



## Standing Right in Front of You

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# Prologue

## London, Mayfair

"I'm leaving," Gwen says quietly, standing in the door to Arthur's study with her coat on and her handbag tucked under her arm.

Arthur looks up from his desk with a frown. He didn't see any appointments in their shared calendar on the pantry door for tonight. He wonders if he forgot pub night again.

"When will you be home?" he asks, remembering that Gwen asked him to show more of an interest in what she was doing. Gwen's face, instead of showing signs of pleasure that Arthur's showing an interest in what she's doing, goes through an emotion that disappears too quickly for Arthur to identify. He thinks it looked like sadness.

Arthur's frown deepens.

Gwen takes a step into the study, and now Arthur can see the suitcase and duffel bag sitting in the hallway.

"I didn't know you were going on a trip," he offers apologetically. Maybe he truly didn't notice that there was something on the calendar. Of course it's entirely possible that it's a spontaneous trip. It's the school holidays, after all. Gwen might be taking him up on the offer to go on vacation without him since he'd be too busy working to take time off. "Do you want me to drive you to the train station?" He makes to get up from his desk but stops when Gwen shakes her head.

"No, not a trip," she replies calmly. "What I meant was, I'm leaving you. For good."

Arthur's eyes widen and he stares at Gwen. Her words make no sense to him. "What?" he finally manages.

"I don't know how to make this plainer," Gwen says. "Things haven't been right between us for so long and I just —" She sighs and tucks a strand of her hair back behind her ear. When she speaks again, her voice sounds resigned rather than sad or regretful. "I can't do it anymore, Arthur. I just can't."

"But we've been working things out!" Arthur tries to protest. "I've been trying to be more attentive." He swallows. "I thought we were doing better," he finishes quietly.

Gwen shakes her head again. "We really weren't. I want more from you than meaningless platitudes and hollow efforts to be affectionate." She looks at Arthur, and he wonders how Gwen can be so bloody calm about this. She's giving up on their life together, on everything they've built over the last ten years. Why isn't it affecting her?

"I don't want to end up hating you," Gwen admits finally. "I care about you too much for that, but I can't be with you anymore. Not like this. I'm sorry."

She steps away again and Arthur wants to call her back, wants to get up and take her hand and stop her from going.

But he doesn't.

He feels numb and his first instinct is to shut down and not let any emotions overrun him, so he goes with it. He needs to keep a cool head first and foremost. If he allows himself to feel all the pain and anger and resentment that he knows lurks just at the back of his mind, he might lash out. Losing his temper now won't help anything because it will turn into harsh words that will make certain that Gwen won't ever speak to him again.

"I'm staying with Morgana for the time being. I've packed enough clothes to last me a while, and I've been moving out anything I want to keep already, so there's not much left to pick up anyway."

Arthur swallows. He hadn't even noticed that Gwen's things had been disappearing. *Oh God.*

"Goodbye, Arthur. I wish things could have been different," she says, and now there's finally a hint of regret in her voice. Arthur looks up. He doesn't know how to cope with this situation, so he does what he always does when he finds himself out of his depth. He straightens his back, and juts out his chin. It's almost as if he can hear his father tell him 'stiff upper lip, son!'

"Me too," he says stoically.

He doesn't stop Gwen from turning her back on him and leaving the room, but it's a close thing. He almost rushes after her to fall on his knees and beg her to stay, to give him another chance. The prospect of being alone from now on scares him, and yet he can't make his legs move.

When he hears the front door click shut, Arthur flinches. His shoulders are still rigid when he sits back down. He stares straight ahead, staring at the open door until his eyes hurt from the strain. His mind keeps going round in circles, always coming back to Gwen's impassive face when she told him she was leaving him. He wonders how much he must have hurt her that she's able to walk away from their relationship appearing as if it didn't even hurt a little bit.

Finally, he drags himself to their – well, his, now – bedroom. He undresses simply by habit, and crawls under the sheets. Sleep doesn't come for hours.

### **Meanwhile in Hackney**

Merlin stares at the picture of himself and Will for a long time. They're at the beach, Merlin with a horrible sunburn, and Will looking almost as bad. They're laughing, arms slung around each other, both obviously happy just to be near each other. The quality of the print isn't the best because when they took it, selfies weren't even called that yet and phone cameras hadn't yet reached the standard they have nowadays. And yet, it's one of Merlin's favourite pictures of them.

He strokes Will's face, traces his smile with the tip of his finger.

It's unfair. Horribly, terribly unfair.

They were meant to have a great night out. Nothing special like celebrating an anniversary or promotion. Just a date. Dinner, a terrible film at the cinema, and then a walk home.

It was the same as so many nights before. They stole bites off of each other's plates, and shared dessert. At the cinema there were a handful of other people braving the late night showing. Of course that meant that Will and Merlin were constantly shushed. They have a habit for laughing too

hard during moments that weren't supposed to be funny and therefore inadvertently always were to them. It had been the perfect night out.

It had rained while they were in the cinema, and even though the temperature had dropped a few degrees, Will wanted ice cream. Merlin had argued that it was too cold for ice cream now but Will wouldn't give up. Not even when Merlin pointed out that there was nowhere open to get ice cream from. They could head back and go to the Tesco on Morning Lane, Will had said. But Merlin was much more interested in getting home and into bed.

He was going to tell Will exactly what it was they could be doing instead of getting ice cream when Merlin heard the screeching of tires.

Someone, probably a police constable but Merlin isn't sure, explained to him that the driver had swerved to avoid hitting a stray dog. Apparently he had lost control of his vehicle on the wet cobbles and ended up heading straight for the pavement.

Merlin screws his eyes shut, trying to dislodge the memory of the headlights racing towards him and the sudden pain as he hit the ground a few feet to the side. He looked up just in time to see –

Merlin gasps, and tries to replace the image with happier memories.

Like that day on the beach.

Tears are blurring the picture beneath the glass. Eventually Merlin cries himself to sleep on their bed that feels like it has grown in size since this morning. He's curled around the picture, still wearing all his clothes, not bothering to pull the duvet over himself.

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## Part 1

### Six weeks later

Arthur's inspecting begonias, wondering if he should get those or go with the more conventional red roses instead. At least he recognises those without a helpful sign on the bucket in which they're kept. The shopkeeper offered to put something together for him but Arthur said he wanted to browse. He feels like he ought to do this himself, really put in the effort to pick out something for Gwen. She deserves personal gestures. Big, romantic, personal gestures.

Arthur sighs and picks up one of the yellow begonias. It looks like spring and new beginnings. That's good, right? Arthur knows that Gwen likes warm weather, and especially spring. Seeing the first sign of flowers after winter always makes Gwen smile.

He smiles to himself. He remembers the times when they used to take walks through parks together. Before they were married, they often spent hours just walking around Regent's Park. Gwen especially loved the rose garden, and Arthur especially loved Gwen gushing over the flowers. Maybe he should go with the roses after all.

It wasn't until much later that things had gone wrong for them. After they had got married, and Arthur had begun working as vice president for his father's company things had begun to fall apart slowly. Arthur had always felt the need to prove to his father that marrying Gwen, of whom Uther had never approved, would not interfere with Arthur's career plan. Gwen for her part had tried her best to be supportive and understanding.

But after Uther's death, Arthur took on even more responsibility and that's when his marriage had begun to suffer for it. He was driven by the need to lead his father's company just as successfully, if not better, than his father had.

Gwen had often complained that Arthur worked too much, and she had begged him not to turn into his father. She often said that it was a shame that Uther worked so much and never showed any real affection for his family.

Arthur had almost always snapped at her that she simply didn't understand what it was like for him and his father. And maybe she hadn't, but Arthur realised (too late) that he hadn't made enough of an effort to explain it to her. He supposes her fears that he'd become as detached and consumed by work as Uther hadn't been unfounded after all.

Arthur frowns at the flower and brings it close to smell it.

"I wouldn't get those if I were you, mate," says someone behind Arthur. He looks up and turns around, the flower still in hand. There's a man, just a smidgen taller than Arthur, with a mop of dark hair, pale skin, and a scruffy beard that, despite covering half of his face, does nothing to hide incredibly sharp cheekbones. He's skinny to the point where Arthur thinks it can't be healthy, and his shirt and trousers are wrinkled. Overall the man doesn't make a very competent or even trustworthy impression on Arthur.

Arthur frowns. "Do I know you?"

The man attempts half a smile but shakes his head. "No, but those flowers aren't a good choice if you want to make your spouse happy."

Arthur can feel his temper rising. Who is this guy that he presumes to tell Arthur what flowers to buy? Has he guessed that Arthur is separated? Is he taking a cheap shot?

Arthur glares at him. "I believe that's none of your bloody business."

The man's eyes widen slightly. "Alright," he says, holding up his hands. "I'm just trying to help. I was leaving, but saw you agonising over the begonias, so I thought I'd offer my help. But hey, you don't want it, that's fine. It's not going to be my fault if your significant other leaves you over *begonias*. It'll be fine if they don't know what they mean either." He shrugs and smiles somewhat crookedly.

Arthur lunges forward, quickly grabs the man's arm and twists it behind his back. It's a good thing they're near the back of the shop. Arthur manhandles the man behind a shelf full of vases and pots to better hide from the shopkeeper.

The man gasps but otherwise doesn't make a sound. He's smart enough not to struggle. Maybe he's used to being restrained like this.

*Probably has a police record*, Arthur thinks.

"Do you think you're being funny?" he asks in a low voice just loud enough for the man to hear. "Hm? Think that it's a big joke that my wife has left me?"

He hitches the man's arm up a fraction, careful not to dislocate his shoulder by going too far. He's sure it still hurts like hell but the man doesn't so much as grunt.

"You're probably just trying to deflect from the fact that you're a sad, lonely freak who's not even able to properly feed himself, let alone do his own laundry," Arthur snarls. "Did *your* spouse bugger off to graze on greener pastures?"

This gets him a reaction. The man makes a noise that Arthur can't say for sure is a sob or a grunt, and then Arthur can feel him go slack in his grip, as if the fight drained completely out of him.

Arthur lets go and steps back. He's sure that he has hit the mark.

"You really shouldn't stick your nose where it doesn't belong," Arthur tells him.

The man nods jerkily and slowly bends to pick up the bouquet that he dropped when Arthur grabbed him. He's got his back to Arthur but even from this angle Arthur can see that the man's cradling the flowers in his arms as if they were the most precious thing. Arthur doesn't understand what's so special about them. In fact, they look a bit ruffled now. A few deep red petals have fallen off, and several stems have broken completely. The man doesn't seem to notice or care.

Without looking at Arthur again, he rushes past him and out of the shop. Arthur can see him wipe at his eyes with his free hand, and just like that it dawns on him what he just did. The attack was too aggressive, and nearly unprovoked. Gwen always says that Arthur's temper could be terrifying.

Arthur winces and is glad that Gwen hasn't seen him. She would be so disappointed in him. He had been a bully when they first met; condescending and confrontational, and always sure that he had every right to behave like that.

Arthur sighs and heads over to the counter. He's glad the florist, an elderly woman in a brightly patterned apron, hasn't noticed the scuffle going on behind her.

She smiles at Arthur and asks if he'd like some help after all. He nods and asks her to put together a nice bouquet for his wife.

With another smile (this one bigger than the first), she bustles off to pick out flowers. They're the same that the man had bought, and Arthur winces inwardly but doesn't object.

"Why these?" he asks. He would have expected her to go for the roses, least of all because they're more expensive.

"They're carnations," she says. "Red ones stand for deep, romantic love and admiration in the language of flowers," she explains. "My husband used to bring me these whenever he could afford it."

Arthur smiles politely at her. "That man that was just here had the same kind," he comments.

"Poor Merlin," she says. Arthur frowns at the name. Merlin certainly was an unusual choice, but he supposes that a freaky looking guy deserved a weird name. It probably wasn't his real name anyway. He most likely was called something ordinary like John, and just wanted to make himself sound mysterious and interesting.

"What, is he trying to impress a girl who's out of his league?" Arthur jokes lightly, just to get his own guilty conscious to stop nagging at him. He wants the florist to confirm that this Merlin is a creepy fuck so Arthur can stop worrying about being a wanker.

The florist shakes her head. She looks sad all of a sudden, and Arthur's heart sinks.

"His partner died in an accident a few weeks ago. Merlin comes here every other day and buys red carnations for his grave."

Arthur feels as if he's been punched in the gut, several times, by a wrecking ball.

*Fuck.*

This man was grieving for his dead boyfriend, and Arthur had not only insulted him, but also violently assaulted him, and mocked him for being alone.

*Bloody, bugging fuck.* Arthur's going to hell for this, he's sure. Never mind that he doesn't believe in hell, he'll still end up there.

He clears his throat, not daring to look at the florist. "Do you happen to know at what cemetery he is buried?" Arthur asks as casually as he can manage.

The florist hums. "I don't know for sure. The nearest one is St Barnabas, so maybe there."

She finishes up the bouquet. "There," she says, smiling fondly at the flowers. "This will make your wife happy, I'm sure. Lovely flowers, carnations."

Arthur nods dumbly and pays her almost double the price she asks. He feels like he needs to make amends for attacking a grieving man in her shop, even though she doesn't know that it happened in the first place.

He heads out and instead of going straight to Morgana's to deliver the flowers to Gwen, Arthur searches for the cemetery of St Barnabas church. Maybe he'll catch Merlin there to apologise.

When he finally reaches it he ends up walking up and down every row of graves, but Merlin's nowhere to be seen. He does, however, spot a fresh grave. There's not even a stone on it yet, only a bouquet of slightly ruffled carnations in a vase that's stuck into the ground.

Arthur feels wretched. This feels worse than the time his father utterly humiliated Gwen during a family dinner. Arthur had been ashamed for weeks for putting Gwen in that position.

He crouches down and puts his own bouquet down at the foot of the grave. He looks at the mound of fresh earth for a long while. The earth is dry. It's been uncharacteristically sunny for September this year and Arthur forces the thought that his trousers will be dusty out of his mind.

"I'm sorry your flowers are worse for wear today," he says at length. "That was my fault. I behaved poorly. You shouldn't be angry with him for that, you know. It wasn't his fault. But I'm sure he told you that. He seems like the sort who would speak to a dead loved one."

Arthur frowns. He never talked to his father's grave. Talking to his grave seems pointless because all the things Arthur should have said would have had to be said while Uther was alive. Now the man can't make up for all the mistakes he made.

Arthur's not sure what speaking to the grave of a man he never even knew will achieve, but here he is.

"Well, I'm going to go now," Arthur says. He's starting to feel awkward and out of place.

Arthur stands and goes. He doesn't notice until later that he left the flowers at the grave.

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**Begonia** <*begonia*> Native to moist subtropical and tropical climates, some species are commonly grown indoors as ornamental houseplants in cooler climates. Some species are cultivated outside in summertime in cooler climates for their bright colourful flowers. Genus of perennial flowering plants in the family *Begoniaceae*. They're often used in wedding bouquets. In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers begonias mean *beware* and *a fanciful nature*.

**Carnation** <*dianthus caryophyllus*> Native to the Mediterranean region. Species of *Dianthus*. In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers carnations have many meanings. Red carnations are meant to mean *my heart aches for you* and *admiration*.

*Mona's Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

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Arthur's back at the flower shop, picking up a bunch of red roses.

He has been sending Gwen flowers every other day for the last two weeks, always relying on the florist to help him pick them out. Apparently he couldn't be trusted to pick them out by himself after all.

Before the flowers, he had tried calling her but she had never picked up, not even when he called from someone else's phone. According to Morgana, she had tried to convince Gwen to give Arthur a chance to talk. Gwen, however, remained stubborn.

If it weren't for Morgana's constant nagging and assurances that all Gwen needed was time and gestures of true affection, Arthur would have let her go already.

Then again, if Arthur's honest with himself, he wouldn't have gone after Gwen at all, if not for Morgana. The way Gwen had walked out ... Arthur didn't get the impression that she wanted him to stop her.

Of course has been absolutely hopeless at reading her cues, it would seem. What does he know what she would have wanted?

*One morning, a week after Gwen had left, Morgana woke him up early. She used her key – given to her for emergencies only – and let herself in. Then she marched right up to his bedroom and all but ripped the door from its hinges with all the force she had used to pull it open.*

*The loud bang the door made when it crashed against the wall was what woke him up with a start, and he sat bolt upright in his bed, eyes unfocussed and mind muddled. He'd been in the middle of a pleasant dream about Gwen and their honeymoon and he was not best pleased to have it had interrupted.*

*"Arthur Pendragon, what the fuck do you think you're doing to my best friend?" Morgana shouted before Arthur had had time to properly come back to consciousness.*

*He groaned and rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I'm sure she's already told you," he said as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "She's been at your house long enough." At least he wasn't still wearing his suit trousers, and button down shirt like he had done a few times over the last couple of days. Last night he actually had managed to strip down to his underwear.*

*He really should have been expecting a visit from Morgana. Aside from him, no one else had been more thrilled that he had married Gwen. Morgana was probably as devastated by the end of their marriage as he was; she was just far more vocal about it.*

*"She has," Morgana confirmed. "And now I want to know what you intend to do about it?"*

*Arthur stood up slowly and stretched, then scratched his belly and yawned widely. He had no desire to discuss the end of his marriage with his half-sister of all people. He had been blaming himself enough for it already, so he didn't need her to add to it.*

*Morgana was tapping her foot impatiently behind him. "Well?" she snapped finally when Arthur still made no move to acknowledge her question. "I can't believe you would let Gwen just walk out of your*

*life like that. I thought you loved her! Isn't that what you shouted at father when he tried to get you to not marry her?"*

*He walked over to the wardrobe as he tried to ignore her ranting. It was much too early to be yelled at, but Morgana was annoyingly persistent and had a tendency to only become louder and shriller the longer she kept going. He would have to cut her off soon before his ears suffered permanent damage.*

*"Arthur!" Morgana shouted, right on cue. "I'm talking to you. Gwen is heartbroken. She has been crying almost non-stop since she got to my place and I want to know what you're going to do to fix it!"*

*Arthur finally swung around to glare at her. "What is there left for me to do? I agreed to couples counselling. We went, and it didn't help. I was doing my best to be the man she wants me to be, and it wasn't enough." He turned back to the wardrobe and started to pick out a suit and shirt. His movements were jerky enough to almost rip several hangers off the rack.*

*"Of course it's not bloody enough," Morgana exclaimed. "You work all the time. I only see you on birthdays and major holidays, and even then you're usually on the phone, either answering an email or talking to an important client. It drives me up the wall! I can only imagine what it must do to someone who lives with you."*

*He picked a black pinstripe suit that he liked to wear because it made his arse look great – or so Gwen had used to say. He found a matching shirt and tie, and set them out on the dresser next to his cufflinks. The cufflinks had been a Christmas present from Gwen the first year they were married. They were sterling silver and shaped like small dragons.*

*When he was done he turned to look at Morgana again.*

*"My work is important. Father left his company to me. It's his legacy. I can't just turn away and ignore it whenever I feel like it," Arthur explained as patiently as he could. "It's a great responsibility. Hundreds of employees depend on me to lead the company successfully so they can keep their jobs. Gwen understands that. Or at least she used to."*

*Morgana's mouth was a thin line as she stepped closer and raised her hand. Arthur didn't expect it, and that was the only reason she managed to slap him hard across the cheek.*

*"You're a bloody pig-headed ass. If you don't do something now you really will lose her for good!" she shouted.*

*"I've already lost her!" Arthur yelled back, the last bit of patience finally gone. "She walked out a week ago. She's been moving out for days before that and I didn't even notice. It's over!"*

*Morgana silently shook her head at him. "It's over because you won't get your head out of your arse and do something," she said quietly after a few moments. "You can still get her back. I'm sure she's hoping that you'll come after her."*

*Arthur scoffed. "I doubt that. If she wanted that she wouldn't have moved all her things."*

*"You don't know that," Morgana protested. "She thinks that it's what you want. All you have to do is convince her otherwise."*

*He looked at her challengingly. "And how do you think I'll do that, hm? I've never been good at this stuff. Gwen's the one who asked me out, remember? When I tried to flirt with her, I ended up insulting her. She used to find that charming, but I doubt she still sees it that way."*

*He ran a hand through his hair. He didn't want to be having this argument with Morgana. "Look. Just. Leave her be. Maybe she really is better off without me."*

*Morgana's eyes widened. "You don't mean that! You love her, don't you?"*

*"Yes, of course I love her," Arthur said. "I wouldn't have gone to all the counselling sessions if I didn't. I wanted things to work out. But they didn't. It's time to admit defeat."*

*"You're Arthur Pendragon. You never admit defeat," she argued.*

*Arthur smiled wryly. If only that were true, he thought. He turned towards his dresser and opened a drawer to find a pair of socks.*

*"Just think about it," Morgana said to his back. "If you really believe that either one of you can be happy without the other, then alright, get a divorce and move on. But I'm telling you, she wants you to come after her and get her back. I'm her best friend, I should know." With that she turned on her heel and walked out on him.*

*Arthur had been staring at the pair of black socks he had just picked up for a long while before he remembered that it was Sunday and he didn't even have to go work that day.*

It's the florist who brings him back to the present with a polite cough. He smiles at her and fishes his wallet out of his back pocket.

He looks at the bouquet of roses again and nods approvingly. He knows Gwen likes roses, and nothing's more romantic than red ones without thorns, Arthur knows that much.

He's just about to pay when the shop door opens, jangling the bell that's fastened above it. Arthur turns around, more out of reflex than real curiosity. A moment later he's glad that he did because in the door stands none other than Merlin.

Merlin, unfortunately, sees him too and immediately changes direction. He heads back out of the shop and starts running down the street.

Arthur curses under his breath and throws a fifty pound note on the counter. He has no time to wait for change and calls "Keep it!" to the florist as he runs out with the roses, just in time to spot Merlin rounding the corner.

"Merlin!" he calls, but Merlin doesn't stop. Instead, he runs faster. Arthur grits his teeth and sprints after him.

He catches up with Merlin a few moments later, managing to overtake him and cut him off. He's bracing the hand with the flowers on his knee and holding the other up to signal Merlin to wait. Arthur's surprised when Merlin actually does.

He looks furious though.

“What?” he snaps. “Want to twist my arm some more? You didn’t dislocate it last time, want another shot at it? Maybe insult and mock me some more?”

Arthur winces, and straightens slowly. There’s a sharp pain in his side and he makes a mental note to start cardio workout again soon. He finds it highly unfair that he’s this out of breath when Merlin didn’t even break into sweat.

“No,” he says. “No, quite the opposite. I’ve been an utter ass, and I wanted to say sorry. I tried finding you, but you had already gone and I didn’t know how else to reach you.”

Arthur takes a few deep breaths while he waits for Merlin’s reply. Merlin’s angry glare hasn’t gone away though, and Arthur frowns.

“I’m really sorry, Merlin. I had no right to say any of those things to you. Especially not under the circumstances,” Arthur tries again. He’s going for a soothing tone of voice but he’s not sure how well he manages because Merlin only seems to become angrier.

“The circumstances? What, you found out the love of my life died, and now you feel sorry for me? If I really were a useless loser like you thought, your insults and your physical abuse would have been okay?” Merlin all but shouts. “And how do you know my name anyway?”

Arthur’s actually taking a step back, holding both hands up now, trying to placate Merlin.

“The florist told me,” he tries to explain. “What I said and did wasn’t okay under any circumstances. But in your case...” He winces. “I’m sure it must have hurt a lot more. And I’m sorry. Truly.” He lowers his hands slowly even though Merlin’s still glaring daggers at him.

“Look,” Arthur says after a moment. “May I buy you a coffee, or something?”

“Why?” Merlin asks suspiciously. “Because I don’t know how to feed myself now that my husband’s dead?”

Arthur’s taken aback. “No,” he says. “God, no. It’s a peace offering. And it looks like it’s about to start raining and I don’t much fancy getting wet. This suit was expensive.”

Merlin’s eyes are still narrowed suspiciously but eventually he nods. “You posh gits are probably used to getting what you want. It’s your lucky day because there’s a coffee shop just there that I happen to like.” He points to a shop barely twenty metres down the street. “One drink, and then you leave me the fuck alone.”

Arthur nods. “Okay. Promise.” He crosses his heart and holds up his hand as if to swear a solemn oath. Merlin just rolls his eyes and leads the way.

It seems like Merlin’s a regular because the barista waves at him cheerfully from behind the counter. Three walls are painted in your typical coffee-colour brown, the other one is kept in a complimentary cream colour. There’s no noticeable pattern to how tables and chairs are placed, and Arthur gets the distinct impression that the owner is trying to not-so-subtly copy Starbucks, and he hopes that the coffee won’t be as bad as well.

Rain starts falling only moments after they’ve stepped inside, and Arthur grins triumphantly at Merlin. Merlin just huffs and heads to a table in a corner by the large front window.

Arthur lays the flowers on the table. The roses are looking rather battered now, and Arthur thinks he'll have to buy fresh ones before he can drop them off for Gwen.

Merlin sits down slowly on one side. Arthur notices he's eyeing the flowers critically for a moment but doesn't say anything.

"I'll just go and get our drinks. What would you like?" Arthur asks.

"They know my order around here," is all Merlin says. Arthur watches him for a moment but then nods and heads over to the counter.

It turns out that Merlin's usual is a caramel latté. Arthur just gets black coffee.

He returns to the table and sits down opposite Merlin before handing Merlin's latté over.

"Listen," he begins after taking his first sip. "I'm really sorry for how I behaved. Your comment about my wife leaving hit too close to home, and I lost my temper. It's actually something she complained about a few times. My temper, that is, not the flowers. I never even brought her flowers except on her birthday and our anniversary." He frowns. "She left two months ago, and I'm trying to win her back."

Merlin's looking at him as if Arthur just recited the periodic table of elements instead of giving a heartfelt apology. "What?" Arthur asks, finding the stare unnerving.

"Why are you telling me this?" Merlin finally asks.

Arthur's frown deepens. "Because you deserve an explanation for why I reacted the way I did."

"And also so I could feel bad for pointing out that begonias might get you into trouble with a loved one?" Merlin snaps back.

"No, not at all," Arthur says hastily, shaking his head vehemently. "You had no idea that my wife had left me. You were just trying to help, and you were trying to be non-confrontational about it." He wants Merlin to understand that he's not angry anymore. Merlin clearly still is though, and with reason, Arthur knows. He just wishes he could make up for all the unintentional hurt he caused. Before Arthur can say anything more though, Merlin continues, apparently ready to give Arthur another piece of his mind.

"That's right, I just wanted to help. Because I figured, hey, there's a guy who clearly has no idea about the what kind of message the wrong flower can send, and he's going to send the entirely wrong message if I don't help him, and he'll probably be grateful if I spare him from being teased about it. And instead of taking the advice, you mock me and insult me and *attack* me. I still have bruises on my wrist and shoulder, you know? It fucking hurt to even just lift my arm for days," Merlin snaps angrily.

Arthur winces. "I'm really, very sorry. I thought I grown out of that kind of behaviour. Your comment hit a sore spot and I lashed out in defence without thinking of the consequences." He tries for a self-deprecating smile but he's certain it falls short. Arthur's not usually this humble in front of other people, let alone strangers.

“Yeah, well, better work on that temper,” Merlin suggests, “or you might hurt someone who really means something to you.”

Arthur’s eyes widen. “I never abused Gwen!” he blurts out. Just thinking about it makes him go cold all over, and he only barely manages to suppress a shudder.

It’s only when Merlin keeps looking at him as if to ask “Are you really sure about that?” that it hits Arthur: What he did to Merlin, he could have done it to anyone. If someone pushed his buttons, would he react like that again?

The thought scares Arthur more than anything else.

He swallows thickly and reaches for his mug. While he sips his coffee and tries to calm down, Merlin doesn’t say anything. He just keeps looking at Arthur as if he’s trying to figure him out.

Eventually, Arthur sets the mug down.

“You’ve got a point,” he admits. “I’ll have to keep a closer eye on my reactions.”

He runs his finger over the handle of the coffee cup, lost in thought. Maybe he really should take up some sport again. Work on his cardio, and get all the anger and frustration worked out at the same time.

“Did she like the flowers?” Merlin asks at length, startling Arthur out of his thoughts. He looks up at him, finding Merlin’s expression calm now.

“She never got them. I went with carnations instead. Red ones, like you bought, but I, er, lost them while I was looking for you,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck self-consciously.

Merlin looks thoughtful for a moment. “You were at Will’s grave,” he says finally.

Arthur thinks about lying, but he has already done so much wrong with this man, lying to him about this would only add insult to injury.

“Yes, I was. As I said, I was looking for you. Fresh grave, red carnations ... it all fit. Only you weren’t there anymore.”

Merlin nods. “I didn’t stay long that day. I had to go to an appointment with our lawyer.”

“I didn’t mean to leave the flowers, but I think it was the best I could do in lieu of apologising to you personally,” Arthur explains. He hadn’t even noticed that he had left the flowers at the grave until he had stood outside Morgana’s door. When he realised what had happened he had just turned around and gone back home.

“It was a nice gesture,” Merlin concedes, “even if unintentional.” Arthur smiles. “Thank you.”

He drains his cup. “I’ll get another one. Do you want one more?” Arthur asks, but Merlin shakes his head. He holds up his glass to indicate that it’s still half full. Arthur nods in understanding and heads over to the bar for a refill.

Merlin’s leaning back in his seat when Arthur returns. He’s studying him as Arthur sits down and places the cup carefully on the table before adding sugar and milk. It makes Arthur nervous to be

studied like this. Morgana does it often, and Arthur doesn't like it then either. Gwen used to do it, but her looks were always affectionate. Well, maybe not near the end. Arthur didn't pay enough attention to notice how she looked at him.

"Why did your wife leave?" Merlin asks bluntly, and Arthur almost burns his tongue on the coffee in his surprise. He sets the cup down carefully and then looks up to meet Merlin's eyes.

He's not sure what it is about Merlin that makes Arthur want to answer him honestly. Maybe it's the guilt over hurting Merlin, or maybe it's the chance to tell an outsider. All of his friends, and especially Morgana, are so invested in this, Arthur feels like he has nobody else to talk to about his failing marriage. He doesn't know Merlin well enough to worry about his opinion of him – especially because Merlin's opinion of him isn't great to begin with.

"I wasn't being a good husband. I work too much, I'm not attentive enough." He sighs. "She doesn't feel appreciated or loved anymore, I suppose."

Merlin continues to study him. "And why do you think she's going to come back to you?"

Arthur shrugs. "I don't know. Because she still loves me, I hope. I want to be better, to give her what she deserves."

"What if she deserves someone who doesn't have to lose her first to realise that he wants her?" Merlin asks coolly. Arthur winces.

"Then I'll let her go. But if I don't fight for her at all, she'll think that she doesn't matter to me anymore, and that's not true. I'm not a perfect man, but I can improve. She's changed me for the better. I want to be the man she fell in love with again. I liked myself better back then."

He wonders what Merlin would think if he knew that Arthur didn't even think to try to get Gwen back at first, and that it was his half-sister who had practically dragged him into action.

"How do you know about flowers?" he asks before Merlin has a chance to pose more uncomfortable questions.

Merlin shrugs. "You pick up things. Will wasn't big on romantic gestures, but I liked being cheesy once in a while." Merlin smiles to himself. "He would always pretend to be annoyed by my attempts at romance, but I know he secretly loved it when I wooed him." His smile turns sad.

Arthur wishes he knew how to comfort someone, but he grew up in a big, impersonal house with a father whose idea of comfort was to tell Arthur to "be a man and stop crying."

Merlin shrugs again. "I guess I bring him carnations because I know Will would've loved to tease me about it, and then he'd put them in a vase anyway and make sure they were kept fresh for as long as possible, all the while pretending that he was doing *me* a favour."

Merlin falls silent, obviously remembering his partner. Arthur doesn't want to break the moment, and so they sit there and share an almost companionable silence, each sipping their coffee quietly and watching the rain.

And then, Arthur has an idea.

“Hey, Merlin?” he asks, looking up at him.

“Hm?” Merlin hums, looking as if he’s only slowly resurfacing from a pleasant memory. “What?”

Arthur swallows thickly, and sets down his cup.

“Can you teach me all this romantic cra-, I mean, this romance stuff? I want to be the man Gwen deserves, but I know now I can’t get there on my own. I need someone to help me, to train me, if you will.”

Merlin frowns. “And you want me to do it?” he asks dubiously.

Arthur shrugs. “You know flowers, and probably other things. You can tell me about them, and help me figure out the best way to get Gwen back.”

Merlin looks like he’s about to say no, so Arthur decides to appeal to Merlin’s pride. “Please, Merlin? I’d be forever in your debt. You can ask me for any favour in return and I’ll grant it.”

If anything, Merlin looks vaguely uneasy by that proclamation. “Or not. Whatever you want, Merlin, I swear. Just give me a few pointers.”

Arthur’s well aware that he’s close to begging now, but it must be a testimony of how determined he is to get Gwen back that he doesn’t even mind.

Merlin draws his feet up onto the chair, and hugs his knees. “I’m really not that romantic,” he tries to deflect.

Arthur just shakes his head. “From what you said you’re worlds better than I am. Come on, it’ll be fun. You get to boss me around and impart your knowledge,” he coaxes.

Merlin appears to be considering it now at least. He nibbles on the rim of his cup, and finally, after much head shaking and nodding, and an incredible display of expressive eyebrow movements, he sits up straight and holds out his hand to Arthur.

“Alright, but on one condition.”

Arthur takes Merlin’s hand.

“Name it.”

Merlin smiles brightly.

“Buy a book on flower languages and actually read it.”

Arthur laughs. “Deal.”

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**Rose** <rosaceae> Most species are native to Asia, with smaller numbers native to Europe, North America, and northwestern africa. Woody perennial flowering plant of the genus *Rosa*, in the family *Rosaceae*. In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers roses have many meanings. Red roses stand for *love, respect, beauty* and say *I love you*.

*Mona’s Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

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"I thought you said I would get to boss you around!" Merlin complains.

Arthur tucks the mobile between head and shoulder to free up his hands. "Well, yes, but Morgana is Gwen's best friend. She knows what Gwen likes. And it makes sense, doesn't it? Gwen teaches English. She loves poetry. This is a great idea." He's searching through a stack of files on his desk at home. He could have sworn he brought that contract home with him to review.

Merlin huffs. "You shouldn't get right back into courting her. You still need to make up for being a prick."

"I can do both at the same time," Arthur argues. "I can apologise by sending her romantic verses."

"So, why are you calling me?" Merlin asks.

"I had hoped you could help me out with the poetry part," Arthur admits at length.

Merlin starts laughing. "You want me to teach you poetry?"

"No!" Arthur denies vehemently. "I want you to write a poem for me for Gwen. Or pick one out. You're supposed to be good at this kind of thing." Arthur puts the phone on speaker and sets it down on his desk.

"I never said I knew poetry," Merlin points out. There's the sound of rustling fabric on the other end and no more reply from Merlin. Arthur's actually about to hang up and wait until Merlin has finished getting dressed, or whatever it is he's doing, but then Merlin starts speaking again. "Arthur, listen. I'm not going to write poetry for you. I'm also not going to pick out something. The whole point is for you to express your feelings for Gwen. "

"I don't have time to leaf through books of poetry, and I have no artistic talent whatsoever," Arthur grumbles. He can't find the damn contract.

"Well, then you'll just have to think of something else, won't you?" Merlin mocks, sounding less teasing and more annoyed.

Arthur stops rifling through his desk drawer and looks at the phone in surprise. He considers telling Merlin to just forget about their arrangement if he's not actually going to help, but deep down Arthur knows Merlin's right. He sighs. "Alright, alright," he says. "I'll make time to find her a nice verse," he says.

"That's better," Merlin says. "I won't mind if you run it by me before you send it to her. And try to find something better than just 'nice'."

"I will. Thank you, Merlin," Arthur says, the corner of his mouth twisted upwards.

"Whatever. I still think my idea is better," Merlin says, and Arthur can practically hear the shrug through the phone.

"I appreciate your help," he says, probably a bit too formally because Merlin doesn't reply at first, and Arthur imagines that he's rolling his eyes.

"Whatever," Merlin says again after a moment, and then hangs up without another word.

Arthur frowns and looks at his phone. Did he offend Merlin again? He supposes it is rude of him to ask for Merlin's help and then not take his advice, but Morgana is Gwen's best friend. She knows her better than anyone, and she said poetry was a good idea.

He shakes his head and then opens up his messages to quickly type out a text to Fred, his secretary.



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Of course, when he gets to work the next day, there's a minor crisis going on and Arthur spends the entire day and the next one in meetings, or talking to clients on the phone.

By the time he comes back in on the third day, he has entirely forgotten about the poetry books.



Merlin texts him during the morning, and Arthur has no clue what he's talking about.

Arthur groans as he finally remembers that there was something he had been meaning to do. He rummages around on his desk that's covered in statistics and financial reports until he finds a handful of books.

*Busy week at work*, he texts back. It only takes a moment for Merlin to call him.

"So, you really did forget?" he asks as soon as Arthur accepts the call. It's noisy in the background with traffic and Arthur wonders where Merlin is. *Maybe at the bus stop, going to work.*

"I didn't forget. It just went to the back of my mind. As I said, I was busy at work."

"So busy that you forgot that you were going to be romantic and more attentive to your wife?" Merlin asks, and Arthur can't tell if he's teasing or actually shocked.

"There was a crisis at work," Arthur explains.

"And now?" Merlin asks. The background noise changes, the sounds of traffic more muted now. Arthur assumes it's because Merlin boarded the bus. He gets his confirmation when he hears the electronic voice announce the bus line and destination in the background. *'277 to Canonbury. The next stop is Stannard Road.'*

"Now the crisis is over and I'll pick a poem for Gwen," Arthur says, remembering that Merlin asked him a question.

"Good. Let me know what you pick," Merlin offers.

"I will," Arthur promises. Fred appears in the door to his office with a stack of files in her arms. He waves her over and gestures for her to put the papers down on his desk. She's about to turn around when Arthur holds up his empty coffee mug. She shoots him a reproachful look – it'll be his fifth mug that day – but takes it nevertheless. She'll probably give him decaf.

"Alright," Merlin says, and then hangs up again without saying goodbye.

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Arthur ends up picking a classic. He's sure he can't go wrong with Shakespeare, especially because Gwen always goes on about how brilliant Shakespeare was. This way, Arthur can show that he has indeed been listening to her *and* be romantic.

He gets another bouquet of flowers – giving the red carnations another chance – and a simple card. He writes out the sonnet by hand and signs it with “Love, Arthur”.

Morgana looks thrilled when she opens the door and sees him with the flowers and the card. Gwen isn't home, and Arthur feels a pang of disappointment that he won't be able to give her the flowers himself. It's been like this every time he has come round to drop something off for her. Arthur's suspecting that Gwen's usually in, because he's relatively certain that she doesn't teach at six in the evening. It smarts that Gwen refuses to see him, but she also hasn't told him to stop trying yet, so Arthur's going to take that as a good sign.

Morgana, as usual, promises to keep the flowers ready for Gwen and to make sure that Gwen will definitely see them as soon as she gets home. He leaves the flowers with Morgana and heads home.

He doesn't hear from either Morgana or Gwen over the next week, and when Morgana finally calls him on the following Saturday, it isn't with good news.

“What do you mean, she didn't like it?” Arthur asks. He's just got home from an extra half-day at work to clean up the latest mess, and he has barely even had time to get out of his jacket and tie before Morgana rang. “You said she would appreciate flowers and poetry!”

“Yes,” Morgana protests. “Because I thought she would. That's what you did for her when you two started going out. She talked about it after she came to me. She said that you used to be so romantic and would bring her flowers and poems, and that she always found it incredibly charming.”

Arthur only vaguely remembers having done that, but if Gwen says so it must be true. He frowns. Come to think of it, it's much more likely that he tried to impress Gwen with poetry when they were dating during university. He failed miserably then too, despite Morgana's claim that Gwen had found it charming.

“What was it that she didn't like?” he asks. “The flowers or the sonnet?”

“Both,” Morgana says, and Arthur winces. “She looked at the card and got very sad. She said that it's not platitudes she wants. I don't think she believes you meant the gesture.”

Arthur frowns. “But I did.”

“Well,” Morgana says. “She didn't seem to have that impression when you went and spent more time at the office than at home. Or when you cancelled dates to ‘get some extra work done.’”

Arthur throws his head back and groans. “Stop. You've scolded me enough already. I don't need another lecture from you right now.”

“I bet you don't even remember what it was like when you first started going out with Gwen,” Morgana goes on undeterred. “Do you even remember about the poetry?”

He shrugs, glad that she can't see him. “Not exactly. I remember I did it a few times, but not specifically which poems I picked. It was a long time ago,” he says.

“And yet Gwen still remembers.”

“She’s always been more romantic than me,” he says tersely.

He wonders if that’s the problem. Gwen’s great with all the little details. She remembers and cherishes small things, while Arthur’s always more interested in the big picture.

“It would’ve done you some good to take notes,” Morgana comments. “Then you wouldn’t be so useless now.”

Arthur sighs. “Alright, I get it. I’m an even lousier romantic than husband. I think I’m going to stop taking advice from you, though, since you clearly don’t know what Gwen wants from me *now* either.”

Morgana makes a sound that’s obviously supposed to signal that she’s offended, and also that she thinks he will crash and burn without her help. Arthur doesn’t care. He says goodbye and hangs up without waiting for her response.

He dials Merlin’s number next.

“So, the flowers and the poem didn’t work,” he says before Merlin has a chance to say anything at all. “Morgana got her signals crossed or something, and it turns out that Gwen doesn’t want poetry, she just wants to know how I feel. I think that maybe your suggestion wasn’t so bad after all. I’m going to write her a letter tonight, and I want you to read it before I send it to her. Can you come by my house in an hour?”

“Er,” Merlin says. “Arthur? Is that you?” he asks, sounding dazed.

“Of course it’s me, Merlin. Who else would it be?” Arthur snaps.

“Well,” Merlin drawls. “Any person I know usually starts a call by saying ‘hello’ and asking how I am.”

Arthur sighs and runs a hand across his face. “Hello, Merlin, how are you?”

“I’m alright. You woke me up.”

“How could I have woken you up? It’s only just gone eight.”

It sounds as if Merlin’s yawning. “So?”

“So, normal grownups go to sleep after ten, not before eight.”

“I took a nap around three,” Merlin explains. “Seems I slept through my alarm.”

“What kind of job do you have that you can take naps in the afternoon?” Arthur asks incredulously.

“I work at a veterinarian clinic,” Merlin explains. “And it’s my day off.”

“I see,” Arthur says. He has a brief flash Merlin in scrubs, holding a puppy. He probably pets all the animals and tells them how pretty they are. Despite himself, Arthur finds the idea charming. “Can you come by in an hour to check my letter for Gwen, or not?” he asks more politely.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be there. Text me your address.”

There's the sound of clothes rustling on the other end, and then Merlin groans. Arthur guesses he got up and stretched.

"Yes," Arthur says. "See you in an hour. I'll order some food. Curry alright?"

"Sounds good," Merlin agrees.

"Great, see you then," Arthur says cheerfully.

"Sure," Merlin mumbles. Arthur hopes he won't fall asleep right away again.

Arthur hangs up to text Merlin his address.

He decides that a change of clothes, and ordering dinner should happen before he gets started on that letter.

It's a quarter of an hour later before he finally sits down at his desk and rummages through the drawers to find the sparsely used set of stationary that he knows he has somewhere. "Aha!" he calls in triumph when he finally discovers it under a stack of old insurance contracts.

It's nice, cream coloured paper. Arthur decides that he ought to use his fountain pen on it, just to make it that more special.

After just a moment of contemplation he begins to write.

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By the time Merlin arrives, a little over an hour later, Arthur has discarded eight drafts. He switched to a legal pad after the third so he wouldn't waste more of the expensive stationary. After the fourth he put down the fountain pen and started using a pencil instead.

He's now on his ninth attempt and already he can tell that this is no better than the first eight.

The doorbell rings and Arthur practically jumps out of his chair, he's that relieved to have an excuse to get away from his desk for a few minutes.

"Hey," Merlin says, smiling at him. "Wow, you look stressed. Difficult work issue?" he asks, casting a glance at Arthur's hair. Arthur takes a step back and looks into the mirror next to the door and grimaces at the sight of his hair. He must've run his hands through it while trying to write this damned letter.

"Uh, no. Come in." He steps aside to let Merlin in.

Merlin closes his umbrella and steps inside. It's not until Merlin's under the warm light over the hallway lamp that Arthur notices that something's different.

