himself together before Gaius walked into the room.

"My boy," Gaius said, giving him a broad smile. Merlin stood up to take Gaius' enfolding hug, stepping back a moment later to duck his head down and shake his head.

"I don't know what happened," Merlin said. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "I got lucky. I don't think it'll happen again."

Gaius swatted him on the back of the head, and Merlin glared at him. "What I heard tonight, that
was not luck, Merlin. That was you. That was the boy who sang for the simple pleasure of singing. The boy no one has seen for a very long time. And I am very happy to see him. You had better not hide him away."

"Gaius --"

"Merlin." The stern tone in Gaius' voice silenced Merlin. "There is no sin in allowing yourself to enjoy this moment. God knows that I am."

Merlin bowed his head. The door to his dressing room was ajar, but he could only hear receding voices now, the quiet of distant doorways closing, of people leaving. How long had he been in here, trying to hold himself together? It sounded as if nearly everyone had gone, even the stage hands.

"I should go," Merlin said. It was still early, he could pick up some wine and Arthur's favourite ice cream, and they could celebrate. He turned away and rolled his clothes into the garment bag. He went through his backpack, looking for his phone. He'd promised to text Arthur when he was finished with the show to let him know how it went. He glanced at Gaius while waiting for his phone to turn on. "Are the --"

"The reporters have been ushered out of the theatre, but they are most likely milling around the front entrance. If you really mean to disappear from the public eye again," Gaius said, a note of disapproval filling his voice as he too-astutely deduced what Merlin had in mind, "I recommend leaving by the side doors."

"They might already have thought of that," Merlin said, but it was worth a shot. "What about --"

"I very sternly reminded Mr. Sullivan that you sang the full Ode by yourself and that you are no doubt exhausted now. It took some persuasion, but he finally did leave," Gaius said. Merlin nodded his thanks, distracted as his cell phone vibrated with incoming messages. "He is intent on having you as his Oberon, you do realize that?"

"Yeah, I think it's come up," Merlin said. He frowned when he saw all the messages from Lance. Something had to be wrong, if Lance would fill his inbox like this. Was Arthur all right? Was the apartment building on fire?

Gaius put a comforting hand on Merlin's shoulder and squeezed. "You performed beautifully tonight, Merlin. I look forward to the next time."

And there would be a next time, if the tone in Gaius' voice and the raise of his eyebrow was anything to go by. Merlin nodded, in part to appease Gaius, in part because he had a feeling that he wouldn't have a choice.

"Goodnight, Merlin," Gaius said, heading for the door.


Gaius turned around. "Yes?"

"Thank you," Merlin said, the words failing him. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for pushing me. Thank you for being here for me.

Gaius smiled, gave him a small nod, and he was gone.

Merlin took a breath before flipping through the text messages from Lance.
Does Arthur know?

Merlin's brow furrowed. Know what?

*Im srry! Gwen got tckts. Thought u told Arthur about u.*

"What?"

Merlin scrolled through the messages in a panic.

*Arthur said didnt want u to knw we r here, not want u to be more nrvs*

*Tried to get bckstg to warn u but woulndt let me in*

*Shit. I think Arthur knows*

Merlin sat down heavily in his chair; the chair creaked.

*Srry. Arthur made me tell him evrythng.*

The screen dimmed and went dark.

Merlin's entire world dimmed and went dark.

He couldn't move. He couldn't feel his heart beating. He couldn't make himself breath. The only thing coursing through his mind was *Arthur*. It wasn't blood running through his veins; it was the absolute, total terror of knowing he'd lost Arthur.

The way his magic had behaved during the performance, from beginning to end? The way it had lashed out wildly, as if it had been searching for something? The way it didn't calm and settle until it had found the very thing it had been looking for, refusing to curl around the music until it had first curled around the object of its desires?

It made sense, suddenly. Abrupt, sudden, fearsome sense.

Merlin's magic had found Arthur in the crowd. Merlin's magic had let Arthur *hear* the music.

"Oh, God. No. Please, no."

Desperation pushed the string of completely useless "if onlies" that were going through his mind, latching onto his despair and plumbing their depths for more. He wanted to call Lance to find out what he'd told Arthur, exactly, because it wasn't as if Lance knew how Merlin's magic worked any more than Merlin did. He wanted to text Arthur to find out where he was, to catch up to him, to explain.