"You shaved," he says in surprise. He is, however, pleased to see that he was right about Merlin's cheekbones.

Merlin, in the process of putting his umbrella in the stand to drip off, looks up. "Er, yeah. Felt like doing something different." He shrugs.

Arthur nods approvingly. "It suits you."

The corner of Merlin's mouth turns up. "Thanks." He strips out of his jacket but leaves the ridiculous looking scarf around his neck that Arthur's seen him wearing it the last two times as well. It's a bright shade of turquoise, and printed on it are witches hats and broomsticks. Arthur guesses it's supposed to be a joke about Merlin's famous namesake.

"It's not cold inside my house," he protests.

Merlin just shrugs. "I like this scarf," is all he says, and Arthur decides to let it go. What would be the point of picking a fight over Merlin's silly scarf anyway? They have more important things to do.

Arthur leads the way up to his study. Merlin looks around curiously, only stopping in the upstairs hallway to look at the pictures.

"So this is Gwen," he says. Arthur stands next to him and looks at the picture. It's from his and Gwen's wedding. Arthur's hugging her from behind, arms around her waist, and they're both laughing. Arthur remembers that one of their friends had done something behind the photographer that got him and Gwen cracking up. They couldn't keep to the arranged pose, nor the polite happy smiles.

Out of their whole wedding photo album, Arthur had always liked this picture the most.

"I think Leon, Gwen's best friend, was doing the chicken dance behind the photographer," he tells Merlin.

Merlin smiles. "Our mate Gwaine was miming what he thought our wedding night would look like," he says, grinning. "There was a lot of spanking going on for some reason."

Arthur chuckles. "Not into BDSM, are you?"

"Not really, no," Merlin snorts. "Not that we haven't tried almost everything at least once, but no, that wasn't our thing."

Arthur blushes very faintly. He doesn't need to know or think about Merlin's sex life. Thankfully, he's saved by the bell, quite literally, when the doorbell rings again. Arthur quickly heads back downstairs for their food.

When he returns, Merlin has moved on to the next picture. It's one of him, Morgana, and their father. Arthur only ever put it on the wall because it was supposed to be a family picture gallery and this was the only family picture he had of his father. In fact, if Gwen hadn't insisted that he put it up there, Arthur would've been happy to shove it into a box and forget about it. Uther made his usual stern face, and Morgana and Arthur were trying hard not to look like they were forcing their smiles.

"I'm guessing this is your sister and your father," Merlin says.

Arthur nods. "Yes. It was taken six months before he died." He swallows. "He and my sister fought a lot. I disappointed him a lot."

Merlin hums. "But you loved him anyway, didn't you?"

"I did," Arthur says. "He was the only parent I had, and I know he loved me even if he couldn't always show it."

Merlin bumps his shoulder against Arthur's. "It's good that you don't resent him. It's healthy."

Arthur huffs. "Yes, well, he also left me half his fortune and his company, so I would be very ungrateful indeed if I resented him for it."

"True," Merlin laughs. "Shall we take a look at your letter?" he asks, turning to Arthur.

"Yes," Arthur says, nodding. He holds up the bags of takeaway. "But dinner first."

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Merlin barely eats any of the curry Arthur ordered.

"I thought you were hungry," he says when Merlin puts his fork down after not even finishing half of his portion.

"I never said that," Merlin points out. "You said you'd order food and I said 'sounds good'."

Arthur rolls his eyes. "The part that it would be for both of us was implied, you pillock."

Merlin shrugs. "Sorry."

Arthur sighs but lets the subject drop.

When they're done eating – or rather, Arthur's done and Merlin has definitely stopped for good - Arthur tells Merlin to wrap up the leftovers to take home later. "I'm not accepting any protests," he tells him sternly.

Merlin raises an eyebrow and just looks at Arthur as if to say 'I never agreed to take your orders.'

Arthur stares him down undeterred. He's more than used to getting people to do what he wants. "I'm not going to eat it. You've slobbered all over it."

That elicits an amused snort from Merlin at least. He starts packing up the food a moment later though much to Arthur's smug amusement.

When they walk into the study, Merlin takes one look at Arthur's desk and the surrounding bodies of discarded drafts and can't help but laugh.

"Well, at least you gave it a shot," he teases.

Arthur scowls. "It's a lot harder than it looks."

Merlin grins. "I'm sure it is. Talking about your feelings is very difficult, indeed."

He goes over to the desk and looks at Arthur's latest attempt.



*Dear Gwen,*

*As you may know, I often experience difficulties expressing my emotions. I also know that this causes you distress and unhappiness. I wish nothing more than to make you happy forever. Therefore, I am asking, most cordially, that you give me another chance to prove my affections for you.*

*Yours,*

*Arthur*

Merlin raises a brow. "Okay, Mr Darcy, maybe a little less Austen-like, and more from the heart?"

"What do you mean? This is from my heart."

Merlin grimaces. "Seriously? This is how your heart speaks? Your heart got stuck in the Regency?"

Arthur frowns at him. "What do you mean?"

Merlin holds up the letter. "This! 'I know this causes you distress and unhappiness,'" he reads aloud. "I am asking most cordially. To prove my affections. Good lord, Arthur, anyone reading this would think you're trying to scare her away, not win her back."

"Gwen knows this stuff is hard for me," Arthur argues. "Besides, she'd probably love the style. She's a big Austen fan."

"But you're not actually the male lead in a romance novel."

"Then you should write it for me if you think you're so bloody good at it," Arthur snaps.

Merlin shakes his head. "No, Arthur. I told you before, I'm not writing these things for you. They need to come from you, otherwise it's just not genuine."

Arthur sighs. "Fine. But you're helping."

"Yes, I'm helping," Merlin says. He sits on the desk, and looks at Arthur expectantly.

Arthur sighs again, runs a hand through his hair, making it messier in the process, and finally sits down. He rips the sheet with draft number nine off the legal pad, balls it up and throws it in the general direction of its eight abandoned siblings.

"Okay," Merlin says. "First of all, don't say 'dear Gwen'. I know you've probably been taught that a good letter to a family member starts like that, but Arthur, you're writing to your wife, the love of your life, the woman you miss. You don't just fob her off by greeting her with 'dear Gwen'."

"Then what do I say?"

Merlin shrugs. "I don't know. Just write 'Gwen', or use a nickname. Call her 'beloved' or 'darling'. Whatever works for you. Both of you. Did you never send her love letters when you started dating, or write her a birthday card? What did you call her during your wedding night or any other occasion when you had hot and steamy sex?"

To his horror, Arthur can feel himself blush. "That's none of your business," he mutters. Merlin smirks. "No, but it's Gwen's, and it'll remind her of the *really* good times you've had."

Arthur nods slowly. As much as he didn't want to think about Merlin's sex life earlier, Arthur really doesn't want Merlin thinking about his either.

But he understands where Merlin is going with that.

He considers Merlin's suggestion, and there's only one thing that comes to mind. Only one thing that he ever called her that would count as an endearment.

*My Gwen*, he writes, then looks up at Merlin to see him nodding approvingly. "That's good. Bit possessive, but if that's what you called her when you were being affectionate, then that's fine. Okay, next you want to tell her that you miss her. Don't be afraid to tell her exactly what you miss about her. Maybe her laugh or how she speaks. I promise, anything is good. And tell her how it makes you feel that she's no longer around."

Arthur stares at the blank page and thinks. Her smile, yes, and her beauty. Her kindness. The way she always stands up to him and never lets him get away with any bullshit. How she always hummed to herself when arranging flowers, or when cooking dinner. He frowns. He can't remember the last time he was around to keep her company while she cooked, nor can he pinpoint when there stopped being flowers in every room.

He starts writing.

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When Arthur looks up again, he has written three whole pages, and Merlin is no longer sitting on his desk. He looks around only to find that Merlin's not even in his study anymore.

Arthur sets down the pad and pencil and heads into the hallway. He wonders where Merlin might have gone. Possibly he's wandering around, looking for the bathroom.

*Maybe*, Arthur thinks, *he went back to the kitchen to have more curry. He really didn't eat all that much earlier.*

He heads downstairs and sees a dim light coming from the living room. Now that he's almost down the stairs, he can hear a strange, muffled sound.

Arthur decides to investigate. He pokes his head into the living room. The light is coming from one of the small reading lamps on a table next to the couch.

It's not until Arthur's taken a few steps into the room that he's able to see over the back of the couch. Merlin's curled up on his side, holding something close to his chest. The strange sound Arthur heard was Merlin hiccupping and sobbing, he realises.

*Shit*, Arthur thinks. He feels entirely out of his depth again.

He assumes that this is probably about Will, but he has no idea what to do to help or comfort Merlin. Arthur didn't know Will at all, nor does he know Merlin very well. When his own father died, Arthur hadn't had much time to grieve for him. He allowed himself two days, and then he went back to work.

His father had always said that crying about something wouldn't change it or make it better. Somehow Arthur doubts that telling Merlin this is going to help.

He quietly goes to pick up a box of tissues from the guest bathroom, then returns to the living room, hoping that Merlin might have calmed down in the minute Arthur was gone.

Merlin hasn't moved from his spot, unfortunately, and he's still crying. Arthur supposes that a miracle was too much to hope for.

Arthur sits down in the armchair closest to Merlin's head and puts the box of tissues within reach of him, but Merlin neither grabs one, nor does he stop crying.

After several minutes, Arthur moves out of the chair again to sit down next to Merlin on the couch. He's perching awkwardly on the edge, but he reaches out to touch Merlin's shoulder.

At first, nothing changes. Merlin continues to be wrecked by sobs while Arthur keeps his hand on Merlin's shoulder, squeezing and rubbing it gently.

Eventually, though, Merlin's sobs turn into quiet sniffles, and little by little he loosens the death grip on whatever it is he's clutching in his hands.

Arthur can see now that he was holding his phone the whole time. Merlin sits up slowly, plucks a tissue from the box, and blows his nose noisily.

"Sorry," he says, sounding hoarse.

Arthur shakes his head. "No need to apologise."

Merlin takes several deep breaths and sits up slowly. His eyes are bloodshot and his whole face blotchy.

"I had the brilliant idea of listening to the last message Will left on my mailbox. And then I called his mailbox in return, because why not hurt myself some more, right?" He laughs. It sounds mirthless, and nasal.

"It's not wrong to want to hear the voices of the people we lost," Arthur says at length. "I've never even heard my mother's voice."

He can tell that Merlin's looking at him. Arthur shrugs. "On the upside, I also don't know what I'm missing because I never met her." He frowns. "I shouldn't try to compare your loss to mine. It's not the same."

He feels awkward for having brought it up in the first place. Arthur didn't even *lose* his mother, as such, because he never actually had her. Merlin, on the other hand, lost someone he knew practically all his life, someone whom he loved, and who loved him back the same way. It's not the same, and he shouldn't have mentioned it.

Merlin blows his nose again. "Thanks," he says, and Arthur shrugs once more.

They sit in silence for a little while.

Arthur wonders if it's appropriate to bring up the letter to Gwen so soon after Merlin was crying his heart out on his couch. Come to think of it, does Merlin often make himself cry like this, or is it something that overcomes him just like that? He said that he decided to listen to Will's message but surely he doesn't sit around all day and just ... wallow like this?

He sneaks a glance at Merlin. Merlin, for his part, is staring off into space again. Arthur's seen him do this before, at the coffee shop a fortnight ago. He wonders what Merlin thinks about when he's spaced out like this.

*Probably better times with Will*, he concludes.

Eventually he just gets up and fetches Merlin a glass of water. Merlin gulps it down in one go.

"Thanks," he says again, and this time Arthur nods.

"I finished the letter," he says.

Merlin gives him a weak smile. "Want me to read it?" He takes off his scarf, straightens it, then ties it back around his neck. Arthur thinks they're called infinity scarves but he isn't sure. Gwen would know.

"I think it'll be alright. I followed your advice and just wrote down how I really feel," he says.

Merlin nods. "That's good. I'm sure Gwen will appreciate it."

Arthur smiles at him. "I hope so."

~\*~

Arthur,

Thank you for your letter. I will need time to think about all the things you've said. It means a lot to me that you've opened up to me.

Gwen

Arthur whoops in triumph and immediately pulls out his phone to text Merlin.



It only takes a few moments for Merlin's reply to come through.

Arthur rolls his eyes at Merlin's poor spelling but he supposes he can do Merlin the favour of doing what he *orders*.

An hour and a half later, Arthur is seated at the same table where he and Merlin had talked the first time. He's already halfway through a cup of coffee, and bouncing his leg nervously, when Merlin finally strolls in with ten minutes to spare.

Merlin waves at him and nods towards the bar. Arthur jumps up and walks over to the counter to pay for whatever Merlin orders. Of course Merlin takes his bloody time to choose an iced caramel latte with extra whipped cream and sauce

As if the latte weren't enough, Merlin also gets a piece of chocolate cake.

"Do you intend to fall into a sugar induced coma?" Arthur asks with wide eyes.

Merlin grins wryly. "Nope. Just trying to keep my blood sugar up. I've not eaten much today so this will do me good."

Arthur frowns but pays for everything and waits impatiently while the barista prepares Merlin's order.

As soon as they sit down at the table, Merlin digs into the chocolate cake with fervour. With just four bites he has finished it off. He picks up the crumbs one by one, using his right forefinger, and licks them off. The view is mesmerising to Arthur, if only for the sheer tempo in which it all happens. Or maybe for the dedication Merlin puts into making sure he gets every crumb's worth out of that piece of cake.

Eventually, when the plate is as clean as it was before the chocolate cake ever touched it, Merlin sits back with his feet up on the chair, picks up his drink, and slurps it through the straw.

Arthur watches him with amazement. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone savour a piece of cake less," he comments. Merlin just shrugs. "I was hungry."

"I bet you were. Maybe I should have asked you out to dinner instead."

Merlin laughs. "I'm fine, I promise. Why did you want to see me?"

Arthur immediately perks up and quickly hands Merlin the yellow envelope he received in the mail today.

Merlin takes it from him gingerly, possibly because he just had chocolate cake and doesn't want to get any smudges on it.

He frowns at Arthur's address on the front, then looks up at Arthur.

"Is this your handwriting?" Merlin asks, waving the envelope.

"No," Arthur says. "You've seen my handwriting, it's not that tidy."

Merlin nods. "True."

"Besides, why would I send myself a letter?" Arthur asks, frowning at him.

"Dunno," Merlin says with a shrug. "Posh people are weird."

Arthur huffs indignantly. "You're weird."

Merlin laughs. "Not your best comeback."

"Just look at the back already, will you?" Arthur says impatiently.

Merlin finally turns the envelope over and reads who sent it. His eyes widen.

"She replied!" he says excitedly, and Arthur nods, smiling.

"Yes. Read it!"

Merlin carefully fishes the card out of the envelope, still making sure that he only holds it with the tips of his fingers, and reads. As he reaches the end of her short note, Merlin nods approvingly. He gently puts the card back into the envelope before handing it back to Arthur.

"That's good," he says. "It's progress."

Arthur nods again. "It is. It's the first reaction I've received from her since she left. Before that, it was always Morgana who told me that it hadn't worked."

He looks down at the envelope again. Gwen's handwriting was a welcome, familiar sight. He remembered the times when she used to leave him notes everywhere. Sometimes just to tell him that she loved him, sometimes shopping lists. Arthur smiles. It's good to know she's still talking to him.

"What do you intend to do next?" Merlin interrupts Arthur's thoughts.

Arthur sighs and puts the card down on the table. "I don't know. She said she needs more time to think, but I don't want her to talk herself back into staying away from me. I should do something, shouldn't I?"

Merlin's looking pensive and begins sucking on the straw again. Arthur finds it distracting, but he's not sure whether it's because of the noise it's making, or because of the way Merlin's cheeks hollow.

"Well, you've told her what's in your heart – or so I assume?" Arthur nods. "I have." Merlin nods as well. "Then there's no need for any further declarations just yet."

"But I can't go back to being silent now. I just showed her that I can be open about my feelings."

Merlin gives him an amused look. "You've done it once, Arthur. And I'm proud of you for opening up, as is Gwen, apparently." He gestures towards the envelope with his drink. "But oversharing is not attractive. If you do too much of the same, she'll think that it's not genuine, or be annoyed by hearing the same stuff over and over again. The point of romance is to surprise your love, to make them feel special and desired. You want her to know that you're thinking of her, but you also don't want her to think you're obsessed."

Arthur groans and lets his head fall back. He rubs his hands across his face before looking back at Merlin.

"So, what? I wait for her next reply?" Arthur asks. He's not convinced that that is the best option. The last time he did nothing, he lost Gwen.

"No. Didn't you listen to what I just said?" Merlin asks. "I said make her feel desired and let her know that you think of her. Just don't be a creepy stalker about it."

"Can't you be a little more concrete?" Arthur asks, patience running out. "That's why you're here, isn't it? To help me with this stuff."

Merlin's expression darkens, and he sets down his drink.

"Only because you begged me to help you. I'm not sure I don't still think of you as the guy who almost broke my arm when I tried to help before," he says coolly.

Arthur flinches. He deserved that.

"I'm sorry," he says sheepishly. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

Merlin watches him for a few moments, most likely waiting for Arthur to lose his temper again. Eventually he picks his drink up again and goes back to slurping it noisily. Arthur tries hard not to look annoyed.

It's not long before Merlin finishes it and sets the empty cup down. Arthur has been thinking about how he can salvage the situation. He considers apologising again, and possibly buying Merlin another piece of cake. Luckily for him, Merlin seems unwilling to stay angry with him today.

"When you go through your day," he says into the quiet between them, "do things remind you of Gwen? Do you randomly think of her?" Merlin asks.

Arthur thinks about the question. "Sometimes?" he asks.

Merlin raises a brow. "Are you telling me, or asking me?" One corner of his mouth is twitching as if he's trying not to laugh.

"Telling. I think about her sometimes."

Merlin nods. "Good. When that happens, you could send her a small gift. Either send her whatever it is that reminded you of her, or a facsimile."

"How do you mean?" Arthur asks. He's not entirely sure Gwen would appreciate being sent office supplies whenever Arthur thought about how much tidier his study was after Gwen had gone through it. She's not that much like his secretary, who's regularly bribed with new stationary and pens.

Merlin's mouth opens, as if he's going to speak, but then closes again. His eyes take on a sad look, and Merlin turns his head to look out of the window. Arthur's learning to recognise this look as Merlin's "thinking about Will again" expression.

Again, Arthur wonders if he should break the silence or wait for Merlin to return to the conversation by himself. He opts for the middle-ground and clears his throat.

"I used to send him news postings or leave paper clippings on the kitchen counter," Merlin says at length. "He loved to read about archaeological finds of medieval villages and all that stuff." He drags his finger through the condensation on the empty plastic cup of his drink, lost in a memory.

Arthur lets him be for a little while when it's obvious that Merlin's not going to say more. At least it gives him time to think on Merlin's suggestion some more.

The barista comes by and picks up the empty plate. "Slow day," she says, smiling at them. "Do you want a refill?" She nods at Arthur's empty cup.

"Yes, please," he says.

"What about you, Merlin? Up for some more sugar?" the barista teases, but Merlin doesn't react.

"It's okay," Arthur says. "He'll come to you if he changes his mind later."

She takes Arthur's cup with her but casts another worried glance at Merlin.

After Arthur's coffee has arrived, Arthur slowly leans over and touches Merlin's hand that's cradling the empty plastic cup.

Merlin jumps, and Arthur's glad he didn't order another coffee for Merlin as well. Merlin would have knocked it clean off the table, and probably into either his or – worse – Arthur's lap. As it is, Merlin's cup falls over and rolls almost off the table, only stopping centimetres from the edge.

*The floor must be level*, Arthur thinks idly.

"What?" Merlin asks, eyes wide.

"Sorry," Arthur says. "I didn't mean to startle you. But, er, what would you recommend I send Gwen when I want to express that I miss how she gave my life order?"



Merlin blinks several times at Arthur as if trying to remember what they were talking about.

“Order, how?” he asks, brows knitted together.

“I mean literal order. She's very tidy,” Arthur explains.

At Merlin's incredulous look Arthur thinks over what that might imply, and winces. “Not that I saw her as my maid!” he says quickly. “It's just that she knows me so well and she knows how to arrange things so I'll find them. And most of the time it helped me figure out the solution to a problem if she'd gone through my study to tidy up.” He shrugs helplessly. “She had a way of anticipating what I needed to see or know in order for me to make a good decision.”

Merlin appears to be thinking it over. He's picked up the empty cup again, and turns it idly in his hands.

“And Gwen likes tidying up?” he asks slowly.

Arthur, truth be told, has no idea if Gwen likes it. “I don't know,” he admits. “She always did it. I always assumed she enjoyed it.”

Merlin sighs long-sufferingly. “Will she understand why you're sending her office supplies? Do you think she'd find it amusing?”

Arthur doesn't know, and he shrugs. “She might.”

Merlin stares at a spot to Arthur's right, lost in thought again.

Arthur's just about to get up and get himself another cup of coffee when Merlin sits up straight, sets the cup down and pulls a piece of paper and a pen out of his messenger bag.

“Okay, here's what you'll do.”

~\*~

Gwen's just finishing up a text to Leon when she unlocks the front door to Morgana's house. She's been thinking about finding a place of her own soon, but for now she enjoys not being alone when she doesn't want to be.

The moment Morgana hands her the envelope, Gwen doubts her decision. It has a pale lavender colour, and Gwen immediately knows who sent it. It's obvious by the way Morgana smiles triumphantly when she hands it over, but Gwen checks the sender's address anyway. Sure enough there's Arthur's familiar handwriting.

Gwen frowns. She's having a hard enough time deciding what to do about Arthur's letter as it is. She definitely doesn't need him to add pressure by sending her messages every few days.

With a heavy sigh she puts away her phone. She doesn't know what to expect, but she's afraid Arthur wants to meet or ask permission to call her. If he does, Gwen wouldn't know how to refuse him without hurting both of them more.

She had asked him to give her time to think about his letter, and she was already getting angry that he so blatantly ignored her wishes. Again.

Gwen carelessly rips open the envelope and pulls out the card.

As soon as the top of the card comes into view, Gwen sees the tight line of paperclips in various shades of purple all along the edge. They form a perfect gradient, and, her eyes widening, she pulls the card entirely out of the ruined envelope. The whole card is framed with paperclips in her favourite colour.

Gwen wonders what Arthur's trying to say as she turns the card over. There's just one line written on the back.

*I live in chaos since you left.*

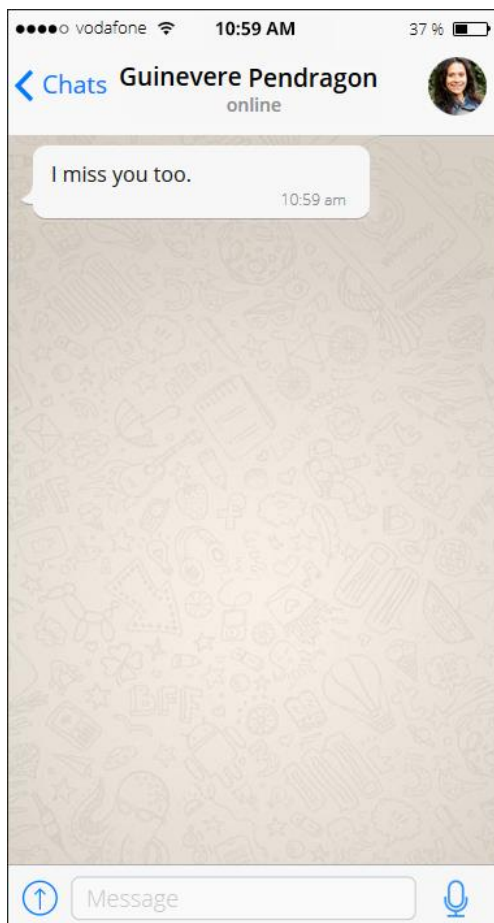
When it finally dawns on Gwen what Arthur means, she can't help but smile fondly as she traces the twisted shapes of the paperclips. She used to tease Arthur for not being able to keep a tidy desk, and in return Arthur always told her that he needed her to sort through the chaos and to get everything to make sense again. He used to say that he'd end up living in chaos if she ever stopped bringing order to his life.

She holds the card tightly to her chest as she walks to her room, already thinking about what to send Arthur in return.

Behind her, Morgana smiles happily and pulls out her phone to congratulate Arthur on his success.

~\*~

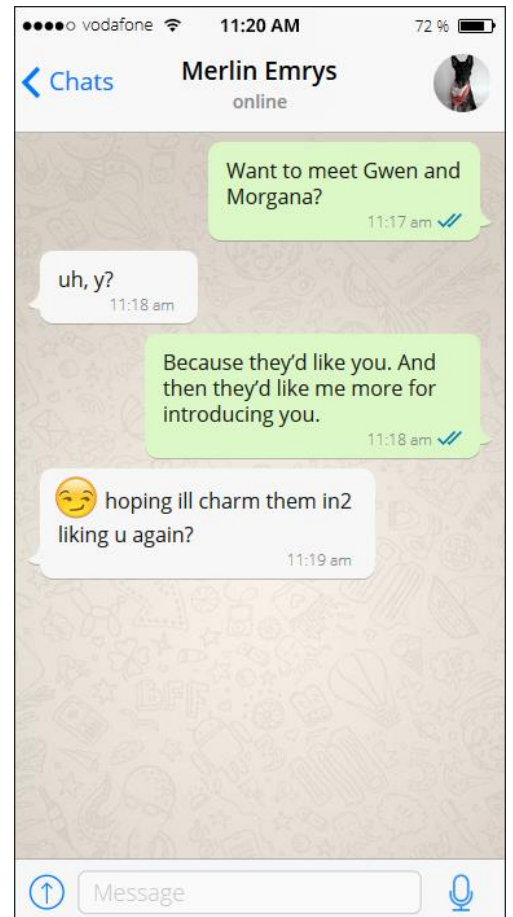
Arthur receives a text from Gwen less than a week after his card arrived.



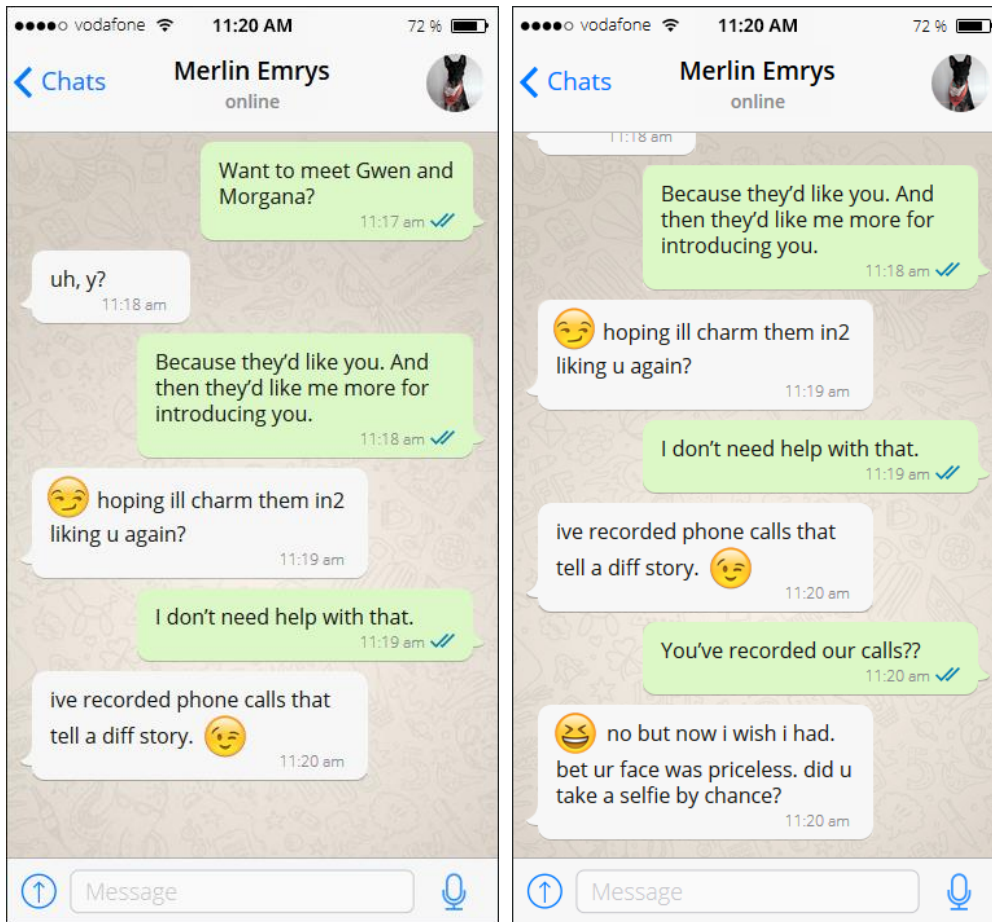
He takes a screenshot and sends it to Merlin.



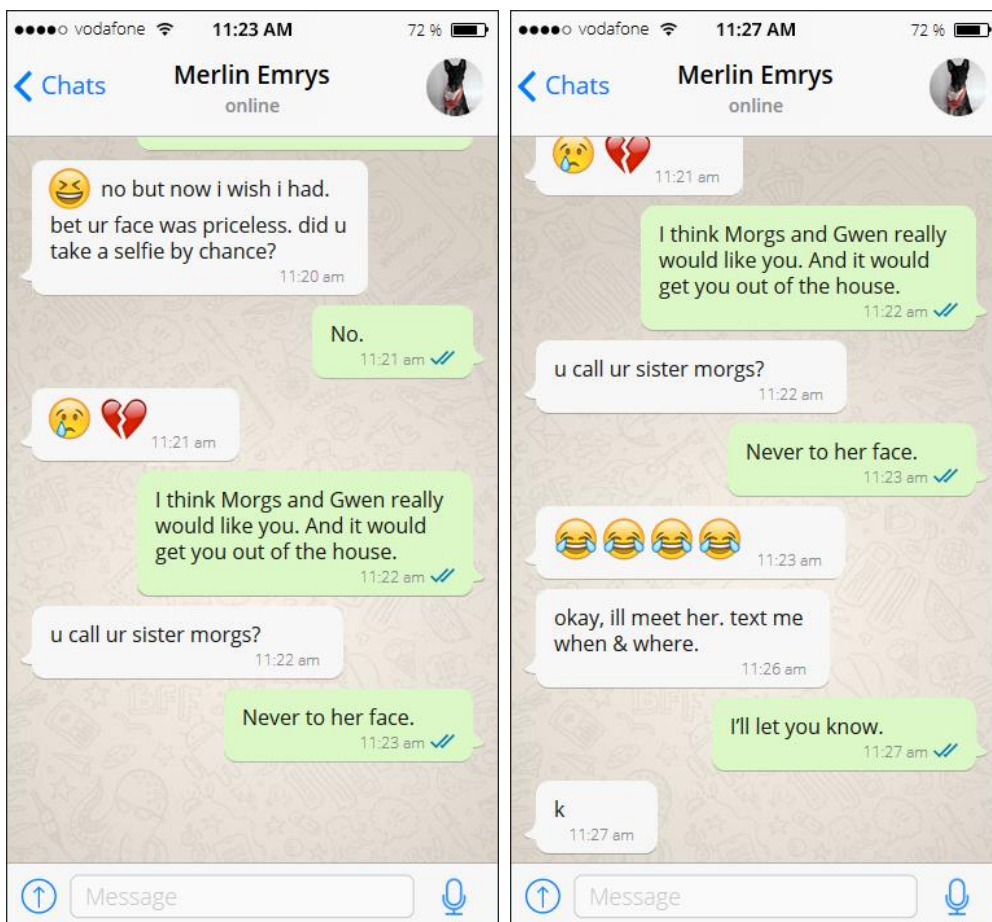
Arthur shakes his head at the conversation, smiling the whole time. Merlin certainly is an odd one. But kind of adorable too, Arthur must admit. He's sure Morgana would adore him. Come to think of it, Gwen probably would too. Maybe he should introduce them soon and get some credit for making new friends, and good ones at that.



He snorts at Merlin's reply. It's hardly a concern and he tells Merlin as much.



Arthur rolls his eyes. Trust Merlin to milk the situation.



Of course, Arthur has no time to set up anything just then because he's at work and already feeling guilty for taking time out of his schedule to text Merlin for so long. The only reason he texted instead of calling him was because he thought it would be faster.

He completely forgets all about scheduling dinner or lunch for himself, Merlin, Morgana and Gwen when Fred knocks on his door to bring him the latest figures for their current contract negotiation. As so often in Arthur's life, everything else goes by the board.

The few times he makes it out of the office at a reasonable hour, he ends up going directly home and to bed. The only time he stops on his way is when he walks past a flower shop that has a lovely looking bouquet of red chrysanthemums and some asters. He spends a whole five minutes being proud of himself for recognising them, and when he asks, the florist confirms that Arthur was right, both about what kind they are, and what they mean. Arthur pays for the bouquet and a simple card.

He writes *Look up their meaning. I mean every word*, and has them sent to Morgana's place for Gwen.

On his way out of the shop he sees a bunch of gladiolus. It takes him a moment to remember what he read about them, but then he asks the florist to make up a small bouquet. Arthur takes it home with him and arranges it in a vase before setting them in the spot that gets the most sun in the living room. He takes a picture and sends it to Merlin.

*These reminded me of you.*

Satisfied with himself and a job well done, he heads upstairs and to sleep.

~\*~

**Aster** <aster> Commonly found in Eurasia. Genus of flowering plants in the family *Asteraceae*. In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers asters are a *symbol or talisman of love*, and stand for *daintiness*.

**Chrysanthus** <chrysanthemum> Native to Asia and northeastern Europe. Flowering plants of the genus *Chrysanthemum* in the family *Asteraceae*. In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers chrysanthus have many meanings, depending on their colour(s). Red chrysanthus stand for *love*.

**Gladiolus** <gladiolus oppositiflorus> Occurs in Asia, Mediterranean Europe, South Africa, and tropical Africa. Genus of *perennial cormous* flowering plants in the iris family (*Iridaceae*). In the language of flowers gladiolus mean *strength of character, faithfulness, conviction and honour*.

*Mona's Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

~\*~

## Part 2

It's hectic these next few weeks, as always when Christmas is approaching. All companies want to get everything done before the holidays as no one fancies coming into the office between Christmas and New Year's.

In past years since Arthur took over as CEO, Fred usually did all his Christmas shopping. That's probably why she looks like she suffered a heart attack when Arthur tells her that he'll be going out this afternoon to buy presents himself.

As it turns out, this is much harder than anticipated. He has only vague ideas of what to get anyone, and after spending two hours at Harrods, he still hasn't spent a single pound, albeit not for lack of trying by sales personnel. Arthur has no idea how his secretary does this every year, and wonders if he should give her a belated pay raise for putting up with it.

If he had thought that there would be less of a crowd at Harrods due to being horrendously pricey, Arthur was wrong. He supposes that with only a fortnight left until Christmas, everyone is out trying to get those last minute presents.

After another half hour of browsing, during which he picks out and discards half a dozen items, Arthur decides to try somewhere else instead and heads to Covent Garden. Traffic is a nightmare though, and it takes him almost an hour to reach his destination. The rain has turned into some sort of wet snow slush and he has a feeling that his suit will be ruined by the end of the day.

Nevertheless, he opens his umbrella and braves the crowd of people milling the streets.

He's glad when finds a small antiques bookshop after only a few minutes of walking down Charing Cross Road. It's in a small side alley into which he normally wouldn't have ventured, but the crowd was so thick that he needed an escape. There are still a lot of people in the alley, but at least he can walk without bumping into someone every step.

The shop itself is small but well cared for and well lit. Despite the selection of antiques the shop doesn't smell dusty.

Arthur browses their poetry section for a long while, and actually finds a copy of Keats' Poems, published 1817, in great condition.

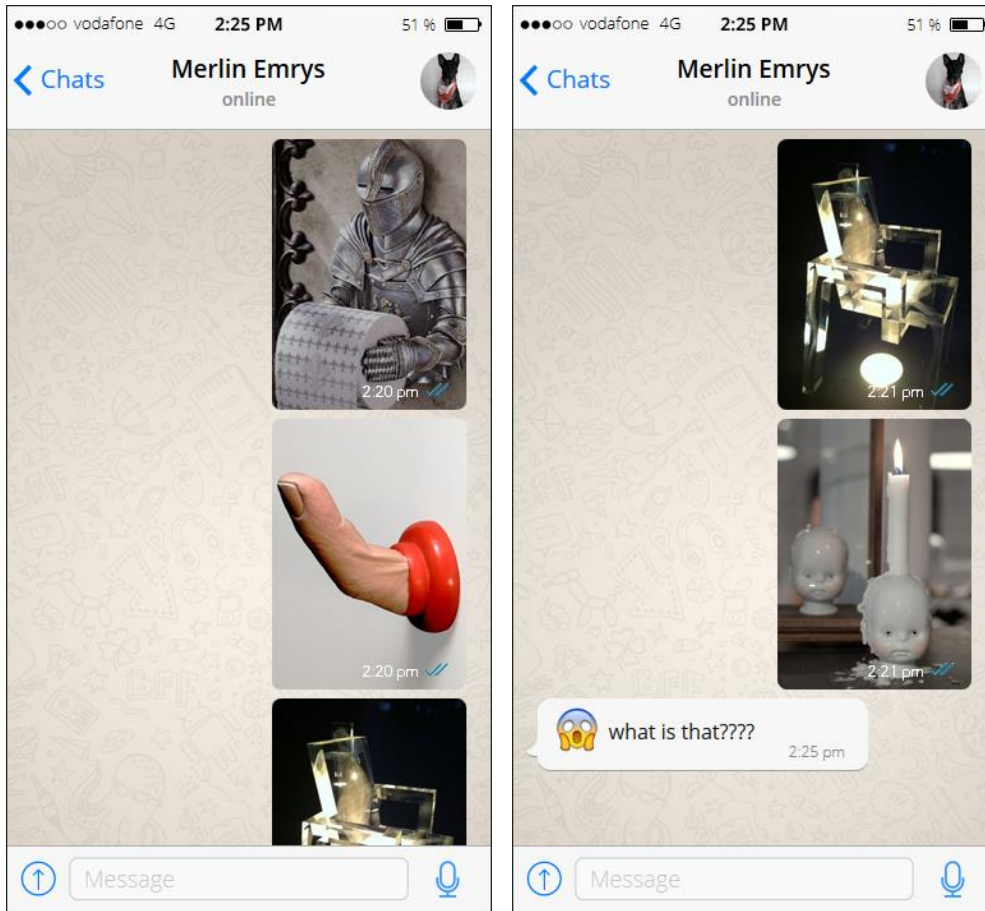
He sneakily takes a picture and sends it to Merlin.



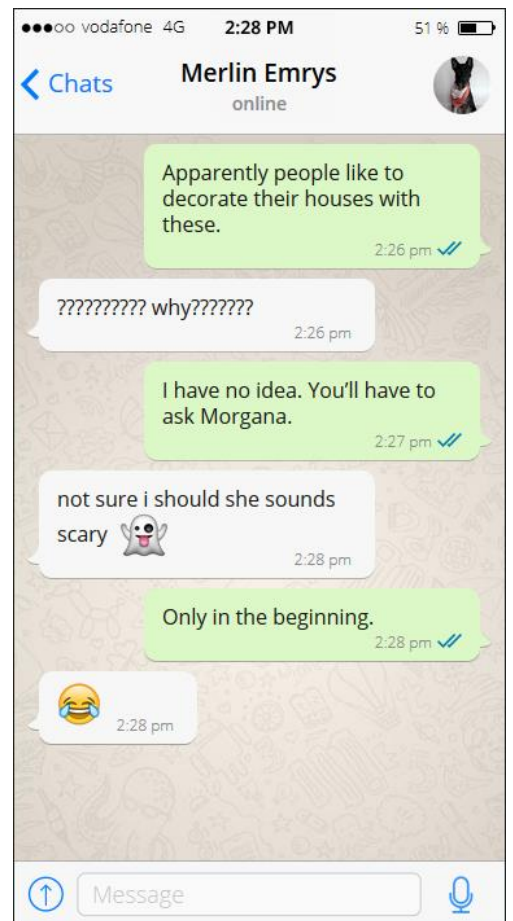
Arthur sighs long-sufferingly at Merlin's use of emoticons and improper grammar, but puts the phone away. At the counter he just hands over his credit card, not even asking what it costs.

The bookseller wraps it up carefully first in tissue paper, then in brown paper, before tying it with a bit of string. She puts it in a small plastic bag for extra protection, then hands it to Arthur. He puts it securely in his coat pocket and heads back out, umbrella at the ready.

The next shop he enters specialises in unusual home decorations. Arthur takes pictures of a toilet paper holder shaped like a knight, a wall hook that looks like a cut-off finger, an armchair made of glass, and a candle holder shaped like a doll's head. He sends all of them to Merlin.



Arthur chuckles. He had hoped to be able to shock Merlin and it seems he was successful.





He puts the phone away to browse in peace. To his delight he spots a selection of the kind of snow globes Morgana likes to collect.

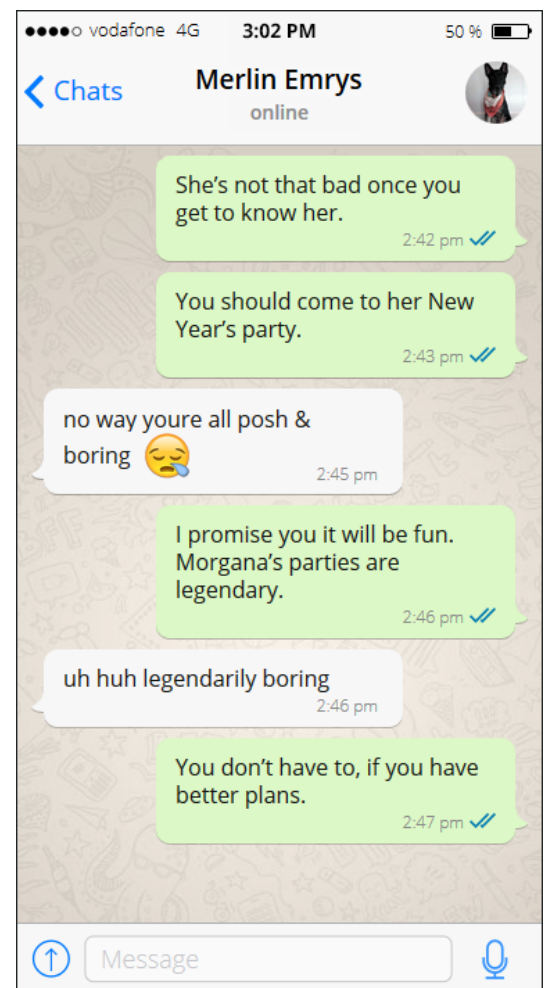
He takes another picture of one of the globes. It shows a horse that's walking away from a man who's strung up on the branch of a tree, and sends it to Merlin.



Arthur laughs out loud and turns the heads of two other customers. They glare at him and he quickly apologises.

He frowns, remembering that he had made a promise to introduce Merlin to Morgana and Gwen. Merlin doesn't reply right away. Arthur could see him start typing but he stopped without sending anything. He frowns and puts the phone away to take a closer look at the globes.

Unfortunately he has no idea which ones she already has but the saleswoman assures him that Morgana may exchange it for another one after Christmas if she so wishes. With that in mind, Arthur selects a set of three globes that he thinks go well together. They all show a woman, and in one case a little girl, standing on a cliff or mountain top. The girl has her hands raised to the sky, one of the women is pouring water into the ocean, and the third one wears a long red dress whose train is held by two men. Arthur thinks that it's almost like they're telling a story.

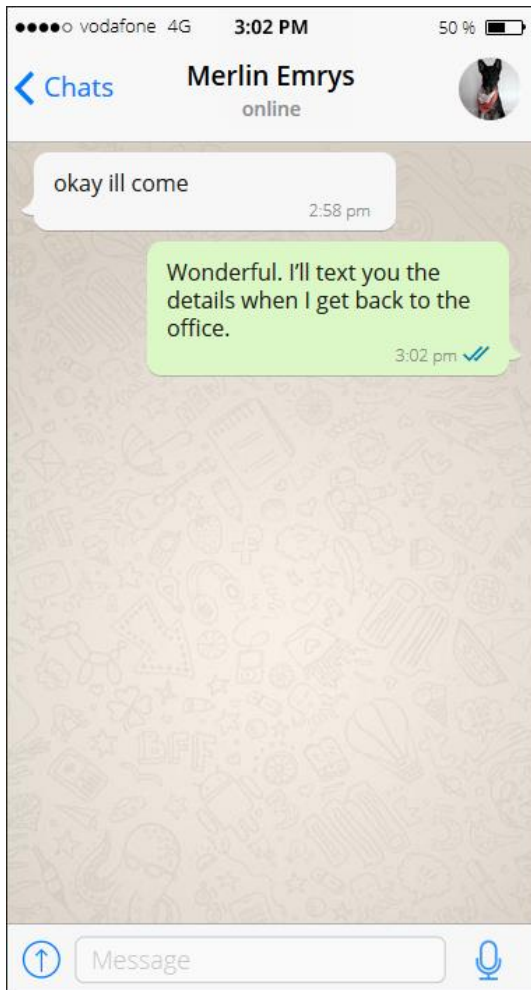


The saleswoman takes them out of the showcase for him, carefully settles them inside a special box each, and then rings them up.

Ten minutes later he's back out on the street, umbrella raised, and carrying a large bag in the other hand.

That's Gwen and Morgana done. He glances at his watch. It only took him an hour too. If he can find something for Elyan in that time as well, he'll be all done.

His phone vibrates in his pocket and Arthur quickly finds a dry spot in a doorway to check it.



He's in an excellent mood when he resumes his way down the street. He passes the window of a small clothes shop, and stops in his tracks. Displayed is a wide array of brightly coloured scarves.

Arthur grins and goes inside.

~\*~

Christmas Eve is incredibly busy until three in the afternoon, and then everyone just seems to stop. Arthur doesn't receive any more urgent last minute calls or emails, his secretary has already left the office, and Arthur is somewhat certain that the only people still in the building are those who don't celebrate Christmas. Well, and him.

The thing is that Arthur has no definite plans for today. Morgana invited him to dinner, and he promised he would come, if only to see Gwen and Leon. Elyan will be there too, so it will be much like any other Christmas Eve. Except that he and Gwen aren't together anymore and Arthur doesn't even know how to behave around her. He has sent her so many things over the last few weeks, and received replies to the most recent ones – thanks to Merlin – but he hasn't actually spoken to Gwen since she left. He hasn't even been in the same room as her.

He sighs heavily and turns off his computer. He won't be able to do much else today. Anything he hasn't finished yet can wait until the holidays are over.

At home he attempts to wrap the presents he bought. Gwen's is relatively easy. He leaves it much as it was wrapped by the bookseller, and merely adds some glittery ribbon.

Morgana's globes are slightly more challenging. The boxes are squares and therefore should be easy to wrap up, but they're also big and unwieldy. He manages, in the end, with more tape than strictly necessary. Morgana will mock him, but as she would have done that even he had not wrapped them at all – or worse, had them wrapped by the saleswoman – he figured that this year at least he'd get credit for trying.

What's trickier is Leon's traditional bottle of 25-year-old Macallan's Single Malt. It's from Uther's whisky collection, bestowed upon Arthur for some reason Arthur never quite understood. He doesn't drink whisky. Uther probably just didn't want Morgana throwing the bottles away. So now Arthur gives the collection to Leon – one bottle at a time.

In the end he ties a bow around the neck and decides that Leon already knows what he's getting anyway.

After this, he's glad that all he has to do for Elyan's gift card from the travel equipment shop is to put it in a nice envelope and write his name on it.

By the time he's finally done with all of it, he has just enough time to take a shower and get dressed before he has to go.

The taxi ride to Morgana's is taking forever, of course. At some point Arthur actually contemplates getting out and walking the rest of the way, but then remembers that he would have to carry everyone's gifts as well. So it takes him another mind numbing twenty minutes to reach her place. Despite leaving extra early he's almost late.

Morgana complains only a little bit when he shows up two minutes past six.

"I said six sharp," she says as soon as she opens the door. Her hair's done up in an elaborate design and she has fixed white gem stones in it. Her dress is dark red and clings to her every curve. Never let it be said that Morgana doesn't dress to impress.

"I know," Arthur says. "Traffic was a nightmare."

“You should have left earlier,” is her only comment before breezing off back upstairs to return to her guests and leave Arthur to fend for himself with several bags of presents.

“I did,” he mutters to himself as he sets all the bags down on a dresser.

He takes his time taking off his coat, just to annoy Morgana some more. He’s in the process of taking off his shoes and finding a pair of slippers when Morgana shouts down the stairs.

“What in the world is taking so long, Arthur?”

“I was just admiring your new entrance hall décor,” he says, gesturing to something that looks like a very weird and impractical coat rack, even though he knows Morgana can’t see him. The coat rack is more or less tastefully decorated with fairy lights. Arthur puts his coat on it as there’s no space left on the old (“It’s antique, Arthur!” Morgana would argue) rack mounted on the wall. Everybody else must already be here.

“It’s a Christmas tree,” Morgana calls. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

Arthur quickly takes his coat off it again, and frowns at the thing. Christmas tree was not even close to what he would’ve guessed, but he supposes he can sort of see it – if he squints and tilts his head and employs a lot of imagination.

“I’m guessing it’s art?” he asks, already knowing that it’s a redundant question.

“Of course it is art, Arthur,” she calls, going back to her exasperated self.

He nods. “Right. Well, it’s nice.”

Morgana scoffs. “As if you had any idea about art,” she says. “I’m going away now. If you want to talk to me, come upstairs already.”

Arthur sighs. *Morgana’s clearly inherited all the artistic talent of the family. If there ever was any, he thinks.*

He stands, feet securely in slippers, and picks up the bags again, to make his way upstairs. The layout of the house is not very cottage-like, with the bedrooms downstairs, while living room and kitchen are upstairs. When Arthur pointed out that this made it less of a cottage and basically just a house, Morgana refused to speak with him for three weeks until he finally agreed that it’s a *modern* cottage.

“With my annoying brother *finally* here,” Morgana says when he appears at the top of the stairs, “we can eat at last!”

Leon and Gwen, who have been standing by the fire place and talking to each other, look over and smile.

Leon’s hair has grown since Arthur last saw him. He’s actually pulled it back into a small pony tail. Arthur has to admit that it suits him and doesn’t clash with his grey suit in any way.

Gwen on the other left her hair undone, and Arthur approves whole-heartedly. She looks stunning in her dark green dress. It’s not nearly as revealing as Morgana’s, nor as tight, but it contrasts beautifully with her skin and hugs her in all the right ways.

Arthur smiles at her, but then makes himself look at Leon to nod his greeting.

“Great, I’m starving!” Elyan says and gets up out of his chair, clapping his hands.

He squeezes Arthur’s shoulder as he walks past and Arthur smiles at him.

Gwen’s brother’s dressed in casual clothes, as always. Morgana possibly pursed her lips at him when she first saw his Christmas themed t-shirt, and faded jeans. Arthur only smiles wider. “Good to see you, Elyan.”

Elyan smiles back and makes his way over to the dining area.

“I’ll just put these under the tree, then I’ll join you,” Arthur says. He raises the bags to indicate the presents he brought.

Arthur turns towards the tree – a real one for the seating area, thank God – and kneels down in front of it to unload his presents.

“I’m glad you came,” comes Gwen’s voice from behind him and he almost drops one of Morgana’s globes in surprise.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Gwen gushes. “I didn’t mean to startle you! I just wanted to tell you that I’m happy you’re here and that I think it’ll be a nice evening, but I wanted to do it away from the others because I didn’t know how you’d feel about me talking to you like nothing happened, because some things did happen and it might have been awkward if everybody was there to listen—”

“It’s alright,” he interrupts her. He sets down the box with the globe and turns to look at her. She’s standing not far behind him, eyes wide and lower lip caught between her teeth. Arthur smiles up at her. “I promise, I’m glad to be here too. And I’m happy to know that you want me here with all of you.”

She relaxes, and smiles one of her sweet, affectionate smiles. “Of course I want you here. They’re your family too. Morgana more so than mine.”

Arthur chuckles. “Don’t bring that up with her. I think she’d much rather have you as her sibling than me.”

Gwen huffs a laugh. “Well, yes, maybe that’s true.” She grins. “But we’re still your family. Besides, nobody should be alone on Christmas.”

Arthur smiles, and nods. “You’re right. Thank you, Gwen.”

Gwen smiles back. She opens her mouth as if to say something else, but right then Morgana’s call of “For goodness sake, Arthur, will you get a move on already?” interrupts her. Gwen giggles, and Arthur can’t help a chuckle either.

“Better hurry up,” Gwen advises with a nod to the bags. “I’ll see you in there.” She nods towards the dining room, then turns and walks away.

Arthur watches her go, still smiling. It’s only when Morgana shouts his name again that he shakes himself out of it and quickly finishes putting all the presents under the tree.

He stands and heads to the dining room, belatedly remembering what Gwen said about nobody being alone on Christmas. Arthur hopes Merlin is celebrating with his family, or his friends too, and he makes a mental note to text him later.

Right now there's a dinner that needs eating.

~\*~

Two hours later they're all stuffed with excellent food, which Morgana claims she cooked all by herself, but a quick glance at Gwen's indulgent smile tells Arthur what really happened in that kitchen earlier. Gwen looks up and catches him looking. She smiles and shrugs, basically confirming Arthur's deduction. He grins, more because of the moment he and Gwen shared than from having confirmation of his sister being too proud to admit that she's an atrocious cook.

Traditionally Morgana is the one to hand out gifts, since it's "my home, my tree, my party," as she likes to remind everyone every year.

She deliberately leaves everything Arthur brought for last, probably expecting them to be the same impersonal things he brought before. It's true that while his secretary is incredibly good at her job, even when buying presents, she only ever goes for safe options. Like scarves, and jewellery, or perfume, maybe the occasional book.

Arthur leans back and smiles. He'll enjoy surprising everyone this year.

First he receives another weird souvenir from one of Elyan's travels, and next a coupon to use any of Leon's cars in his collection for an entire weekend – his traditional gift to Arthur in return for the whiskey.

Gwen has got him lovely leather gloves. "You can use your phone without taking them off," she explains, and Arthur knows she remembered that he complained about getting cold fingers when using his phone outside during winter, and that's why she got them for him. It makes him smile all the wider.

Morgana, of course, leaves her gift to him for last because she always needs to make an entrance, even when she's already in the room.

It's a small box, wrapped beautifully. Arthur opens it slowly, and finds a black box, embossed with Grieb & Benziger in gold letters on it. He knows the company, owns several of their watches, and it's another tradition for Morgana to gift him a watch every few years. She only does it when she finds something in their collection she thinks is worthy of adorning a Pendragon's wrist.

Arthur's immediately one hundred percent more excited about his gift. Morgana's taste in decorations may be dubious, but when it comes to fashion and accessories, she is unbeatable.

He slowly lifts the lid off the box, and what he finds is without a doubt the most beautiful time-piece he has ever seen.

The clockwork is visible, and surrounded by delicate ornaments. That alone is breath-taking, but what really catches the eye is the engraved crystal: the Pendragon crest right where the number 12 would be.

Arthur looks up with shining eyes, to see Morgana smiling softly at him. "Turn it over," is all she says, and Arthur carefully takes it out of the box to look at the back.

There's another engraving there at the top. It's his mother's sigil, and the words *be kind, be gentle, be honest* beneath it. Arthur wipes roughly at his eyes.

"I found her crest and the motto in the library at Uther's house," Morgana says softly. "I have them upstairs in my study. They're yours, if you want them."

He nods, and carefully replaces the watch in the box. "Thank you, Morgana," he says, surprised that he's not sounding hoarse. He stands and goes to hug her tightly. She clings to him just as hard.

After a moment he pulls away and clears his throat. "Let's move on, please."

He takes his seat again and let's Morgana turn back to the tree. No doubt she's already gearing up to mock him endlessly about his lack of creativity or involvement.

However, she looks intrigued when she realises that none of the gifts are artfully wrapped, which means that they weren't done in a shop. Neither are they all approximately the same size. She starts with Elyan, who is more than happy to be able to shop for new gear as soon as the shops open again.

Next up is Leon, who nods and hums appreciatively at the whisky. Morgana opens her own boxes next and is squealing with delight when she sees what's inside.

"Arthur, you sly dog!" she shrieks. "I can't believe you found these!" She takes them out of their boxes one by one to turn them over and get a proper look at them.

"They even all fit together!" she says once she realises that they can be put in order.

Arthur smirks. "I know," he says. "That's why I got you all three."

She laughs in amazement, shaking her head disbelievingly at the globes.

After several minutes, Arthur clears his throat. "Morgana, aren't you forgetting something?" he asks, and she looks up, seemingly confused for a moment. Arthur nods towards Gwen whose just accepting a drink from Leon.

"Oh!" Morgana says, and quickly jumps up to find Gwen's gift.

She carries it over, frowning at the plain wrapping. Gwen takes it with a smile, and a nod to Arthur.

Arthur watches her intently as she hands back her drink to Leon who holds it dutifully for her. Gwen carefully unties the bow, then the bit of string, and then slowly removes the packing paper. As soon as she can make out the title on the spine through the thin tissue paper, her head snaps up and she stares at Arthur.

Arthur smiles at her and nods at the book, eyes wide in question.

Gwen looks back at the book and slowly removes the tissue paper. She runs her fingertips over the letters on the leather bound spine before very carefully lifting the cover.

She gasps when she sees that it's a genuine first edition from 1817. She closes the book again and places a hand on the front before looking up with a bright, warm smile. "Thank you, Arthur. It must have cost a fortune, but thank you."

He smiles back. "Anything to make you happy."

"Thank you," she says again, then looks up at Leon. Leon smiles at her and hands her back her drink. She takes it looking almost grateful, and takes a small sip.

Arthur's sure that's the exact same whisky Leon just received from him. He shakes his head fondly, and then picks up the box from Morgana again to have another look at his beautiful new watch.

~\*~

It's nearing midnight when Arthur's mobile rings. Morgana shoots him a reproachful glare, and Arthur's about to reject the call when he sees who it is.

"Excuse me," he tells his friends and heads out into the hall to answer.

"Merlin?"

"Uh, no, this is Mick. Are you Arthur?" a strange voice in a thick cockney accent asks.

"What are you doing with Merlin's phone?" Arthur asks back, immediately suspicious.

"Your mate's at my pub and he had too much. I cut him off an hour ago but he won't leave. I need you to come and pick him up."

Arthur's eyes widen. "What?"

"I'm not sure he'll make it home safe, but if nobody can take care of him I'll kick him out in half an hour anyway. Wife's waiting for me to get home," Mick explains, not sounding much like he's actually worried about Merlin's safety.

"Text me the address, I'm leaving right now," Arthur says, already heading downstairs towards the front door.

"Cheers," Mick says and hangs up.

Arthur pulls on his coat. He texts Morgana to say sorry for leaving suddenly, resigning himself to her wrath for not *properly saying goodbye on bloody Christmas, Arthur!* He knows he'd have to give an explanation for leaving so suddenly, and then all his friends would be worried and ask if they could do something, and Arthur just wants to get to the pub quickly.

Next he calls for a taxi. While he waits outside the house, Mick's text comes through, and as soon as the car's there, Arthur slips inside and gives the cabbie directions.

It takes almost half an hour to cross from Islington over into the next borough. Arthur's jiggling his right leg nervously the whole time, willing the car to go faster. Not that it helps any. London has been surprised by snow and of course nobody was prepared for it, as usual. The cabbie's driving reasonably slowly, ensuring his, Arthur's and other people's safety. Arthur knows all that, of course. It's just bloody aggravating when you're trying to get somewhere quickly.



Finally he reaches the little pub smack in the middle of Hackney. It's called "The Cock Tavern". Arthur actually pulls up the text from Mick again to check that he's got the address right.

Yes, this is definitely the place, so Arthur asks the cabbie to wait while he goes and gets Merlin. He's worried he's going to find Merlin leaning, or – worse – sitting against the cold wall outside.

To his immense relief, there's no one outside, and a dim light comes through window panes of the double doors.

Arthur cautiously pushes the door open.

The light's coming from low hanging lamps above the counter. They illuminate the dark wood panels lining the bar. The stools in front of it – wooden as well, and only some fitted with a cushion – are set at respectable distances from each other to ensure proper privacy for the average antisocial English person.

The walls are lined with old church benches, and most of the tables are small and round. Arthur wonders how anyone could find this place cosy.

He has no time to dwell on it because at that moment, a man comes out from behind the bar. His black hair is shaved down to a fuzz, but what he lacks there, he more than makes up for with his beard. He's wearing glasses, and a dark t-shirt.

"You must be Arthur," he says. Arthur recognises the voice, even though Mick's accent seems to be lighter in person than on the phone.

"I am," Arthur confirms. "Where's Merlin?"

Mick gestures towards a slumped figure towards the far end of the bar. There's a tall glass of water standing right in front of Merlin, but it looks untouched.

"How long has he been here?"

Mick shrugs. "Couple of hours. Came in around dinner time and started drinking."

Arthur nods. "Thanks for calling me."

Mick shrugs again. "No problem. Normally I don't worry too much about the drunks finding their way home alone. They're adults, right?"

Arthur nods absent-mindedly. He's still watching Merlin who hasn't moved an inch since Arthur arrived.

"But this one, he looked sad, you know," Mick adds when Arthur doesn't say anything. "So I took his keys and phone."

"Thank you," Arthur says again, then frowns and turns to look at Mick. "Why did you call me?"

Mick hands Arthur Merlin's phone and keys. "I called this other bloke first. Uh, Will Something. Figured he and Merlin must be mates because he's called him so often. His phone's turned off though."

Arthur's chest tightens.

"There weren't many other numbers he called. The two other most recent ones were out of reach, and his mum didn't answer, probably already asleep. But he's been texting you a few times so I figured I'd try my luck, and here you are," Mick finishes cheerily. "Now, if you don't mind, I really want to get home."

"Yes, of course," Arthur says. He pulls out his wallet and quickly hands Mick a wad of cash to pay for Merlin's bill, and a large tip. "I hope that covers everything," Arthur says.

Mick quickly counts the money, then gives Arthur a cheerful grin. "Yep, that about covers it."

Arthur nods. "Thank you again."

Mick makes a dismissive hand gesture, then heads back behind the bar. He's gone a moment later, leaving Arthur and Merlin alone in the pub proper.

Arthur goes over to Merlin and gently nudges him.

"Merlin?" he asks tentatively.

Merlin sits up so suddenly, he almost knocks their heads together. A second later he clutches the bar as if he's worried he's going to fall off his chair if he doesn't hold on tightly enough. Arthur guesses he's got a nasty bout of vertigo from snapping his head up so quickly.

"Merlin," Arthur repeats. "It's me, Arthur."

Merlin slowly turns his head towards him, and, as if Arthur was watching a recording in slow-motion, Merlin breaks into a smile. He looks incredibly pale, and he has grown his beard back.

"Arthur!" he says, sounding far happier than Arthur expected. "Arthur, let's have a drink!"

Arthur's already shaking his head no, and Merlin's happy smile turns into a pout.

"The pub's closed," Arthur explains. "I'm here to take you home."

"Oh," is all Merlin says. He stares at Arthur for several long moments, then turns back to look at the bar. It takes him a few long seconds before he nods and begins to carefully slide off the stool. Arthur keeps an eye on him, ready to jump in and steady him as soon as necessary. But Merlin makes it off the stool and down to the floor without falling down or knocking something over. Arthur's a bit impressed.

However, it takes another five minutes to get Merlin into his coat because Merlin keeps on missing the sleeves or dropping the coat altogether.

Arthur's starting to worry that Mick will just kick them out, weather be damned. Eventually Arthur just takes the coat and holds it out for Merlin, remembering the etiquette lessons his father made him take at fourteen. Merlin, however, still isn't able to put his arms into the sleeve holes himself, even though he tries several times. Arthur finally asks him to just hold still, and then slides the coat up onto his shoulders himself.

Walking is just as difficult, and after the first wobbly steps, Arthur decides to take things into his own hands - literally. He slides an arm around Merlin's back, pulling him in close against his side and steadying Merlin that way. Together they make it out of the pub.

Arthur's glad to find the cabbie still waiting outside. He wrestles Merlin and his floppy, uncoordinated limbs into the car, and fastens his seatbelt before getting in himself. The cabbie looks worried, like he fears that Merlin's going to be sick all over his leather seats. Arthur concedes silently that it's a valid concern, but he'll deal with the consequences should it come to that.

For a moment they're all three sitting in the taxi, watching each other before Arthur remembers that he needs to give the cabbie his address.

He's about to tell him to go back to his house when he realises that Merlin might prefer his own bed to Arthur's guest room.

Arthur checks Merlin's phone for his address, only to find that he hasn't stored it in there. Sighing with exasperation he turns to Merlin and searches his coat pockets instead. Merlin starts giggling halfway through, poking Arthur's head and mumbling about shiny, soft gold. Arthur eventually finds the wallet in the back pocket of Merlin's trousers. Fishing it out involves a lot more groping of Merlin's arse than intended. Fortunately Merlin doesn't seem offended, seeing how he's giggling.

A few minutes later they arrive at Merlin's flat which turns out not to be too far from the pub.

After paying the cabbie handsomely, Arthur manhandles Merlin back out of the car and to his front door. The townhouse looks shabby from what Arthur can see in the dark. The path to the house is covered in slush and Arthur tightens his grip on Merlin to prevent him from slipping and breaking a leg.

He carefully props Merlin against the door before he takes out the keychain Mick handed him. It takes him a while to find the right key and by the time it slides into the lock, Arthur's fingers are frozen from the cold. He remembers leaving his gloves at Morgana's place and quietly curses himself for not taking them with him.

Merlin has gone quiet again. It seems that whenever Arthur's not actively doing something to him, he returns to the same dream-like state he had been in at the pub. It worries Arthur, especially because he would have never thought that Merlin was such a quiet, morose drunk.

The door finally opens and Arthur quickly grabs hold of Merlin again before he can stumble from his support suddenly giving way.

Inside the hall, Arthur gropes around for a light switch, and is temporarily blinded after he finds it. Merlin, meanwhile, is shuffling down the hall, shedding his coat and shoes as he goes.

Arthur's not sure what to do. Merlin didn't exactly invite him into his home, but Arthur's worried he might hurt himself or choke on his vomit if left alone. In the end he decides to make sure Merlin's tucked in securely with a glass of water, and a bucket nearby.

He takes off his shoes and coat as well, then follows the trail of Merlin's clothes.

Merlin, meanwhile, has made good progress. His steps are less wobbly, possibly from moving around the security of his own home. Arthur doesn't notice much about the space – doesn't really look either. It has less to do with his disinterest and more with the sparse lighting. Apart from a small nightlight to illuminate the stairs, the bright shine of the hallway lamp, and a soft yellow glow coming from upstairs there are no lights turned on. He just follows Merlin up the stairs and into the bedroom. The warm light comes from Merlin's bedside lamp that he must have turned on before he climbed into bed. Arthur marvels at how fast Merlin did all of this in his state when he wasn't even able to put on his own coat less than twenty minutes ago.

A quiet snuffling sound from Merlin drags Arthur back to the task at hand. He spots a glass sitting on the bedside table and grabs it before leaving the bedroom to poke around the upper hallway for the bathroom. He's in luck and indeed finds what he's been looking for on his first try. He fills the glass from Merlin's nightstand with water, then has a quick look inside the medicine cabinet where he immediately spots a packet of pain killers.

He takes both back to the bedroom and sets it down on the nightstand.

Merlin looks like he's dozing off again, and while Arthur hates to do it, he nudges him gently.

"Merlin?" he asks, feeling an odd sense of déjà vu when Merlin's eyes slowly focus in on him and he begins to smile.

Arthur smiles back. "Merlin, I need you to sit up again."

Merlin continues to stare, and Arthur finally gives in and pulls Merlin up into a sitting position himself. "There," he says, handing him the glass of water. "Drink that."

Merlin eyes the glass with distaste, but doesn't say anything. He drinks it all down, then looks to Arthur for approval. "Good," Arthur says. "Stay there," he adds before heading back to the bathroom for a refill. When he returns, Merlin has indeed stayed exactly where he was, even with his hand still raised as if still holding the glass. Arthur sighs, but pushes the glass back into his hand.

"And again," he instructs, and Merlin obeys again, only managing half the glass this time before handing it back to Arthur. Arthur figures this is good enough for now.

"Okay," he says and sets the glass back down on the nightstand.

Arthur takes another look at Merlin. He's out of most of his clothes. All Arthur can see is that he's still wearing pants, socks, and the same ridiculous scarf he never seems to take off. However, the latter could easily become a choking hazard during the night, or at the very least get ruined if Merlin gets sick. Arthur guesses that Merlin likes this scarf and doesn't want to have to burn it.

He carefully lifts it over Merlin's head, making sure that it doesn't catch on Merlin's ears or nose. Merlin makes a sound of protest and half-heartedly grabs for it. "It's okay," Arthur says. "I'll leave it right here on your nightstand. You don't want it spoiled if you're sick." He sets it down on the bedside table as Merlin watches with drooping eyes.

Next he gently pushes on Merlin's shoulder to get him to lie back down again, then coaxes him to lie on his side instead of on his stomach.

“Don’t want you to choke,” he explains quietly but Merlin’s not showing any sign of hearing him.

Arthur sighs and heads back downstairs to find a bucket. There’s a small utility cupboard under the stairs where he finds one, and a few minutes later the bucket’s lined with a bin bag, the glass of water is topped up, and the pain killers are popped out of the blister pack. Merlin has fallen asleep while Arthur was quietly arranging everything to make things as comfortable as they can be for him.

Now Arthur’s standing there, watching Merlin sleep. His cheekbones are casting a rather harsh shadow in the low light of the reading lamp. Arthur contemplates turning it off, but decides against it. Merlin probably turned it on for a reason, considering that he was able to move through the house in almost complete darkness before, despite being drunk off his arse.

When he looks at the nightstand again he sees a picture in a frame lying at the foot of the lamp, now half obscured by the scarf. He picks it up to take a closer look.

There’s Merlin and another man on the beach, both with horrible sunburns, and happy smiles.

“So this is Will,” he says quietly enough not to wake Merlin. He replaces the picture and, following an impulse, runs his fingers through Merlin’s hair soothingly. “Sleep,” he tells him. “I’ll be here in the morning.”

He pulls away and leaves the bedroom, not closing the door entirely so he’ll hear if Merlin wakes in the night. He tiptoes back downstairs and into the living room, where he knocks his knee painfully against the edge of a small table next to the couch. He barely suppresses a shout and ends up hopping around on his other leg for a good few seconds. His eyes are slowly getting used to the dark and then he can make out the shape of a small lamp on the same table. With some more light to navigate safely, he strips out of his shirt and trousers, finds a comfortable looking afghan and pillow, and lies down.

Sleep doesn’t come for hours.

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Arthur wakes from what sounds like a big animal dying painfully on the upper landing. It takes him several seconds to remember where he is and why he’s not in his own, very comfortable, not at all lumpy or scratchy bed.

Then he’s on his feet and running up the stairs to Merlin’s bedroom.

As expected, Merlin is awake and retching into the bucket. Arthur grimaces but steels himself to go and help. He sits on the edge of the bed and rubs Merlin’s back soothingly. The smell is disgusting, and Arthur fights hard not to get sick himself.

Several disgusting minutes later, Merlin has finally stopped and is hanging limply, half off his bed. His back is clammy with cold sweat, and Arthur finally pulls away to take the bucket outside. He makes sure to tie the bin liner before leaving it sitting in the bathroom to be taken out later.

When he returns to the bedroom, nothing has changed. He kneels down to be more on eye-level with Merlin. His face is ashen and sweaty, and Arthur can’t resist reaching out and swiping Merlin’s fringe to the side to get a proper look at him.

“Hey,” he says softly. “Ready to sit up and have some water?”

Merlin blinks his eyes open slowly but doesn't do anything else. Arthur decides to take this as agreement. He carefully and slowly helps Merlin up into a sitting position, leaning him against the headboard with great care. Arthur has some experience with caring for hungover mates. He used to get drunk quite often during his first years at university. However, Arthur can't remember ever feeling the need to be this gentle with any of his mates. He decides to put it down to Merlin's overall emotional state and fragile appearance. There's just something that screams *baby duck, handle with care* about him.

As soon as Merlin's upright, and seemingly able to support himself in that position, Arthur hands him the glass of water. “Drink,” he orders, and it's a testament to how poorly Merlin's feeling that he obeys without complaint, not even the roll of an eye.

After Merlin has finally managed to drink the whole glass, Arthur gets up and refills it. This time he hands Merlin the pain killers first.

Merlin swallows them without protest and takes another large gulp of water. He sips the rest slowly, and after he has drained the glass for the second time, he finally looks at Arthur.

Arthur offers him a smile. “Hey,” he says again.

“Hey,” Merlin croaks in return. His voice is hoarse and quiet, very unlike what Arthur's used to from him.

“Think you can manage a shower?” Arthur asks. It takes a while, but eventually Merlin nods, then winces.

“Want my help?”

“No,” Merlin rasps.

Arthur nods. “Just let me know if you change your mind.” He stands and takes the glass with him to refill it again. He returns it to the nightstand just as Merlin's finished swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Arthur decides to leave him to it and instead heads back to the bathroom to take care of that bucket.

It takes him a minute to remember where he put the keys to the front door last night, and then he realises that he had better put on clothes before going outside. When he returns with the empty bucket a few minutes later, he can hear the shower running upstairs.

He puts the bucket back under the stairs and decides to make coffee and maybe some toast. Merlin will need some food before long.

Arthur fiddles around with the coffee maker, cursing his luck that Merlin of course doesn't own a Keurig or something similar. Instead he still has an old fashioned machine with filter and pot. It takes Arthur a while to figure it out, and he probably made the coffee too strong, but finally the machine starts gurgling and begins to drip delicious caffeine into the pot.

*Right, toast next*, Arthur thinks and checks the breadbox. There's nothing in it, and so he checks the fridge - which is equally empty. Now frowning, Arthur checks all the cabinets and cupboards in the kitchen, only to find one can of beans and nothing else.

*Who has no food at home on Christmas?* he wonders, but decides that Merlin probably had plans to spend the holidays with friends or his family, and that because they fell through unexpectedly, he isn't properly stocked up. *That's probably why he was out drinking too*, Arthur thinks.

Arthur decides to make the beans, if nothing else. He opens the can and picks a bowl out from one of the cabinets. He looks around for a microwave, only to realise that there is none. He sighs, and instead rummages around for a pan.

"Did you lose something?" Merlin asks, and Arthur, who's shoulder deep inside one of the cabinets beneath the counter, hits his head painfully on the frame as he tries to pull out of the cabinet and straighten up at the same time.

He rubs the back of his head and bites back a pained noise. "Pan," he says.

Merlin offers him a smile. His skin is looking healthier, and his hair is still wet from the shower. He's dressed in a t-shirt and jeans that look like they're too big on him. The scarf is firmly back in place as well.

Merlin points to the drying rack next to the sink. Arthur turns to look, and of course there's a pan sitting there. He sighs, rolls his eyes, then grins.

"Thanks." He picks up the can and shows it to Merlin. "Breakfast?"

Merlin makes a face. "No, thanks," he says.

Arthur looks at the can again, and nods. "You're right. It's Christmas morning we should have a proper breakfast."

Before Merlin can protest, Arthur goes back to the living room to find his phone. Within minutes he has found a delivery service that does breakfast, even on Christmas morning.

"How about I help you tidy up a bit in here?" he calls to Merlin, who's ostensibly still in the kitchen.

A moment later he comes into a view, holding a cup in his hands.

"Did you make this coffee?" Merlin asks slowly.

"Yes!" Arthur says proudly. "How is it?"

Merlin pulls a face. "Too bloody strong."

Arthur sighs. "I was afraid of that. I haven't made coffee like that in ..." he trails off, looking thoughtful.

"Ever?" Merlin supplies, giving him a small smile.

Arthur smiles back. "Yes, actually. I don't think I've ever made coffee like that."

“Yeah,” Merlin says. “I can tell.” He turns around and goes back to the kitchen, probably to pour away the rest of Arthur’s poison.

“I ordered breakfast,” Arthur calls after him. “With coffee!”

Merlin doesn’t reply, but he returns a few moments later with another glass of water.

Arthur’s begun to straighten up the living room. He isn’t sure how much he’ll get away with, but he figures it won’t hurt to tidy up the couch since he slept on it, and maybe get some order into the mess on the coffee table. However, as soon as he touches one of the books lying opened on its face, Merlin jumps into action.

“No!” he calls, moving forward, hand raised as if to stop Arthur from doing something dangerous. Arthur pulls his hand back from the book. “I was just going to put a bookmark in and lay it back down properly,” he explains.

Merlin shakes his head and moves between Arthur and the coffee table. “Don’t touch anything,” he says. He looks around wildly, as if to find out if Arthur has moved anything else while he wasn’t looking. Thankfully, Arthur hadn’t got that far yet.

“Okay,” Arthur says slowly. “I won’t.”

Merlin visibly deflates. He takes a deep breath, looks around again, then sits on the couch and pulls his knees up to his chest. He wraps his arms around his knees and holds on tightly, as if he worries he’s going to fall apart if he doesn’t physically hold himself together.

Arthur sits down next to him and just looks at him for a while. Merlin’s pale, but he always has been pale. *He looks thinner than before*, Arthur thinks. *And the circles under his eyes have grown.*

He wonders how he could have missed it before, but then realises that of course he had missed it. He had seen Merlin only a handful of times, and not at all over the last few weeks. They’ve only texted a few times since Arthur sent Gwen the paperclip card.

“Hey, Merlin?” Arthur ventures.

“Hm?” Merlin hums.

“Why aren’t you with your friends for the holidays? This bloke you mentioned, er, Wayne?” Arthur guesses.

“They’re on holiday,” Merlin answers, mumbling into his knees. “And it’s Gwaine.”

“Right, Gwaine.” Arthur frowns, and not just because of the unusual name. If the spouse of any of his friends had suddenly died, he wouldn’t leave them alone for the holidays.

“And your family?” he probes when Merlin’s not offering any other explanation.

“At home,” Merlin says.

“Don’t you get along with them?” Arthur tries, because maybe Merlin has a difficult relationship with his parents.



“No, I love my mum,” Merlin says. “But she’s in Chirbury,” he says as if that explains everything.

It doesn’t.

“Chirbury is where you grew up?” Arthur asks to clarify.

“Hm,” Merlin hums. “Will and I were neighbours.”

Ah. Now he’s getting closer.

“And you don’t want to go back yet, because ...”

“They’re all going to look at me,” Merlin says. “And they’ll tell me how sorry they are, and that I will move on some day, and that I’m still so young, I’ll find somebody else, and—” Merlin stops when his voice breaks on a sob. He buries his face in the crook of his arm and cries.

Arthur sits awkwardly for a few seconds before he scoots closer and carefully wraps an arm around Merlin’s shoulder. When Merlin neither protests nor moves away, Arthur pulls him closer against his side and wraps the other arm around him as well. The position is awkward, and soon enough it will be uncomfortable, but Arthur holds on to Merlin as he cries.

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Hours later, after they’ve had breakfast (Merlin not managing more than two slices of toast and a boiled egg), and long after Merlin has stopped crying, Arthur and Merlin are sitting on the couch, side by side. Merlin tells Arthur that after Will’s death he didn’t change anything in the house that wasn’t necessary. The book on the coffee table is what Will had been reading the day of the accident. The clutter around the room is there because both he and Merlin had been too lazy to tidy up on a Saturday. He’s even still using the same sheets on the bed because he can pretend that they still smell like Will. (They don’t, haven’t for weeks.)

Arthur listens without saying anything. He knows next to nothing about grief. When his father died, Arthur hadn’t wanted any reminders of him; they would have been cause for too many conflicting feelings, much like the living Uther Pendragon had been.

For Merlin it was different. He lost someone whom he loved dearly, and he wanted to keep him as close as he could.

Arthur wondered how Gwen would feel if he died. Would she be the same?

He pushes the thought away because it raises unwelcome questions. (How would *he* feel if *Gwen* died?)

After a while, Merlin stops talking. He’s still too pale, and too thin, and he’s clearly not sleeping well. Arthur wonders if anyone at Merlin’s job ever asks him about his health. He gets his answer a moment later when asking Merlin directly.

“I quit,” he says simply. “They didn’t fire me because they’re not allowed to do it, but my boss asked me to think about taking some time off to ... cope with my loss.”

“And so you just quit?” Arthur asks, voice rising.

“Yeah,” Merlin said. “I wasn’t exactly great at my job ever since, you know. Always depressed, and distracted. I made mistakes. And the animals caught my distress. I had to leave before I got someone’s favourite bunny killed.”

“But what about a leave of absence, some sort of sabbatical?” Arthur interjects.

“It wouldn’t be fair. They need to hire a new vet assistant while I’m gone, and they can’t afford to pay me *and* someone else to replace me.”

“So you’ve been sitting around the house all day, thinking about your pain?” Arthur’s feeling guiltier by the minute. In hindsight it seems odd that Merlin was able to reply to texts and calls immediately, no matter what time of day it was. Arthur should have realised that something was up.

“No, I go out. Sometimes,” Merlin says, looking away again, and Arthur at least knows him well enough by now that if he lets Merlin get away with it, Merlin will just stare off into space endlessly.

“To the cemetery?” he asks, trying not to sound accusing.

Merlin doesn’t reply but he lowers his eyes guiltily.

“And how have you been supporting yourself this whole time?”

“Savings,” he says. “Will and I were saving up to buy a house outside the city, maybe go back to Chirbury and settle down there.” He sniffs. “That’s over now.”

“And what happens when you’ve run out of money?” Arthur asks at length.

Merlin shrugs. “I’ll find another job,” he says. “But it will be a while before that needs to happen. My overheads are pretty low since I live alone, and I don’t have much of an appetite so I don’t need as much food.”

“That’s bollocks, and you know it,” Arthur says matter-of-factly. “You’ve lost weight since I last saw you. Actually, the last time I saw you, you ate an enormous piece of chocolate cake in less than a minute, and also had a sugary drink with enough calories to feed a horde of children. Your body most definitely wants you to eat more.”

“Still don’t have an appetite,” Merlin defends meekly.

“I don’t care. I’m not going to let you develop an eating disorder on top of everything else, if it’s the last thing I do,” Arthur snaps.

“Why do you care?” Merlin suddenly shouts.

Arthur so shocked by the sudden outburst, his jaw drops.

“We’re not friends,” Merlin says, just as angrily. “What’s it to do with you what happens to me?”

“Of course we’re friends, Merlin. Don’t be ridiculous,” Arthur says as calmly as he can.

“Assaulting someone and then talking them into helping you woo your ex-wife isn’t friendship,” Merlin says.

Arthur counts to ten before answering. Merlin might not think of him that way, but Arthur considers him a friend anyway.

“I care about you,” he says at length. “I like you, and I see you as my friend.”

“Friendship’s a symbiosis. What we have is osmosis at best. I give you advice, and you don’t give anything back.”

Arthur clenches his jaw to keep from saying the first thing that pops into his head. That Arthur has given things back, that he’s bought him coffee and dinner and invited him to spend New Year’s Eve with Arthur and his friends. But Arthur has learned from years of arguing with his father that saying the first thing that comes to mind during an emotional argument is not the best course of action.

Besides, he has to concede that at the time he considered both coffee and dinner as a sort of payment for Merlin’s help. Arthur hasn’t actually made much effort to get to know Merlin better. Every time they talk or text it’s about Arthur or people in his life. Apart from when Arthur apologised for attacking Merlin, last night was the first time he did something for Merlin without expecting anything in return.

Arthur sighs. “You’re right, I’ve been selfish,” he says because even if it’s not the whole truth, it’s enough.

That seems to surprise Merlin because he doesn’t say anything in return.

Arthur dares a small smile. “But, if you’ll let me, I’d like to change that. I want to be your friend.”

Merlin regards him suspiciously but doesn’t object. Arthur figures he just needs to prove to Merlin that he’s as good as his word.

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The week following Christmas, Merlin sees more of Arthur than in the three months they’ve known each other. Starting on Boxing Day, Arthur turns up at Merlin’s house for either lunch, or tea, and in one case, dinner. He always brings takeaway, never the same thing twice, and usually leaves a few groceries in Merlin’s fridge as well.

Merlin would be annoyed by all this patronising if he weren’t actually glad for some company.

When he told Gwaine and Percy to go on ahead and have their well-deserved holiday in Spain, he thought he’d be fine being alone on Christmas. Besides, it isn’t like Merlin hasn’t been shutting Gwaine out for a while. His friends mean well when they drag him off to the pub or movie night, but Merlin always feels out of place lately. Being alone now would be just like any other day for the last four months, no difference.

Except ... of course it was different. He kept thinking about how he and Will used to decorate the house with fairy lights, and how they always put awful decorations on the tree because it made them laugh. They’d sing along (badly) to all the cheesy Christmas songs on the radio, and then have mac’n’cheese on Christmas Eve. There’d be bloody fantastic sex on Christmas morning, too. And of course gifts, and a long, lazy breakfast, and more sex later.

When the memories threatened to overwhelm him, Merlin got out of the house. The Cock Tavern is not his usual pub, even though he and Will had always meant to go there – just for the name, of course. Merlin chose it because he didn't want the barman at his regular place, who has known Merlin since he and Will moved here, asking him about how he's feeling, and he certainly didn't want any more reminders of time spent with Will. What he wanted was a new place, void of any emotional attachment, and he wanted to get drunk.

Well, he achieved both, and neither made him feel better in the end.

And now Arthur is coming by on a daily basis and sneaking food into Merlin's home. Merlin realises he might have been too harsh (and too hungover) when he told Arthur they weren't friends, but Arthur apparently only took it as encouragement to get more involved in Merlin's life. Merlin is not entirely sure that's a good idea, but as there's currently nobody else around to distract him from how empty the house feels at all times, he takes what he can get.

When Arthur shows up on Boxing Day he does not just bring a bag of groceries, and a second bag full of takeaway boxes, but he also has a badly wrapped Christmas present tucked under his arm.

Merlin doesn't have anything for Arthur in return, but Arthur waves him off, puts on his best prat impression, and tells Merlin magnanimously that he doesn't need anything in return.

He waits until after they've eaten before he hands him the present. The paper's already ripped in a few places, a fact that seems to distress Arthur.

"I wrapped it myself," he tells Merlin, sounding almost sheepish. Merlin can't help a smile. It's so unlike what he knows of Arthur so far, but Merlin supposes that he was bound to have a positive influence on him at some point. Or maybe Arthur badly wraps Christmas presents for near strangers every year.

Merlin rips the paper off the rest of the gift, delighting in Arthur's gasp and following grimace.

What he finds inside is the softest scarf he has ever held.

"It's cashmere," Arthur explains. "There are washing instructions in there too."

Merlin holds up the scarf and looks at it. It's a beautiful lapis lazuli colour, even with lighter streaks woven in, perfecting the image of a gem stone.

Merlin sees Arthur fiddling with the ring on his left index finger. "I thought it might suit you," Arthur says after clearing his throat.

Merlin puts the scarf down and turns to look at Arthur. "It's very beautiful. Thank you."

Arthur smiles. "You could try it on," he suggests.

Merlin reaches up to the scarf he's wearing, running his fingers over the thread that's come loose some time ago. He bites his lip and shakes his head. "Not now."

He picks up the new scarf and takes it upstairs. He puts it in a drawer in his dresser where he keeps about a dozen other scarves. He sets it neatly beside a bright red one, and runs his hand once more over the soft fabric. After a moment he pushes the drawer shut.

When Merlin looks up, he sees Arthur standing in the door. Arthur isn't saying anything, but he looks at Merlin as if he knows what's going on. Maybe he does.

Merlin looks away, and Arthur takes a deep breath. "I'll put the groceries in the fridge," Arthur says, sounding a lot like he's trying not to make a big deal out of anything. "If you don't want me to mess up your non-existent order, you better come with me."

Arthur turns, and heads back downstairs. After a moment, Merlin follows, and the corners of his mouth are turned up in an exasperated smile.

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On New Year's Eve, Arthur arrives with a bouquet of yellow tulips to pick up Merlin before heading over to Morgana's. He wants to make sure Merlin actually comes to the party, and that he finds Morgana's city cottage.

Merlin isn't even showered yet, but Arthur planned for this. He sends Merlin up to shower so Arthur can have a look at what Merlin picked out to wear, but Merlin is still stuck on the flowers that Arthur has handed him.

"You brought me flowers," Merlin says with a furrowed brow.

"Yes, so?" Arthur asks. "You should put them in a vase so they'll keep into the new year."

"*Why* did you bring me flowers?" Merlin asks.

"I saw them and thought you might like them," Arthur explains with a shrug. "Is that a problem?"