Merlin's phone buzzed in his hand, and he stared at it dumbly, not wanting to hear any more bad news from Lance. It wasn't until the very instant before the screen blinked out that Merlin registered an important detail.

Arthur had texted him.

He almost dropped his phone in his rush to read the message, but his finger hovered over the screen, fearing the worst. *I don't want to see you again.*

A gasped sob escaped his lips. He didn't want that. He'd do anything to keep it from happening. He'd come crawling on his knees and swear he'd give up music forever if Arthur could forgive him.
He forced himself to blink through the tears and read the message.

*Im on the stage.*

The mad dash from his dressing room, down the corridors, past the few people who remained, across the backstage, through the curtains — it was all a blur. Merlin skidded to a stop when he saw the sole figure standing in the middle of the stage, on the exact spot where Merlin had stood during the performance. Arthur had his back to him. His shoulders were slumped, his head was averted, looking out into the sea of empty chairs.

Arthur must have felt the reverberation of Merlin's footsteps on the wood floor, because his chin dipped down, and he turned around.

There was just enough illumination in the dimmed theatre that they could see each other clearly. Arthur was wrecked; his eyes were red, his hair was a mess, his tie was loosened, the top two buttons of his shirt were open. His expression was distant, far-away, closed-off.

Merlin could feel his heart shatter all over the stage. He tried to raise his hands, to sign that he was sorry, to ask that he be given a chance to explain, but all that happened was that his phone slipped out of his fingers and bounced on the floor.

Arthur's eyes followed the fall. The wall he hid behind crumbled, and Merlin couldn't make sense of the emotions behind it.

It was strange to see Arthur raise his hands, to gesture awkwardly and weakly and unsure, and Merlin had to blink through the haze of hopelessness to understand what Arthur was signing.

"I guess... you were... singing to me."

Merlin gasped a sob. How could he explain that Arthur had been the only thing on his mind when he sang? That his magic had never felt as powerful as that moment when it had found Arthur in the crowd? That he wouldn't have been able to carry through to the very end if Arthur hadn't been there?

He couldn't find the words. He nodded.

Arthur seemed to know everything that Merlin wanted to say, because he took a step forward.

"Would you... sing to me again?"

"Yes," Merlin said, his voice thick, his hands trembling uselessly. There were no thoughts that he didn't even know if he could. For Arthur, he'd find a way. "Yes. You're the... You're the only one I would sing for. If that's what you wanted."

Arthur didn't move. His eyes glistened, and a tear streamed down his cheek. Merlin wanted to close the distance between them, to wipe that sadness away. He sniffled, feeling miserable and knowing he had no right to feel this way, because he was the one who had done this to Arthur.

"What I want..." Arthur signed, his hands faltering. He licked his lips and took a deep breath.
"What I want is for you to come home with me."

"Arthur," Merlin said, and he couldn't say any more. Arthur was in front of him, reaching up to touch him with gentle fingers, and for this touch alone, Merlin knew that he would give Arthur anything.
Merlin stepped closer, the contact of Arthur's chest against his a shock that made him gasp. Arthur brushed his palms over Merlin's cheeks and behind his neck.

Arthur kissed him, his lips soft and tasting of tears.

It wasn't Merlin's first time in Arthur's penthouse, but it was the first time that he didn't gawk at the elaborate décor. He took a dutiful glance around the room to note that nothing had changed, except in one short evening out, everything had turned on its head.

Arthur stood motionless just outside of the kitchen in the open-layout concept, facing the living room with blank eyes. He reached out and put his keys in the bowl on the island and tugged at his tie.

"I'm still --" He stammered to a stop. "I'm... It's been almost thirty years. I don't --"

He rolled his tie in his hands. He stared at it for a long time.

Merlin put his backpack on the floor and draped his lumpy garment bag over one of the kitchen stools, where it promptly slipped and fell. Merlin's magic lashed out and held it in the air for a wobbly moment. He stared at it. Arthur was staring at it, too.

The garment bag crumpled to the ground in a messy plastic heap.

"How long have you been able to do that?" Arthur asked.

"My whole life," Merlin signed and said when Arthur looked up at him. "I didn't know about the singing until --"

"Will."