Merlin shakes his head. "No. Thanks." He keeps looking at the flowers with a puzzled expression as he heads to the kitchen to find a vase.

A few minutes later he's finally upstairs and in the shower, leaving Arthur free to inspect Merlin's wardrobe choice for the evening.

He frowns at the selection. The jacket looks nice enough. It's a deep shade of blue that Arthur thinks will suit Merlin well. However, the jeans and t-shirt Merlin laid out beside it look entirely too scruffy for Arthur's liking. They would diminish the jacket's neatness.

He walks over to the wardrobe and has a look around. He finds trousers that match the jacket, and then picks out a dark button-down shirt that will go well with it. He can't be sure it's not one of Will's but he's willing to take the risk.

Arthur takes both over to the bed and holds up the shirt and trousers for inspection. They appear clean and pressed. He nods approvingly and lays them down on the bed. Perfect.

Twenty minutes later, Merlin finally returns to the bedroom, towel slung around his waist. His hair still looks damp, and he shaved. Arthur can't help but think that he prefers this look on Merlin. He looks younger and less forlorn than when he lets the beard grow in.

"I took the liberty of making a slight adjustment to your outfit," Arthur informs him. Merlin wanders over to the bed and looks at the shirt and trousers.

“I thought you said it was a casual party,” Merlin says, sounding doubtful.

“It is,” Arthur says. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t look nice. It’s the end of the year, and you’ll want to start the new one as you mean to go on. Which should include looking nice.”

Merlin doesn’t say anything, but Arthur thinks he might have nodded a tiny bit.

“Get dressed. I’ll wait downstairs for you.”

He heads back downstairs, and checks the kitchen while he waits. Some of the fruit he brought yesterday is gone, and Merlin could do with a new loaf of bread. Arthur grins. It would seem that force-feeding Merlin for a week has already helped.

Merlin clears his throat behind him, and Arthur turns around. Just as expected, the blue jacket brings out Merlin’s eyes and makes him look very handsome. Arthur smirks. “Look at you. You clean up well, I must say.”

Merlin rolls his eyes. “Thanks. I live for your approval.” The words lack bite, and Merlin’s smiling even before he finishes the sentence.

“As well you should,” Arthur says smugly. “But there’s something missing.” Arthur tilts his head and inspects Merlin closely. A moment later he snaps his fingers. “Got it.”

He grabs a pair of scissors from a kitchen drawer and heads to the living room, still smiling to himself. A few moments later he returns with one of the tulips, cut a few centimetres beneath the flower.

Arthur sets the knife down on the counter and steps closer to Merlin. He carefully threads the stem through a buttonhole on Merlin’s jacket.

“There, now you’re perfect,” he says as he dusts off imaginary lint from Merlin’s shoulders.

He steps back to have another look at Merlin’s appearance, then nods approvingly. “Come on, Morgana will never forgive me if I make you late to her party.”

They put on their coats. Arthur watches as Merlin loops the ugly scarf around his neck, and doesn’t comment on how much warmer the one he gave him would be.

In the taxi, Merlin’s bouncing his leg nervously as he stares out of the window, and Arthur reaches over and places his hand on Merlin’s knee to still it.

“You’ll be fine,” he says quietly. “Morgana is generally nice to new people, and the rest of my friends are all very lovely.”

Merlin nods, and exhales slowly. “Do they, uh, know? About Will?” he asks. There’s an edge to his voice that leaves Arthur wondering what answer Merlin would prefer. He supposes he’ll find out in a moment.

“I told Morgana that you’re a widower, yes,” Arthur admits. “She can be very direct, and she’s forever meddling in everybody’s love life. I wanted to make sure she wouldn’t make you uncomfortable by trying to push you into a blind date.”

Merlin nods. His leg starts bouncing again, and Arthur gently presses down on it to make him stop. "No one will ask you awkward questions, I promise. And we can leave any time you want after dinner."

"Okay," Merlin says.

Arthur keeps his hand on Merlin's knee for the rest of the taxi ride.

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**Tulip** <*Tulipa gesneriana*> Commonly found in Eurasia and North America. *Genus* of perennial, bulbous plants in the lily family (*Liliaceae*). In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers tulips have varied meanings. Yellow tulips say *There's Sunshine In Your Smile*.

*Mona's Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

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Morgana, as Arthur expected, takes to Merlin right away.

She's especially charmed by his eccentric choice in scarves. Merlin takes it with a self-conscious half-smile and stuffs it into the sleeve of his coat. Arthur watches him gently stroke the fabric before pulling away and following Morgana upstairs into the living area.

Arthur and Merlin are the last to arrive again, which is no surprise, given that Gwen still lives with Morgana, Elyan is sleeping in the second guest room while visiting for the holidays, and Leon has a tendency to be overly punctual.

Morgana takes it upon herself to introduce everyone to Merlin, who is welcomed with a drink and many friendly words. Arthur smiles. He had had a feeling that Merlin would fit right in.

Everyone, except Elyan, is dressed to impress again. Morgana went for a flowy silver gown, this time with a tight pony tail, and Gwen is in a bright blue dress. It's rather shorter than anything Arthur has seen her wear in years. It would seem that he had forgotten how lovely her legs looked.

Leon's in another suit, but this time his hair's in loose curls. Arthur marvels at how he never looks scruffy, even with a beard and longer hair.

Merlin turns to shoot Arthur a reproachful look when he sees Elyan's attire of another themed t-shirt and the same faded jeans that he wore on Christmas. Arthur just shrugs and looks in Morgana's direction meaningfully.

After introductions are done, Morgana barely leaves them enough time to finish their drinks before ushering them to the table.

"So, you two are siblings," Merlin sums up after everyone has sat down. He points to Elyan and Gwen, and both nod. "And you two are half-siblings," he says, gesturing at Morgana and Arthur. Morgana sighs heavily. "I'm afraid so, yes. Arthur's father and my mother."

"It was a scandal," Arthur explains. It had been much worse than that, of course. Morgana's mother, a semi-famous actress, had become an outcast practically over night when the press got wind of who Morgana's biological father truly was.

"It's in the past," Morgana says with a smile. Everyone except Merlin could tell that the smile was forced, but Merlin let the subject drop anyway.

"And how did you guys all meet?" he asks instead.

"Arthur and I met at university," Gwen says, smiling just like she always did when telling someone this story. "We were at the library, and he stood behind me while I was checking out books. It was my first year, and I hadn't yet mastered the self-checkout. Arthur, of course, was in his third year and an old hand at using the library. He tapped his foot impatiently behind me. At some point he started sighing and coughing rather loudly. None of that was of any help to me." She grins at Arthur, and he smiles back, remembering it again as well.

He had been, beneath all the impatiently scoffing facade, admiring the line of Gwen's neck, and the curls that had come loose from her hair bun and fallen down to tickle the back of her neck. Part of why Arthur needed Gwen to speed up and move away was so he wouldn't end up blurting out something ridiculously embarrassing in front of half the student body currently present in the library.

"So then, after the machine had refused to scan any of my books for the fifth time, and Arthur's eye-rolling had become practically audible, I turned to him and told him that if he was so keen to be done he could just offer to help."

Arthur cleared his throat. "If I remember correctly, you also called me a condescending, mardy tosser."

Gwen blushes, and everybody else starts laughing. "Funny," Merlin says as he slowly stops giggling. "I thought much the same when I first met Arthur."

That triggers a new round of chuckles, and even Arthur can't help smiling, even though he feels a stab of guilt as he remembers exactly how he and Merlin had met. He catches Merlin's eyes and is relieved to find that there's only amusement in them. Arthur's smile becomes wider in return.

"Anyway," Arthur says finally. "I did help her after that, and the next time I saw her I offended her less, and eventually I even managed to ask her out without her thinking that I was taking the piss."

Gwen is giggling hysterically, doubtlessly remembering Arthur's very awkward attempts at inviting her to dinner with him while holding a bouquet of supermarket flowers as if they were a protective shield.

Arthur smiles fondly at the memory. He had been terribly inept at non-confrontational social interaction.

Morgana tops up everybody's drinks and as she walks past Arthur, she quickly squeezes his shoulder. He smiles and nods up to her.

"And after you started dating, you met Elyan, and Gwen met Morgana?" Merlin asks after Morgana has sat down again.

Arthur just took a bite, and instead of answering simply shakes his head.

"I didn't meet Elyan until our wedding day," he says. "But it turned out that Morgana had known Gwen before I did."



"I did!" Morgana says. "Gwen was in my hall, right next to my room. I got to hear all about the bloody tosser who spent a solid five minutes not helping her at the self-checkout." She smirks triumphantly. Morgana always enjoys having the upper hand, especially over Arthur.

Arthur rolls his eyes, and takes another bite of his dinner. He has learned that it is best not to engage Morgana when she's gloating.

He looks to Merlin, only to find him grinning. *Great*, Arthur thinks. These two are going to be a nightmare if they join forces against him. However, Merlin takes mercy on him and changes the subject again. Arthur wonders why Merlin was so reluctant to come out tonight. He's clearly very sociable, and apparently enjoying himself. Arthur's pleased that it's working out. He'll want to get in touch with Merlin's so-called other friends, and find out why they didn't put in more effort to help Merlin.

"And how does Leon fit in?" Merlin asks.

"Evie and I have been friends since we were children," Leon says. He raises his glass and toasts Gwen. Gwen smiles and raises her glass in return. They hold eye contact for a few moments, and then Leon turns back to look at Merlin. "We grew up together."

"And Leon's the only one who calls Gwen 'Evie'," Arthur points out.

"Everybody else receives a deathly glare," Elyan adds, and laughs. Gwen just blushes prettily.

Merlin nods. "It's great that you and Leon are still close," he says to Gwen. "Some friendships are just meant to last forever." For the first time there's a hint of sadness to his voice tonight. Arthur's sure that he knows why. He clears his throat.

"Elyan, tell Merlin about that time you jumped into a helicopter that had already taken off."

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After dinner they break up into smaller groups. Merlin and Elyan seemed to have clicked and they're off in a corner talking, probably about Elyan's travels. Morgana snatched Leon away, winking at Arthur as she leads Leon downstairs to talk about new security measures for her already well-secured home. Trust Morgana to find one of the few cottages in the middle of London.

That leaves Arthur with Gwen. If he weren't annoyed that it's such an obvious attempt of Morgana's to give them some time alone, he'd be glad for the chance to talk to Gwen.

However, Gwen is nothing but gracious and completely ignores the awkwardness of the situation. They're still in the kitchen because as soon as Morgana had disappeared from view, Gwen started rinsing the dishes before loading them into the washer.

While she works she cheerfully fills in Arthur about the remodelling of Leon's childhood home, in which, apparently, she's involved quite a bit. Arthur tries to listen, but he finds his gaze drifting over to Merlin and Elyan several times. Arthur tells himself that he's just checking and making sure that Merlin's still having a good time, and that he isn't upset or uncomfortable. Or drinking too much.

Every time he looks, Merlin's smiling at Elyan, listening attentively to what he's saying. He's perched on the arm of Elyan's chair and leaning in close to listen to him. Every time Arthur sees Merlin smile,

he has to smile as well. He's glad that Merlin's enjoying himself, and that he's distracted enough from his grief to laugh at Elyan's ridiculous tales.

He turns back to Gwen and catches the end of what she's saying.

"... the fireplace. You should have seen it."

"I will, once it's all done, I'm sure," he says, smiling at her.

She gives him a look that tells him that she knows exactly that he's been only half listening to what she's been saying. He offers her a sheepish smile. "Sorry. It's just that Merlin hasn't been outside the house much, and I was worried tonight might be too much for him."

Gwen smiles warmly. "I think it's lovely that you're helping him."

Arthur shrugs. "He's helping me too," he says without thinking. If Gwen asks him, he'll have to lie. Or tell the truth, which is just embarrassing.

Gwen, however, doesn't ask. She merely smiles knowingly, and nods. "I can tell."

Arthur smiles back, even though he has no idea what Gwen's thinking. Whatever it is she thinks she knows, she doesn't mind, so either way, Arthur's in the clear.

"So," Arthur begins, then clears his throat. "I was hoping that maybe we could have coffee together some time?"

"Oh," Gwen says, eyes wide. She looks like she's on the verge of falling back into her old habit of babbling uncontrollably, so Arthur quickly adds: "Only if you like. It's alright if you'd rather not."

Gwen's eyebrows raise and she closes her mouth. She studies him, and Arthur does his best to look non-threatening and open. Eventually she smiles. "I'd like to go for coffee, yes," Gwen says finally.

Arthur grins. "Yes?"

"Yes," Gwen says, and nods. "Coffee would be lovely. Next weekend, maybe?"

"Definitely," Arthur agrees. "I know a place not too far from here. I'll come and pick you up. Around three, maybe?"

Gwen nods again. "Sounds lovely." She smiles at him with that warm, affectionate smile that Arthur adores so much. It takes everything in him not to ask her to come back to him right then.

Suddenly there's a loud thump, and Arthur's looking up, eyes searching for Merlin who's not sitting on the arm of the chair anymore. He has to move closer to see that Merlin apparently has fallen down and is now lying on the floor next to the chair.

Arthur's at his side, and helping him up, in an instant.

"What happened?" he asks worriedly.

Merlin's grinning. "Elyan told this story about a cave he investigated in Peru and suddenly there was a bat." Merlin starts giggling. "He just surprised me and I forgot that I didn't have any support behind me to fall back against."

Arthur laughs nervously. "Try not to break any limbs, okay? I don't fancy taking you to A&E on New Year's Eve to get a cast on your arm or leg."

"You won't have to, I promise. My bones are strong. Will always says it's all that milk I drank as a kid, and ..." He trails off, face falling suddenly when he realises what he just said. Everybody's watching them now, and Arthur has no idea what to do.

"Well, it certainly didn't make you any less clumsy," Arthur jokes, hoping that it will lighten the mood. He wonders if Merlin's aware he sometimes still slips into present tense when talking about Will.

Merlin gives him a weak smile and nods. "No, it didn't, but I also developed lactose intolerance, so my milk drinking days stopped long before I finished growing."

"Ah, there you have it, then," Arthur says, smiling much wider than necessary.

Merlin smiles back, not nearly as brightly as before, but neither as sadly as he must feel.

Arthur claps him on the shoulder and squeezes reassuringly. "Come on, let's get you a drink. Just one though, I know what a lightweight you are."

"I'm not!" Merlin protests indignantly. "I'll have you know that I can easily drink you under the table any day."

"I doubt that, but we're not going to find out tonight. Morgana would kill me if I got drunk during her party," he stage-whispers loud enough for Morgana to hear.

"Wrong," Morgana says, returning – as ever – at the perfect time. "I would hire assassins. I'm not going to get my hands dirty for you, brother dear."

Arthur rolls his eyes at her. When he looks back at Merlin, Merlin's grin is looking more sincere already. It's just a few minutes later when Merlin's back to his cheerful demeanour from earlier. He sits back down - this time on the seat of an armchair, just to be safe - and starts a conversation with Leon about the merits of big dogs versus small dogs.

For the rest of the night, Arthur keeps close to Merlin, just to be safe.

At midnight there are hugs, and chaste kisses on cheeks from Morgana and Gwen for everyone, even Merlin.

It's nearing three in the morning when Arthur and Merlin leave. Arthur takes Merlin home first, to make sure he gets there in one piece. Merlin hugs him again just outside his door, and thanks him for bringing him along.

"It was good to get out," he admits.

Arthur grins. "I told you you'd have fun."

"You did, yes," Merlin says. "So, did you manage to talk to Gwen?"

"Yes," Arthur says, grinning proudly. "We're going on a date next weekend."

Merlin looks impressed. “Wow. You’re not wasting any time.”

Arthur smirks. “No, I’m not. Of course I’ll come by your place a few hours before to get some more pointers for my first date in a few years.”

Merlin laughs, but nods. “Sure. Wouldn’t want you to make any rookie mistakes now.”

Arthur laughs as well. “Exactly.”

Following an impulse, Arthur leans in and gives Merlin a one-armed hug. “Happy new year, Merlin.”

Merlin wraps his arms around Arthur and hugs back, holding on a bit tighter than Arthur is. “Happy new year, Arthur.”

They pull apart, and then Merlin finally unlocks his front door and goes inside. Arthur waits until he hears the door being locked from the inside, then heads back to the street and his waiting taxi.

It’s going to be a much better year than the last.

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A week into the new year, Arthur’s beginning to fret about his date with Gwen. It’s in a few hours and while he has figured out what to wear (jeans and a t-shirt, Gwen likes him casual and down to earth), he is worried that he won’t be able to talk to her like he used to.

He has been texting Merlin since late morning to ask for advice, but Merlin hasn’t responded to a single message yet, and Arthur decides to head over with lunch and ask Merlin directly.

He picks up Thai takeaway, and rings Merlin’s doorbell for several minutes before Merlin finally opens the door.

Merlin looks terrible. His eyes are red-rimmed, and his face is waxy pale, set off even more by the return of the dark stubble on Merlin’s cheeks. His hair looks like it hasn’t been washed since New Year’s Eve – it probably really hasn’t – and he’s wearing tracksuit bottoms and a hoodie that are both much too big on him. He’s clutching his scarf in his left hand.

Arthur steps into the house, sets down the bag with their food, and quickly takes off his coat. He doesn’t need to ask what has happened. He already knows this must be about Will somehow.

Merlin shuffles back to the living room where he curls up on the couch.

Arthur follows him and takes a look around to find that the room is a mess again. There are empty mugs on several surfaces but no plates or bowls, telling Arthur everything he needs to know about Merlin’s eating habits over the last few days. There are several used tissues littered around the floor, and the tulips Arthur brought him only a week ago have wilted and lost all their petals. They’re drying up on the couch table, and the water in the vase has begun to smell.

Arthur picks up the vase, and decides to start with the food. He heads to the kitchen, empties and rinses the vase, then washes his hands, and finds them clean plates and cutlery. He has the food dished out quickly and is soon carrying the plates back to the living room.

He wonders how quickly things could have gone south. It's only been a week since he has last been to Merlin's place. Arthur had gone back to work a few days ago, and spent the first three days of the new year reviewing the figures of the last. It had been hectic and he has had barely enough time to do or think about anything that wasn't to do with work.

His resolution to be a better friend to Merlin already failed, he thinks.

Arthur grits his teeth and carries the plates out to the living room. Merlin's sitting up against the sidearm of the couch, legs drawn up close to his chest, arms wrapped around them, and eyes staring into space. Arthur manhandles Merlin until he's sitting up properly, then pushes the plate into his hands. "Eat," he commands, and Merlin does.

Merlin manages half of his portion, then holds out the plate to Arthur. Arthur sighs, but takes it from him. He can warm up the rest later.

Merlin curls back up as Arthur finishes his own meal.

Arthur decides to let Merlin mope for a little while longer while he takes the dishes to the kitchen and tidies up a bit. He busies himself with washing the dishes, throwing out groceries that have gone off, then making a list of what to buy fresh.

It's at least an hour later when he returns to the living room to find Merlin in the exact same position in which he left him.

Arthur sighs, runs his hands through his hair, and hooks them behind his neck as he watches Merlin. The Merlin he saw on New Year's Eve seems so far away now, and it pains Arthur to see his friend hurting so much.

He finally walks back over, pulls on Merlin's arms until he loosens his grip and lets himself be pulled into a hug. It's possible that he's slowly figuring out how this comforting business works, Arthur thinks.

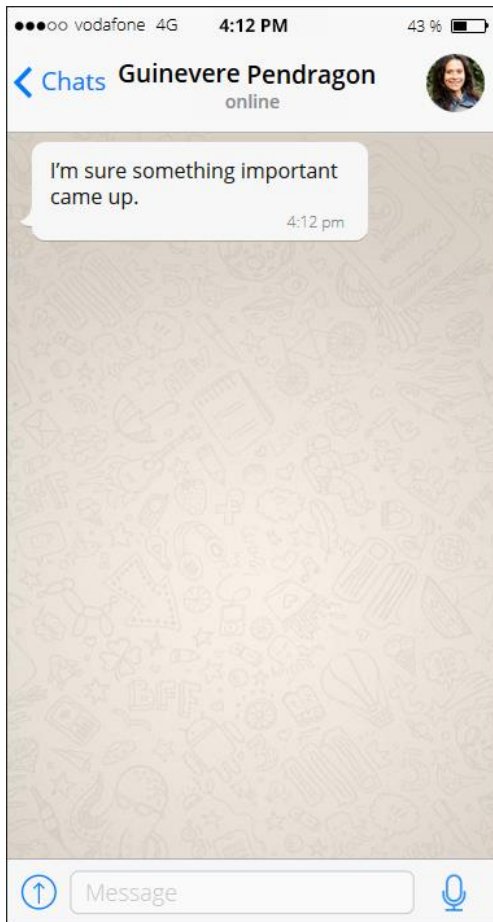
After what feels like hours, Merlin's breath hitches. There's a sob, followed by a muffled sound that could be a gasp, and finally Merlin lets go and cries into Arthur's shoulder. Arthur continues to breathe evenly, and rubs Merlin's back in soothing circles.

"It's okay," he murmurs as Merlin's sobs eventually subside. "You'll be okay."

Merlin sniffles, and Arthur wraps his arms around him tightly and holds him.

Much later, after Arthur persuaded Merlin to take a shower, and shave, Arthur's back in the kitchen, reheating the leftover food for Merlin, when his phone chirps with a new text.

He takes out his phone, and groans when he sees who sent him the text.



Arthur bangs his head against the nearest cabinet, and curses under his breath.

"Did you burn the food?" Merlin asks from where he's standing in the doorway. He changed back into tracksuit bottoms, but fresh ones, and a clean t-shirt and cardigan. The scarf is back around his neck.

"No," Arthur says, trying to sound offended. "Just forgot an appointment."

"Sorry," Merlin says, but Arthur shakes his head.

"There's no need for you to apologise."

"You missed your appointment because of me."

"I missed my appointment because I decided that taking care of my friend was more important," Arthur says firmly. *And because I forgot I had a date*, he adds silently. "I'll reschedule."

Merlin nods. "If you say so."

The pan sizzles noisily and Arthur turns to look down at it. He quickly turns the heat down and scoops the chicken up with a fork and back onto a plate. "There you go." He sets the plate down on the kitchen table and gestures for Merlin to sit.

Merlin's apparently too exhausted to protest about Arthur bossing him around. He sits down and begins to eat.

Arthur takes the moment to text back.

He puts his phone away, and sits down across from Merlin. The plate's already almost empty.

"Hey, slow down," Arthur cautions. "I don't want you throwing it all up again."

Merlin slows down deliberately, and starts chewing in slow motion.

"Ha ha," Arthur deadpans. He breaks into a smile a moment later, and he's relieved when Merlin does too.

"Guess I'll have to come back every day again," he muses as Merlin picks up the last sesame seeds with his forefinger. Arthur's oddly mesmerised by the movement of his fingers, and can't even look away when Merlin licks it clean. He's glad he notices that he's staring before Merlin does, and he quickly looks away.



“You don’t have to,” Merlin says. He stands and takes his plate back to the sink himself. He surveys the neatly stacked dishes on the counter, and frowns. Arthur’s getting the feeling that Merlin’s not entirely okay with Arthur taking over like this.

“I would like to,” Arthur insists. “I’m not trying to, I don’t know, tell you what to do. Mostly because I know you’re much too stubborn for that to work.” Arthur smiles, and Merlin’s shoulders visibly relax. “But I think you could stand not to be alone so much. I don’t know what triggered you, and you don’t have to tell me how or when it happened. But if you wanted to, I’d listen, and I’d like to be here for you.”

Merlin still hasn’t turned around. He picks up one of the mugs that Arthur washed earlier, and turns it over and over in his hand.

“It’s been five months,” Merlin says at length. “Yesterday was the exact date. Five months since Will di—“ Merlin breaks off on a choked-off sob.

Arthur winces. He had never thought to ask the exact date, didn’t even think about what date or month it had been when Will had died. Even now that he knows how long it has been, he still has to count back in his head to know for sure when it was.

But of course it was always on Merlin’s mind. He probably counted time in how long it has been since he lost his husband. Arthur again catches himself wondering about what that would be like for him, or Gwen, if it had happened to them, and quickly shakes off the thought. It’s not about him, it’s about Merlin.

“You should tell me more about him,” Arthur says. “I barely know anything about him, and I think it would be good for you to think about something other than what happened that day.”

Merlin keeps turning the mug in his hand, and after several long minutes finally nods. “Okay.” He steps forward and picks up the electric kettle. “But I’ll need tea for that.”

Arthur nods, and watches as Merlin prepares two cups of tea, one of which is too sweet and milky for Arthur’s liking, but he has a feeling that it’s how Will drank it, seeing how Merlin prepared it in the cup that says “World’s Best Husband” on the side – the same mug that Merlin’s been holding only a few minutes earlier.

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## Part 3

"I don't actually want to go to the cinema," Merlin complains.

Arthur just shrugs. "I don't care. You're coming with me."

"But I don't even like Star Wars."

"I don't care," Arthur repeats. "You'll love this one. It has got great characters."

Merlin sighs, but gives in and follows Arthur out the door.

~\*~

"You know as well as I do that I can't continue to buy all your groceries for you," Arthur argues.

Merlin's already pulling a woolly hat onto his head. His face, however, speaks of great reluctance.

"Not that I can't afford it," Arthur says as he watches Merlin slip into his coat. "But you need to get your routine back. And this way you can't complain to me about buying the wrong biscuits."

"No one buys plain biscuits, Arthur," Merlin says petulantly. "Absolutely no one."

Arthur grins. He may have been buying the wrong kind of biscuits deliberately just to get Merlin to come with him the next time he goes to Sainsbury's.

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"Merlin?" Arthur says during an ad break.

"Hm?" Merlin hums and turns his head slowly away from the meerkats on the telly.

"What's inside the locked room upstairs?" Arthur asks when he's sure he has Merlin's attention.

Merlin doesn't respond right away. He turns back to the telly and takes a sip of his beer while Arthur waits. For a few moments, Arthur isn't sure Merlin's going to respond at all.

"I'm only asking so I can stop worrying that it's something awful, like a kidnapped child, or a fetish play room for furry enthusiasts," he says to take some of the sting out of his question.

That, however, makes Merlin choke on his drink.

"A fetish play room for furry enthusiasts?" he asks incredulously.

Arthur shrugs. "You never know. It's not that I'm judging your preferences, but ..." He grins at Merlin.

Merlin breaks into laughter. "It's not a fetish room. *Especially* not for furry kink stuff."

"Okay," Arthur says, still smiling. He's willing to let the subject drop for now when Merlin leans back more comfortably into the couch, his head on the back rest so he's staring at the ceiling.

"It's Will's office," he says finally.



That, or something like that, is what Arthur had expected it to be. "Okay," he says, and then the ad break is over.

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"Have you always cooked your own meals?" Merlin asks curiously.

Arthur's in the process of cracking a bunch of eggs into the pan to go with the bacon and mushrooms he's frying up for a late breakfast.

"No, I only started doing it after Gwen left," he admits. "I made breakfast a few times when we were just married, but later I never really had time."

"What's changed now?" Merlin asks. He's leaning against the counter next to where Arthur's standing at the stove.

"The house was too quiet, and the kitchen felt too cold from disuse," Arthur says. "And I figured it would be nice to be able to impress Gwen with a home cooked dinner once she was back."

"Mhm," Merlin hums.

There's a long silence while the eggs begin to firm up. Merlin pushes off the counter to get some toast ready, and to make some tea before Arthur's done with the food.

"For me it was always Will who cooked," Merlin says suddenly into the relative quiet of the kitchen. "He always had a meal ready when I came home from work."

Arthur can hear a smile in Merlin's voice.

"I used to tease him about being a proper husband who takes care of all my needs."

Arthur smiles as well. He's glad that Merlin's opening up to him bit by bit. He hopes that it will help him in the long run.

"Well, dear," Arthur jokes. "Is the table ready? Because any longer and the bacon is going to become rubbery, and the eggs will burn."

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"He's clearly a Gryffindor," Elyan says. "Just like Leon."

"Hm, I don't know," Leon argues. "Arthur is very accepting, and he always tries his hardest to be kind and fair. I think he'd do well in Hufflepuff."

"He'd definitely be competitive enough about Quidditch to lead the Puffs to win the Cup," Elyan acquiesces.

"I agree with Leon," Merlin says. "Arthur's definitely a Hufflepuff. They could do with another really butch guy after Cedric."

"Don't I get a say in this?" Arthur asks.

"No," three voices answer in unison.

Arthur sighs. "Fine. You keep arguing over my imaginary future at Hogwarts, I'll get us another round of butterbeer. That's about the only thing you three should be allowed to drink anyway."

He heads off to the bar, and looks back to their table once he's there. Merlin's arguing animatedly, using his hands to gesture, and Arthur can't help a fond smile. He's glad he convinced Merlin to a pub night with Elyan and Leon.

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"What made you decide to become a vet assistant?" Arthur asks one day while they're half-heartedly watching a footie match. Well, Merlin's not watching at all, and Arthur's only watching because whoever wins this match will play Arsenal next week.

"I wanted to work with animals," Merlin says. "I'm good with most of them, and I've always had a sort of calming influence on them." He shrugs. "Vets need that sort of presence when they're trying to examine an animal or especially when they're trying to sedate it."

"So, a mixture of natural talent, and personal interest?" Arthur asks to clarify.

"Yes, you could say that." Merlin gets up. "Tea?"

"Yes," Arthur agrees. "Thanks."

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"You made me watch Star Wars, so now you can watch Lord of the Rings with me," Merlin says.

Arthur groans. When he had suggested a movie night to Merlin he had imagined something like James Bond.

"I'm not backing down on this," Merlin says. "You can watch Lord of the Rings with me, or nothing at all."

Arthur sighs and flops down onto the couch.

"You've read Harry Potter but won't touch Lord of the Rings? How's that even possible?" Merlin asks as he puts the disc in the player.

Arthur rolls his eyes. "I tried reading Tolkien but the style of writing is just very boring."

Merlin huffs. "Philistine."

Arthur chuckles as Merlin hits play. At least there's a lot of popcorn to keep him well fed throughout the whole thing.

~\*~

"So, the two hobbits, Frodo and ...?"

"Sam."

"Yes, Frodo and Sam. They're going to trust this Gollum thing to show them the way to Mordor?"

"Yep."

"But that creature is vile!"

"He's had a hard life."

"Maybe, but he's still not trustworthy."

"Frodo relates to him."

"Frodo should trust his boyfriend instead of a grimy, naked guy with evil voices inside his head."

"Don't diss mental patients."

"I'm not! I'm just saying, he's talking to himself and his other personality is vicious and greedy. He *needs* help rather than being qualified *to* help."

"Yeah, that's true. Does that mean you want to watch the next movie?"

"Of course I do. I need to see how this train wreck turns out!"

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"Didn't you have a coffee date with Gwen a while ago?" Merlin asks just as Arthur's pouring the hot water into their tea mugs.

"It got cancelled," Arthur admits.

"Oh." Merlin pauses. "Why?"

"I had an important matter to attend," Arthur says, trying to evade further questioning.

"Work matter?" Merlin asks undeterred.

"No," Arthur replies curtly. He sets the electric kettle back down.

Merlin lets the subject drop, and Arthur's glad for it.

They drink tea and argue over whether scones are better with or without raisins. They decide to agree that it depends on a person's taste, but Arthur still holds the opinion that if anybody wants raisins in their scones, they should not make other people suffer through them as well.

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"So, what is it you do, exactly?"

"I'm the Chief Executive Officer of Pendragon Corporation," Arthur says. "Or to put it simply: I'm the big boss of a really big company."

Merlin rolls his eyes. "Yes, thanks, I got that much. What I wanted to know is what your company *does*."

"We own several smaller companies."

“Good God, it’s worse than pulling teeth with you, isn’t it?” Merlin complains.

Arthur chuckles. “We supply hotels, bed and breakfasts, and so on. As long as you buy in bulk you can get pretty much anything from us, be it bathrobes or the tiny chocolates left on the pillows. We don’t only supply it, though, we also customise it. Want your hotel’s name embroidered on the sheets? No problem. Want everything in a garish shade of neon yellow, we can do it.”

“Oh, I see,” Merlin says at length. “So, whenever I stay in a hotel, the towel I use to dry off after a shower came from your company?”

Arthur nods. “Most likely, yes. We also export worldwide, and we do a lot of special orders.”

“Huh,” Merlin says. “That’s a lot more interesting than I had expected,” he admits.

Arthur laughs. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Something boring like finances and stock markets.” Merlin shrugs.

“Well, we deal with both a lot, of course, but it’s not our main purpose.”

“So, I guess I can’t scrounge a nice new bathrobe from you?” Merlin jokes.

“If you want a new bathrobe, you’ll have to wait until your birthday,” Arthur deadpans.

Merlin starts laughing and makes Arthur promise to get him a monogrammed bathrobe for his birthday. He does, however, forget to tell Arthur when that is.

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“Does that mean I finally get to meet your elusive friends?” Arthur asks sceptically.

Merlin nods. “Yeah. Gwaine and Percy.”

“Excellent,” Arthur says. He was pleasantly surprised when Merlin asked him to come along. Apparently Merlin’s friends have asked him out on a pub night, and Merlin in turn had invited Arthur.

“I met your friends, now you need to meet mine,” Merlin had argued.

Arthur would have said yes anyway. He thinks that he’ll finally get the chance to grill them over why they thought it was a good idea to leave Merlin alone over the holidays. Or why they never seemed to come round at all.

Merlin must have read something in Arthur’s expression because he sighs. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice,” Arthur argues. “I’m a delight to be around.”

Merlin scoffs but doesn’t otherwise disagree.

A few minutes later they’re inside *The Prince Arthur*.

(The irony does not escape Arthur but he thinks it better not to say anything. Merlin’s gleeful little face is already annoying enough as it is.)

Merlin looks around for his friends and spots them at a table at the far end of the room but with a direct view of the entrance.

Arthur stops to take off his coat before heading further inside, and takes a moment to look around.

This place is a definite step up from the Cock Tavern, Arthur notes. The bar has properly turned panels, and stools with nice, thick, dark green cushions. The whole pub is kept in dark wood and dark green upholstery. Every piece of furniture looks like it's regularly polished.

There's music in the background but not so loud that you have to shout to keep up a conversation. The telly behind the bar is muted and showing a rugby game.

Arthur likes the place instantly.

Merlin touches Arthur's elbow to get his attention, and jerks his head in Gwaine and Percy's direction. Together they walk over.

Percy is a hulk of a man, but his eyes are kind, Arthur notes. Arthur would be worried about having his hand broken in a handshake if Percy didn't also seem incredibly aware of his own strength. Arthur has the feeling he deliberately doesn't grip his hand as tightly as he could.

Gwaine on the other hand seems to be the kind of man who likes to brag. He shakes Arthur's hand, claps him on the shoulder, and is generally loud and very friendly.

What interests Arthur the most though is how they interact with Merlin, so he makes sure to watch as they greet him.

Percy just offers his hand and a kind smile. Gwaine pulls Merlin into a hug that lasts for at least half a minute.

Merlin's smile is wobbly at best, and his eyes are shining with unshed tears, but he keeps it together and sits down next to Gwaine, leaving Arthur the seat next to Percy.

Merlin's been doing better these last few weeks, but seeing him now with his friends shows Arthur that there's still a long way to go. If a simple meeting between friends has Merlin near tears within minutes of arriving, Arthur will need all the help he can find to get Merlin to accept Will's death and move on.

Arthur doesn't get his chance to talk to Gwaine and Percy alone until Merlin is off to the bar to buy their next round.

"I had to pick up Merlin from a pub on Christmas Eve because he was drunk off his arse," he says into the relative quiet. He watches their reactions carefully. Percy winces, and Gwaine runs a hand through his long, thick hair. "He told me you two had gone on holiday, and that he didn't want to go back to his mum's house because of the memories."

"I *knew* we should have stayed," Gwaine says, followed by a string of curses. Percy puts his hand on Gwaine's.

"Why didn't you?" Arthur says sharply.

“He didn’t want us around,” Percy explains when Gwaine just glares at the empty glass. “We told him that we were going to cancel our trip so we could stay with him over the holidays, but he insisted that we go,” Percy continues.

Arthur huffs. “So? You should have cancelled your trip anyway.”

“Merlin had been pushing us away for weeks before that,” Gwaine snaps. He looks up at Arthur, a deep line between his eyes, and drawn mouth. “We were honestly surprised when he called the other day to arrange a pub night,” he says.

“Why didn’t you try harder?” Arthur demands to know. “I’ve only known him since September and even I’ve caught on to what’s going on.”

“Yeah, well, you also haven’t lost a close friend yourself, have you?” Gwaine snaps. “Will was our friend too, and we miss him. Being around Merlin and his grief ... it drags us down as well.” Gwaine glares at his empty glass. “It wasn’t right of us to let him push us away, but we thought that if being around us would help him he wouldn’t try to get rid of us so much, you know?”

Arthur sighs. He supposes he can see their point.

“We had hoped that a bit of distance would help him heal,” Percy eventually says.

“Well, it hasn’t,” Arthur says tersely.

“How is he, then?” Gwaine asks. “I mean, how’s he really?”

Arthur sighs and looks around to make sure Merlin’s not coming back yet. It seems he’s still stuck at the bar trying to get the bartender’s attention.

“He has good days and bad days, from what I can tell. He keeps all of Will’s things around, doesn’t want anything moved from where Will left it. He quit his job a while back, and most days he has trouble getting out of bed, or feeding himself.”

Gwaine and Percy look shocked and hurt. *They had no idea it’s been this bad*, Arthur thinks.

“I come round most days to make sure he eats at least once per day. I managed to get him to talk about Will, but I don’t feel like I’m helping him beyond keeping him alive,” Arthur admits at length.

He had hoped that with what little comfort he had to offer, he could snap Merlin out of his depression, but he realises now that it was foolish of him. It doesn’t work like that.

In the few weeks he’s been seeing Merlin on a daily basis, Merlin has gained some more weight, but other than that there hasn’t been much improvement.

“And now the six month anniversary of the accident is coming up,” Arthur says, sighing heavily. “I’m at my wit’s end.”

The silence stretches between them for long seconds.

“Grief counselling,” Percy says suddenly.

Arthur looks up. “What?”

“Grief counselling,” Percy repeats. “We need to get him to accept professional help. From what you say he’s a danger to himself in this state, and he’s not getting any better.”

Arthur nods slowly. “That’s a good idea. Do you know someone?”

He should have thought of that himself, he thinks. But, with his father being who he was – always telling Arthur not show vulnerability, and never to do anything he wouldn’t want to end up hearing about in the press – it’s hardly a surprise that therapy did not occur to him.

“Elena,” Gwaine exclaims, thumping his fist down on the table. It startles Arthur almost into spilling the last dregs of his beer.

“She’s Gwaine’s cousin,” Percy explains. “She’s a therapist, specialising in grief counselling. She’s been helping us a bit. She’d be able to take Merlin on, I think.”

Gwaine’s nodding vehemently as he fishes his phone out of his jeans pocket. “I’ll text her right now.”

Arthur takes a deep breath. “Okay,” he says, then nods. “Yes, all right, that’s good.”

“What’s good?” Merlin asks. He’s carrying four pints at once and Arthur quickly takes two glasses off him, sliding the pint of stout over to Gwaine.

“That you’ve returned with more drinks,” Arthur says easily. “I was nearly dying of thirst.”

Merlin rolls his eyes, but doesn’t ask again.

Gwaine stays focussed on his phone for a couple of minutes and Percy tells Merlin that Gwaine’s got the idea to buy them a sex swing so now he’s looking into offers. Gwaine looks up at that and gets a glint in his eyes that tells Arthur that he thinks that a sex swing would actually be an amazing idea.

When he gives Arthur the thumbs up sign a few minutes later, Arthur isn’t sure if that’s in response to Elena, or the sex swing. He figures it’s probably both.

~\*~

On the day of the six months anniversary, Arthur picks up Merlin at home.

Well, he has to get him to get out of bed first, and then into clean clothes, but eventually they’re on their way. Both of them buy flowers at the shop where they met. Merlin gets his traditional bouquet of carnations, and Arthur buys an arrangement of purple hyacinths.

Arthur keeps his distance when Merlin goes up to the grave. They stay there for a long while, but eventually Merlin turns away and heads back to where Arthur’s waiting. Arthur squeezes Merlin’s shoulder briefly. “I’ll be right back.”

He quickly walks the few paces to Will’s grave and sets down the flowers next to Merlin’s.

“I’m taking care of him as best as I can,” he promises Will. “I know he wishes you were here, but he needs to find a way to let go of the past. At least enough so he can have a future. You understand, right? You wouldn’t want him to stay unhappy for the rest of his life.”

Arthur knows he won't receive an answer, but he's certain that Will would agree. He has accompanied Merlin often since the new year began, and heard enough stories about Will to feel like he knew the man a little bit himself.

After just a few minutes, Arthur returns to Merlin and together they start to walk back.

They pass "their" coffee shop, and Arthur persuades Merlin to go inside and have a coffee.

Their usual table is free, and Arthur tells Merlin to sit down while he gets the drinks. By now Arthur's a familiar face in the shop, and the barista smiles at him when she sees him approaching the counter. She's in her early twenties, Arthur guesses. Her name is Jane, and her face is round and cute, just like the rest of her – especially when she's having a floral dress day like today. She's also several heads shorter than Arthur. Arthur was amused to find out one day that, to reach all of the handles of the machine, she steps onto a footstool.

"The usual?" she asks, and Arthur nods. They both knew she already started making black coffee for Arthur, and a caramel latte for Merlin. All that's left to do is for her to plate a piece of chocolate cake.

Merlin's staring into space when Arthur arrives back at the table, hands full of the tray with his mug of coffee, Merlin's latte, and the largest slice of the chocolate cake Jane could find.

Merlin gives him a small smile, and Arthur smiles back. "Try to eat it slowly," he advises, and this time Merlin chuckles softly.

He picks up the fork and takes the first bite in slow-motion until Arthur snorts a laugh and gently cuffs him around the head.

After that, Merlin eats properly, and Arthur sips his coffee. He tries not to watch him too much, and instead looks out of the large front window. He's not sure yet how to broach the subject, but he figures that "head on" is his best option.

When Merlin's done eating he begins to slowly sip his coffee. Arthur turns back to look at him. He figures this the best moment, so he clears his throat.

"So, uh, I've been talking to Gwaine and Percy."

Merlin looks over at him. "Yeah, I know, I introduced you."

Arthur swallows. "Yes. What I mean is. I've been talking to Gwaine and Percy about how we can help you."

"Help me?" Merlin says slowly.

"Yes. Because we thought that we could get you through this by being there for you and helping you to maintain a normal life as much as possible," Arthur explains. "But we're not really helping, are we?" he states.

Merlin doesn't say anything.

"So," Arthur says with emphasis. "Gwaine has a cousin."



Merlin's brows furrow. "Gwaine has many cousins, as far as I know. What has that to do with anything?"

Arthur runs a hand through his hair. He's obviously not explaining things well. "This cousin is a therapist," he blurts out.

"Oh," Merlin says. "You think I need a shrink?"

"I don't know," Arthur says honestly. "And that's the problem, you know? I don't know what you need. When I lost my father I didn't cry much, and I was done grieving after two days. I have no bloody clue what it's like for you, and so I don't know what it is that would help you."

Merlin sips his coffee silently.

"Elena - that's Gwaine's cousin - she specialises in grief counselling," Arthur adds. "Gwaine says she's very good at her job, and she's willing to see you. We can make an appointment any time."

Merlin's still not saying anything. It worries Arthur. Merlin's usually very vocal about things he doesn't want to do.

"It's only one session, to see if you two can work together," Arthur tries again. "If you don't like her you don't have to go to any more appointments."

Merlin drains his cup and sets it down. There's nothing else for Arthur to say, except: "Please, Merlin. You can't go on living like this. Will wouldn't want you to live your life like this."

Merlin looks up sharply, eyes angry and mouth in a thin line. "What do you know about what Will would want? Hm? You never even met him!"

Arthur holds up both hands in a placating gesture. "I know," he says. "But Gwaine and Percy have. They lost their friend the same day you lost your husband," he says as calmly as he can. "They've been getting some help from Elena too."

Merlin looks taken aback, and then, as if someone let all the air escape, he sags back into his chair.

"Maybe you're right," he says. "I miss him so much, but I don't want to go on like this. It's like there's no point to anything."

Arthur nods encouragingly. "Just the one session, to see how you get on."

Merlin nods. "Okay. One session."

Arthur resists the urge to pump his fist in the air, or do a victory dance around the table.

"I'll call her on the way back to your house, and we can set it up, alright?"

Merlin nods again. Arthur stands, leaving his half empty mug behind. "Come on, then. Let's get you home. There's a recipe I've wanted to try, and I know you must be hungry for some proper food after all that sugar I let you eat."

Merlin rolls his eyes, but stands as well.

On the way back Arthur calls Elena, and she agrees to see Merlin in a few days. Arthur puts the appointment in his own calendar as well. He has every intention of picking up Merlin and making sure he actually goes.

~\*~

**Hyacinth** <*Hyacinthus*> Native to the eastern Mediterranean, Iraq, north-east Iran and Turkmenistan. From the family *Asparagaceae*, subfamily *Scilloideae*. According to the Victorian interpretation, hyacinths express *Sorrow*, and are used to issue apologies as the say *Please forgive me*, and *Sorry*.

*Mona's Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

~\*~

One trial session turns into two regular sessions per week. When Merlin asks about how he's going to pay for all of it, Arthur tells him to shut up and stop worrying about it. Merlin does for once, and the next time Arthur stops by Merlin's place, Merlin has actually cooked him dinner.

The pasta is too soft and the sauce is slightly burned, but Arthur appreciates the gesture and only teases Merlin a little bit.

They're halfway through March, and between taking care of Merlin, and making sure his company doesn't lose millions of Pounds because of a manufacturing error for their latest series of soaps, Arthur completely forgot to figure out a new date with Gwen.

It's her text that finally reminds him.



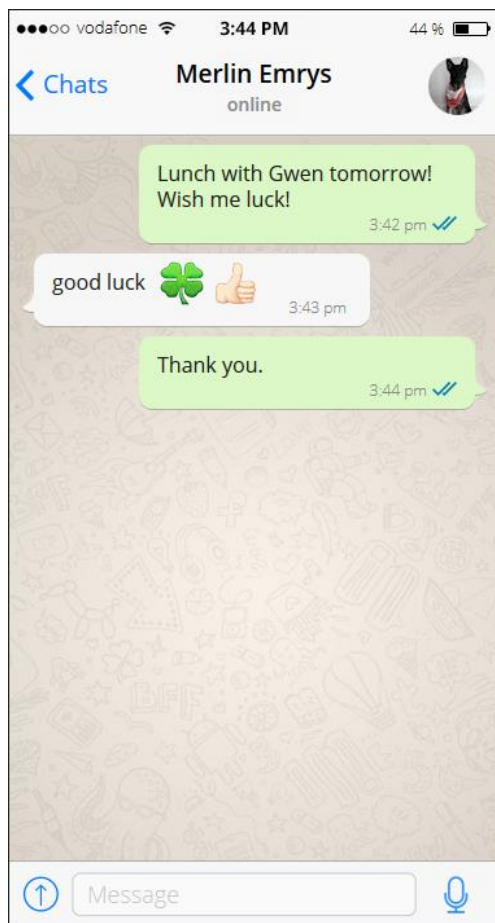
It takes Arthur a full five seconds to realise that it's not a text from Merlin. (The proper spelling and punctuation gives it away.)

He looks at his schedule and winces. He has a phone conference scheduled for that time.

Gwen replies within a few minutes, and Arthur sighs with relief.



He opens up his conversation with Merlin next to share the good news.



~\*~

The Pret A Manger is packed of course. Arthur grabs a baguette and water from the fridge and heads to the counter to pay for it when he sees Gwen walk in. She smiles and waves at him, and quickly picks out a soup and a bottle of tea for herself before joining Arthur in the queue.

"Sorry, the bus took longer than expected," she says.

"That's fine, I only just arrived myself. Fred held me up with documents that apparently needed to be signed right now."

Gwen laughs softly. "Good to hear that she's still bossing you around."

"Well, she keeps my work life in perfect order. I'd be a fool not to do what she says." He grins at her.

They reach the front of the queue. "You go and pick a table while there's still room. I'll take care of lunch," Arthur says and takes her soup and tea from her. Gwen smiles and heads to the window where she apparently spotted two empty seats. Arthur pays, and has them heat up both the soup and his baguette. Within a few minutes he has everything loaded up on a tray and is joining Gwen.

"Great seats," he comments. They're sitting at one of the bars set up along the windows with a view of the busy street outside.

"I like to watch the people," Gwen says.

"I remember," Arthur replies with a smile. He sets the tray down and puts Gwen's soup in front of her along with a spoon and her tea.

"Thank you." Gwen carefully opens the lid of the container and takes a sniff. The scent of vegetable soup escapes and Gwen hums appreciatively.

Arthur watches her and appreciates how beautiful she's looking. Her hair's shorter, she must have had it cut since they saw each other last, and it shows off her neck beautifully.

"You look great," he blurts out.

Gwen turns to look at him, looking surprised. "Thank you. You look well too."

He huffs a laugh. "That's generous."

Her smile softens. "I mean it, Arthur. You look good. I've noticed it on New Year's Eve too. You seem more relaxed."

Arthur shrugs. "I'm trying to work less."

Gwen laughs. "That could be it."

Arthur laughs as well but it sounds awkward even to his own ears. He turns to his food to have something to do. Gwen does the same, and they sit in silence for some time while they eat. Arthur's feeling more like a teenager on his first date by the second. Eventually he sets his half-eaten baguette down and clears his throat nervously.

"Thanks for texting me. I meant to reschedule but it's been very busy at work, and Merlin's been having a hard time lately."

Gwen sets her spoon down and smiles at him. "It's okay, Arthur. I understand. And I think it's sweet that you're helping him. I only know what Morgana told me, but it must be so hard for Merlin to lose someone he loved so much."

She looks so sad and sympathetic at the same time and Arthur's impressed all over again by how much compassion Gwen always shows for the people around her. She's always been like that and it's part of why Arthur fell in love with her in the first place.

"He's getting professional help now. His friend's cousin is a grief counsellor and Merlin's seeing her twice a week," Arthur says after a moment. Talking about Merlin seems like a safe option. At least Arthur knows what to say while they're talking about his friend. It's the topic of *them* that has him nervous.

Gwen's expression lightens. "That's good that he's getting help. Not that you didn't help him. I just mean that a therapist deals with this a lot and probably knows better how to help. Well, maybe not better, just different—"

Arthur starts grinning as Gwen rambles on and finally Gwen just presses her lips together and smiles sheepishly.

"I know what you mean," Arthur says. "And I agree. Merlin needs more help than I can provide. Elena can maintain a professional distance."

Gwen nods. "Yes, that's what I meant."

Arthur chuckles, and Gwen joins in after a moment.

"How's your soup?" Arthur asks to change the subject.

"It's good," Gwen says. "Want to try?"

She scoops up some soup and holds out her spoon for him.

Arthur smiles, glad they haven't lost their easy familiarity after all. Or maybe they found it again. Either way, he's going to enjoy the moment.

"Hm," he hums. "It is good. Could be warmer though."

"Always complaining," Gwen teases, and Arthur laughs again. He has missed this light side to their relationship more than he had realised.

"My baguette isn't much warmer at this point," he admits. "But a cold baguette is not as bad as cold soup."

Gwen just shrugs. "I don't mind. It's a good temperature for eating quickly." With that she goes back to eating, and so does Arthur.

His mind starts to wander and inevitably lands on Merlin. They'd had fish and chips last night and because Merlin's stomach has turned into a bottomless hole, he had stolen chips off Arthur's plate after he had eaten all of his. The memory makes Arthur smile. He only pretended to be annoyed by the food-theft. In truth he's glad that Merlin's eating more, and comfortable enough around Arthur to help himself to his plate.

Arthur and Gwen are both done eating, they sit and sip their drinks while watching the people passing outside the café. Arthur's begun putting together a shopping list for groceries (both for himself and Merlin, because the man is still incapable of buying things that aren't instant noodles), when Gwen interrupts his thoughts.

"There's something I have to tell you," she says.

Arthur turns to her, only to find her already looking at him with a very serious expression.

"You're not sick, are you?" Arthur asks, his imagination already running wild with worst-case scenarios.

"Oh God, no," Gwen answers quickly, looking apologetic. "No, I'm fine. God, Arthur, I'm sorry, it's not *that* serious."

Arthur exhales slowly. "Okay," he says. "Okay."

Gwen offers him a small smile. "I've been seeing someone."

The words take several seconds to process and all Arthur manages is a startled "Oh."

Gwen's look turns sheepish. "It started last year," she elaborates. "November, actually."

Arthur keeps staring at her.

"We didn't tell anybody yet because we thought it would be uncouth." Gwen's biting her lower lip.

"Arthur? Are you alright?"

Arthur frowns. "I think so."

"You're very quiet," Gwen says.

"I'm not sure what to say."

"I'm really sorry," Gwen says. "I didn't mean to keep it a secret for this long. I was going to tell you in January but then you cancelled, and there wasn't really any time after that, and I didn't just want to send you a text or tell you over the phone."

Arthur nods slowly. "I understand."

"Please don't be angry," she pleads.

"I'm not," Arthur says automatically and finds that it's the truth. He isn't angry. He's surprised, yes, but not angry. He isn't even terribly disappointed or upset.

"Who is it?" he asks after a few moments. "Someone I know?"

Gwen blushes and Arthur already has an idea what she's going to say next. "It's Leon, isn't it?"

She nods, and then her eyes go wide with surprise when Arthur starts laughing. When he hasn't stopped laughing a minute later Gwen starts to look really worried and so Arthur forces himself to calm down and drink some water.

"Sorry," he wheezes between gulps. "It's just that I always suspected that if you were going to leave me for anyone it would be him."

Gwen frowns. "I never cheated on you, not even emotionally."

Arthur shakes his head. "No, that's not what I mean. I never thought you did. I'm sorry, that was an insensitive thing to say." He drains his bottle and puts the cap back on. "I'm trying to say that I'm happy for you. I'm glad it's Leon."

She smiles at him and before Arthur knows what's happening Gwen's leaning over and hugging him tightly.

"Thank you," she says into his shoulder. "I'm so glad you understand. I didn't plan for it to happen, but it's like I suddenly realised that I have all these feelings for him."

She pulls back and her cheeks are flushed red again. "He said he's been in love with me for years. Can you imagine?"

Arthur's smiling at her. "I absolutely can. I know what it's like to be in love with you."

Gwen's expression turns sad again. "Oh, Arthur. I'm so sorry." She flings her arms around him again for another hug. Arthur holds on to her, not so much because he needs to be comforted, but because he likes that they can do this again now.

"It's okay," he says. "I think I'm a little relieved, to be honest."

Gwen just holds on tighter and doesn't say anything.

Now that Arthur doesn't have to look at her face when he says it, and now that he knows that she won't break apart from hearing it, he can admit it. "I'll always love you, Gwen, and sometimes I miss you so much ..." He squeezes her gently. "But I've been okay without you, and I don't think we'd be happy together anymore."

He can feel her nod. "I'll always love you too," she says. "We'll stay friends, I promise."

Arthur smiles and buries his face in her shoulder. "I'd like that."

They stay like that for a little while longer before the position truly becomes too uncomfortable to maintain. When they pull apart, Gwen's eyes are shining with unshed tears, and Arthur has to clear his throat a few times to make sure his voice will sound normal. He glances at his watch. He hadn't even noticed how much time has passed.

"I have to go back to the office," he says regretfully.

Gwen checks her own watch. "I have to go back too. I have class in an hour."

Arthur stands and takes their empty tray away. He feels lighter, somehow, but also confused. He feels relieved that Gwen has moved on and isn't bitter or upset about the end of their relationship anymore. But he also wonders what it says about him that he feels that way.

They part ways outside the café. Arthur hugs Gwen again and she kisses his cheek.

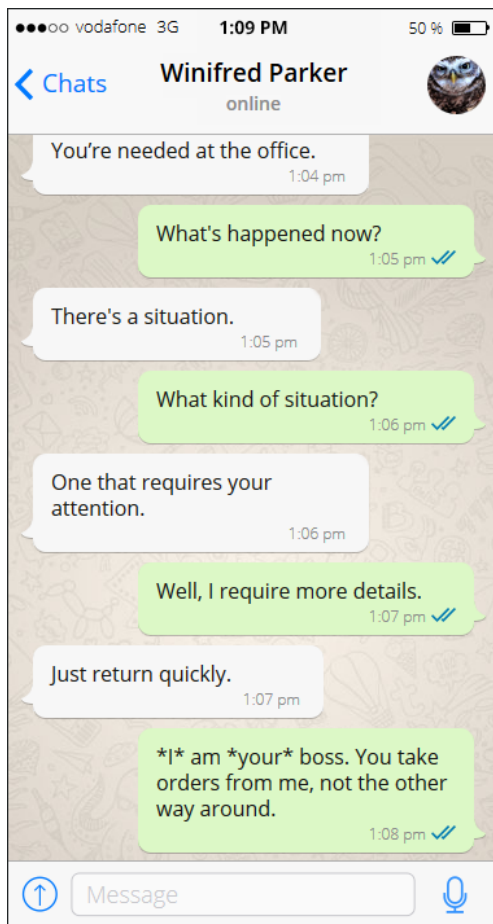
"You're wonderful," she tells him, and now it's Arthur's turn to blush.

"I mean it," Gwen says with conviction. "You've been a good friend to Merlin, and you've changed so much over the last six months." She smiles at him. "It's like you're finally letting yourself be the man I always knew you could be."

With that she turns and walks away towards her bus stop. Arthur stares after her until she has disappeared around a corner.



A text from his secretary brings him back to reality. Arthur curses and heads back to work.



Fred only sends back a smiley face that looks very serene and appeasing, and Arthur just knows that she's nodding and smiling to make him think that he has any kind of authority. He decides that he'll finally give her the long-overdue raise she's been demanding for over a year.

~\*~

Later in the afternoon, Arthur texts Gwen again.



Gwen's next reply arrives while Arthur's on the intercom with Fred to get the process started. Now that they've made the decision, he intends to execute it promptly.

He grins through the rest of their conversation, and finally puts his phone away.



~\*~

Arthur has stopped coming by Merlin's place every day. Thanks to Elena's counselling it's no longer necessary. It's not like it was a terrible chore before, but Arthur's glad that Merlin's no longer dependent on him to remember to eat or shower. He's even learned to wash the dishes before they start walking out of the house on their own.

Arthur still goes to see him two or three times a week. They still text on a daily basis, too, so Arthur's always kept in the loop about Merlin's day. Merlin, in turn, endures all the rants about incompetent suppliers and amateurish clients.

Arthur hasn't told Merlin yet about his lunch with Gwen. He means to tell him in person because for some reason it would feel wrong to put that in a text.

It's not until Arthur has rung Merlin's doorbell that he realises why he wouldn't just text it. No longer pursuing Gwen means that Arthur no longer needs Merlin's help. Merlin might think that it also means that Arthur no longer intends to hang out with him.

Arthur frowns at the door. The thought that he might stop seeing Merlin hasn't even crossed his mind until now.

The door swings open to reveal a nervous looking Merlin. His hair's in more disarray than usual and Arthur's immediately worried.

"Hey," Merlin greets. He steps aside to let Arthur in.

"What's wrong?" Arthur asks before he's fully over the threshold.

"Nothing," Merlin replies much too quickly. It makes Arthur suspicious.

"Merlin?" he asks in his sternest voice.

"It's nothing," Merlin repeats, sounding even less convincing than before. He takes the bags with their food from Arthur and makes a big show of sniffing to find out what Arthur brought.

"Moroccan?" Merlin hazards a guess.

Arthur sighs and decides to let it go for the moment. He trusts Merlin to tell him. And if not, Arthur trusts himself to find out anyway.

"Yes," he says.

Merlin grins triumphantly. "I'll set the table." He quickly vanishes into the kitchen while Arthur unties his shoes and slips out of them.

Despite all the progress Merlin has made, the house is still cluttered. Will's shoes, despite lying around haphazardly, are all free of dust. Merlin must wipe them down regularly and then put back into place. Arthur sighs. *One step at a time*, he reminds himself.

A few minutes later they're sitting at the old wooden kitchen table. There are a multitude of water stains and scratches on the table top. Early on in their friendship, Arthur once offered to have it cleaned and restored, but of course Merlin had declined. Arthur hadn't asked again.

He's in his usual seat with his back to the nearest wall and a clear view of the room and the door. Merlin's sitting opposite him, picking at his couscous while Arthur's meticulously cutting his lamb into ever smaller pieces before he finally puts them on his fork to eat them.

"I met Gwen the other day," he says at length.

Merlin looks up, seemingly glad to have a distraction. "Oh?"

Arthur hums around a bite of rice and vegetables. He takes his time chewing before he swallows. His plan works because Merlin starts eating just to have something to do while he waits for Arthur to continue.

"For lunch on Wednesday," Arthur elaborates. "She asked to see me."

Merlin smiles at him. "That's great. Did you have a good time?"

Arthur nods. "We did." He takes another bite from his lamb before continuing. "She gave me some very interesting news."

"Are you getting back together?" Merlin asks, eyes wide. "Did my expertise finally pay off?"

"No," Arthur says at length. "We didn't get back together. In fact, we broke up for good."

"Oh," Merlin says. His face falls and he goes back to picking at his food. "Sorry to hear that," he mumbles.

"She's seeing someone," Arthur explains.

"Ah," Merlin says, looking up again to study Arthur's face. "That must've been hard to hear."

Arthur shrugs. "It wasn't that bad," he admits. He takes his time eating the next two forkfuls. It's only when Merlin's noisily tapping his fingers on the table that Arthur looks up at him.

"What?" Arthur asks.

"It wasn't that bad?" Merlin echoes. "You've been going after her for half a year because you want her back and now it's *not so bad* that she's dating someone else?"

Arthur frowns. He hadn't expected Merlin to be so upset about this.

"Er, yes?" Arthur ventures slowly. "If she's moved on from what she had with me far enough to start dating again then I don't think there's anything else I can do, Merlin. I'm not going to kidnap her and force to come back to me."

Merlin rolls his eyes. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" Arthur asks.

Merlin sounds aggravated when he speaks again. "Why aren't you more upset about this?"

"Because I'm just not," Arthur explains. "I love Gwen, she's great, I wish we were still together and happy," he elaborates. Merlin opens his mouth as if to interrupt but Arthur stops him. "But," he says emphatically, "we're not together anymore, and we weren't happy when we were. We've talked

more these last six months, including the first couple of weeks when she ignored me, than we did when we were together. She's happy now, and I'm okay too. It's alright that we're not together anymore. I'm glad she has found love again. I hope I will too."

Merlin's face is a grimace. It looks as if he can't decide between being angry and being sad.

Arthur sighs. "Merlin," he begins, but Merlin shakes his head and pushes away from the table hard enough that his chair falls over when he stands abruptly. Merlin's out of the kitchen the next second and then Arthur hears him stomping upstairs and slamming the bedroom door.

He sighs again, then starts to pack up the leftovers and puts them in the fridge for later.

After enough time has passed he decides that he should go and check on Merlin. He has a strong feeling that this is less about him and Gwen and more about the fact that Merlin would've given everything to have another chance to be with Will again.

Arthur knocks on the bedroom door and opens it slowly even though he received no reply. Merlin's curled up on the bed, clutching the picture frame from his nightstand in his hands. Arthur walks over and sits on the edge of the bed.

"Merlin," he says softly. "Letting Gwen go is the right thing for her and me to do. It's better this way. She and I get to stay friends, and we have the chance to be happy. It doesn't mean we don't care about each other or that we're ungrateful for the time we had together. Sometimes you have to let people go so that you and they can be happy, even if it means that you can't be with them anymore."

Merlin turns to look at him. His eyes are shining with wetness but he isn't crying yet. He swallows a few times before he speaks, and when he does his voice is still brittle.

"Elena asked if I wanted to try and put some of Will's things away. She said it would help me accept that he's gone."

"Oh, Merlin," Arthur says sympathetically.

"I know she's right," Merlin argues wobbly. "But it feels like giving up on him. What if I forget him when there are no reminders?" Merlin's starting to sound panicked and his breath is coming in shorter and shallower bursts. "I'm burying him all over again!"

Arthur takes Merlin's face into his hands. "Look at me," he commands. Merlin's eyes are bright blue and big and so desperate. Arthur makes sure to speak slowly and clearly. "You're not going to forget him. You don't have to pack away every last bit of him. We'll start with just a few things. Things you haven't looked at since August. We can pack them up and store them in the attic until you're ready to go through them."

Merlin bites his lip but nods slowly. His breathing is calming down again and Arthur lets go of his face.

"We'll do it together, alright? There's no rule that says you have to do it alone."

"No," Merlin agrees hoarsely. "Thank you."

“Don’t mention it,” Arthur deflects. He squeezes Merlin’s shoulder. “I’ll go and get some moving boxes and when I come back we’ll start, alright?”

Merlin nods jerkily.

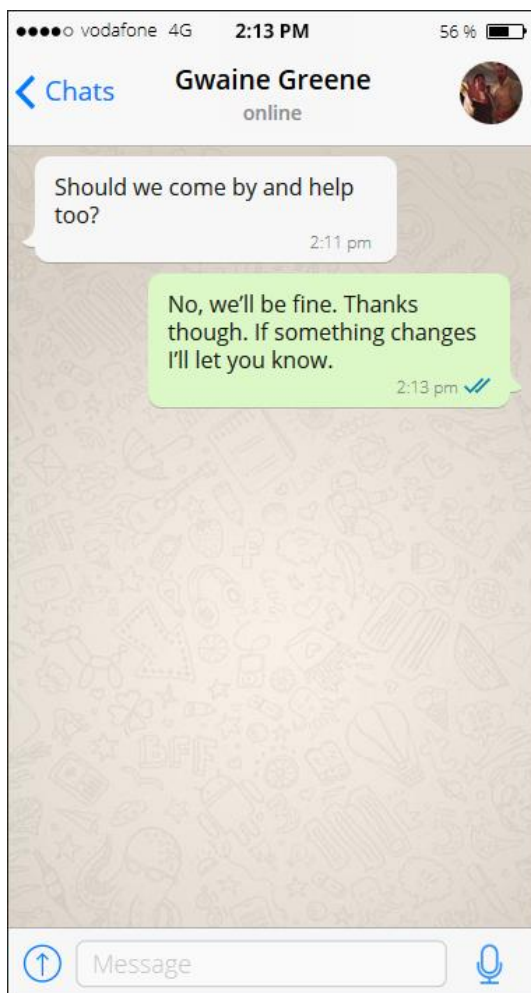
“Alright,” Arthur repeats. “I won’t be long. I put the food in the fridge if you want to finish your lunch.”

He gets up and walks over to the door.

“Thank you,” Merlin says again. Arthur turns around to find Merlin smiling at him.

Arthur smiles back. “You’re welcome. I’ll be right back.”

He turns back and heads out to pick up a bunch of boxes. On the way to the car he texts Gwaine and tells him to come by later so they can all go to the pub and distract Merlin. Together they’ll make sure that Merlin gets through this in one piece.



Gwaine texts back and asks if they should come by and help too.

Arthur thinks about it but ultimately figures that Merlin probably doesn’t need more people around for this.

It’s half an hour later when Arthur returns with boxes. He’s pleased to find that Merlin has moved out of the bedroom and has even begun pulling books off one of the shelves.

“Hey,” Arthur says. He folds one of the boxes and sets it down next to the pile. “Do you want me to start packing them up, or do you want to do it yourself?”

“You can do it,” Merlin says. “I think that’s probably better.”

Arthur nods and starts piling books into the box. They work quietly for a little while. Merlin was already mostly done with the bookshelf when Arthur joined him, and so they soon move on to the next. It would seem that Will had a lot of books.

“He’s got quite the collection,” Arthur comments. He’s holding an edition of the complete ‘Lord of the Rings’ trilogy bound in red leather in his hands.

“Mhm,” Merlin hums. “Will read a lot.”

No more explanation is forthcoming and they go back to working in silence. Then Merlin suddenly stops, and just stares at the next book on the shelf.

“He used to read to me, you know?” Merlin says quietly.

Arthur didn't know, and he's not sure if he should say anything. Merlin, however, just keeps on looking at the book in his hands.

“Sounds nice,” Arthur says eventually, just to break the silence.

“It was,” Merlin says. “We'd cuddle up on the couch or in bed and then he'd read me a few chapters.” He starts smiling. “I usually interrupted him with snarky comments about the plot or the characters, and he always threatened he'd stop reading to me if I didn't shut up right away.”

Arthur chuckles. “That sounds like you, yes.”

Merlin laughs softly. “Yeah.”

He puts the book back on the shelf. “I'll leave that there for some more time,” he explains as if Arthur didn't understand perfectly well why Merlin can't pack it up yet.

Merlin leaves a few more books on the shelf. He always takes them into his hands first, strokes the front cover, and then replaces them on the shelf. Arthur doesn't question it and just continues to pack up the books that Merlin leaves out for him to collect.

Soon they have three boxes full of Will's books. They range from fantasy to science fiction and back to everyday novels. There was Austen packed in with Tolkien and Huxley. Arthur's rather impressed with the selection.

“Are you sure you want to store these in your attic? It might get too hot up there for the books in the summer. And too cold in winter, come to that.”

Merlin frowns. “I have nowhere else to put them.”

“If you like I can give them to Morgana. She has a library in her cottage where they would be well taken care of, and in reach if you want any of them back,” Arthur offers.

Merlin stares at the boxes. Arthur has labelled them all (*Will's book collection*) and stacked them neatly next to the door to the hallway.

“That would probably be best,” Merlin says at length. “I don't want them to get damaged.”

Arthur nods and pulls out his phone to text Morgana. He hopes she actually has some space in her library, even if just for a stack of three boxes.

While he waits for her reply he decides that they deserve a little break. “Why don't I make tea and you take a crack at clearing up the coffee table?” Arthur suggests.

Merlin just nods and Arthur fights the urge to stay and do it for him. “You can do it,” he encourages him instead. “I'm just a shout away if you need me.”

With that he heads to the kitchen to start the kettle.

~\*~

“I met this woman at Elena's,” Merlin says later.

The coffee table has been cleared, the book that Will read last joined the ones that Merlin didn't pack up, and some of the other clutter has finally been thrown out.

They're having tea and biscuits while surveying the living room. The book shelves look empty and Arthur thinks they ought to rearrange their contents and maybe move some of the furniture around.

"Her name's Freya. She's very nice," Merlin says. "But she seemed sad."

Arthur doesn't respond beyond watching Merlin as he speaks.

"Her parents were killed when she was young," Merlin goes on. "She said she tried to kill herself, and that she started seeing Elena after she was released from the psych ward." The empathy is clear in Merlin's voice, but so is the fear.

Arthur sips his tea slowly and continues to look at Merlin. "You're not the same," he says after draining his cup and when Merlin adds nothing of his own.

"No," Merlin agrees. "But we could have been. If you, and even Gwaine and Percy, hadn't been there for me." Merlin looks up and Arthur's throat suddenly feels tight with fear.

"You're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit," he says, hoping that his voice sounds much less shaky than he feels.

"You don't know that," Merlin says as he shakes his head slowly. "And you saw how I was before. You called me a sad, lonely freak who couldn't properly feed himself."

Arthur winces. He had been extremely abrasive when they first met and he will forever regret how he treated Merlin then.

"And it only got worse after that," Merlin goes on and looks back down at his tea. The cup is shaking in his hands. "I thought about doing it," he admits. "A few times, I thought about it."

Arthur keeps completely still. He's afraid of what else Merlin will confess, and at the same time he wants Merlin to confide in him.

"I even thought about how I'd do it." Merlin exhales noisily and Arthur can't stand it anymore. He takes Merlin's cup out of his hands and sets it down on the coffee table before pulling him into a tight hug.

"I'm glad you didn't," Arthur says. His words are muffled in Merlin's hair but a soft gasp from Merlin tells him that he heard. "I'm so glad you're still here because it means I got the chance to get to know you."

Slowly Merlin's arms wrap around Arthur in return and then they just sit there, holding each other and breathing in sync. "I'm glad too," Merlin says after a long while.

Arthur doesn't know how long they stay like this but eventually he pulls away and clears his throat awkwardly. "Do you want more tea?"

Merlin shakes his head. "No, I'm good for now. Let's just put on a movie and order pizza."



“Actually,” Arthur says. “I asked Gwaine and Percy to come over and take us to the pub. Do you want me to cancel?”

Merlin thinks about it for a moment, and then shakes his head. “No, but not the pub tonight. They can watch with us. And bring some beer.”

Arthur grins. “Good idea.” He stacks their empty cups and plates and carries them to the kitchen. There, he takes a few moments to breathe and sort his thoughts. He can’t believe that he had come close to losing Merlin after just meeting him. Arthur can’t even imagine how different everything would be if Merlin had gone through with it. Arthur would have never had the chance to apologise to Merlin. He might have gone back to Will’s grave to leave a note for Merlin only to find that the gravestone bore a second name.

Or he might have phoned Merlin only to receive no answer no matter how often he tried until Gwaine finally picked up one day and told him that Merlin was gone.

Arthur pours himself a glass of water and gulps it down in one. He pulls out his phone next and texts Gwaine the change of plans. All he receives in return is a string of pizza and beer emojis. It makes him smile.

He returns to the living room when he’s feeling calmer, and finds Merlin sitting on the couch. Merlin’s absentmindedly playing with a loose thread on the colourful afghan Merlin’s mother made for him and Will as a housewarming present. He’s smiling, but not sadly or regretfully, but happily – or at least content.

It eases the tightness in Arthur’s chest some more to see him like this. His stomach tingles and Arthur puts it down to another side effect of anxiety leaving his body.

All he can think in that moment is that *Merlin’s okay now. He’s getting help from Elena, he’s begun to accept Will’s death. Everything will be alright.*

Arthur smiles, walks over and flops back down onto the couch. “What do you want to watch?”

~\*~

It’s a little after midnight. Gwaine and Percy just left, taking a dozen empty beer bottles with them, and Merlin and Arthur are in the kitchen loading the dishwasher.

“So, who’s Gwen dating?” Merlin asks, finally picking up their conversation from over twelve hours ago. Arthur had completely forgotten that they had been talking about that when he first arrived.

“Leon,” Arthur says.

“Huh,” Merlin huffs. “Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“No,” Arthur agrees. “Neither am I, to be honest.”

“And you’re really okay with it?” Merlin asks, sounding dubious.

“I am,” Arthur confirms. “I didn’t expect to be but I am. I was a little relieved too, to be honest.”

Merlin just hums.

"I mean, I told you, I love her, I'll always love her, but she's happier now than she has been with me in ages. And I'm happier too. I'm doing well for myself."

Merlin closes the dishwasher and frowns at Arthur. "So, that means you no longer need me for dating advice," he says.

"I don't," Arthur says. "But if you care to remember, I haven't asked for advice in months anyway."

"Because you completely *forgot* that you were wooing Gwen," Merlin teases.

Arthur laughs. "Well, you're not wrong about that."

Merlin grins triumphantly. "You should know by now that I'm always right."

"I wouldn't go that far," Arthur says and rolls his eyes. "But you're not wrong surprisingly often."

Merlin snorts. "You really need to step up your complimenting game if you intend to date anybody new."

"I'm not," Arthur says. "I'm not looking to date anyone new right now. I'm happy with my life the way it is at the moment. I don't need to add anybody new."

Merlin bumps his shoulder against Arthur's. "They might sneak up on you though."

Arthur laughs softly. "That's true, they might."

He playfully shoves Merlin out of the kitchen. "Off to bed with you. I'll crash on your couch tonight if it's all the same to you. Don't much fancy trekking all the way back to my place in the middle of the night."

"Sure," Merlin says. He's already halfway up the stairs when he stops and turns to look back.

"Thanks for being here today," Merlin says.

Arthur smiles up at him. "Any time, Merlin."

Merlin smiles back for a few moments, then turns back around and climbs the rest of the stairs.

Arthur's still smiling to himself when he falls asleep on the couch with the afghan spread out over him.

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Arthur lets himself into the house one Saturday afternoon in the middle of April with the key Merlin gave him two weeks ago. "For emergencies," he had said, but they both knew that Merlin was just too lazy to get up and open the door every time Arthur came by.

"Merlin?" Arthur calls down the hall. A pained yelp answers him and Arthur doesn't even finish taking off his jacket before he runs upstairs to see what had happened.

"Merlin!" he calls again as he takes to steps at a time. "Where are you?"

"Bedroom," Merlin calls back.

*At least he didn't knock himself out*, Arthur thinks. He reaches the landing and runs down the hall to the master bedroom.

He finds Merlin standing in the middle of the room behind an ironing board. Merlin's got two fingers of his left hand in his mouth, and is glaring at the clothes iron.

Arthur breathes a sigh of relief. "What happened?"

"Burnt myself," Merlin mumbles around his fingers.

"You're not supposed to iron your fingers," Arthur wisecracks, and Merlin turns to glare at him instead.

Arthur chuckles. "I'll get you some water. Unplug that iron before you hurt yourself worse."

A huff follows Arthur as he heads to the bathroom, but when he returns with a bowl full of lukewarm water, Merlin has unplugged the iron and set down on the edge of the bed.

Arthur sets down the bowl on the nightstand. "Keep your fingers in the water for a while, it'll soothe the burn. Do you have any burn ointment somewhere?"

Merlin pulls his fingers out of his mouth and dips them into the bowl instead. "In the fridge," he answers. "Will always kept a tube around in case one of us burnt themselves on the stove."

"Are you sure he didn't just keep it around for you? You seem very clumsy."

There's a faint smile on Merlin's lips. "Yeah."

Arthur waits for Merlin to say more but when he doesn't, Arthur decides to go looking for the ointment. "I'll be back in a moment."

Back downstairs, Arthur takes off his jacket before going into the kitchen. It takes him a few minutes to find the ointment where it's buried in the bottom drawer.

Merlin's still sitting on the bed with his fingers in the bowl when Arthur returns to the bedroom.

"How are your fingers?"

Merlin shrugs. "Tender. Warm. Hurting."

"Sounds about right," Arthur says. "Why were you ironing anyway?"

"I felt like doing it. You always make fun of me for looking unkempt and rumpled."

Arthur raises his brows at him. "I didn't even know you had an iron, let alone an ironing board."

"Of course I do," Merlin says. "I run a proper household."

Arthur chuckles. "Yes, yes, you do."

"It's true!" Merlin says indignantly. "I couldn't show up to work in wrinkly scrubs, you realise? And Will's job required pressed clothes, if not sharp suits. His t-shirts were always in perfect condition."

“Alright, alright,” Arthur demurs. “That only means there’s still more I can learn about you.”

“Yes,” Merlin agrees. “I’m deep.”

Arthur snorts a laugh. “I’ll believe that when I see it.” He takes Merlin’s hand into his and inspects the burn. The skin is still red and tight looking.

“You should get your hand under running water, actually. That way it can cool down some more.”

“I know that.” Merlin rolls his eyes. “We just talked about the ointment being there because I burn myself frequently.”

“Obviously you forgot how to take care of minor burns, because all you were doing when I got here was suckling on them like a small child,” Arthur counters.

“I hadn’t got to the bathroom yet!” Merlin argues.

“Nobody’s stopping you!” Arthur replies, voice rising.

“You did! You’ve been fussing since you arrived.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for trying to help my clumsy friend!” Arthur jeers. “Next time I’ll just stand by and watch while you take an hour to remember how to put on a patch.”

“You are such an insufferable git!” Merlin snaps finally. He gets up too quickly and knocks the bowl off the nightstand. It falls to the floor and spills water everywhere. The carpet is soaked and water’s running down the side of the nightstand.

Both Arthur and Merlin are staring in disbelief at the wet patch on the floor. Arthur’s the first to break into laughter, and Merlin follows only seconds later.

“Well,” Merlin wheezes moments later. “That carpet really needed a good scrub anyway.”

That sets Arthur off again and they end up leaning against each other to keep from falling over. Arthur wraps an arm securely around Merlin’s shoulders, and Merlin holds on tightly to Arthur’s waist. It’s great to laugh like this. They’ve been having fun together before, but it’s rare that Merlin really cracks up like this. In Arthur’s opinion, it’s a great sound, and just as great a sight to see Merlin be carefree like this. He hopes he’ll get to see it more often in the future.

When their laughter has finally subsided into silly grins and occasional chuckles, Arthur nods in the direction of the door. “Let’s get you into the bathroom to take care of your boo-boo.”

Merlin snorts. “Sure, mum.”

Arthur huffs in amusement. “There’s a good lad.”

They exchange a look and burst back into laughter. It takes them the better part of a quarter of an hour before they make it to the bathroom to treat Merlin’s boo-boo.

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“These contracts need your signature.” Fred sets down a file on Arthur’s desk. “All of these will have to be approved by the end of the month,” she says as she continues to place more documents in

front of him. "And I need you to review these forms and sign them as soon as possible so I can send them to your solicitor." Another stack of papers joins the ones already in front of him.

Arthur flips open the topmost file that's marked URGENT in bright red letter.

### **Divorce/dissolution/ (judicial) separation petition**

Ah.

"Thank you, Fred. Is that all, or do you have any more things for me to do? I was hoping to go home early today but I have a feeling you would disapprove." He gives her a challenging look.

Fred, of course, just smiles back sweetly. "The contracts can wait until tomorrow," she allows. "And you can review the petition at home."

Arthur chuckles. "Very well."

He closes the file and places it in his briefcase. He had completely forgotten that he had asked Fred to get the paperwork started. Has it really been five weeks since his lunch with Gwen?

"Are you having dinner with Mr Emrys tonight?" Fred cuts into his thoughts, and Arthur looks up at her.

"Erm, yes," he says absent-mindedly. He needs to stop by Tesco first to pick up some groceries, though. Merlin texted earlier that he had no ingredients for dinner in the house.

Only a few months ago that would have worried Arthur, but Merlin has been doing a lot better thanks to Elena's counselling. Well, Arthur would like to think that his constant presence in Merlin's life had something to do with it too, but he knows that a lot of the credit needs to go to the actual professional.

"If I may say so, it's nice to see you leave the office at reasonable hours these days."

Arthur's taken aback. "What do you mean?"

Fred shrugs. "You've been working very hard since you took this position," she elaborates. "And I know it has taken its toll on your personal relationships." She glances at Arthur's briefcase and hesitates a moment before continuing to speak. "It's just nice to see you happy with someone again."

Arthur watches her for any sign of mocking. Fred is an incredible capable secretary and assistant, and Arthur respects her highly for all the miracles she can do. One time he had ruined his shirt, and then his back-up shirt, only twenty minutes before an important board meeting. Fred had raced to the nearest M&S to buy him a replacement. She is also the kind of secretary who knows that she's invaluable and virtually irreplaceable, and thus she has no qualms about being cheeky with Arthur. She never goes too far, and she always manages to pick the right moment, but Arthur wonders if she's being sincere right now or if she's actually taking the piss.

However, Fred's smile appears genuine and there's warmth to her look. Arthur smiles at her uncertainly and nods.

"Thank you, Fred. That will be all."

Fred nods back politely and turns around to leave. The door shuts behind her with a soft click.

Arthur leans back in his chair and thinks about what she has said. Fred makes it sound like she thinks that he's *dating* Merlin.

He supposes it might look like that to an outsider. He takes more meals with Merlin than without him, he's at Merlin's place as much as at his own house, and he picks up groceries and other things for Merlin all the time. They really have become rather domestic, haven't they?

Arthur shrugs. Let Fred think what she wants. He knows that he and Merlin are friends.

He tries to go back to work but his thoughts keep drifting back to Merlin and what Fred inferred about them.

When his head begins to hurt Arthur decides to call it a day. He turns off his computer and tidies up his desk. A few minutes later he's leaving his office and waving at Fred on his way out.

She waves back, smiling cheerfully at him. "Enjoy your evening, Mr Pendragon!"

Arthur has no answering smile for her, and he can just see the beginning of a furrowed brow and her smile fading before he's around the corner and out of sight.

On his way home, he picks up vegetables and fish from the shops. As he walks down the street to his house, Arthur wonders why Merlin never comes over to his place. Despite the one time when Arthur had called him a couple of months ago, they had only ever met up at Merlin's house if they didn't go out.

Making a quick decision, Arthur pulls out his phone and texts Merlin.

Arthur chuckles at Merlin's reply, and puts the phone away. He's glad that the promise of food is enough to draw Merlin out. He's sure that only a few months ago that alone would not have made Merlin so much as get off the couch.

With a glance at the clock Arthur calculates that it's going to take Merlin at least half an hour by public transport to get here. Enough time to take a first look at the divorce papers, Arthur decides.

He heads into his office and pulls the file out of his briefcase before settling down at his desk. He takes a deep breath and opens the file.



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The fish's baking away in the oven while the vegetables steam on the stove. Arthur's busy laying the kitchen table, and Merlin's doing what he does best in the kitchen: he sits to the side and doesn't touch anything.

"Have you thought about going back to work?" Arthur asks.

"Elena's asked me the same thing a few days ago," Merlin replies.

"And, have you?" Arthur presses on. He turns to look at Merlin only to find him looking at the countertop where he's tracing the veneer with his fingers.

Merlin shrugs. "Kind of."

Arthur waits but Merlin doesn't elaborate.

"How did you 'kind of' think about it?" Arthur takes a few steps closer, partly because the drawer with the cutlery is in that direction, and partly because Merlin might actually deign him with eye contact if Arthur looms close enough. He has learned this much in dealing with Merlin: When you want a reply, make sure Merlin cannot escape and has to look at you.

"Just, you know ... it'd be nice to go out and do something again sometimes." Merlin steadfastly watches his own hand. Arthur suspects that Merlin's deliberately avoiding looking at him.

"There's no reason why you can't," Arthur suggests. "I'm sure any vet clinic would be happy to hire you."

Merlin sighs. "I don't know."

"Don't be silly, Merlin," Arthur argues. "Of course they would be. You've got stellar recommendations from your old workplace, you told me that."

"No, I mean that I don't know if that's the right thing for me anymore," Merlin says. He finally looks up at Arthur.

Arthur hasn't seen Merlin this afraid in a while and it makes him smile softly at Merlin. "You can take on another job." He takes the last few steps until he's right in front of Merlin, and puts both hands on Merlin's shoulders. "If you want to keep working with animals, try a shelter or a pet shop."

Merlin looks uncertain, the little crease between his eyes all wrinkled up. Arthur nods encouragingly and watches with delight as Merlin's expression relaxes and he dares a small smile. Arthur squeezes Merlin's shoulders and then steps away. "See? Plenty of options for a talented young man such as yourself. Just don't try going into any kind of service-based industry."

Merlin huffs a laugh but doesn't protest. They both know Merlin's too clumsy for his own good.

It's not until Arthur's neatly placing the cutlery next to their plates that he notices that his heart has been beating faster and is only now slowing down again. He frowns but puts it down to excitement that Merlin's making more progress.

*Endorphines*, he tells himself. *That's all it is.*

They end up watching a movie on Netflix after dinner. Arthur's not sure what the movie's about because he keeps getting distracted by thoughts of the divorce papers on his desk, and the thing that Fred said.

He blames his mind going round in circles for failing to notice that Merlin has sat down much closer after he got back from the bathroom, and is now leaning against Arthur's left side with his right leg flung over Arthur's left thigh. Arthur wonders if Merlin had done it deliberately, or if he, like Arthur, wasn't even aware that he had done it.

Deciding to ignore it seems the best course of action because what's the point in embarrassing both of them? Chances are Merlin will have to go to the bathroom again before long anyway, so there really is no need to draw attention to their current proximity.

Merlin, however, does not get up again. What he does do is pull a blanket over himself to get nice and cosy, and within a few minutes of that he falls asleep. Of course it does not end there, because once Merlin's asleep he wriggles around to get into a more comfortable sleeping position and before Arthur knows what's happened, Merlin has got both his legs draped over Arthur's left thigh, and an arm around Arthur's middle while his head rest on Arthur's shoulder.

Arthur feels entirely helpless. Somehow he's reluctant to wake Merlin. He tells himself it's because of how awkward it would be, but the truth is that Arthur hasn't had any qualms about teasing Merlin before. He could make some good-natured jokes and get a laugh out of Merlin before sending him off to the guest bedroom to crash.

Instead, he carefully manoeuvres his left arm out from where Merlin's body has it trapped against Arthur's side, and wraps it around Merlin's shoulders. He skips back to the beginning of the movie and starts watching again.

This time he manages to grasp what the movie is about, but the finer points still elude him as he continuously gets distracted by the warm weight of Merlin against his side, and the small snuffling sounds Merlin makes in his sleep.