Merlin paused for a moment, trying to figure out how Arthur had known about Will, remembering that he'd mentioned Will all those months ago at the Diamond Show. "Will. We were playing in the back yard. I was six, maybe seven years old. I started to sing, and he... he asked me what that was, and..."

Merlin trailed off. Arthur nodded, but he was shaken, like a man on the wrong end of a collision.

"I haven't... I haven't been able to do it for a long time. The magic, I mean. Will stopped being able to hear me years ago. It's why we fell out. He thought it was because I wasn't happy. I told him he was just jealous of my career. I was travelling all over the world, and he was stuck at home. He told me to quit. I told him to fuck off. Turns out, he was right," Merlin said, dropping his hands.

"I wasn't happy."

Arthur didn't say anything for a long time. He took a step closer and touched Merlin's arm. "And now?"

"I'm happy when I'm with you."

He saw need in Arthur's expression. It wasn't the rattling, heated want that could only be alleviated by desperate, mindless sex. It was deep, bone-deep, soul-deep, heart-wrenchingly open craving for something that could make him whole.

It startled Merlin to see what he felt for Arthur being reflected back at him.

"I don't care if I never hear you again," Arthur whispered, his voice hoarse. His hand travelled up
Merlin's arm. "I don't. I want, but don't need it. It's... It's a little frightening. I've... It's been so long. I don't know how to hear anymore."

"Arthur --"

"But I'm not scared of you. I just -- I want you. I need you. And I --" Arthur's voice faltered, and Merlin had to strain to hear the rest. "You could do so much more. Your magic. Your music. Why are you -- why are you...

Merlin read on Arthur's lips what Arthur couldn't say out loud.

*Why are you with me?*

"I don't want to be with anyone else."

Arthur glanced away, a soft, dry chuckle full of scorn, as if he were steeling himself to send Merlin away. "I can't do anything for you."

It cut Merlin's heart to hear the despair, how worthless Arthur felt. Now, he understood why Arthur brought him here. It wasn't to get an explanation, it wasn't so that Merlin could try to make amends. Arthur was saying good-bye.

Merlin's knees buckled under him at the thought. At a future without Arthur. He couldn't lose him just when he'd found him.

"I can't live in your world. You should be with someone like Gwaine. Someone who understands the music. Someone who --" Arthur pulled away. Merlin caught him.

"Arthur." Merlin took Arthur's face in his hands. "Arthur, listen to me. No, don't be an utter ass and look away. I know how I feel. I know what I want. I don't want to be with anyone else. I love you. You do everything for me. You don't even realize how many times you've saved me."

"Merlin," Arthur protested. He shook his head and took a step back. Merlin walked him to the living room until the couch was a barrier, keeping Arthur from running away. Arthur's hands dropped to the couch to steady himself, but he didn't try to escape.

"I don't care about any other world but ours. All I care about is you. Don't -- don't push me away, Arthur. If someone came to me right now and offered me any theatre in the world, any opera -- I would say no. I would laugh in their faces. I would tell them that there's nothing they could possibly offer me that would make me leave you. I want to stay with you. I would give it all up for you."

"I don't want you to --"

"You're not making me do anything. You're not. I've had it all, Arthur. I've been everywhere. And everything I want is right here. It's you. So stop being a selfless bastard for once in your life. Stop sacrificing yourself for someone else. You want me. You need me."

Merlin sank down to his knees.

"I want you. I need you. And I'm offering myself to you."

Arthur stared down at him, confused, conflicted, helplessly fond. His shoulders sagged in slow defeat. He joined Merlin on the floor, framing Merlin's legs in the vee of his thighs, reaching for him with the soft of a jeweller's hand touching the most fragile crystal.
Arthur never thought he would attend an opera, never mind regularly. He had a full season's ticket and a private box for which he sometimes sent invitations to some of his most valued business associates and staff members to borrow it, and sometimes, sometimes, Arthur brought a select few to join him when he attended one of Merlin's performances. Most of the time, he preferred to sit in the private loge in the mezzanine alone, out of sight of anyone who could see him. He couldn't -- wouldn't -- run the risk of someone finding out just how Merlin's performances affected him. It wasn't just seeing Merlin on the stage as Oberon. It was being able to hear again, even if the only thing he would ever hear was Merlin's voice.