*This is nice*, Arthur thinks absent-mindedly. He can't remember the last time he and Gwen had been cuddling on the couch. He's reluctant to call what's happening now cuddling. For one thing, it's entirely accidental, and, for another, he and Merlin don't cuddle. They don't have that kind of friendship.

Then again, they are easy and comfortable with touching each other in other ways. They don't do it consciously, but Arthur often squeezes Merlin's shoulders, ruffles his hair, or lightly buffs his upper arm. And Merlin in return straightens Arthur's collar, or ironically pats his cheek - usually to emphasise that Arthur's fussing too much.

But cuddling and sleeping together were something altogether different. It was a lot more intimate than playful cuffs around assorted body parts. If Arthur had given it any thought before today he would have assumed that both were out of the question for them. Arthur would have thought that it would end up being awkward and uncomfortable, and he would have been sure that Merlin didn't feel comfortable enough around Arthur to do that with him.



Then again, Merlin had been very open about his grief with Arthur, and the more Arthur thought about it, the surer he was that Merlin was used to a lot of physical affection, and most likely craved it desperately with Will gone.

Arthur sighs. Why couldn't he have realised this sooner? He isn't sure he would've offered cuddle sessions himself, but he might have talked to Gwaine and Percy about coming by more often and making sure Merlin was sandwiched between them while watching telly.

Well, Merlin took the decision out of his hands – how typical – and now Arthur's starting to feel too warm. He can feel his face heating up and his heartbeat increase, and it would be very annoying if it didn't also feel damn nice.

Arthur's just thinking that he probably wouldn't mind repeating this whole thing, maybe in a more comfortable, sleep-promoting position himself, when Merlin smacks his lips, hums, and then mumbles something that sounds a lot like "Will."

In theory, there is no reason why Arthur should feel so disappointed at the sound of Merlin saying Will's name while cuddled up to Arthur, but disappointed he is.

He sighs, and pulls Merlin that bit closer, to which Merlin hums again but thankfully doesn't say anything else. Arthur returns his attention to the movie in the right moment to watch the female lead realise that she has been in love with her best friend the whole time. Arthur rolls his eyes. Movie characters are always so oblivious.

~\*~

The next day at work Arthur's thoughts keep drifting back to last night. The movie had ended and Merlin had still been fast asleep so Arthur had carefully wriggled out. He had helped Merlin into a comfortable position on the couch and draped the blanket properly over him. Merlin had looked so peaceful and soft in his sleep that Arthur was half tempted to join him again. He didn't of course, but even as he went upstairs and to his own bed, he was on the brink of turning around and dragging Merlin off to go to sleep with him.

Last night, Arthur hadn't thought much of it. They were close friends, he was comfortable around Merlin in a way that he never felt around any of his other friends, and the cuddling had felt nice after he had let himself relax and enjoy it.

"Mr Pendragon?"

Fred's voice startles him out of his thoughts and Arthur looks up. She's frowning at him and Arthur gets the feeling that she has been calling him several times before he reacted. He clears his throat and sits up straighter.

"Yes, Winifred?"

Fred's look turns into a scowl and Arthur can't stop smiling. She hates it when he calls her by her full name. She even prefers "Miss Parker" over it. Arthur wonders what it is with people who've been given unusual names and their need to shorten them to conventional nicknames. Gwen is the same. Arthur always thought that Guinevere was a beautiful and unique name, just like Winifred, and yet both of them insist on shortening them. They should own it, not hide it, Arthur thinks.

Not that he would ever presume to tell either of them what to do. He has learned early on (thanks to Morgana) that boys – and by extension, men – have no business meddling in women’s lives unless expressly invited or asked to do so.

(Morgana had never liked it when her name was shortened. He had called her “Morgs” once, and only once. It had ended with a big lump on his head, and the solemn promise that he would never ever call her anything but “Morgana” or “sister” ever again. Arthur had been seven years old and to this day he hasn’t broken his promise. Consequently, he had never quite understood why Gwen insisted that he call her Gwen, but he also never argued the point lest Morgana came back and gave him another “lecture”.)

“I wanted to apologise for yesterday,” Fred says. Her eyes are serious, the unmistakable sign that she is not being cheeky in any way. “I believe I made you uncomfortable with my insinuations about your and Mr Emrys’ relationship and that was not my intention.”

“Oh,” Arthur says eloquently. “That’s alright, Fred. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

She nods. “Thank you, sir. It won’t happen again.”

“Good,” Arthur says. As far as he’s concerned they can drop the subject now, but Fred’s still hovering by his desk.

“Is there something else?” he asks slowly.

“The contract,” she says. “The one that needs your signatures?”

Arthur wrinkles his brows in thought. He looks down at the desk and spots a file that’s sporting half a dozen bright orange flags, most likely indicating either where a signature is needed, or where Fred has found something that needs Arthur’s attention.

He sighs and pulls it closer. “I’ll have it back to you in an hour.”

“I’ll bring you some coffee,” is all Fred says in acknowledgement. She turns and walks out of the room while Arthur starts in on the first flag.

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On his way home that evening, Arthur’s mind turns back to Merlin, the cuddling, and Fred’s words.

He’s not entirely sure she has stopped thinking that he and Merlin are together. All she did was apologise for making him uncomfortable, now that he thinks about it.

Not that he minds that she’s thinking it. Fred is trustworthy and reliable. She would never gossip about him and therefore nobody else would start thinking that he’s dating Merlin.

But it makes him wonder if anybody else thinks the same way.

Once he’s at home, Arthur calls the only person he can think of who’ll be both honest and sympathetic.

“Hello, Gwen.”

“Arthur, what a surprise,” she says. She really does sound surprised. Arthur supposes he should try calling more often. It would seem he’s still terrible at keeping in touch with what she’s doing.

“I need to ask you something,” he says.

“Sure, go ahead,” Gwen replies. He can hear the noise of a pot being set on the stove and realises that he must’ve caught Gwen in the middle of making dinner.

“I can call back later if you’re busy,” he offers.

“No, it’s fine,” she says. “Now is better. What did you want to know?”

He clears his throat. “Well, it’s something Fred said to me yesterday.”

Gwen laughs softly. “You shouldn’t take everything she says seriously. She’s only teasing half of the time.”

Arthur shakes his head. “She was being serious when she said it.”

“Are you sure?” Gwen asks, her voice doubtful.

“Of course I’m sure. I’m able to tell difference between when Fred’s joking and when she isn’t.”

“Alright, alright. What did she say?”

Arthur undoes his tie and pulls it off. “I think she thinks that Merlin and I are a couple.”

“Oh,” Gwen says. She doesn’t sound all that surprised. “But you’re not, right?”

“No,” Arthur confirms. “We’re friends.” He heads up the stairs to his bedroom so he can change out of his suit.

“Right,” Gwen says. Arthur can just imagine her nodding to herself. “I mean,” she goes on. “Not that there’s anything wrong with dating him. Obviously it’s not. But if you aren’t, then you aren’t. And that’s okay too! Just because I’m dating doesn’t mean you have to. Not that you can’t, of course!”

Arthur can’t help smiling. He can picture her so well. She’s probably biting her lower lip now and scrunching up her nose. She has learned to control her babbles most of the time, but sometimes she just can’t help it. Arthur still thinks that it’s adorable.

“Thank you, Gwen,” he teases. “I’m so glad to have your approval, no matter what I do.”

She huffs. “Be quiet.”

Arthur chuckles and a moment later he can hear Gwen laugh on the other end.

“Hold on a moment! Need to put the meat in the pan,” she says. Arthur hears her put the phone down, and a moment later the sizzling sound he’s been hearing in the background becomes louder.

He’s taking off his suit jacket, ferrying his phone from one hand to the other, and puts it on a hanger while he waits.

Gwen returns a moment later.

“So, you’re not dating Merlin, but you think Fred thinks you are,” Gwen sums up.

“Yes,” Arthur agrees. He’s got his phone wedged between his ear and his shoulder now, and is undoing his cufflinks.

“Does it bother you that she might think that?” Gwen asks after a moment.

Arthur frowns, and carefully sets down the cufflinks on the dresser. “Not really,” he admits. “I mean, Merlin’s not bad looking. I could do a lot worse,” he jokes.

Gwen giggles. “You could,” she agrees. “Did you tell her that you’re not dating?”

“Erm,” Arthur says. “I don’t think I have. I’m still not really sure that that’s what she meant. Today she came in to apologise for making me uncomfortable, though.”

“So it *did* bother you,” Gwen points out.

“No,” Arthur says again. He realises he has been pacing the room and sits down on the edge of the bed instead to pull off his socks. “I was just surprised and confused. I hadn’t expected that from her, or anyone. Merlin and I are friends. I didn’t realise that there might be someone who thought we were anything else.”

“I see,” she says, her voice a little muffled. Arthur guesses she’s tucked the phone between shoulder and head as well to have both hands free.

“And then last night, Merlin came over and we were watching a movie,” Arthur goes on. He chucks the socks in the direction of the laundry hamper.

“Did you tell Merlin about what Fred said?” Gwen asks.

“Of course not. He’s finally doing better. I’m not going to suggest anything about him dating anyone, let alone *me*.”

“Oh, yes. You’re right. Hold on a sec.” She puts the phone down again and there’s some noise of pots banging, then running water and more hissing sounds. If Arthur had to guess he’d say that Gwen drained either potatoes or pasta.

He puts his phone on speaker and sets it down beside him. While Gwen’s still making a lot of noise on the other end, Arthur takes off his trousers and shirt. He’s just weighing the pros and cons of showering tonight versus showering in the morning when Gwen comes back.

“You and Merlin were watching a movie last night,” she picks up the conversation.

Arthur turns off the speaker and holds the phone up to his ear as he sits back down on the bed.

“Yeah, some romantic comedy. God knows why he picked that. He probably knew he’d fall asleep during the first half.” Arthur smiles fondly. “The cheeky bastard used me as a pillow.”

“You must’ve loved that,” Gwen says, sarcasm clear as day in her voice. Arthur can’t argue with her tone. He never cuddled with her, except for right after sex.

"I didn't mind, actually," he feels honour-bound to admit though. "He felt a lot less bony than he looks, and he was sleeping so deeply I didn't have the heart to wake him."

"Hm," Gwen hums. Arthur knows that hum. It means she's thinking something that he might not like.

He sighs. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she says much too quickly.

"Gwen," he says, affecting patience. "Tell me."

"I swear, it's not important." He can practically hear her biting her lip now.

"Out with it."

"It's silly," she argues. "I'm reading too much into it."

"Guinevere," Arthur says sternly, applying the well-versed tactic of use of full first name. Just like with Fred, it works a treat, but is only ever to be used with care.

"Okay, okay, I'm telling you!" Gwen grumbles. "I was just thinking that that's a very ... intimate thing to do. It took you months after we got together before you'd let me cuddle you."

"Yes, but one, I'm older and wiser now," Arthur argues. It earns him a snort of disbelief from Gwen.

"And two," he continues undeterred, "I have known Merlin for months as well."

"We just established that you aren't, in fact, dating him. So this was a platonic cuddle, yes?" she cuts through his argument. "Have any cuddles with Leon lately?"

Arthur can tell that she's holding back laughter because she very well knows that Arthur has never and most likely will never cuddle with Leon or any of his other friends. He's not the type who gets that cosy with his friends. He's much more into friendly slaps on the shoulder or quick, one-armed hugs.

"Arthur," she says softly to soothe his bruised ego. She knows him too well, he thinks.

"Hm," he grunts.

"I don't want you to get angry or upset now, but do you think that maybe it's possible that you would like to date Merlin?" Her voice is very sympathetic. Arthur knows she uses her "mediating teacher" voice. Unfortunately, knowing what she's doing doesn't make it any less effective.

"I don't know," he admits. "I haven't thought about it like that before."

"That's okay," she reassures him. He realises that she must have moved out of the kitchen because it's very quiet around her now. She probably thought it would be more appropriate to talk about this in private. Not for the first time Arthur realises what a great person Gwen is for always considering another person's feelings and comfort zone.

"You can think about it for as long as you need," she goes on. "A crush doesn't have to mean anything. Plenty of people have crushes on their friends and it never turns into anything more. Eventually they move on, or, if both feel the same way, it develops into something else."

“Like with you and Leon,” he interjects.

“Yes,” she says, not hesitating for a second. Arthur would be offended if he didn’t completely support their relationship.

“But not everyone is as lucky as Leon and I am,” Gwen explains. “I mean, for one thing, it took us almost thirty years to get this far.”

Arthur huffs a laugh. “Sorry for distracting you.”

Gwen giggles. “Don’t worry about it. You weren’t so bad most of the time.”

“Oh, ta very much,” he shoots back. “I’d like to think that for the first couple of years I was a great boyfriend and husband.”

“You were,” she concedes. “I was very happy with you.”

It makes him smile to have that confirmation, and it lifts a weight off his shoulders.

“My point is,” she goes on saying, “that you can have a crush on a friend and not have it change your relationship in any way. Just don’t treat him any differently.”

“I’m not even sure yet I’m having a crush,” Arthur argues. “There’s nothing there to make me change my behaviour towards him.”

“Well, if you find out, and if your feelings are anything other than purely platonic, don’t panic,” she says. “And feel free to call me again if you want to talk more about it.”

“I will,” he promises. “Thanks, Gwen.”

“Anything for my favourite soon-to-be ex-husband,” she says cheerfully. “Listen, I have to get dinner on the table or Morgana and Leon will start eating the tablecloth. Will you be alright now?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I think I will. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good evening!”

She hangs up without waiting for his reply. Arthur puts his phone down on the dresser next to his cufflinks. Shower tonight is definitely the better option, he decides.

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Arthur’s on his lunch break. He’s trying hard not to think about what the exact nature of his feelings (or lack thereof) for Merlin are, but is failing miserably.

The matter isn’t helped, when he receives a message from Merlin.

It’s a selfie of Merlin standing next to a sign that says “Bark & Meow Animal Shelter”. Merlin’s looking pleased with himself, and just a tad smug, Arthur thinks. The picture is looking sort of grey thanks to yet another cloudy spring day in England.



Arthur's already thinking about what else he can do to commemorate the occasion. He can't tell whether Merlin really doesn't want to make a big deal out of it, or if he thinks he shouldn't.



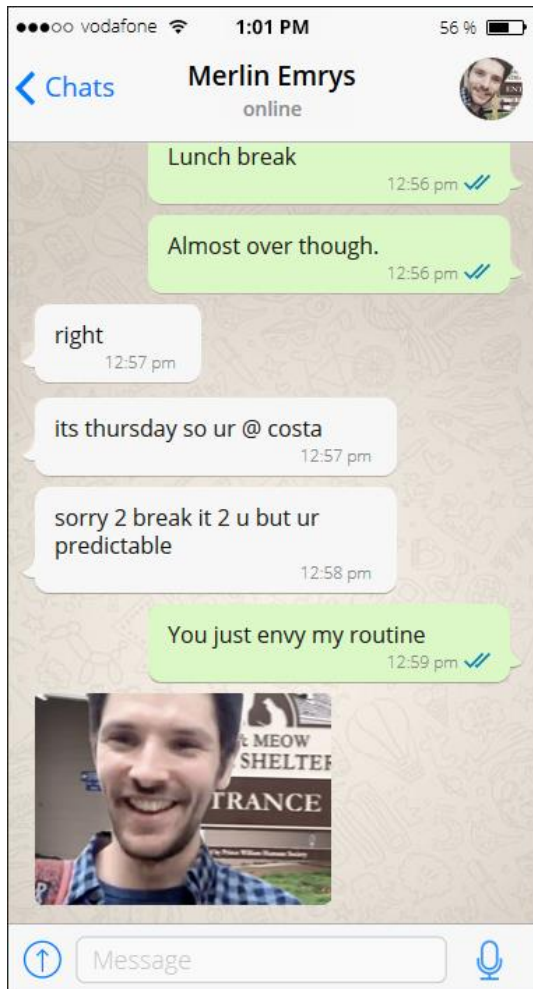
Merlin texts after a few minutes. Arthur has been finishing his sandwich and browsing amazon for some inspiration for a gift for Merlin, but of course he's not going to tell Merlin that.

Arthur frowns at Merlin's omniscience. He is at Costa, as a matter of fact. He just hadn't realised Merlin kept track of where Arthur takes his lunch on any given day of the week. He must have hesitated too long to reply because before he has a chance to text back, another message from Merlin arrives.

***sorry 2 break it 2 u but ur predictable***

Arthur sighs. He supposes he is. He won't deny though that it's also a tiny bit satisfying that Merlin knows him so well now. They've come a long way.

His last reply earns him another selfie of Merlin, and Arthur's breath catches when he looks at it. Merlin's still standing by the sign, but now the sun's shining down on him through a gap in the clouds, highlighting his hair. He's laughing, and Arthur doesn't even care that it's at his expense because it's the kind of laugh that turns Merlin's eyes into crescents, and brings out the lines around them as they crinkle up. Arthur has seen Merlin laugh like this before but last time it didn't make his heart beat faster.



He looks at the picture for a long time, and completely misses the next text Merlin sends. Gwen might have been on to something after all.

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That Friday night they're back at the *Prince Arthur*.

The pub is a lot more crowded than the last time they were here. It shouldn't come as such a surprise to Arthur. After all, it's Friday night and the footie's on. But this being a small, neighbourhood pub, Arthur automatically assumed that he'd find nothing more than a bunch of regulars off in a corner somewhere.

Instead, the place is packed. In fact, the only empty seats are at the long table just off the side of the bar.

There's already a small group of men sitting there when Gwaine, Percy, Arthur and Merlin take their seats. Two of them barely even glance up from their plates to grunt a greeting, but the other two give them friendly smiles.

Gwaine gets the first round, Percy the second. It's half time in the footie game when it's Arthur's turn to get them more beer. He's barely gone ten minutes but when he returns, his seat has been taken by one of the men already at the table. Arthur hasn't paid any attention to him before but now that the man's occupying his chair, Arthur takes a good look at him. He's got dark, wavy hair, and a perfect five o'clock shadow. It's like he stepped out of a fashion campaign.

What's more, he's talking and smiling at Merlin, who's smiling right back. Arthur's stomach twinges.

"Don't just stand there," Gwaine calls to Arthur. "We're dying of thirst here."

Arthur rolls his eyes but takes the last few steps to the table and sets down the glasses. He takes the seat on Merlin's other side. Merlin hardly even notices. He's completely focussed on talking to the fashion model.

Opposite of Arthur sits another man where before there was Gwaine. Apparently they switched seats so both Percy and Gwaine could talk more easily with him. The bloke looks barely older than twenty. His cheeks are flushed, but whether that's from the room temperature, alcohol, or Gwaine and Percy's attention, Arthur can't tell. He's fiddling with his dark grey scarf, though, so Arthur's guessing it's at least a little bit of nerves.

With his dark, floppy curls he almost looks like a younger version of Merlin, Arthur thinks.

Merlin's laughing, and Arthur turns his attention back to their conversation.

"I'm actually lousy at football," Merlin says. "I trip over my own feet more than I hit the ball."

The model smiles generously. "I'm sure you're not that bad," he says. Even his voice is nice, Arthur notes.

"I am. Just ask Arthur," Merlin insists.

"He really is that bad," Arthur agrees, quickly joining the conversation. He reaches his hand out to the other man. "I'm Arthur."

"Lance," the man says. He grips Arthur's hand tightly for a moment, then lets go. "That's my friend Mordred," Lance says, nodding over at the man sitting between Gwaine and Percy. "We're new in the area."

Arthur nods. "Welcome to the neighbourhood."

Lance smiles, genuine and openly. "Thank you, Arthur. Merlin's already told me where all the good shops are."

"Yes, he's a good Samaritan, our Merlin." Arthur's voice is too polite but Lance doesn't seem to notice. Merlin shoots Arthur a curious look, but Arthur doesn't acknowledge it.

"He's been sweet," Lance agrees. "I was just asking if he'd like to come play football with Mordred and me. We've got a friendly game set up tomorrow morning. I think your other two friends are coming as well."

"Yes we are!" Gwaine calls from his end of the table. "Mo's already invited us."

Lance laughs. "There you go. Would you like to come too?"

Arthur hesitates. Lance seems like a decent guy but something about him bothers Arthur.

"Come on," Merlin pleads. "It'll be fun."

"I doubt I'll be having so much fun patching you up," Arthur teases. It earns him a huff and a pout from Merlin. That makes Arthur laugh and before he can change his mind, he agrees.

"Alright, I'll be there. Someone has to make sure Gwaine plays by the rules," he says.

"I heard that," Gwaine protests. Arthur turns to smirk at him. "Good, then I don't have to repeat myself."

Percy snorts a laugh and earns a kicked-puppy-look from Gwaine for it. Both of them lean forward and kiss right in front of Mordred's face. Mordred doesn't seem to mind. If anything, Arthur's getting the impression that he'd like to have his turn next.

Arthur decides it's safer to go back to talking to Merlin and Lance.

"Then that's decided," Lance says. "You'll all play with us tomorrow."

"Yes," Merlin says, more sibilant than usual. Arthur makes a mental note to get Merlin no more alcohol.

"And if Arthur doesn't show up," Lance continues, "I'll take care of you."

Arthur suppresses a snort. It's such an over-used, cheesy line. Even Mordred seems to be doing a better job at flirting with Gwaine and Percy, because of them look just about ready to take Mordred home and have him for dessert.

That's when Arthur chokes on his drink because he realises that that's exactly what Lance has been doing. He's flirting with Merlin and Merlin is either oblivious or flirting back.

Merlin thumps Arthur's back to help him get rid of the coughing fit. A glass of tap water appears in front of him and he takes a few sips.

"Thanks," Arthur croaks.

“No problem,” Lance says, and Arthur looks up into his smiling face. Arthur smiles back awkwardly, and toasts him with the glass.

Lance sits back down, but Merlin’s still turned towards Arthur. “You alright?” he asks.

Arthur nods. “Yeah,” he says. “Just remembered something I forgot to do for work. I might have to go in tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Merlin says. He looks disappointed. “Does that mean you can’t come to play footie with us after all?”

“No,” Arthur says too quickly. “I’ll just do it on Sunday. I wouldn’t miss watching you score an own goal,” he teases.

For a second Merlin looks like he’s going to protest, but then his eyes crinkle up and he starts laughing. “Fair enough,” he says.

Arthur chuckles, and for a moment he feels the tingling sensation in his stomach again.

He’s distracted by Gwaine, Percy and Mordred all suddenly getting up.

“We’re heading home,” Percy says.

“Yeah,” Gwaine says. He’s got an arm around Mordred’s shoulder. “We’ll show Mordred around some more. There are a few more sights he hasn’t seen yet.”

“Your bedroom is not a famous London sight,” Merlin deadpans.

Gwaine just smirks. “That’s what *you* think.”

Mordred’s face is already bright red, so he can’t blush any further.

“Just go,” Arthur says. “Your new friend is embarrassed by your open discussion of his soon-to-be sex life.”

That elicits a small “eep” sound from Mordred. It looks a little like he’s fighting the impulse to hide behind Percy’s arm. Arthur thinks that, as far as hiding places go, it would probably do the trick of hiding Mordred completely.

“Just try not to break him,” Merlin advises. “I’m sure Lance wants him back in one piece.”

“I do,” Lance agrees. “And so does his family.”

“We’ll take the best care of him,” Gwaine promises. “See you three tomorrow on the field.”

He winks at them and waggles his eyebrows as he follows Percy and Mordred outside.

“Well,” Lance says at length after they’ve gone, “shall I get us a fresh round?”

“Just water for me,” Merlin says. “Thanks.”

Lance smiles at him. “Of course.” He looks to Arthur. “Anything for you?”

Arthur holds up his glass to indicate that he still has some beer left. “No, thanks.”

Lance gets up and heads to the bar.

Merlin turns to Arthur. "You okay again?"

"Hm?" Arthur hums. It takes him a moment to remember that he was choking earlier. "Oh, yeah." He takes another swig of his beer just to prove his point.

"Gwaine and Percy didn't lose any time, did they?" he comments.

Merlin laughs. "No. They've always been like that. They see someone they like, and if they're up for it, off they go."

"But we were supposed to be celebrating your new job," Arthur points out. "Not nice to take off in the middle of that."

"It's okay," Merlin says, shrugging. "Besides, you and Lance are still here."

Arthur smiles. "Yes. We certainly are." He licks his lips. "So, uh, Lance seems nice."

"He really is," Merlin says. "He said he used to live in London when he was a kid, but then his family moved back to Spain and he's lived there until a couple of months ago. He's been travelling all across Europe before coming back here."

"Sounds like he's got some interesting stories to tell," Arthur says. If Merlin likes this man, Arthur doesn't have it in him to spoil it for him. "It was nice of him to invite us to play football with him and his other friends."

"It was," Merlin says. "I just hope I won't embarrass myself too badly."

Arthur chuckles. "I'm sure you'll be fine. If worst comes to worst, you'll trip over your feet and have to be benched in the first fifteen minutes. Then everyone will coo over poor, wounded Merlin, and wait on you hand on foot."

Merlin smirks. "What, you too?"

Arthur snorts. "Not a chance. Let your new friend Lance do it. He seems more than eager to take care of you."

Merlin frowns. "What do you mean?"

Arthur makes a mental note to knock his head against a wall later. It might just improve his ability to keep his mouth shut.

He clears his throat. "It looked like he was working up to asking you out."

"He can't," Merlin says, the pitch of his voice higher than usual. Arthur notices that Merlin's hands are balled into fists tightly enough to make his knuckles go white.

"It's okay," Arthur says. He puts a hand on Merlin's. "You don't have to say yes. If he's a decent guy he'll back off."

Merlin swallows, and nods jerkily. "Do you really think he's going to ask me out?"

"He might," Arthur says carefully. "Maybe he's just being friendly."

Merlin's not relaxing yet.

"Do you want to go home?" Arthur asks concerned. "We can leave any time you want."

"I don't know," Merlin says, his voice wavering. "Won't Lance think we're rude?"

"Maybe," Arthur admits. "But I'm not really bothered by what Lance thinks about me. If you want to get out of here then I'll make it happen."

That seems to do the trick. Merlin's shoulders visibly relax and he slowly uncurls his fists. When he speaks his voice is still thin but slowly gaining composure again. "We can stay a little longer."

Arthur nods. "Okay," he says. "If you change your mind, just say the word and we're out of here."

"Thanks," Merlin says.

Arthur squeezes Merlin's hand, then pulls away. "You're welcome."

Lance returns a moment later with two glasses of water. "I thought to myself that Merlin had it right," he explains at Arthur's raised eyebrows. "There's no obligation to drink alcohol just because you're in a pub."

"True," Arthur agrees. Merlin's attempting a smile but only half succeeding. Arthur's guessing that he's trying to see any signs that Lance is interested in him.

Arthur presses his knee firmly against Merlin's to reassure him that he's okay. He's rewarded with a press of knee back against his.

Merlin slowly raises his glass. "To not getting drunk," he toasts.

Both Arthur and Lance clink their glasses against Merlin's. "To not getting drunk," they repeat, almost in unison.

Arthur supposes it's just his luck that even though Merlin's calmed down he still manages to knock his glass over and spill most of the water on Arthur's trousers.

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"Sorry about earlier," Merlin says as he and Arthur walk back to Merlin's place some time later. It's after midnight already and Arthur's beginning to feel tired. He had an early morning and he's ready to just go to sleep. This will be yet another night that he sleeps on Merlin's couch.

Lance took off in the other direction when they said goodbye in front of the pub. He didn't ask Merlin out, but that might have been because Merlin managed to mention Will a lot for the rest of the night. Finally, when Merlin went to the bathroom, Lance asked if Will and Merlin's break-up had been very recent. Arthur explained to him what happened, and when Merlin returned, Lance was still friendly and open, but decidedly less flirty.

Merlin, in turn, loosened up again as well, and so the evening wasn't completely ruined.

"It's only water, Merlin," Arthur says.

“Not that,” Merlin says. “Although, I’m sorry for that as well. You have to admit, though, that your undignified squawk made the whole thing funnier.”

“I do not squawk, undignified or otherwise,” Arthur protests.

Merlin chuckles. “You did.”

Arthur would argue the point more but there are more important things to talk about.

“What are you sorry for, then?” he asks.

“Freaking out like that,” Merlin says at length. “When you said Lance was interested in a date with me, I just panicked. I couldn’t stop thinking about how I had enjoyed talking to him, and that led to thinking that I was maybe flirting back.” Merlin takes a deep breath. “And if I flirted back then that meant that I wasn’t thinking about Will anymore.”

Arthur puts an arm around Merlin’s shoulder and squeezes him.

“You didn’t cheat on Will,” he says quietly. “You weren’t aware of what Lance was doing, and just because you liked talking to him it doesn’t mean that you were flirting. In fact, you *weren’t* flirting because that’s something you have to do consciously.”

“Yeah,” Merlin says. “That’s what the rational part of my brain keeps saying too.”

“Good,” Arthur interjects before Merlin can say more. “Listen to it. In fact, you ought to listen to it more often. At least then I wouldn’t have to sit through hours of terrible fantasy slash sci-fi movies.”

“Jupiter Ascending is a masterpiece and I will defend it until my dying day,” Merlin states passionately.

Arthur huffs but doesn’t argue the point. He has learned his lesson that it’s futile to argue with Merlin about the ridiculous films he likes. It’s equally useless to object when Merlin gifts him one of these ridiculous films on Blu Ray. That’s something Merlin did a few weeks ago only to see the annoyed expression on his face, Arthur expects.

“My point is,” Arthur turns the conversation back. “You have no reason to feel guilty. You haven’t forgotten Will. And whenever you’re ready to start dating again it won’t mean that you’re forgetting him then. You can love more than one person.”

“I’m never dating again,” Merlin says slowly. “Will was the love of my life. I don’t think I could ever feel for someone else like I feel about him.”

There’s a voice at the back of Arthur’s mind that wants him to tell Merlin that he should never say never, but Arthur wisely ignores it.

And anyway, he’s far too busy examining the huge feeling of regret and disappointment that’s overcoming him just then. Ironically enough it’s when they pass a flowerbed of daffodils that Arthur realises that he really would have liked to ask Merlin out on a date some time.

**Daffodil** <*narcissus*> Native to Asia, Europe and North Africa. Commonly called *daffodil*, *narcissus* or *jonquil*. In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers, daffodils stand for *regard*, *unrequited love*, *sunshine*, and *respect*.

*Mona's Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

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## Part 4

The first week of May passed much too slowly for Arthur's liking.

He's acutely aware that that's because he hasn't seen Merlin since the day after pub night when they went to the park for the footie match. Merlin started out on a late shift, and Arthur, consequently, stayed in the office longer as well. On the bright side, he got more work done, but Fred regarded him disapprovingly whenever she went home before him.

Fortunately, it's Friday, and Merlin has the weekend off. Arthur already invited himself over for dinner, and then another pub night with Gwaine and Percy to celebrate Merlin's first week.

They're having pasta (Merlin cooked), and Merlin is talking non-stop about the shelter, his colleagues, the animals, the patrons – anything that comes to mind. Arthur already knows about most of it because Merlin kept up a running commentary via text the whole time he was at work. Arthur enjoys listening to Merlin talk, though, so he doesn't mind in the least. Merlin's cheeks are flushed, he's gesticulating wildly, and there's a glimmer to his eyes that Arthur is delighted to discover for the first time. He feels that in this moment Merlin is entirely carefree and happy. It's a good sight, one that Arthur hopes to see more often from now on. Listening to the story about Kilgharrah, the weird bearded dragon, is a small price to pay to see Merlin this light-hearted – no matter that Arthur already had the whole saga on his phone, documented with pictures and videos.

By the end of the meal, Merlin's slowly winding down and finally remembers his manners long enough to ask Arthur about his week.

So Arthur tells him about the divorce petition and that Fred has sent it off to court first thing Tuesday morning. Merlin's expression darkens briefly, but Arthur is quick to change the subject to a story about a client who made a spelling mistake on their order. They ended up with a couple of thousand towels monogrammed GERM. (It was supposed to read HERM for the Hotel of England's Royal Majesty)

A little while later, after clearing the table and washing the dishes, they're on their way to the *Prince Arthur*.

"Elena said I could stop coming in twice a week," Merlin says.

Arthur looks over at him to see him smiling. "That's good news," he says.

Merlin smiles more brightly. "Yeah," he agrees. "I've been making good progress, she said."

"I agree," Arthur says nodding. "You seem more at home with yourself."

"I am," Merlin says. "I still miss Will terribly, but I'm starting to feel like maybe I'll be okay some day."

Arthur bumps his shoulder against Merlin's. "That's good news." He wraps an arm around Merlin's shoulder and squeezes. "Really good news."

Merlin laughs. "Thanks." He wraps an arm around Arthur's waist in return.



They arrive at the pub to find Percy and Gwaine already there. They've secured one of the well-cushioned benches along the wall opposite the entrance. Each of them has a pint in front of them, and an empty plate.

Arthur stops by the bar to fetch a round for all of them while Merlin goes on ahead to say hello. By the time Arthur makes it to the table, Merlin's already talking about his job at the shelter again. This being the third time Arthur's hearing the stories, he tunes out of the conversation fairly soon.

It's not until someone nudges him under the table that he realises he has been staring at Merlin's mouth for an undefined amount of time. He looks away to find Gwaine smirking at him. Arthur quickly puts on a scowl. He glances at Merlin but thankfully Merlin seems as oblivious as ever. He's currently telling Percy about Kilgharrah, so Arthur thinks it's safe to get up and fetch another round of beers. As he heads to the bar, he has the uncomfortable feeling that Gwaine's still watching him, and still smirking.

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A few weeks later, and they've fallen into a rhythm. Merlin's shifts alternate between early and late. He always has the weekend off after late shifts, and makes it a point to meet up with Arthur, and sometimes with Percy and Gwaine as well. At least Friday pub nights are a somewhat regular occurrence again.

When Merlin's on the early shift, and working on the weekend, he gets off two days during the week to make up for it. He and Arthur don't always manage to meet up on those days, but Arthur has taken to scheduling meetings according to Merlin's work schedule so that they have the same days off.

Arthur once mentioned that he postponed a meeting so he and Merlin could meet for lunch, and Merlin had seemed incredulous that Arthur would do this for him. Arthur only just managed to suppress a blush. Instead he shrugged and told Merlin to eat up before Arthur's stolen all the chips.

It's a lucky coincidence that has Merlin's day off during his early shift fall on the ten month anniversary of the accident. In addition to going down to only one session per week with Elena, she has asked Merlin to try and sort through the rest of Will's things for the occasion.

Arthur shows up early that Wednesday morning. He had Fred clear the whole day after Merlin asked him to be there. "Just in case," he had said.

He lets himself into the house, expecting Merlin to still be asleep. Instead he finds him in the kitchen, staring at the inside of the cabinet that holds the mugs.

*Got an early start, then,* Arthur thinks. He joins Merlin in front of the cabinet. "Morning," he says.

"Hey," Merlin greets. "There's coffee."

"Great," Arthur says. "May I take a mug, or are you still practising your telekinesis?"

Merlin frowns and turns to look at Arthur. "What?"

Arthur grins and nods towards the open cupboard. "You were staring at the mugs so intensely, I thought maybe you were trying to find out if you could get them to fly over to the coffee pot and fill themselves."

Merlin rolls his eyes. "Prat."

Arthur chuckles and picks the same mug he always uses, the one that says *World's Best Husband*.

Merlin tracks it with his eyes, and Arthur stops pulling it off the shelf mid-air.

"Should I not be using this one?" he asks slowly.

Merlin frowns at the mug, then shakes his head. "No," he says. "You can use it."

Arthur waits a moment longer, just in case Merlin changes his mind, but then takes a step, and pours himself some coffee.

"You know," Merlin says at length. "That was Will's favourite mug."

Arthur looks at it as if he's never given it any thought, when, in truth, he has thought the exact same thing every time Merlin pulled it out of the cupboard and handed it to Arthur without comment.

"Was it?" Arthur asks, still inspecting the mug. The yellow print is fading in some places, and the words are beginning to flake off.

"Hm," Merlin hums. "I got it for his twenty-third birthday."

"It's a nice mug," Arthur agrees. "I wouldn't mind if someone got one like that for me."

Merlin huffs in amusement. "Maybe someone will."

Arthur takes a sip of his coffee to hide that he's not smiling. He's never been any good at flirting, and in any case, he shouldn't try it with Merlin at all. Merlin doesn't need another admirer, he needs a friend. Arthur's been content being that for last couple of months, he can stay happy going on like that. Just because he discovered a new dimension to his feelings for Merlin doesn't mean anything needs to, or indeed should, change.

"Yes," Arthur says. "Maybe." He gestures at the cupboard with his mug. "Are you clearing out some of these?"

Merlin sighs. "I might as well. I haven't used at least half of them."

"Then pack those up. We can take them to Oxfam when we go later."

Merlin nods and starts pulling mugs out of the cupboard. Arthur watches him. With most of the mugs, Merlin quickly sets them aside, presumably to be packed up later. But two or three times he pauses and just holds the mug in his hand for a moment, looking at the print.

"You know," Arthur says quietly the next time it happens. "You don't have to give all of them away. We can put some in storage."

Merlin shoots him a grateful look and sets the mug down, away from the ones that will be donated. He even goes as far as transferring two mugs from the donate-pile to the storage-pile.

It all takes only a few minutes and then the shelf holds only a third of the mugs. "Look at that," Arthur says. "I never really noticed how many you had!"

Merlin chuckles. "We kept giving them to each other as joke gifts," he explains. "And then Gwaine and Percy did it too."

Arthur laughs. "That would explain it. Still, no man needs that many mugs."

"No," Merlin agrees. "I really don't."

Arthur sets his half-finished mug of coffee down on the kitchen table and heads into the hall. He stored some more moving boxes in the cupboard under the stairs after the time Merlin sorted out books. He gets one now for the mugs.

"Any other dishes or appliances you'd like to get rid of?" he jokes.

Merlin smiles, but shakes his head. "No, I think the mugs will be enough. Let's do the bathroom next, yeah?"

"Sure," Arthur says.

Merlin fetches an old newspaper, and they quickly pack up the mugs before setting the box down in the hall.

Arthur brings the rest of the boxes upstairs and they deal with the bathroom quickly. Merlin throws away Will's toothbrush and disposable razor. Will's towel goes into the laundry pile, and all his hair products land in the box that Arthur's holding. Everything else, like shower gel and toothpaste, were used by both of them. It's not a big change, Arthur notes, but it's still progress, and there's still Will's office to deal with, and the bedroom.

Merlin decides to leave the office for later, and so they head to the bedroom. Arthur sets the box he's been holding down outside the door to the office, picks up the stack of unfolded boxes and follows Merlin.

They work their way methodically through the wardrobe, the dresser, and the two bookshelves on the wall. It's past noon by the time they're done, but they have a neat stack of boxes that will go to Oxfam, and a smaller stack that will go into storage. Merlin's house doesn't have much attic space and it's already crammed with Christmas decorations, childhood memories, and "some other junk", as Merlin put it. Arthur, on the other hand, has more attic space than he knows what to do with. He'll happily store the boxes for Merlin and fill up some of that empty space. The additional benefit to this arrangement is that with the boxes gone, the temptation for Merlin to go and put everything back where it was first chance he gets will be removed.

Arthur makes them lunch (grilled steak, potatoes, and brown sauce), and they sit on the terrace of the tiny garden behind Merlin's house. Arthur has been out here only a few times, and hadn't even been aware of its existence until a few weeks ago when Merlin had been busy mowing the lawn when Arthur arrived for Saturday lunch.

The weather's nice, and now that Arthur takes his time to look around, he notices that there are several patches of earth, neatly sectioned off. They're overgrown with dandelions, daisies and other weeds.

"Did you use this to grow vegetables?" Arthur asks.

"Will did," Merlin says. "He used to say that since he's the cook in the family, he insists on working with fresh ingredients. All I ever said to that was that he'd have to take care of them himself because I certainly wasn't going to bother with it."

Arthur laughs. "Yeah. Can't imagine you wearing a garden apron and sun hat."

"You'd be surprised," Merlin says. "I ended up helping a lot more than I wanted."

Arthur takes another look around. "And now? Do you want to use the garden again?"

Merlin shrugs. "Maybe. I've thought about it a bit, but I don't think I'd do vegetables and herbs."

"Could always plant proper flowers," Arthur points out. "Not that the wild ones don't look nice as well."

"Hm," Merlin hums. "Maybe."

Arthur changes the subject after that. He asks about Merlin's job and Kilgharrah, the bearded dragon. Even weeks later, Merlin's face still lights up with excitement whenever he talks about his new job.

When they can't justifiably procrastinate any longer – doing the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen doesn't take that long, especially not when there's two sets of hands working on it – Merlin takes a deep breath and opens the door to Will's office.

He hasn't been in there since before the accident, he admitted to Arthur a few days ago. Arthur had never asked about the room again after that first time, figuring that Merlin would come to him if he ever wanted to talk about it.

"I had Gwaine and Percy check for dirty dishes and perishables," he had said. "And they covered everything up with sheets to make sure it wouldn't gather dust."

When, a few days ago, Merlin had told Arthur that he intends to clear out Will's things in the entire house, Arthur had asked whether Merlin wanted him to go into the office alone to pack up. Merlin had shook his head and insisted that it was important for him to do it himself.

"I need closure," he explained, and Arthur had promised to be there.

Now, Merlin's standing in the open door and still breathing deliberately slowly. Arthur's about to suggest that they can always come back to it tomorrow, when Merlin takes a step inside.

Arthur follows him. The room isn't very big, and all the furniture is covered with sheets, just like Merlin had said.

Merlin carefully lifts one of the sheets. Dust rises and Arthur quickly walks over to the window in the far wall to open it.

Together they remove all the sheets and hang them out the window before they do anything else.

Now that the room's uncovered, Arthur takes a good look around. There's a chaise longue set up against one wall, with a small desk next to it on one side. The opposite wall is covered in books and magazine binders. In the middle of the room sits a large wooden desk, and on top of it sits a laptop, two speakers, and what Arthur thinks is one of those light boxes one uses to look at old film negatives. A file cabinet is wedged into a corner next to the door.

It occurs to Arthur in that moment that he never asked what Will actually did for a living, so he does.

"He was a journalist," Merlin says. "Commenting on social injustice, racial prejudice, and the likes. If the government or a big corporation were fucking over any working class people, Will would be the first to talk about it."

Arthur frowns. "Somehow I'm starting to think that he would not have liked me."

Merlin chuckles. "Not at first, no. But then, I didn't like you in the beginning either. You don't exactly make good first impressions, do you?"

"I suppose you're right," Arthur concedes. "Was he able to live off his work?"

"Yeah," Merlin says. "There were slow times, of course, but with the Tories winning the last election, and the rise in xenophobia all over the country, he kept busy."

Arthur nods. The room seems remarkably tidy. Considering how cluttered the living room had been, Arthur wonders if Will kept his work space this clean by himself, or if it's the work of Percy and Gwaine. He's in no hurry to ask Merlin about that though.

"Where do you want to start?" he asks instead.

Merlin sighs and looks around. "Bookshelves," he decides.

There's nothing on there that Merlin wants to keep so they soon have a large stack of boxes packed with more books sitting in the hall. Arthur's going to call a minivan service later. He doubts Oxfam will want any of these, but maybe he can find a specialist book shop that's willing to buy them.

They break for tea and biscuits and discuss how to proceed.

Merlin wants to keep Will's laptop and the binder of articles Will wrote. Other than that there are only a few framed pictures on the wall that Merlin intends to put into storage for the time being.

The furniture is going to stay, but nothing else.

They finish their teas, and go back to work. Arthur clears out the desk while Merlin pulls up the shredder to the file cabinet in the corner and sets to work.

It's dark outside by the time they're done. Arthur leaves calling the movers for the next day, and instead orders them curry. Merlin decides that he needs a shower before they eat, so Arthur's the one who carries the last box into the hallway, and then closes the door with a soft 'click' behind him.

He's surprised but also proud of how well Merlin seems to be coping with everything today. They've pretty much packed up any reminder of Will, with the exception of a few. The picture of them at the

beach, for example, was still on Merlin's nightstand, and the book that Will had been reading last was still sitting on the coffee table downstairs. It was closed now, though, and a bookmark stuck between the pages where Will had stopped reading.

Merlin hasn't said yet how he intends to use the office and Arthur suspects he'll probably let it sit for a while longer.

With that in mind, Arthur turns around and goes back into the room to cover everything with the sheets again.

When he's done, Merlin's coming out of the shower. He's got a towel around his waist, and his hair is still wet.

Arthur looks away to stop himself from staring too hard at Merlin's chest or stomach. He's had just enough time to notice that Merlin has gained both weight and muscle mass since he last saw him half undressed, though. It would seem that the regular meals and the full time job are doing their bit.

He leaves Merlin to get dressed, and heads back downstairs to grab his overnight bag. A shower is just what he needs himself right now. Clearing out the office disturbed a lot of dust, despite the sheets, and Arthur feels sticky and grimy. Plus, he could use a few minutes to himself after the sight of Merlin just now. He grabs a fresh towel from the cabinet in the upstairs hallways, and disappears into the bathroom.

By the time he re-emerges, Merlin has paid for their dinner and already served it up in bowls on the coffee table. *Looks like it's going to be another movie night*, Arthur thinks. Not that he minds. They usually watch telly or a movie when they stay in – which is most nights. He wonders what Merlin will pick today. Arthur's guessing either 'Jupiter Ascending' (*please, not again*), or 'Princess Bride'.

They make themselves comfortable on the couch. Merlin puts the disc in the player ('Princess Bride', *thank God*) to watch while they eat.

It doesn't take long until they set their half-empty bowls down on the coffee table. What surprises Arthur is that Merlin's looking at him nervously.

"What?" Arthur asks. "Do I have something on my face?"

Merlin shakes his head.

"Then what?" Arthur asks. He sits up straighter.

Merlin turns away. "Forget it."

Arthur sighs. "What is it, Merlin?"

"It's nothing," Merlin insists. He picks up a cushion and hugs it to his chest.

"Merlin," Arthur says again, more sternly. "Tell me." He picks up the remote and pauses the DVD.

"It's nothing," Merlin repeats. "I was going to ask if we could cuddle but you'd just think I'm weak or weird, or both."

Arthur stares at Merlin for a moment, then laughs softly. "You're ridiculous."

He wraps a hand around Merlin's elbow and gently pulls him closer. "Come on. It's not like we haven't done this before."

Merlin lets go of the cushion and frowns at Arthur. "What? When?"

"Few months ago. You used me as your pillow and promptly fell asleep on me. Come to think of it, I should send you the dry-cleaning bill for that shirt you drooled on."

"I didn't drool on you," Merlin protests.

"Yes, you did," Arthur lies. "Now come on." He tugs on Merlin's arm again and this time Merlin moves. It takes a few tries until they've settled in a position that's comfortable for both of them. Arthur's sitting sideways, one foot up on the couch, the other one on the floor. Merlin's got his head on Arthur's chest and arms around his waist. That leaves Arthur to wrap his arms around Merlin's upper body.

Arthur hits play on the remote and the film continues. Soon enough, Arthur's beginning to play with Merlin's hair. It's a nice texture. Soft under his touch, and thick. Merlin makes a content noise that makes Arthur think of a cat, and he smiles.

The film's almost over when Merlin shifts in Arthur's arms. He raises his head high enough that they're face to face. Arthur turns to look at him, only to find Merlin staring intently at him.

"What?" Arthur asks quietly, but Merlin just shakes his head minutely. He licks his lips and Arthur thinks he's going to explain, but then Merlin closes his eyes and leans in.

Arthur reacts on instinct. He cups the back of Merlin's head in his hand and moves in the rest of the way to kiss him.

It's chaste, just a press of mouths against each other. Merlin's lips are soft, just like Arthur thought they'd be, and they're barely moving for the first few seconds. Merlin makes a sound in the back of his throat that Arthur can't interpret. There's a moment when Arthur thinks it's all over as fast as it began, but then Merlin leans back in and kisses him again. He gently pulls on Arthur's lower lip with his teeth, then soothes it with his tongue. Arthur automatically parts his lips and then he's finally getting a taste of Merlin. Unsurprisingly he tastes of curry and beer and Arthur can't think of anything better right then.

Of course, that's when Merlin slips a hand beneath Arthur's t-shirt and makes Arthur incredibly aware of the situation.

Arthur pulls away quickly – not that it seems to deter Merlin in the least. Now that he's been robbed of the chance to kiss Arthur's mouth, he starts trailing kisses along his throat.

"What are you doing?" Arthur asks. His voice is much breathier than he'd like.

"You can't tell?" Merlin teases. Arthur can feel his smile against his skin.

*Christ.*

"Okay, let me rephrase," Arthur says, trying hard to hold on to his sanity even as his cock's clearly showing interest in what Merlin's doing. "Why are you doing it?"

“Well,” Merlin begins. “When two people are attracted to each other, sometimes they want to show each other how they feel.”

Arthur clenches his jaw in an effort to keep his face impassive. Does Merlin know he’s got feelings for him?

He grabs Merlin tightly by the shoulders and pushes him away.

“What’s going on with you?” he asks seriously, just barely resisting the urge to shake Merlin.

“Nothing,” Merlin says. “I just want to have some fun.” He grins and tries to move forward again.

Arthur locks his elbows and keeps him at arm’s length. “And that involves snogging me now?”

Merlin attempts a shrug, not pulling it off because of how tightly Arthur’s holding him. Arthur loosens his grip marginally.

“Yeah,” Merlin says. “I thought you were into it. In fact, I could feel it.” He glances down at Arthur’s crotch.

Arthur feels his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment.

“Jesus Christ, Merlin. What’s going on with you? Have you been thinking about snogging me for long?” he asks. If Merlin wants him, really wants him, that ... Arthur doesn’t even know what to do with that. He had been sure that Merlin wasn’t the least bit interested in him like that.

Merlin apparently needs a moment to think about the question. “Not really,” he says at length. “But it seemed like a good idea.”

“Brought on by what? Were you bored with the film, or what?” Arthur asks more harshly than he means to.

Merlin’s looking away, his expression closed, and eyes downcast. “I felt safe and comfortable,” he says slowly. “It was nice to be held by someone.”

Arthur watches him carefully. Merlin’s shoulders are tensing up, his entire posture becoming stiff. He’s clearly beginning to regret his impulsiveness. Arthur loosens his grip further.

“Then what went through your head?” Arthur prompts as gently as he can.

Merlin sighs. “I don’t know. I just wanted to kiss someone.”

Arthur swallows. *Right, then*, he thinks. *That clears that up*. He can feel himself get angrier by the moment and let’s go of Merlin entirely so he won’t hurt him accidentally. One angry outburst at Merlin’s expense was quite enough.

“It’s not that I wouldn’t want to,” Arthur says slowly through gritted teeth. “But this isn’t something you should rush into, especially with me.”

Merlin grabs the cushion from earlier again, hugging it close to his chest once more. Arthur can’t resist the urge to move closer and wrap Merlin up in his arms.



"You've come a long way in the past months," Arthur murmurs. "You've made so much progress. Don't do something now that you will regret in the morning."

"You don't know that I would," Merlin argues. He tries to turn in Arthur's arms, possibly to kiss him again, and Arthur's not sure he could resist if Merlin continues to push. So Arthur keeps holding him tightly in the awkward sideways hug.

"I do," Arthur insists. "You don't want me like that. I'm just convenient because I'm here, and we're close friends."

"Not true," Merlin protests but his voice is brittle.

"It is," Arthur says decisively. "And it's okay. I'm not offended."

*Just bloody disappointed*, he thinks.

Merlin takes a shuddering breath, and Arthur squeezes him gently.

"Let's just watch the rest of the film, and then go to sleep, okay?"

Merlin nods jerkily.

The film's actually almost over now and they only catch the last two minutes before the credits start rolling. They stay on the couch until the DVD has cycled through the title menu at least a dozen times, then Arthur finally lets go of Merlin to turn off the telly and the DVD player. He's not going to watch that film for a while after tonight.

Merlin stands slowly. He doesn't meet Arthur's eyes and Arthur suspects that the guilt and embarrassment are setting in already.

Arthur wonders if he should head home instead of staying the night. He's tempted to run and hide, to forget that anything at all happened between them. But he needs to be here the next morning to give directions to the removal company, so he clears his throat and says: "Sleep well."

"You too," Merlin replies. "Do you need anything else?"

Arthur shakes his head. "I'll be fine. There are enough pillows, and your afghan's proved to be much warmer than it looks.

Merlin manages a small smile. "Okay. Well, good night, then."

"Good night," Arthur says much more upbeat than he feels.

After he hears Merlin's bedroom door close, Arthur sits back down and buries his face in his hands.

~\*~

**Dandelion** <*taraxacum*> Native to Eurasia and North Africa. The common name *dandelion* derives from the French word *dent-de-lion*, and means "lion's tooth". In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers, dandelions represent *faithfulness*, *happiness*, and are used as *love's oracle*.

**Daisy** <*bellis perennis*> Native to Europe, part of the *Asteraceae* family. In the Victorian interpretation of the language of flowers, daisies have many meanings: *innocence, loyal love, I'll never tell, purity, and beauty.*

*Mona's Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

~\*~



Arthur texts after picking up his bag again. He quickly glances at the time. Merlin should be on his lunch break now.

Merlin texts back almost immediately, and Arthur smiles triumphantly. He knew it.

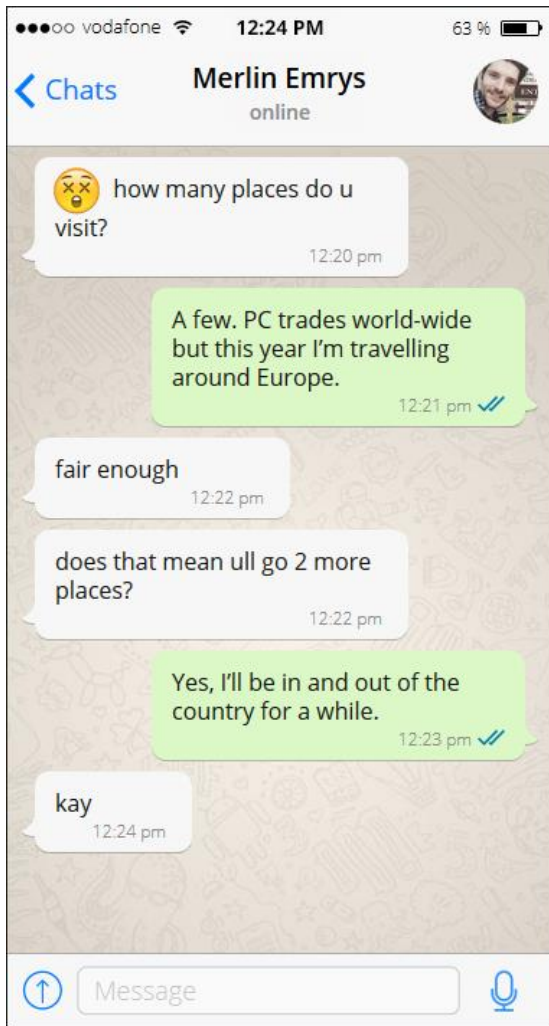
Arthur shoulders his bag more comfortably and makes his way into the duty free section of Heathrow Airport before responding.

Arthur cringes at Merlin's reply. He knows he should have told him earlier.

His father had usually invited hoteliers and suppliers to London, but Arthur thought it showed more courtesy if he went to them.

This trip would lead him to Rome, then Venice, and finally Florence. Fred was planning his visits to Spain and France already.





Arthur doesn't know what else to say after that. He puts away his phone as he steps onto the conveyor. Instead of stopping, like almost everybody else, Arthur walks quickly along.

He's just arriving at the shop area when his phone vibrates in his pocket.

Arthur smiles warmly at his phone, and puts it away again.



He looks up and around for a coffee shop where he can spend the next half hour until his flight's ready for boarding. There's a small café that offers sandwiches where Arthur has eaten before. If he remembers correctly, they make a nice masala sandwich there. He picks one, and a bottle of *Highland Spring* water, then settles down at one of the small tables.

The sandwich is as good as he remembers but Arthur only barely tastes it. He's thinking about the awkwardness of his and Merlin's interaction since Wednesday night. It's only been a few days since Arthur helped him clear out Will's office, and the following incident, and there's definitely some unpleasant tension between them.

On Thursday morning Merlin hadn't even been able to look at Arthur. Arthur, in turn, decided to leave as early as possible, which meant that he had to call the removal company and agree to a sizeable mark-up so they'd come by earlier than initially arranged.

At least now all the boxes were stored in Arthur's attic.

Arthur had had to go to work later that day, and that's when he decided that he could kill two birds with one stone.

He'd been postponing his trips to business partners all across Europe for a while, reluctant as he was to leave Merlin alone for too long.

Now, however, Merlin not only showed signs of making excellent progress, but also relative stability. It probably would also do them good to get some distance.

In any case, Arthur hoped that it would help him to get some perspective, and maybe get over this crush he has on his best friend.

He's brought out of his thoughts by the announcement that his flight is ready for boarding. He's set on getting some work done in the next two hours while they're in the air. No time to be thinking about Merlin, and how nice his mouth had felt against Arthur's.

None whatsoever.

~\*~

From: arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk

To: idonthaveawhitebeard@gmail.com

Subject: I'm emailing because texting becomes tiresome.

1 attachment 23,3 kB  
IMG\_02156.png 23,3 kB

Paragraph Calibri,sans-serif

The heat almost makes me miss the dreary English summers full of rain.

My meetings went well, thank you for asking.

The staff at Palazzo Manfredi was welcoming and friendly as always. The dining room and terrace have an excellent view of the Coliseum, which is part of the reason why I look to stay in this particular hotel. The other reason would be that it would be incredibly rude to ask them to buy through my company but stay in another hotel.

Anyway, I've attached a picture of the dining area.

How's your manic lizard?

I'm off to Florence in an hour. I'll talk to you later.

Take care.

Arthur Pendragon  
Pendragon Corporation  
+44 7756 966 707 | +44 20 8999 2100 | 1 King St., London EC2V 8AU, UK  
arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk | http://www.pendragon-supplies.co.uk

~\*~

From Merlin Emrys <idonthaveawhitebeard@gmail.com>

Subject **but txtng is so easy!**

To Me <arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk>

Reply Forward Archive Junk Delete More

10:26

dont think ill put any more effort in2 spelling & stuff just bc u want 2 email. im doing emails on my phone so u better put up w/ this.

Pic looks gr8 btw. rilly nice view. makes me want 2 visit rome. will & i wanted 2 go some time but never got round 2 it.

florence sounds nice 2. ull have 2 take me along next time u go.

kilys doing well. still creepy af tho. even lance sorta freaked out 😊

whats up with the formal sign off?

gtg work starts in an h.

-

M

Sent from my Huawei P8

13/06/2016, 11:26 a.m.,GMT +02.00 <arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk>:

The heat almost makes me miss the dreary English summers full of rain.

My meetings went well, thank you for asking.

The staff at Palazzo Manfredi was welcoming and friendly as always. The dining room and terrace have an excellent view of the Coliseum, which is part of the reason why I look to stay in this particular hotel. The other reason would be that it would be incredibly rude to ask them to buy through my company but stay in another hotel.

Anyway, I've attached a picture of the dining area.

How's your manic lizard?

Arthur sighs exasperatedly at Merlin's email. He had hoped, however faintly, that Merlin would adapt to the different format and actually use coherent speech. He had, however, not considered that Merlin would, like most people, just answer his emails on his phone. Arthur's on his laptop most hours of his workday, and uses only one e-mail address for both personal and professional correspondence, so this is actually easier for him. Apparently it made no difference to Merlin either way, so Arthur would just keep to it while he's away on business trips.

The Villa La Massa in Florence was, as always, tranquil and gorgeous. Part of why Arthur enjoys coming to Italy is the two days he gets to spend in Tuscany.

He sometimes dreams of leaving his job, moving to Tuscany, maybe buy a vineyard ... In earlier versions of this fantasy, it was always Gwen who accompanied him but Arthur's imagination always stopped short at that point because Gwen was far too attached to London, Morgana, and especially Leon – even back then. She'd never have moved so far away from them.

Not that that was the only thing that stopped Arthur from going through with it. His father entrusted him with his life's work. Arthur couldn't – and wouldn't – just throw it all away because of a fancy.

Looking out over the green hills where he could definitely make out several vineyards, the dream resurfaced. However, this time Merlin was there with him.

Arthur swallowed and quickly shook his head. That would never happen. Merlin and he were close, and maybe Arthur really would take him along on a business trip some time, but that's all it would ever be.

He closes his laptop and puts it away to head outside before his meeting to take a few pictures of the surrounding area to send to Merlin.

It's not until later that evening that he gets back to his room and his laptop.

From:	arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk	2 attachments	683 kB
To:	Merlin Emrys <idonthaveawhitebeard@gmail.com>	IMG_02171.png	256 kB
		IMG_02172.png	427 kB
Subject:	I might be a little bit durnk		
Body Text	Variable Width		

The whine in this area is excellent. I've ordered 2 crates to be shipped directly to my home address. We'll share a bottle when I get back!

What's lance doing at your work? Looking to buy a Persian cat?

My signature is automatic. At least its better than yours!

More pics attached for you. Witch you were here.

Arthur Pendragon  
Pendragon Corporation  
+44 7756 966 707 | +44 20 8999 2100 | 1 King St., London EC2V 8AU, UK  
arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk | <http://www.pendragon-supplies.co.uk>

On 14/06/2016, 10:26, Merlin Emrys wrote:

dont think ill put any more effort in2 spelling & stuff just bc u want 2 email. im doing emails on my phone so u better put up w/ this.

Pic looks gr8 btw. rily nice view. makes me want 2 visit rome. will & i wanted 2 go some time but never got round 2 it.

florence sounds nice 2. ull have 2 take me along next time u go.

kilys doing well. still creepy af tho. even lance sorta freaked out 😊

whats up with the formal sign off?

gtg work starts in an h.

~\*~

Arthur makes a point of not apologising to Merlin for his drunk emailing the night before. He didn't actually write anything incriminating. It's been a week since they kissed – and God, Arthur needs to stop thinking about that kiss already – and with a bit of luck, Merlin will have found the email hilarious instead of embarrassing. At the very least, Arthur hopes that Merlin won't read too much into it.

He doesn't have time to check Merlin's reply – if there is any – until later today. That will give him enough time to come up with a few worst case scenarios of what Merlin thinks of him now, and how he might react to it.

Arthur finishes his breakfast as calmly as he can, then checks out of the hotel and climbs into his rental car to drive to Venice via Verona. He has another meeting there and if he gets there quickly enough, he might have half an hour to himself to see what Merlin wrote.

~\*~

From Merlin Emrys <idonthaveawhitebeard@gmail.com>Reply Forward Archive Junk Delete More

Subject :D:D:D:D:D:D:D:D09:26

To Me <arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk>

---

looking forward 2 that wine sampling session w/ u. how much did u drink to get drunk enough 2 forget 2 spell check?

tuscany looks gr8. wish i was there w/ u 2. as i said ull have 2 take me along next time.

no changes here since day b4 yesterday. going out w/ lance & the boys on fri. pub quiz night @ prince arthur. perwaine, will & i used to crush that back when.

y would lance buy a persian cat??? he just came by 2 visit me @ the shelter. he said i mentioned working there when we played footie a couple of weeks ago & he wanted 2 check it out.

where r u off 2 next? still in florence?

hope ur not hungover but if u r: pls send pics!!!

-

M

Sent from my Huawei P8

14/06/2016, 10:42,GMT+02:00 <[arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk](mailto:arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk)>:

The whine in this area is excellent. I've ordered 2 crates to be shipped directly to my home address. We'll share a bottle when I get back!

What's lance doing at your work? Looking to buy a Persian cat?

My signature is automatic. At least its better than yours!

More pics attached for you. Witch you were here.

Arthur Pendragon

~\*~

From: arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk

To: Merlin Emrys <idonthaveawhitebeard@gmail.com>

Subject: not a word

Body Text Variable Width

Let's just say I drank enough, and that the wine here is packing a punch I didn't expect.

I wish all of you luck for the pub quiz. I won't be back in London until later tonight, unfortunately. I'll have to join you another time. If you'll have me, that is.

You and Lance seem to be getting on well. It's good to see you make new friends.

I'm in Venice. I stopped off in Verona on the way. Neither are favourite places of mine but Fred scheduled the meetings and I can't not show up.

Is there a footie match planned for Saturday? I could use some exercise when I get back.

Arthur Pendragon  
Pendragon Corporation  
+44 7756 966 707 | +44 20 8999 2100 | 1 King St., London EC2V 8AU, UK  
arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk | <http://www.pendragon-supplies.co.uk>

On 15/06/2016, 09:26, Merlin Emrys wrote:

looking forward 2 that wine sampling session w/ u. how much did u drink to get drunk enough 2 forget 2 spell check?

tuscany looks gr8. wish i was there w/ u 2. as i said ull have 2 take me along next time.

no changes here since day b4 yesterday. going out w/ lance & the boys on fri. pub quiz night @ prince arthur. perwaine, will & i used to crush that back when.

y would lance buy a persian cat??? he just came by 2 visit me @ the shelter. he said i mentioned working there when we played footie a couple of weeks ago & he wanted 2 check it out.

~\*~

From Merlin Emrys <idonthaveawhitebeard@gmail.com>

Reply Forward Archive Junk Delete More

Subject **spoilsport**

10:21

To Me <arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk>

im looking forward 2 that wine tasting even more now.

thx. perwaine said theyre confident we'll win bc theyve been coming in 2nd 4 a while. lance is p smart so im sure weve got a good chance.

isnt venice supposed 2 b super romantic? whats not 2 like about canals & gondolas? & veronas supposed 2 b bursting w/ Shakespeare.

the boys r playing footie but lance & I aren't joining. i promised 2 show him around the city. all the non-tourist spots & stuff. but ur welcome 2 join the game. usual place & time.

txt when ur back in the country.

-

M

Sent from my Huawei P8

15/06/2016, 08:28, GMT+02:00 <arthur.pendragon@pendragon-corp.co.uk>:

Let's just say I drank enough, and that the wine here is packing a punch I didn't expect.

I wish all of you luck for the pub quiz. I won't be back in London until later tonight, unfortunately. I'll have to join you another time. If you'll have me, that is.

You and Lance seem to be getting on well. It's good to see you make new friends.

I'm in Venice. I stopped off in Verona on the way. Neither are favourite places of mine but Fred scheduled the meetings and I can't not show up.

Is there a footie match planned for Saturday? I could use some exercise when I get back.

Arthur Pendragon



Arthur doesn't reply to Merlin's last e-mail for two reasons.

One, Merlin wouldn't read it before Arthur got back to England anyway, so he might as well just text after he lands.

And two, Arthur needs time to process the feelings of jealousy and disappointment.

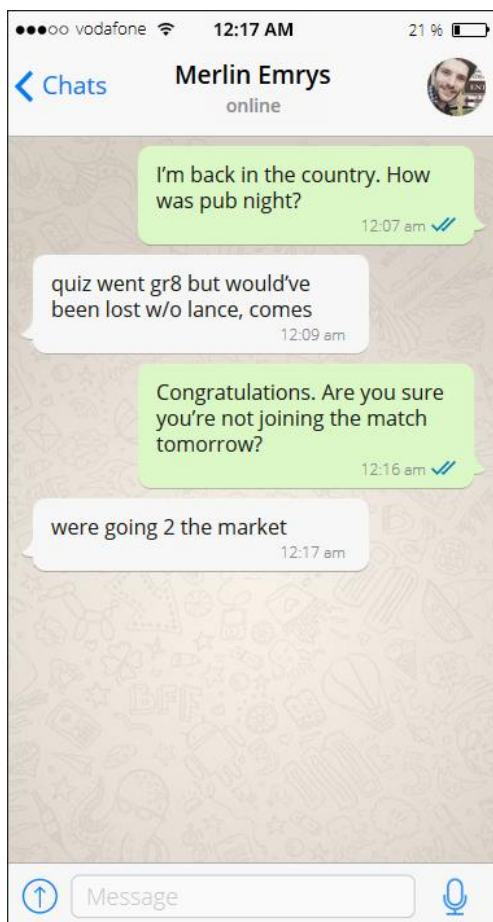
He goes into his last meeting of the day feeling significantly less cheerful. Despite being in Venice in the summer when it's severely overcrowded, Arthur had been in a good mood. He had been looking forward to going home, to seeing Merlin on the football field the next morning, to maybe going out for lunch afterwards ... He wonders if Merlin is purposefully avoiding him.

Not that he could blame him. Their encounter last week was awkward, and most likely still on Merlin's mind. Maybe Merlin is trying to distance himself from Arthur to make sure Arthur understands that he's not actually interested in him? After all, Arthur made it clear last week that he is definitely attracted to Merlin.

Arthur forces himself to pay attention to the meeting, and to put Merlin out of his mind for a couple of hours.

He only succeeds at one of the two.

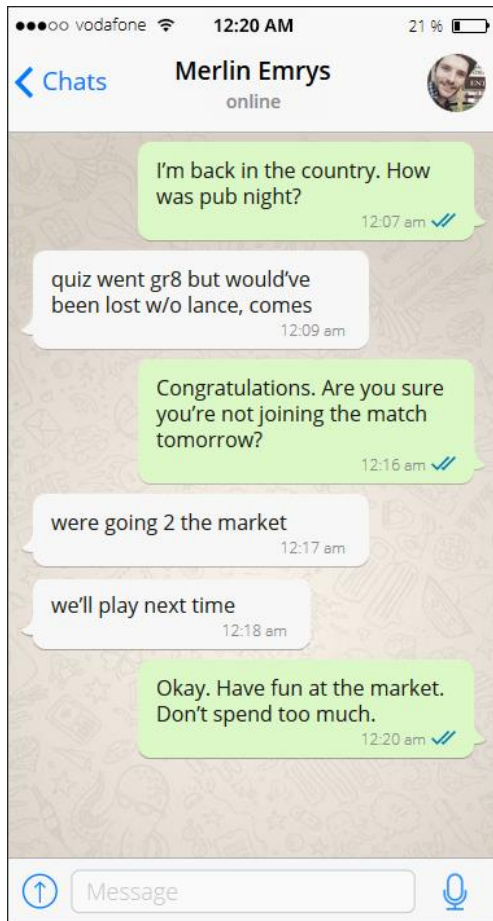
~\*~



Arthur texts Merlin as soon as he's stepped off the plane. It's shortly after midnight and he's certain that Merlin's still out with Gwaine and Percy – and Lance.

The reply comes only two minutes later while Arthur's finding a seat in the airport shuttle. He doesn't text back until he's sitting down.

Arthur wonders which market and if he should ask to come along. He's still thinking about it when another text from Merlin comes in.



*Right*, Arthur thinks. His worry that Merlin's avoiding him comes back full-throttle and Arthur decides that he should probably just give Merlin some space.

No matter how often Arthur checks his phone until he finally falls into bed, Merlin doesn't text back that night.

~\*~

On Monday morning, the first thing Fred puts down on Arthur's desk is a form for him to sign.

### **Application for a decree nisi conditional order or (judicial) separation decree order**

He's honestly glad that Fred is keeping track of everything for him and Gwen. She occasionally gives him an update on the process of things, but other than that, Arthur just signs whatever she puts in front of him. He knows it probably would take at least twice as long if he tried to do it without her help because Arthur would fail to send any of the forms on time.

He scans the document, then signs his name at the bottom.

"Thank you, Sir," Fred says as she sweeps the sheet off his desk and sets down a batch of files in its stead. "These all need reviewing. There's an itinerary for your next trip in there as well."

Arthur sighs. "I'll need coffee. And one of those pastries from the bakery across the street."

Fred holds up a finger, turns around and disappears into the front office. She returns a moment later with a small tray that she sets down on Arthur's desk. A mug of coffee, and a plate with a selection of pastries.

He smiles at her. "You're a life saver."

"I know," she chirps. "Feel free to give me a raise any time."

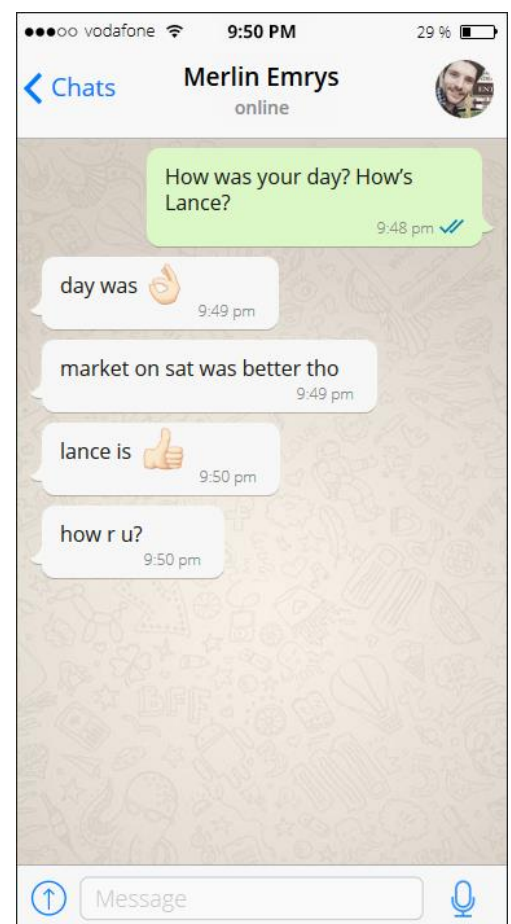
Arthur chuckles. "I'll see what I can do."

She nods at him, then leaves him to his boring fate of financial reports and meeting preparations.

It isn't until shortly before ten in the evening when Arthur finally heads home for the day, that he checks his phone for new messages.

There are none.

Arthur sighs, pulls up the chat window and types out a text to Merlin as soon as he's in the lift. The ride down takes several minutes anyway.



Arthur checks his calendar app for any appointments this week, and realises with delight that Fred left his Wednesday afternoon open. He texts as soon as he's out of the lift.



Arthur dials Merlin's number and the phone barely even rings once before Merlin accepts the call.

"Hey, you," Merlin says. He sounds as tired as Arthur feels. "So, how was your day?" he asks again.

"Could've been better," Arthur replies. "Tell me about yours."

Arthur manages to wave down a taxi and gives his address. Merlin's just breaking into a tirade on irresponsible pet owners when Arthur gives his address to the cabbie.

Finally, when Merlin breaks for air, Arthur interrupts him.

"I was thinking, I could come over for lunch on Wednesday? Fred didn't schedule any appointments, I checked earlier."

Arthur hasn't seen Merlin in almost two weeks, the longest they've gone without seeing each other in half a year. Listening to his voice as he rambles on about his job is just driving the fact home that it's weird not to see Merlin's name in his calendar.

"Sorry," Merlin says, and he really does sound apologetic. "But I've already made plans."

"With Lance?" Arthur asks before he can stop himself. The taxi's only moving slowly through traffic despite the relative late hour, thanks to several construction sites. *At least it's not rush hour*, Arthur thinks.

“No,” Merlin says, sounding not annoyed, exactly, but close. “I’m meeting Freya for coffee. Do you remember her? She’s the woman I met at Elena’s office a while ago.”

“Yes,” Arthur replies. “I remember her.” How could he not? You don’t easily forget when your best friend tells you about the suicidal thoughts he’s had.

“Yeah, well, we’ve been chatting whenever we got the time, but my sessions are ending soon and I didn’t want to lose touch with her, so we exchanged numbers,” Merlin says as if none of that was news.

“Your sessions are ending soon?” Arthur asks, picking up on the most important piece of information.

“Yes,” Merlin says, and now he sounds almost proud. “Elena says that I’ve made excellent progress so I can stop seeing her soon.”

“That’s wonderful,” Arthur says. He knew Merlin had improved in leaps and bounds these last few weeks. Arthur just hadn’t realised that he had come this far already. That, however, might be attributed to the fact that Merlin tried to shag him out of grief only two weeks earlier.

Arthur can feel his face become warm and he quickly turns his thoughts in a different direction.

“I hope you two will have fun.”

“Thanks. You and I can meet up on Thursday, if you like? Lance showed me this great recipe for paella that I want to try.”

Arthur snorts only a little bit.

“Hey,” Merlin protests. “My cooking has improved a lot.”

“So it has,” Arthur allows. “But unfortunately I’m heading to Barcelona on Thursday, where I’ll have proper paella, thank you.” He’s feeling far more regretful than he lets on. Home-cooked, slightly burnt and over-seasoned paella sounds actually a lot more appealing than leaving London and Merlin behind for another week.

To think that only last week Arthur was glad for the distance. Of course that was before he knew that Merlin wouldn’t miss him all that much, apparently. Between Lance, Freya, pub quiz, and work, Merlin’s schedule appears to be rather busy. Now Arthur seems to be the only one who misses their closeness.

“How long will you be gone?” Merlin asks.

“Until Friday next week. I’ll be too late for pub night again,” Arthur says, allowing some of the regret he’s feeling to come through in his voice.

“Oh, okay,” Merlin says. Arthur can’t identify the tone. Is he sad? Disappointed? Indifferent?

“Well,” Merlin adds, now definitely sounding more cheerful. “At least this time you told me before you’re about to board the plane.”

Arthur chuckles. “Indeed, I did. And I’ll also tell you that I’ll be home most of July.”

“Yeah, but I’ll be gone most of it,” Merlin says. This time Arthur’s sure he heard aggravation in Merlin’s voice.

“Where are you going?” Arthur asks. The taxi’s just passing Trafalgar Square, a clear sign that they’re more than halfway to Arthur’s home. He settles back in his seat and leans his head against the head cushion.

“I’m visiting mum,” Merlin says. “It’s her birthday and I haven’t been home in a year, so, you know ... an extended holiday is in the plans.”

Arthur’s eyes widen and he sits up straight again. It’s no wonder that Elena said Merlin could stop seeing her soon. If he was making plans to go home to Chirbury and face the memories there, he really must be on the verge of a final breakthrough.

“We’ll figure it out,” Arthur says as cheerfully as he can. “It’s good you’re going home. Your mum will be delighted to see you, I’m sure.” His main objective is to encourage Merlin’s healing. Going home to see his mother sounds like a big step, and Arthur is incredibly proud of Merlin for taking it – not that he’ll say it in so many words.

“Yeah,” Merlin says. “She sounded close to tears, actually, when I called her.”

“Tears of joy,” Arthur says. “You just said it yourself: she hasn’t seen you in almost a year. Of course she’s crying with happiness that her prodigal son returns home.”

Arthur knows Merlin is rolling his eyes. It only makes Arthur smile.

“I’m not a prodigal son,” Merlin says eventually. “But yeah, I think you’re right. She’s just excited and happy. Probably going around town and telling everyone that I’m coming, and not to bother me, or remind of Will.” He sighs.

“She just wants to protect you,” Arthur says. The taxi is making quick progress up St James’s Street now. Only a few minutes left, then.

“I know,” Merlin says. “But I’m much better now. I don’t need to be shielded anymore. If I didn’t feel ready to face all the memories, I wouldn’t be going back, would I?”

“And you’ll tell her that,” Arthur says. “Once she sees for herself how well you’re doing she’ll probably back off.”

“I hope so,” Merlin grumbles. A moment later Arthur hears him yawn.

“You should go to bed,” Arthur says. “You’ve got an early morning.”

Merlin snorts. “Now *you’re* behaving like my mother.”

“I just don’t want your supervisor calling me to tell me that you need to be taken home because you fell asleep on a fluffy golden retriever.”

“Hm, the one we’ve got really *is* fluffy,” Merlin muses.

“See?” Arthur says. “Best not use it as a pillow though.” Arthur vehemently tries to shake the image off a sleeping Merlin, curled up around a golden retriever in one of the kennels. The idea itself would

be funny, but thinking about it inspires much more domestic fantasies of Merlin and a pet at home - a home that he'd share with Arthur.

Merlin sighs. "Fine. I'll go to bed. Where are you now? Already past the embassy?"

"Yes, just now," Arthur says, smiling warmly. He's been calling Merlin on his way home often, and describing what landmarks he just passed. It's no wonder Merlin has a good grasp of how long it takes Arthur to get home from the office, and also where he'd be at any given moment. If anyone ever wanted to stalk Arthur, Merlin could give them advice with his eyes closed and standing on his head. The thought makes Arthur smile wider.

"Then you're almost home too," Merlin concludes. "Have a good day at work tomorrow. Don't let Fred tease you too much."

"Never," Arthur promises. "Have fun with Freya. I'll email you from Barcelona."

"Sure. Next time you get drunk, take a selfie," Merlin goads.

"Definitely not," Arthur says. "Goodnight, *Merlin*."

Merlin's grin is audible when he says goodnight back.

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When Arthur returns from his trip on Friday night, he has a text from Merlin waiting, telling him that he's welcome to join the footie match in the morning, but that Merlin himself won't be there. At least this time Merlin's not spending the day with Lance, much to Arthur's relief.

Merlin's packing a suitcase for his trip to Chirbury, apparently. Arthur offered to come by and help (he has become very proficient at packing over the years), but Merlin says he'd like some time to himself to prepare for the trip. Arthur takes that to mean that Merlin needs time alone to get into the right frame of mind, and also to brace himself thoroughly for all the reminders he'll have to face come the next day.

Arthur, while worried about Merlin, trusts him to let Arthur help if there was something he could actually do. It's a relief that Arthur can rely on Merlin to *ask* for help when he needs it. He supposes it's a good sign that Merlin's ready to take on these challenges by himself now, and not fear breaking down.

Still. Arthur *likes* being the one Merlin relies on for moral support.

He tells Gwen as much the next day. He didn't go to the match, and instead called Gwen to complain about not seeing Merlin in several weeks.

She's good enough not to say anything along the lines of 'now you know how it feels'. Arthur makes a mental note to get her something special for her birthday in a few weeks just to show her how much he appreciates her and her support despite everything that happened between them.

"It's good that you two can spend time apart," she says instead. "It just means he's not co-dependent on you."

Arthur huffs. "I like it when he depends on me. I'm dependable." He pours himself a drink, then remembers that it's still before noon, and heads to the kitchen for a cup of tea instead.

Gwen laughs softly. "Yes, I know. But co-dependency is actually very unhealthy in a relationship. The fact that that he's making new friends, and that he's allowing himself to face challenges alone is good. If you two are ever getting around to going out, at least you'll know he's not doing it out of gratitude for how much you helped him."

Arthur grimaces. The thought had never occurred to him. "*If* we go out," he says, emphasizing the conditional clause heavily.

"Even if not," Gwen amends. "Your friendship will be richer and healthier for it."

"I suppose you're right," Arthur sighs. "You've always been much more relationship-intelligent than I." He tucks the phone between his head and shoulder to have both hands free to fill the kettle. He idly notes that it could use a proper cleaning sometime soon, going by the lime coating the heating element.

"I'm much more intelligent in general too," Gwen teases.

Arthur laughs. "True. All I know is how to do business on a big scale. You're definitely smarter than me."

"Oh, well," she says, affecting a placating voice that doesn't fool Arthur for one second. "I suppose some people are just born that way."

She starts laughing a second later, and Arthur joins in. It's so nice to laugh with her, to have a chat about something other than their failed marriage. It's finally feeling like he's gaining his friend Gwen back, even though he lost his wife in the process.

"You two are still texting and emailing though, right?" she asks after they've calmed down again.

"We are," Arthur says. He frowns at the kettle as he sets it down on its base and turns it on. He hasn't told Gwen about the kissing, nor the almost-shagging. He's certain that she would agree that he did the right thing in refusing Merlin. However, she would also feel sorry for him and his jilted feelings and Arthur just doesn't want to hear it. He's trying not to wallow in self-pity after all.

"It's not the same, though," he says, then moves the phone over to his other shoulder before he cramps up. "And, at the risk of sounding petty, I'm ... well, not exactly jealous of Lance, or Freya, or even the damn dog—"

"But actually you are kind of jealous of Lance, and Freya, and the damn dog?" Gwen finishes for him.

He sighs, runs a hand through his hair, then pulls a mug from the cabinet. "Yeah." Arthur marvels at the irony that he never opened up about his thoughts to Gwen when they were married, but he's now admitting to petty jealousy, of all things.

"Oh, Arthur," she says in exactly the kind of tone that Arthur had been trying to avoid.



"I'm not *pinning*," he says tetchily. He has to rummage through the cupboard to find the tea he wants. There are only a handful of bags left, and he scribbles down 'tea' on the shopping list on the fridge door. Since he's already there he grabs the milk as well.

"No, of course not," Gwen says, and Arthur just knows that she's rolling her eyes at his unconvincing lie.

"It's just that he might realise that they're all much nicer people than I am," he says at length, and regrets it immediately. He's not in the habit of putting himself down like that, especially not in front of other people.

"You don't mean that," Gwen says right away.

"No, I don't," Arthur agrees. "I'm clearly the nicest person anyone knows." He drops the bag in the cup and adds a generous amount of milk.

"Arthur," Gwen sighs impatiently.

*So she did hear the sarcasm*, Arthur thinks. He replaces the milk in the fridge and even manages to grab the sugar bowl before Gwen repeats his name more sternly.

"Fine," he says long-sufferingly. "I can be nice," he allows. He adds two spoonful of sugar, and just after he put the bowl back where it belongs, the kettle clicks off.

"That's right," she says. "All it takes is some patience until one gets to know you properly."

"You realise I'm not actually about to cry into my tea over how unlovable I am, right?" he asks, just to be sure she's not going to show up on his doorstep with an emergency care packet of cuddly blankets and stuffed animals. He's got his phone back in his hand, the mug of fresh tea in his other.

"I do," she says, proving that she can lie much more smoothly than Arthur when necessary.

"Good," Arthur says nevertheless.

There's a long pause in which neither of them acknowledges the fact that they do not believe a word of what they're saying to each other, and Arthur gingerly sips his tea which, thanks to the milk, is already at perfect drinking temperature.

"I should go and get some work done," he says eventually.

"Me too," Gwen agrees.

"But before I forget," Arthur adds, already on his way upstairs. "Fred sent the application for the decree nisi to my solicitor on Wednesday. I believe it will be at court by Monday."

"That's good to know. Thank you for keeping me updated," Gwen says.

"You're welcome, of course. It's your divorce too, after all."

She chuckles. "You're right about that."

He smiles. "Thanks for the talk."

“Any time.”

They hang up and Arthur stays in his chair, staring off into space for quite a while afterwards.

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Merlin leaves for Chirbury the next day, Arthur fights down the impulse to go and see him off at the train station. Instead he sends a text, wishing Merlin a safe trip, and telling him to call or email once in a while.

All he gets in response are several eyeroll-emoji and a ‘yes mum’. It makes Arthur smile.

With Merlin gone, Arthur feels at a loss as to what to do with his free time. It’s not just the weekend that’s suddenly void of entertainment, even weekdays are suddenly a lot more boring than they used to be.

Sure, Merlin texts regularly, just as promised. Arthur receives several pictures of Merlin’s childhood home, his mum, the duck pond in the middle of the town, and a hiking path in the woods, that, “if you follow it long enough, takes you to Wales,” according to Merlin.

So, yes, Arthur isn’t out of the loop. He knows what Merlin’s doing all day long, just like if he were still in London and at work. However, Merlin actually isn’t around and Arthur hasn’t seen him in so long, he wonders if Merlin grew his hair out, or if he got a nice summer cut. (What he would need it for in a typical English summer with more rain than days in the month is another question.) Maybe the beard that Arthur both likes and dislikes is back.

If he’d known things would get like this, Arthur might have just given in and shagged Merlin back in June.

Well, no. He still wouldn’t have done it, because Merlin was emotional and vulnerable, and Arthur would have been taking advantage. He might not be incredibly empathic, but he’d never abuse a friend’s trust.

Merlin has been in Chirbury for over two weeks when he calls Arthur. It takes Arthur completely by surprise, and not just because he had been pre-occupied with a financial chart from one of the company’s suppliers.

“Merlin?” he says as he sets the chart down and leans back in his chair.

“Hey!” Merlin says cheerfully. “Arthur!” he slurs, swallowing half of Arthur’s name so that it sounds like Arth.

Arthur frowns. “Merlin, are you drunk?”

“Yes,” Merlin says with conviction. “Very drunk. It’s my mum’s birthday and there was punch.”

“Ah,” Arthur says. “Good punch, was it?”

“The best!” Merlin says with a wide, happy grin, Arthur guesses.

“Did you leave any for the other guests?” he asks. He gets up from his desk in his study at home and heads downstairs to the kitchen. He’s suddenly ravenous and he hopes that there’s still some left over lasagne in the fridge.

“Of course,” Merlin promises. “Only had—” Merlin interrupts himself to count the number of glasses he drank. “Maybe eight?” he guesses finally. “Could have been nine, I’m not sure.”

“Mhm,” Arthur hums. “Best drink some water before going to sleep later. And keep a bucket by the bed. Remember Christmas last year?”