The silence that Arthur lived in had become uneasy without Merlin. He hadn't known true peace until Merlin.

Tonight, he had a guest. He hadn't minded that his newest acquaintance had witnessed Arthur tearing up because he'd been tearing up himself.

Arthur checked his watch. Right about now, Merlin was removing the thick layer of makeup (he would no doubt miss a few spots that Arthur would clean off for him later), and changing into something less ostentatious than a fairy King's costume (there was one in particular that Arthur insisted Merlin bring home one night, but Merlin had not given in to Arthur's demands). He'd be out to join the after-party soon.

His guest had disappeared -- something about needing to collect himself after listening to Merlin. Arthur could understand the sentiment; there were nights when Arthur positively suffocated under the strength of Merlin's voice and magic.

Arthur already spotted some of the cast milling about and socializing; he smiled to himself, knowing that it wouldn't be much longer before Merlin emerged.

There weren't many after-parties -- and even then, more often than not, Merlin would emerge from his dressing room with a tired, but satisfied look on his face that was all that Arthur needed to know that he'd had enough and that he wanted to go home. It was on those quiet nights with Merlin that Arthur was graced with seeing Merlin truly, completely calm. But at this after-party, Merlin's presence as the star was mandatory. This special presentation of Gwaine Sullivan's Midsummer's Night was associated with the fundraising gala for the Blood Diamond Relief Fund -- the one that Gwaine had promised to hold if only Arthur could secure Merlin as Oberon. Little did Gwaine know that Merlin had made the decision on his own. Arthur had never once mentioned Oberon to Merlin, but, then again, Arthur had no scruples when it came to raising money for his charities. He was already planning on squeezing out many more similar shows from Gwaine, starting with hints that perhaps Merlin wasn't interested in the opera that Gwaine was composing now -- an opera that Gwaine was writing specifically to make use of Merlin's rare vocal range.

Having the opportunity to make Gwaine Sullivan squirm always made Arthur happy, if only as payback for the number of times that Merlin came home from practice in an angry huff.
The Toronto Opera House was full to bursting with the city's elite -- there were a fair number of celebrities from around the world as well, which only helped heighten awareness of the charity's purpose and sell even more tickets. Arthur looked around with a small smile on his lips, absurdly proud that all these people had come to listen to Merlin' sing but knowing full well that it wasn't the only reason that they were there.

If people wondered why Arthur Pendragon was attending the opera, they tactfully never asked. Tonight, however, there was a purpose -- the Pendragon fundraiser. The crowd took full advantage of his presence to engage in a little bit of business. The enterprising few weren't limited to stockbrokers or investors or even the odd celebrity, but included the media.

Ever since the news had broken with headlines for Agravaine's multiple indictments, the media had been chasing Arthur for a statement. Arthur had refrained from making any direct comments about Agravaine, instead promoting the company as being proactive in its cooperation with the investigation and dedicated to regaining the public's trust, but now that the jury had returned with multiple multi-year to life-sentences for industrial espionage, counterfeiting, attempted murder, and his hand in the deaths of Uther and Ygraine (Agravaine's associate, Helios, had been most damning in his testimony in exchange for a lesser sentencing), the media was becoming more aggressive in wanting to hear Arthur's side of the story.

And no less aggressive than a hungry vulture picking at a carcass was Morgause Gorlois, the reporter who had been chasing after Arthur and Merlin ever since she'd spotted them together at that gala fundraiser months ago.

Arthur spotted Morgause's approach and excused himself from the Romãos with a kiss on Isolde's cheek and a firm handshake with Tristan, taking a steeling breath when Morgause stood in front of him with a smug smirk on her lips.

"Hello, Morgause," Arthur said. He glanced down at her outfit -- a navy blue sequinned evening gown that showed off both curves and cleavage -- and added, "You're looking beautiful this evening. Is that a loaner from Dior?"

"Ever the evasive flatterer, Arthur," Morgause said. She paused to glance around. "May I offer my congratulations?"

"You can," Arthur said with a slight nod of his head. "But only if they don't come with questions. Tonight is not the night."

"But there will be a night?" Morgause asked, raising an interested brow. "Are you reconsidering that exclusive I've been asking for?"

Arthur heaved a sigh. "Morgause --"

"Before you decide," Morgause said, "You should know that I'm not necessarily congratulating you for the success of this show. And maybe, just maybe, this will change your mind about that exclusive. I'm not the enemy, Arthur."

She handed him a large white envelope and walked away.

Arthur frowned at her -- he would never understand reporters, particularly not ones as enigmatic as Morgause. He took out and unfolded the sheets of paper from the envelope.

It was a full-colour mock-up -- the sort right before the print run went to press -- with a post-it note in Morgause's spidery handwriting: *The New Year's edition of People. I trust you have no objections.*
Arthur rolled his eyes. If he did have objections, well, it was too late now. No one, not even the editor-in-chief at the magazine would call for a stop if Arthur was in a snit over an article in --

Arthur checked front page again.

-- the World's 100 Most Beautiful People.

Arthur scoffed. He removed the blue post-it note.

The headline, in big, bold script, was *A New Dynasty*. There were several brightly-coloured photos catching the eye -- a small photograph of Arthur at the Diamond Show that previous March; an old photograph of Merlin in concert in Edinburg; a square of what must have been a telephoto shot cropped to show Arthur and Merlin walking out of a restaurant.

Larger than life was a grainy low-light backlit photograph -- from a cell phone, maybe -- of Arthur and Merlin on the stage at the Four Seasons that must have been taken on the first night that Arthur had ever heard Merlin sing. They were holding each other, their lips touching in a kiss.

Arthur stared at the image for a long time. He hadn't known that it even existed -- and he would have known if it had. He regularly ran vanity-searches on Merlin's name, filling his obsession of knowing everything that people said about Merlin and his talent, and while photographs of Arthur with Merlin were not uncommon, this photo...

It was perfect. He didn't know if it was the lighting. The way they were facing each other. The desperation they had felt that night. But in the grainy black-and-white, faintly coloured image, Arthur was distinctly struck with the thought of seeing two parts of the same whole.

He glanced up, and predictably, spotted Morgause looking in his direction. He scowled at her and turned the page to read whatever damning article that Morgause had written now.

_Uther and Ygraine Pendragon's fairy tale romance, their generous, philanthropic deeds, and their conquest of both Wall Street business and High Society fashions came to an abrupt end in a tragic plane crash over one year ago. They passed on their legacy to their only son, and it is a legacy that promises to be as scintillating as the one that came before. If not more so._

_Very recently, it came to light that Agravaine DuBois, formerly of Nexen, BRINKS, and Pendragon Industries, was involved in an international smuggling ring supplying faked authenticity certificates to diamonds emerging out of war-torn countries. An indictment of charges handed down by the judicial court includes not only shady business practices, forgery and money laundering, but also manslaughter and attempted murder. This blight on the diamond industry has been sentenced to what is, at last count, two cumulative life sentences._

_Despite this scandal, Pendragon Industries, one of the principal producers and suppliers of precious gems and metals, is riding the crest of the international popularity as Arthur Pendragon spearheads a worldwide drive in accepting the latest advancement in tracking and curtailing the influx of Conflict Diamonds on the market, but in securing peace of mind with the laser-engraving of serial numbers in the inner facets of every diamond emerging from a Pendragon mine. At last report, twenty-eight countries have signed the Diamond Mandate issued by the International Diamond Commission, promising compliance with worldwide regulations in an effort to restrict the money fuelling the wars in South Africa._

_On top of this incomparable success, the young sovereign of the diamond world has designed a secret new collection that has the fashion world's heart all a-flutter. Although the buzz is high, and Pendragon Industries has thus far refused to release photographs of the new designs, the plans to unveil the collection, entitled "Albion" in the company's tradition of naming their designs after
British mythology, have not changed. Rumour has it that the diamonds are the ultra-rare black carbonado diamonds from South America -- diamonds that come from property that was acquired in a risky but profitable agreement with the reclusive and volatile Romão family.

Arthur's lips pressed together in irritation. If he ever found out who had leaked this information to Morgause, he would strangle them. He glanced up again to see Morgana and Leon speaking to Morgause, and his eyes narrowed. Arthur trusted Leon, and the Romãos had no idea what Arthur was doing with the black diamonds, but Morgana...

If this was her revenge for having kept Merlin's background as an opera singer -- never mind their relationship -- a secret from her, well, Arthur was going to have to stop telling her anything from now on. That might not stop her, but maybe cutting off her access to the Pendragon vault would teach her a lesson.

Arthur sighed inwardly. He could dream.

He continued to read.

Arthur Pendragon's early reign was tumultuous. A lesser man would not have overcome the obstacles in his path with the same sense of justice, of honour, and of fairness -- not to mention the flair and panache that the Pendragons are known for. One would think that Arthur could rest on his laurels now that his greatest battles have been fought, but Arthur, ever the conqueror, has laid claim on the most elusive diamond of all.

Two years ago, the opera lost one of its brightest rising stars when Merlin Emrys inexplicably disappeared from the stage. Gifted with the rare upper register of a countertenor and with a flexible voice that can fall to a surprisingly deep baritone, Merlin enraptured live audiences worldwide in a multitude of theatrical roles and operatic performances with some of the most famous names in music. His unannounced departure from the profession caused a void in the theatre world that was made all the more devastating by rumours that it had been fuelled by a plague of tragedies that eclipse even Shakespeare's greatest plays.

Merlin's return to the stage was made all the more surprising by his last-minute addition to the St Michael's Boy's Choir charity fundraiser in Toronto where he delivered an impeccable, heart-wrenching solo performance of Purcell's Ode to St Cecilia. How and why he was lured out of the shadows and onto the stage where he belongs as Oberon in Gwaine Sullivan's Midsummer Night can be answered with one name: Arthur Pendragon.

While it remains a mystery how Arthur Pendragon and Merlin Emrys met, the two men have been inseparable for the better part of a year. Merlin Emrys is as much a fixture at Pendragon Industries at Arthur's side as Arthur Pendragon is at the Toronto Opera House where Merlin practices and performs. However improbable the relationship between a deaf diamond magnate and an opera singer of modest origins, the two have become the darlings of the media, not only for their numerous public appearances, but for their charitable work, their down-to-earth charm, and a love of epic, fairy-tale proportions.

With their recent engagement and plans to wed within the year --

Arthur groaned inwardly. If this was going to hit the stands soon, he was going to have to accelerate his timeframe for the proposal. Goddamn Morgana. Arthur wasn't only going to revoke her access to the vaults -- she wasn't even going to get an invitation to the wedding.

-- we see the rise of a new dynasty.

Arthur glanced through the papers again, shaking his head. As much as he was disgusted by some
of the details -- was he really going to have to make his cousin sign a non-disclosure agreement? --
the article was well-written, tactful, and thoughtful, casting Pendragon Industries in a good light
despite the scandal, and giving just enough detail about Arthur and Merlin without infringing on
their privacy.

He looked up to see Morgause through the crowd. She was by herself now; Morgana and Leon
had drifted off, but Morgause had stayed where she was, waiting with far more patience than
Arthur expected her to have. She raised her eyebrows at him in question.

Arthur sighed.

He nodded. He made a telephone with his hand, then pointed his finger first at himself, then at
Morgause. I'll call you.

Satisfied, Morgause smiled and drifted away.

Arthur folded up the papers, replaced them in the envelope, and tucked them deep in his tuxedo
jacket. He had better find a way to propose to Merlin before the magazine hit the stands -- or,
ailing that, before Merlin found the article if Arthur couldn't destroy it first. He spotted movement
through the crowd -- Merlin's audience was applauding his entrance, but he ducked his head shyly
and waved, shaking hands and smiling and trading a few words with people. However much that
he was slowed down, Merlin didn't deviate from his target. Merlin was in front of Arthur within
minutes, cupping Arthur's cheek with one hand, placing a sweet kiss on his lips.

Arthur reached up to wipe a smudge of white at the corner of Merlin's jaw.

"Gorgeous," he said. The singing, the performance, Merlin.

Merlin blushed like he always did.

"You're single-handedly keeping every florist in town in business," Merlin signed. "I keep telling
you not to --" 

Ever since Merlin had made a throwaway comment of never being able to stay at a performance
long enough to collect whatever few flowers he had received from his fans -- never mind to stick
around long enough to see them wilt -- Arthur had made it his personal mission that Merlin would
receive flowers at each and every performance. "Since when do I listen to you?"

"You must listen sometimes, or you'd never manage to get any work done," Merlin signed,
pausing to lean in to kiss Arthur again. "But really, stop it. Or at least make sure the rest of the cast
gets flowers, too. I think they're getting jealous."

"Of the flowers, or of your handsome boyfriend?" Arthur smirked.

"Now you're just fishing for compliments," Merlin signed.

Arthur saw his guest for the opera appear behind Merlin and held Merlin steady. "I have a surprise
for you."

Before Merlin could protest that he shouldn't have, Arthur turned him around.

It had taken some doing to convince Will to come to Toronto, even more to make him consider a
position at Pendragon Incorporated as a graphics designer. When Leon had finally tracked down
Merlin's childhood friend, Arthur had learned that not only was Will incredibly talented, he had
been out of work for the better part of a month. The timing, for Arthur, had been perfect. Arthur
needed a new head of the marketing department after firing the last one -- Arthur had been so
happy to see Edwin go.

But the hardest part wasn't convincing Will to move, to join the company, or even to come to the opera to hear Merlin sing.

It had been to get him to do something about his wavy, out-of-control hair (though, honestly, Gwaine's hair was a million times worse, and Arthur had given up on Gwaine as a lost cause) and to put on a tuxedo.

But it was all worth it to see the stunned expression on Merlin's face, the slack of his fallen jaw, the wide-round of his eyes filling with tears, the way he clasped both hands over his mouth to cover his shock.

Will pressed two fingers against his brow and saluted. "Hello."

It was meant to be casual and nonchalant, except his eyes were just as watery as Merlin's. The silence stretched and neither of them moved until Will broke the silence with a brief glance in Arthur's direction and quick, flighty gestures.

"So this asshole comes knocking on my door. Packs my bags for me. Drags me to Toronto. Finds me an apartment in this dingy little building next to the nicest guy on the planet, a guy you probably already know named Lance. The last tenant was a slob, I'm still finding trashy romance novels tucked in the back of the closet, and the old-ass answering machine that's still hooked up keeps lighting up with messages. Lance tells me that they're from a lady named Gail telling me to get my ass back behind the cash at the store, or I'm fired."

Merlin gestured weakly. Arthur had no idea what Merlin had signed; he was too stunned for words.

"Then just as I'm settled in, this asshole tells me that if I want to keep my new job, I've got to come to this opera thing with him. I was expecting large women with Viking horns and cone tits, except, instead..." Will trailed off, dropping his hands. He took a steadying breath and signed, "It's my skinny-ass best friend, and fuck if I didn't realize how much I'd missed him."

A tear streamed down Merlin's face. He raised his hands and signed shakily, "You have no idea how sorry --"

"Fuck that noise. Just tell me you won't do it again." Will gestured toward Arthur. "He says it won't, that he won't let it, but I want to hear it from you."

Merlin's hands moved in a firm, definite, never-never-never. Will took three quick steps and enfolded Merlin in a crushing hug.

Arthur smiled to himself. He walked away, letting the two catch up. He spoke to a few people, acted as a buffer to distract Gwaine from interrupting Merlin and Will, caught a glimpse of Gwen with Lance talking with her brother, Elyan. Elyan caught Arthur's eye, gestured to his watch and tilted toward the raised floor at the top of the stairs.

As much as Arthur was loathe to interrupt Merlin, he found that he didn't have to. Merlin was walking up to him, Will following behind.

"I love you like mad, you know that?" Merlin signed.

Before Arthur could say anything, Merlin silenced him with a kiss.

When they broke for air it was to more than a few onlookers smiling in their direction; Arthur
thought he saw Gwaine pulling his fingers out of his mouth in what must have been a loud whistle. Merlin ignored it all -- now, like always, all his attention belonged to Arthur.

"Time for your speech?" Merlin signed.

Arthur smiled and shook his head. He took Merlin's hand, squeezed, and led the way up the stairs to the platform.

"Time for our speech."

Chapter End Notes

The LJ Masterpost is here if you prefer to comment there.

Works inspired by this one. Songs In《We Are All Diamonds》 by Lan_Cheer

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!