“Psht,” Merlin protests. “That was different.”

“You were still drunk off your arse,” he points out. “I doubt your mum will appreciate vomit on her floor.”

“She’ll make me clean it up,” Merlin says thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Arthur says. “So put a bucket next to your bed, or ask your mum to do it.”

“Aye, aye!” Merlin says, and Arthur can’t help the smile that’s tugging on his lips.

“Good man,” Arthur says. “How’s Chirbury?” he asks as he opens the fridge. He rummages around, looking for the storage container with the rest of the lasagne from yesterday’s dinner.

“The same,” Merlin slurs. “Everyone’s become so old,” he stage-whispers. “But don’t tell my mum I said that!” He finds the container and does a silent fist pump to celebrate his victory.

Arthur chuckles. “I promise I won’t. Tell her happy birthday from me, will you?”

“Sure!” Merlin agrees, then Arthur has to hold the phone away from his ear and on speaker as Merlin proceeds to shout for his mum until she arrives. Arthur busies himself with putting the food on a plate and popping it into the microwave while Merlin tries to get his mum’s attention.

She must have arrived because he hears Merlin say, “Arthur wants to wish you a happy birthday.”

“That’s sweet,” a female sounding voice replies. “Arthur?” she asks and Arthur returns to the call properly.

“Miz Emrys?” he asks back.

“Oh, please, call me Hunith,” Merlin’s mum says, the smile evident in her voice as well.

“Hunith,” Arthur says. “Happy birthday. Merlin has told me a lot about you and I hope the following years will be happy and healthy.”

“That’s so sweet,” Hunith says. “Thank you, Arthur, dear. Merlin has told me so much about you too. I’m so glad he made a new friend. Someone who makes sure he’s alright.”

Arthur blushes faintly. “It’s my pleasure. Merlin’s a good friend to me as well. We help each other.”

“That’s lovely,” Hunith says. Arthur can hear Merlin asking her to give the phone back to him. He sounds cranky and Arthur feels a burst of pleasure that Merlin’s so possessive over him.

"I had better give you back to him before he throws a fit," Hunith says, laughing softly. "He always reverts back to a petulant six year old when he's drunk too much of my punch."

Arthur laughs. "As long as he doesn't throw himself down on the floor."

That makes Hunith giggle in return. "Not yet. It was nice to meet you, Arthur."

"Nice meeting you too, Hunith. Enjoy the rest of your party."

"Oh, I will," she promises, then hands the phone back to Merlin. Arthur can just hear the muffled sound of her voice as she tells Merlin to "calm down, cariad, I'm giving him back."

"Arthur?" Merlin says urgently a moment later.

"I'm here, *Merlin*. No need to throw a fit." The microwave beeps and Arthur carefully retrieves the plate. He carries it over to the breakfast bar, fetches a fork, and sits down on one of the chairs.

"I'm not throwing a fit," Merlin says, sounding even more like a six year old who didn't get the sweets he wanted.

"Of course you're not," Arthur tries to soothe. "Are you alright, though? Only drinking because you're having fun, not because you're sad?"

"Yes," Merlin says, then: "No."

Arthur smiles. "Which one is it?"

"I'm not sad," Merlin says. "Even though Old Man Simmons came over to me earlier to talk to me."

"Right," Arthur says slowly. "Who's Old Man Simmons?"

"Mum's neighbour. He hates kids, and he really, really didn't like Will and Me."

"Ah," Arthur says. "What did he say? Do I need to come down there and punch him for you?"

Merlin snorts, then starts hiccupping from that. It takes him several minutes to stop, and he only manages it after Hunith made him drink a glass of water in one go.

*At least now he's got some water in his system to dilute all the alcohol,* Arthur thinks while he takes the opportunity to eat some of his dinner.

Once Merlin's back on the phone, and apparently further away from the party by the receding sound of music and talking, Arthur prompts him.

"You were telling me about Old Man Simmons."

"He talked to me," Merlin says.

"Yes," Arthur replies patiently. "So you've said. What did he say to you?"

"That it was *a shame that William had to die so young,*" Merlin says, seemingly giving an impression of Old Man Simmons. "*So much potential wasted!*" Merlin goes on, still imitating the gruff voice of an older man. "*He was a good lad, your William. Even if you two drove me bonkers,*" he finishes.

Arthur's busy swallowing his food, but Merlin stays silent on the other end.

"Merlin?" Arthur prompts after a long minute of silence. "Are you alright?"

Merlin sniffs. "Yeah," he says, sounding hoarser than before. Arthur's not sure if it's from impersonating Old Man Simmons, or something else. "I just—" Merlin starts, then sighs. "I always thought he hated us. We were terrible pranksters when we were younger, you know. And he chased us off his property every other week."

Arthur listens for a smile in Merlin's voice but there's none.

He sets his fork down and pushes the plate away. "Isn't it good that he doesn't hold a grudge?" Arthur asks carefully.

"I suppose," Merlin says. He's sounding more sober by the minute. "It's just so weird, you know. Talking to Old Man Simmons about Will, accepting his condolences."

Arthur nods. "But you knew people would do that," he reminds him. "That's why you didn't go home for the longest time. Do you regret coming?"

Merlin sighs heavily. "No," he says. "It's good to be reminded that Will was well liked and loved around here. I needed to hear all the "sorries" and "chin-ups". Every single widow and widower in Chirbury has taken the time to come and talk to me, even if just to say that they know what it's like to lose their best friend and spouse in one blow." Another shaky sigh. "And that helped a lot."

Arthur smiles warmly. "I'm glad that you don't regret going home."

"I don't," Merlin agrees. "But this isn't home anymore. Or, at least not home the way it used to be."

"I see," Arthur says slowly. "Then where's home now?" he asks, trying to sound as innocuous as possible.

"You know," Merlin says. "London. My house. The shelter. Gwaine and Percy. You."

Arthur's heart races and he has no idea how to respond to that. He swallows past the lump in his throat, then coughs.

"You're staying another week, yes?" he finally asks.

"Yeah," is all Merlin says, and Arthur can't read his tone.

"You can leave any time," he reminds him. "If it gets too much."

"I know," Merlin says. "But it's been good. Like I said, it helps to know that others miss him, and that they know what it's like."

"Okay," Arthur says. "Well, we all miss you too." He actually hasn't spoken to Percy or Gwaine in weeks, but he's sure they miss Merlin as well.

"As well you should," Merlin jokes. "I'm everyone's favourite."

“It would seem so. Morgana keeps asking me when I’m bringing you along for dinner at her house again. You ought to give her a call some time.” He pulls the plate back towards him to finish off his food. There are only a few bites left anyway.

“I don’t have her number,” Merlin points out.

“That’s no excuse,” Arthur says promptly. “I’ll send it to you later.”

Merlin laughs. “Alright. She can come and play footie with the rest of us.”

Arthur huffs a laugh. He doubts Morgana will actually play. She might cheer, though.

“I’m sure she’ll be delighted.”

Someone calls Merlin’s name from afar, and Merlin holds the phone away from his face and covers it with his hand before he shouts something back.

“Everybody wants me,” Merlin sighs.

*I know*, Arthur thinks.

“I’ll text you tomorrow,” Merlin promises.

“Take a picture. I want to know tomorrow morning if you’ve survived the night,” Arthur teases because it’s easier than thinking about how much he misses Merlin and wishes he were here with him. There wouldn’t be any left-over lasagne, that’s for sure. The thought makes Arthur smile bitterly-sweetly.

“Ha ha,” Merlin says, tone dripping with sarcasm. “Good night, cabbage-head.”

Arthur laughs. “Good night, *Merlin*,” he says, sounding much fonder than intended, and hangs up.

A moment later he remembers that he meant to ask Merlin about the endearment Hunith used, and quickly sends a text.



Arthur is suddenly very glad he didn't call Merlin that just to tease him earlier.

~\*~

They don't talk on the phone again, but a week later Merlin comes home to London. As they both knew would be the case, there's no time to meet up even for just a coffee. Arthur's busy with last minute preparations for his meeting with the German and Austrian hoteliers, and Merlin's busy doing laundry.

The only thing Arthur did manage to do, is stop by Merlin's place on Friday to restock the fridge so Merlin wouldn't have to go out and buy groceries right away. It earned him a string of texts that started out exasperated but eventually turned into fond teasing and implied gratitude for Arthur's foresight.

Arthur, of course, only tells Merlin to shut up, and that he shouldn't have given Arthur a key if he didn't want him to use it.

Merlin has no reply to that, so he does what he always does in these situations: He texts a string of emojis that make absolutely no sense, but bring a smile to Arthur's lips.

On Friday night, Arthur's having beer and pork roast when Merlin sends him a few pictures.

The first one's of Gwaine and Percy with Mordred between them. Gwaine's laughing, Percy's grinning along and Mordred looks like he's not sure whether he should be embarrassed or self-satisfied.

A young woman with long, dark hair is in the next picture. She waves shyly at the camera. Merlin's accompanying text tells Arthur that this is Freya. She's very pretty but even if Merlin hadn't told her a little bit about her, Arthur would notice the haunted look in her eyes.

Finally there's a selfie of Merlin – unfortunately with Lance right beside him. Merlin's got one of those really happy grins on his face. The kind that makes his eyes crinkle adorably.

Arthur takes a picture of his dinner and sends it instead of a selfie. Merlin sends back a sound file of all of them mockingly shouting "Awww!" Arthur wants to feel hurt but it actually makes him laugh – especially when the man who's sitting next to him at the table chuckles as well.

Arthur turns to look at him and grins. The man's got brown hair and a striking face with high cheekbones and pale skin that only accentuates his pale blue eyes. His smile is crooked but friendly and inviting.

"My friends are making fun of me for being alone on a business trip while they all get drunk together at the pub," Arthur explains, tilting his phone to show the man the picture of Merlin.

The man laughs. "They must be good friends if you're laughing at their teasing," he says with a light German accent that Arthur immediately finds charming.

"They are," Arthur says. "Or, at least one of them is." He spares another glance at Merlin's smiling face, then turns off the screen and puts his phone away.

"So," he says. "Can you explain to me what these are?" He pokes one of the enormous dumplings on his plate.

The stranger laughs and nods. Less than half an hour later, the stranger, Conrad (“Call me Connie.”), ordered them a bottle of wine, and dessert for both of them. Arthur protested against the dessert but Connie insisted that Arthur had to try prince regent torte – which Arthur is delighted to discover is delicious.

He’s also certain that Conrad is flirting heavily, and Arthur, feeling just tipsy enough, invites him back to his hotel room after they’ve left the restaurant.

After all, why shouldn’t he enjoy his company? Merlin’s unattainable and Arthur’s lonely enough to have stopped caring that he’s taking a stranger back to his room for sex out of, well, not quite spite, but at least loneliness and jealousy. It’s not like Conrad seems to mind either. He must’ve picked up on the fact that all of Arthur’s stories evolve around his friend Merlin.

Besides, neither Arthur nor Conrad has any illusions that this will be anything more than a one night stand. Arthur explained earlier that he’s leaving for Vienna in the morning, and Connie admitted to being terrible at dating and relationships. Arthur’s more than willing to take that at face value right then.

Arthur doesn’t think about Merlin again until the next morning when he checks his phone for his flight plan and finds several texts from Merlin, asking if he’s okay and if they went too far with their teasing the night before since Arthur never replied again.

He sighs and sits up on the edge of the bed, running a hand through his hair and thinking about what to tell Merlin.

*Oh no, don’t worry, I had sex with a stranger and just forgot all about you.*

Arthur grimaces. Probably not that.

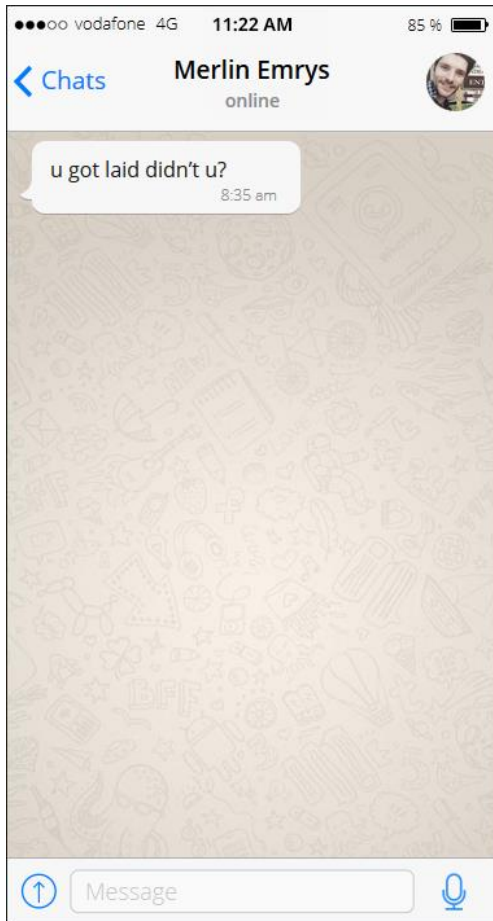
In the end he tells Merlin that he struck up a conversation with someone at the restaurant and forgot to reply. It’s close enough to the truth not to be a lie.

There’s no particular reason why Arthur shouldn’t tell Merlin about Connie. Somehow, though, Arthur thinks that it doesn’t concern Merlin anyway, and it’s not like Arthur’s going to see Connie again anyway. Maybe he’ll tell Merlin later - should he ever manage to meet up with him in person ever again, that is.

Arthur snorts, which must have woken Connie, because a moment later Arthur feels hands sliding up his back and pulling him back down for another round. Arthur has just enough time to put his phone away before he accidentally drops it onto the floor.

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Merlin's text, that he apparently sent only minutes after Arthur messaged him this morning, is much more insightful than Arthur expected. *So much for not telling Merlin*, he thinks.

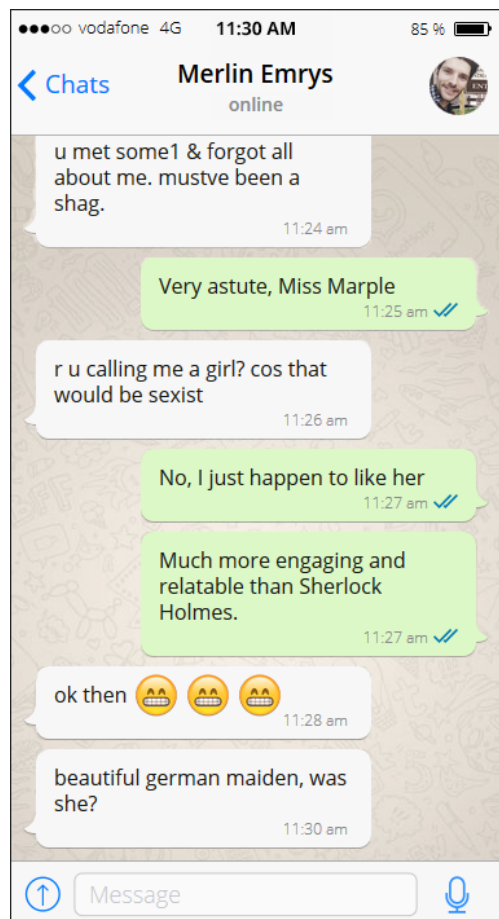
He's on his way to the airport, the taxi's slowly making its way through the traffic when he texts back, playing for time.



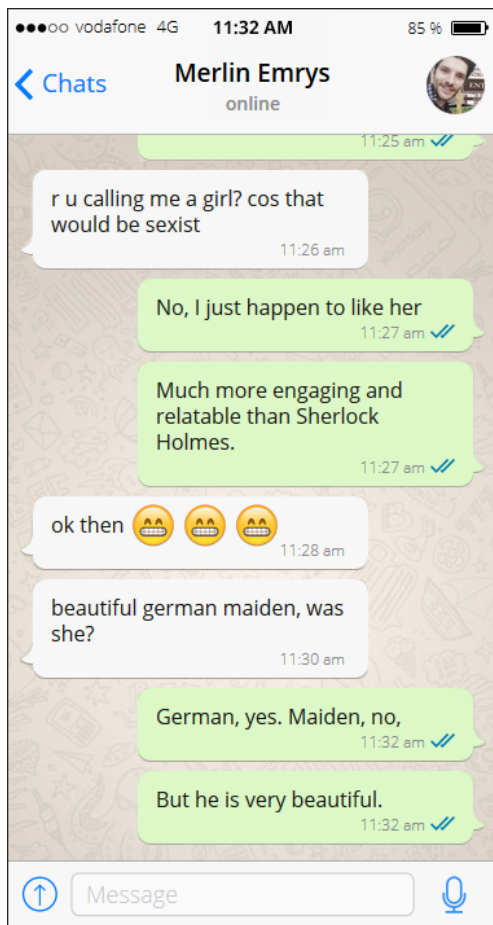
Arthur sighs, but nods to himself. Trust Merlin to call him out.



Merlin sends another text after a moment, and Arthur lets his head hang. He had hoped that Merlin would let it go.



He frowns at the screen. Why would Merlin automatically assume that Arthur took a woman back to his room? They'd been kissing less than two months ago.

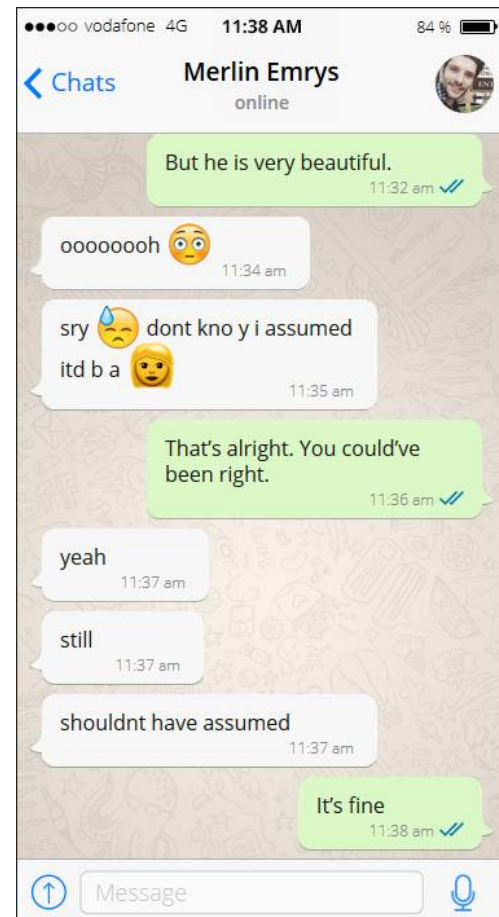


Arthur leans back in the car seat and waits for Merlin's reaction. He wonders if Merlin will feel jealous, or surprised. Maybe a little shocked that Arthur would have a one night stand with a man so soon after rejecting the same thing with Merlin.

Arthur sighs. It doesn't matter what Merlin thinks, in the end. Arthur knows he made the right decision by not sleeping with Merlin, and Merlin's probably glad that Arthur's moving on. At least that way Merlin won't have to think about the awkward situation they were in, what with Arthur basically admitting he has feelings for Merlin, and all.

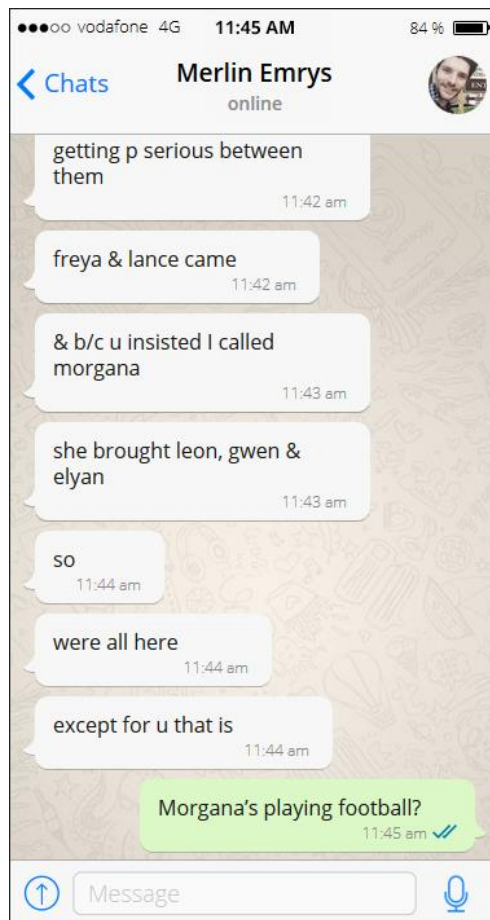
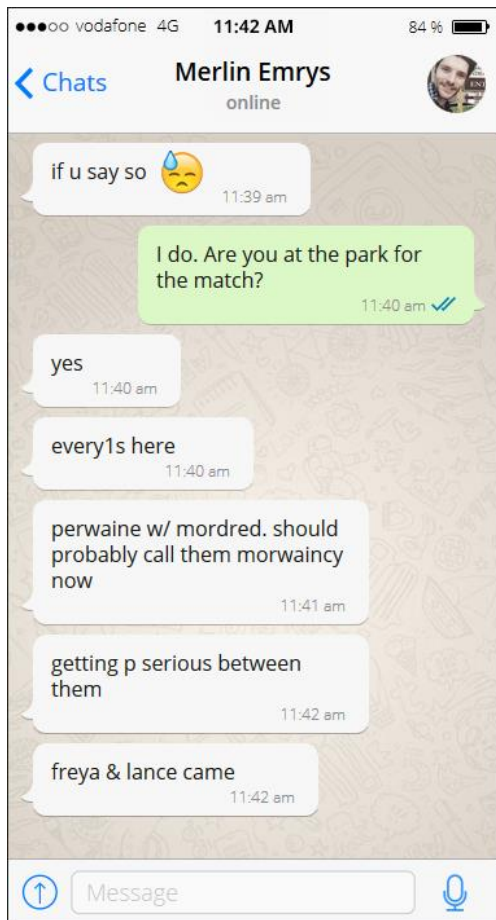
Arthur smiles with relief at Merlin's response though.

He interrupts before Merlin starts to tell him that internalised heteronormative thinking, even when we have evidence to the contrary, is harmful. Arthur has heard this argument before. Something on the news had prompted the tirade and Arthur had been close to shutting Merlin up by coming out right then. In the end he had thrown popcorn at Merlin and changed the channel. It seemed easier at the time.





Arthur asks, hoping to change the subject. He doesn't actually want to talk about Connie.



Arthur follows Merlin's ramble with rising interest. He has to ask about Morgana because the image of her doing any sort of sport is always amusing. Not that she wouldn't be good at it. She always beat Arthur at fencing when they were children. But Morgana much prefers comfort if she has the option.



Arthur debates with himself for a moment how much he should tell Merlin about Morgana's preferences. It's not his place, but it's also not like there's much to tell. Plus, he really doesn't want Merlin going off and playing matchmaker. He stares out the window for several moments, watching the landscape race past. He hadn't even noticed that they left the city. Another text from Merlin prompts Arthur to turn his attention back to his phone. His reply should convey the message without telling too much, he thinks.

It takes Merlin several minutes to send a reply even though Arthur can see him typing the whole time. He's probably rephrasing and deleting all the while.



Arthur smiles at the phone, happy that Merlin seems satisfied with the answer. He trusts him to keep his nose out of Morgana's business now.

Apparently Merlin's determined to be the one to change the subject this time because he texts again a moment later to ask what Arthur's doing. He notices that they've actually just turned into the airport. He can already see the terminal.



Arthur makes a face. He'll have to explain to Merlin that spending several seconds trying to figure out what he's saying is not *fun*.

Arthur can see Merlin typing something else but then he stops and no more messages are coming through. He sighs, and puts his phone away so he can pay the cabbie.

~\*~

"It's hard to believe it's been a year already," Merlin says.

They're at the cemetery, putting down fresh flowers on Will's grave. Arthur's standing beside Merlin, not touching but close enough to reach out and put a hand on Merlin's shoulder if he needs it.

"It is, isn't it," Arthur agrees. They gaze at the headstone in silence for a while.

"Do you want me to leave you alone for a bit?" Arthur asks eventually.

Merlin shakes his head. "No, I'm okay," he says. "I thought I'd feel awful today, that all I've accomplished in the last couple of months would be lost once the day came."

Arthur turns his head to look at Merlin, who's staring straight ahead at Will's name on the headstone.

"And?" Arthur prompts carefully after Merlin's been quiet for a while.

"And it's alright. I mean," Merlin amends right away. "It's not alright. It will never be *alright*, but it doesn't hurt as much anymore. I feel like I can move on with my life now."

The corner of Merlin's mouth twitches up into a wry smile. "Will would probably noogie me and tell me what a baby I've been for taking so long to get here."

Arthur smiles along. "I would've noogied you if I thought it would have helped."

It makes Merlin laugh, which, in turn, makes Arthur feel pleased with himself.

"I don't think it would've worked, but thanks anyway. I appreciate the sacrifices you were willing to make."

Merlin turns to look at him. He's grinning and Arthur can feel his heartbeat speed up in return.

"Coffee?" he asks, just to have something to say.

"Yes," Merlin agrees emphatically.

Together they head to their coffee shop. Lindsey waves at them, and starts preparing drinks a second later.

Their usual table is occupied so they settle for one in the far corner of the room where they're mostly hidden from the entrance.

"Did I ever mention that Gwen left me exactly one year ago?" Arthur asks, knowing fully well that he hadn't.

"No," Merlin says. "I mean, I guessed it must've been around this time, but I didn't know it was the same day."

"Hm," Arthur hums. "She took me completely surprise, as you can imagine. But, in hindsight, I'm glad she made that choice for both of us."

"Oh?" Merlin asks. "Enjoy being a free man, do you?" He grins at Arthur around the straw in his mouth.

Arthur chuckles softly. “Possibly. But I was thinking that if she hadn’t left, I don’t think I would ever have had the courage to do it. Never mind that I didn’t even realise that the relationship had become that bad.”

He takes a sip from his coffee to cover for the fact that he’s inept at relationships. Not that it would deter Merlin if he wanted to press the matter.

“If you had left her, do you think you’d still be friends with everyone?” Merlin asks instead.

Arthur shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m honestly surprised they’ve all been so amicable about it, to be perfectly honest.”

“Well,” Merlin says. “Morgana would still be talking to you anyway, wouldn’t she?”

Arthur grimaces. “Not necessarily. If Morgana holds a grudge and wants to cut you out of her life, she will do it, and never look back.”

“But you’re her brother,” Merlin argues. He sets his drink down in favour of looking around at the cake display to check for his favourite chocolate cake. How Merlin can devour that much sugar in this kind of weather (thank you, global warming, for yet another much too hot un-English summer), Arthur will never know.

“I am,” Arthur agrees, “but that won’t matter if I ever betrayed or hurt her badly enough. She barely spoke to our father after she found out that she’s his daughter, and she completely stopped talking to her half-sister.”

“Wait,” Merlin says, attention finally drawn away from the cakes. “You have another sister?”

“No,” Arthur says, shaking his head. He sets his mug down, and leans back in his chair. “Morgana has a half-sister. Her name is Morgause. She grew up elsewhere and Morgana didn’t properly meet her until she was sixteen. Morgause is a few years older, and very enigmatic. Morgana was in awe of her. Morgause could do no wrong – until she spilled the beans about Uther being Morgana’s father. Morgana’s life changed in an instant, and she never forgave Morgause for that betrayal.”

Merlin’s eyes have gone wide while Arthur was talking.

“That’s some serious Greek drama shit,” he says finally. It makes Arthur smile.

“You could say that, yes.” Arthur smiles. “It would seem that my family’s history is a lot more like the ancient myths from where we got our names than I would like. Which is why I’m glad my father isn’t alive anymore because now I don’t have to lie to him about that friend I have whose name is Merlin.”

Merlin mock-pouts, and, just to show Arthur that he doesn’t care, gets up to buy a piece of chocolate cake. It is then, as Merlin walks towards the counter, that Arthur notices that Merlin’s wearing the blue scarf Arthur got him for Christmas last year. It makes his heart beat faster.

~\*~

The divorce is finalised on a Thursday almost exactly six weeks later.

Arthur calls Gwen the moment he has opened the envelope Fred just placed in the middle of his desk where he couldn’t ignore it in favour of market reports.



“Did you get it yet?” he asks nervously, toying with the letter opener.

“I did. I was about to call you,” Gwen says calmly. Arthur knows that tone. It’s her ‘I’m in complete control of this classroom’-voice.

“How are you feeling?” he asks before she can.

“Strange,” she admits. “Relieved, sad, happy, melancholic, nostalgic,” she recites, and Arthur finds himself nodding along.

“Me too,” he says.

Silence stretches between them for a few long moments. Arthur sets down the letter opener and pulls a pad of paper closer to doodle absent-mindedly. He ends up drawing a stick-figure that has a curly mop of hair and big ears.

“Do you regret it?” Gwen asks eventually.

“No,” Arthur replies almost too quickly. He smiles. “No,” he repeats, calmer this time. He gives the stick figure some trousers and a t-shirt. “It was the right decision. *You* made the right decision. And – I’ve been meaning to say – that is, thank you, Gwen. For making that decision for the both of us.”

“Oh, Arthur,” she says, her voice almost breaking on his name.

For a few panicked seconds Arthur has the horrible feeling that *Gwen* regrets it, but then she laughs with relief and Arthur relaxes. There’s a hole in the sheet of paper where Arthur pushed down the pen too hard. He grimaces at the ruined pen, throws it away, and picks out a new one to give the stick figure a scarf.

“I’m so glad to hear you say that, after everything. I mean, you said you were okay before, and I know you’ve got feelings for Merlin now. But I was scared you’d still be hurt by what I did,” Gwen explains. Arthur thinks that if he doesn’t interrupt, she’ll trip over her own tongue soon enough.

“I’m okay, I promise. My life’s better now, and so is yours, from what I hear,” he reassures her. He frowns at his drawing and changes to another colour pen to colour in the scarf. It’s blue.

“It is. Oh, Arthur, it really, really is. I’m moving in with Leon next month. Now that you and I are officially separated he and I can move forward with our relationship.”

She sounds giddy as she tells Arthur this, and Arthur can’t do anything but smile along. He’s happy for her as well. Truly happy that she found the love and devotion that he couldn’t give her, and he tells her as much.

“Thank you,” she says, and if Arthur still knows her even a little bit, he’d bet that her eyes have gone misty.

“No need to cry, Guinevere,” he teases.

She chuckles, but it’s a bit wet. “You know I don’t like it when you call me that.”

He grins. “I know,” he says. “But now you can’t make me sleep on the couch anymore when I do.”

That makes her laugh properly, and Arthur grins along. He's switched back to the black pen and is trying his hand at drawing a dog.

"You're going to be okay too, you know," she tells him after she's calmed down again. "If things don't work out with Merlin, then they will with someone else. I'm sure of it."

Arthur doesn't reply. It feels like there's a lump forming in his throat and he puts the pen down.

"You deserve to be happy. You're a good man, Arthur, and even better now, thanks to Merlin's good influence."

Arthur smiles wistfully. That's only too true. He knows he owes so much to Merlin. He doubts his split with Gwen would've gone over this smoothly and amicably as it did without Merlin's help and guidance.

"Yes, well," Arthur begins. "I'm still young. Mister or Miss Right might be just around the corner," he forces himself to say. He knows it'll take time to get over his crush on Merlin, but Gwen's right: Arthur deserves to be happy, and he knows he'll get there eventually.

"That's the spirit," Gwen says, sounding much more cheerful.

Arthur merely hums in agreement. They both silent again, and Arthur picks up the letter opener again and plays with it idly. It's in the shape of a proper medieval dagger, and albeit not as sharp as the form suggests, still incredibly adequate to task of cutting paper in half in less than a second. Arthur loves it.

Suddenly, Gwen gasps and practically shouts in Arthur's ear. It startles Arthur enough to cut his finger on the edge of the letter opener. "What?" he asks, trying not to sound irritated as he sucks his finger into his mouth to still the blood flow. He glares at the dagger as he lays it aside.

"We should celebrate!" Gwen exclaims. "Our divorce, we should celebrate it. We can have a proper party at the house, invite all our friends."

"Whose house?" he asks dubiously. He has a creeping feeling he knows which one Gwen means.

"Our house, of course," she says.

"You mean my house," Arthur corrects, only half teasing. His thumb is still hurting from the cut. He examines the wound but decides that it's shallow enough not to need stitches. Thank God. That's the last thing he could use right now.

"Yes, fine, your house," Gwen says rather patronisingly. "It's big enough for everyone, and I think it's the appropriate location."

Arthur makes a non-committal noise. "And I suppose you want to do it this weekend?" He rummages around his desk drawers for a band aid but of course he doesn't have any. He buzzes Fred's desk to signal that he needs her in his office.

"Yes!" Gwen all but shouts with how eager she is. "Saturday would be perfect, don't you think?"

"What if our friends have plans?" he challenges.

Fred appears, and Arthur shows her his finger. He glares at her when she dares to snicker at his battle wound, but she turns around and heads back out, presumably to fetch the first aid kit.

“They won’t have plans,” Gwen decides. “Or if they do, they can cancel them.”

Arthur snorts. “Guinevere Pendragon, I’ve never known you to be this selfish.”

When Gwen speaks again, Arthur can hear the smirk in her voice. “I’ve learned a thing or two from you native Pendragons.”

Arthur continues to smile to himself even after hanging up. He inspects the stick-figure Merlin he drew. The whole divorce is bringing up memories from how he met Merlin, and it only takes Arthur a few moments of scrolling through his phone’s calendar to find the day a year and two days ago when he scheduled “flowers for Gwen” – the day he first met Merlin.

He texts Gwen that he’s fine with the party.

~\*~

Merlin watches from the sidelines as Freya and Morgana immediately disappear into a corner to talk. He grins to himself and hopes sincerely that the two of them are on the same page. He doesn't actually know what Freya likes, but from what he gathered, both she and Morgana have no romantic or sexual interest in men (or anyone, for that matter), but are equally excited about all manner of other things. It certainly seems like a match made in heaven, and Merlin gives himself a mental pat on the back for introducing them.

Not much later, Elyan shows up with a gorgeous blonde who introduces herself as Vivian and, after a minute of polite small talk, effortlessly segues into a discussion about sustainable resources and renewable energy, which then morphs into an introduction of her own company, *Sweet Dreams*. Vivian, it seems, plans and overlooks projects that cover anything from solar power to housing complexes that generate their own energy and treat their own sewage, among other things.

Arthur is listening with rising interest, and while Merlin is all for saving their environment, he’s unable to follow to the conversation for more than a couple of minutes.

*Will would’ve been all over that*, he thinks, and is glad to notice that the thought doesn’t make his heart clench painfully.

Merlin abandons Arthur to his discussion, and wanders off in search for a drink. He does not just find a nice bottle of vodka, but also Lance.

“Hey,” he greets. “Glad you could make it.”

Lance smiles one of his gorgeous, blinding smiles. “I don’t pass up the chance to have a drink with friends.” He clinks his beer bottle against Merlin’s vodka.

Merlin laughs. “Fair enough. Especially when the drinks are free, right?”

Lance grins. “You know me too well.”

Merlin grins back, and uncaps his vodka. “Do you want some?”

“No,” Lance says, shaking his head. “Vodka gets me drunk.”

“That’s the point,” Merlin says, and takes a swig.

“Maybe,” Lance allows. “But I like keeping my wits about myself.”

Merlin huffs. “Now you’re making me feel bad for drinking.”

“Oh, no!” Lance quickly amends. “That’s not what I meant. Everyone’s free to make their own choices. Being drunk can be nice. But when I drink I forget my manners and speak without thinking.”

Merlin’s interest is piqued. “Oh? What kind of things do you say?”

Lance gives him a smile that could almost be called shy, if Merlin didn’t know better. By now he recognises it as Lance’s flirty smiles – and it doesn’t make him as anxious as it would have some time ago.

“I might ask people out,” Lance offers.

“People? Or someone in particular?” Merlin wants to know.

“Someone in particular,” Lance admits. “But I’m not sure he’s ready.”

Merlin takes a step closer. “You won’t know until you ask.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Lance takes the bottle from Merlin, swigs from it, then sets it down on the table next to them. “Merlin,” he begins, sounding even more sincere than usual. “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

Merlin smiles slowly. “Yeah,” he says. “Let’s go on a date.”

~\*~

Arthur grips his glass tightly enough to almost break it. He had been on his way to the drinks table to get a fresh glass of wine, when he spotted Lance and Merlin talking. He had been close enough to hear Lance’s question – and Merlin’s reply.

He swallows thickly, turns back around, glad that neither of them has noticed, and heads to the kitchen instead, still clutching the empty glass. He’s just glad that nobody seems to notice his weird behaviour as he disappears from his own Happy Divorce party.

~\*~

“Arthur?” Morgana calls as she walks into the kitchen some time later.

He sighs and turns towards her from where he was staring out the window. “Yes?”

“Why are you hiding in your kitchen?” She opens the fridge and looks inside, only closing it when she’s found the bottle of orange juice Arthur keeps.

“I just wanted some peace and quiet.”

Morgana picks out a glass from the cupboard and fills it with juice.

“And I thought it was because you didn’t want to look at Merlin fawning over Lance any longer,” Morgana says nonchalantly.

Arthur sucks in a breath, but doesn’t respond. Apparently he doesn’t need to, because Morgana continues talking.

“I thought you’d be happy for your friend.” She puts the juice bottle back into the fridge. “He’s moved on from his dead husband, he’s dating again. It’s great, isn’t it?”

Arthur clenches his jaw and keeps quiet. If he keeps quiet long enough, Morgana might get bored soon and leave him alone.

“It’s just unfortunate that *you* moved on from your ex-wife and fell in love with *him* around the same time, isn’t it?” she goads in that way where she doesn’t even have to use mocking tones and still rattle his metaphorical cage.

“Is there a point to this?” he asks tightly.

“I suppose there is,” she says, sighing softly. “You should have told him before Lance could swoop in. You’ve come a long way, Arthur. It’s painful to watch you cut yourself off from your own feelings again.”

“Thanks for the advice,” he says, not entirely managing to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “I think you should go back to the party. I’ll be out in a bit, before anybody else comes looking for me.”

“Of course,” she says haughtily. She picks up her glass and stalks out of the room.

Arthur pours himself a glass of water, drinks it in one go, and then follows her back to the party.

~\*~

It’s the early hours of the morning when the last of his guests finally head home. Gwen and Leon stayed longer than anybody else to help him get a head start on the clean-up. Arthur had intended to just leave it until the next day, but Gwen wouldn’t allow it.

They’re at the front door, saying goodbye finally. Leon’s bringing the car round while Gwen lingers on a hug.

“Merlin will come around,” she says as she continues to hold him tightly. “You’ll see.”

Arthur sighs and pulls away. “I don’t know, Gwen. You’ve seen them. They were incredibly chummy.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Lance is hot, sure, but I don’t think he’s ready to settle down. Merlin probably finds that appealing right now, but they’ve got different ideas about relationships, I think. Merlin’s much more down to earth, while Lance is an idealistic dreamer.”

Arthur can’t help but smile fondly. Gwen is doing her best to cheer him up and to give him hope. Maybe she’s right. Either way, Arthur knows he has to set his own feelings aside. He’s been doing it all this time anyway, so why should Merlin dating Lance be any different?

Because it could’ve been me, comes the unbidden thought.

Leon reappears and Arthur is spared from having to respond to Gwen's impromptu pep-talk.

"Good night," Gwen says with another encouraging smile.

"Night, you two," Arthur replies, forcing another smile.

After he's shut and locked the door behind them, Arthur finally drags himself up to his bedroom. As he falls asleep, his mind replays Merlin's voice saying "Yeah, let's go on a date."

~\*~

## Part 5

When Merlin goes out with Lance that following Wednesday, his day off, Arthur tries not to feel betrayed. He can't help being disappointed though. Originally, Merlin and Arthur had planned to go flat hunting together. With the divorce finalised, Arthur feels he needs a change of scenery, a fresh start.

After Merlin agreed to help him pick a place, Arthur had been excited. Merlin's an integral part of his life now, and he values his opinion. After all, Merlin's own home embodies cosiness and domesticity.

However, Merlin had called a few days ago to ask if it would be okay if Arthur went by himself because Lance wanted to take Merlin out that day – for the whole day.

Arthur couldn't say no, no matter how much he wanted to. Merlin sounded excited and happy, and Arthur wasn't going to stand in the way of that.

He sighs. The flat he's looking at is gorgeous. Fred did some preliminary searches on his request and gave him a longlist of places that met his specifications. Instead of narrowing it down to a shortlist, Arthur asked Fred to schedule viewings for all of them.

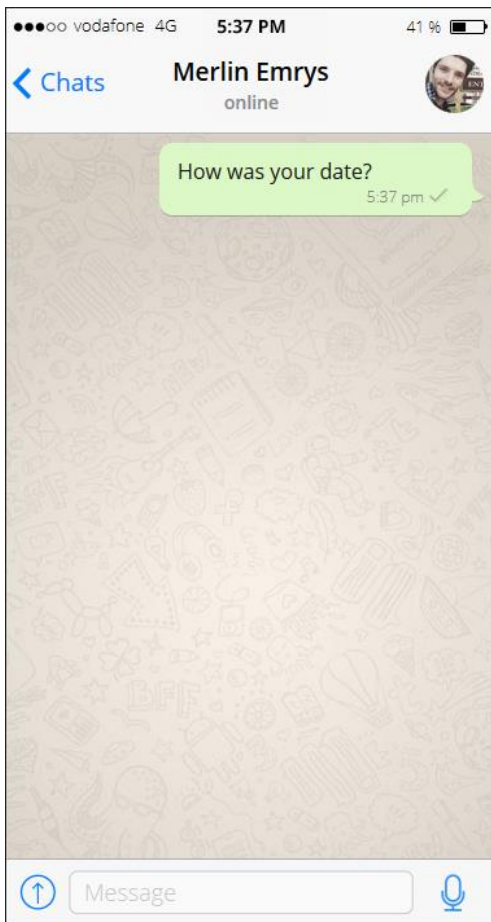
With its large spaces, lots of sunshine, sound-proofed walls and windows to keep out the street noise (and the neighbours) this place is exactly what Arthur's looking for and Arthur tries to imagine it with furniture in place.

*It would be more fun if Merlin were here, Arthur thinks.*

Merlin would comment on how posh and snobby the place is, would tease Arthur for having expensive taste, and then probably end up taking off his shoes to slide on the floorboards.

It makes Arthur smile, and he makes a note to come back to this place after he's viewed a few more properties.

He texts Merlin later that day. He has looked at half a dozen flats and still likes the first one the best.



Merlin's response doesn't come until much, much later at night. Arthur startles at the notification for a new text. He's been working at home to catch up with what he's missed due to being out of the office for most of the day. He picks up his phone, notes that it's well past one in the morning, and unlocks the screen to read Merlin's message.

Arthur makes a face. That's more information than he wanted.





Arthur decides to have a drink. It'll hopefully help him sleep, if nothing else.

He sends back *I did*, and thinks: *Unfortunately*. He pours himself a shot of vodka and downs it in one go.

After Merlin's next reply of smirking faves, Arthur pours himself another.

He announces to Merlin that he's going to sleep as he makes his way upstairs and into his bedroom. The two vodkas aren't enough to make him drunk, especially not this quickly, but he thinks he's ready to get some rest.

Merlin's *sleep tight* goes unanswered.



~\*~

From there it only gets worse. Arthur sees much less of Merlin, even though they still talk on the phone frequently. It's just that Lance takes up most of Merlin's free time with his perfectly romantic dates, and all the great sex they're apparently having.

To say that Arthur is jealous is an understatement.

It's not even just about the fact that Lance gets to date Merlin, and kiss Merlin, and touch Merlin, and—

Arthur cuts off that train of thought. He's been going round in circles like this pretty much since they started dating over four weeks ago. He doesn't even have any particular reason to be thinking about it now. He's at work, pouring over yet more financial reports, and market studies, and new contracts.

He sighs, trying to finish his thought to get it out of his head so he can go back to concentrating on running his company.

The point is that Arthur misses Merlin's company, his friendship. They don't spend much time together anymore, at least not with just the two of them. The only times they do see each other are during pub nights or Saturday morning footie games.

It's great that Merlin's no longer dependent on Arthur to be there as a constant support, but Arthur didn't expect to be effectively left out quite like this either. To think that it was Merlin who was worried that Arthur would lose touch after he stopped pursuing Gwen.

Losing Merlin (despite not actually losing him) hurts a great deal – more than Arthur will ever admit to anyone, including himself.

Of course, whenever Merlin asks if Arthur minds that Merlin's spending so much time with Lance instead of him, Arthur says all the right things to be the supportive best friend he's supposed to be.

It's a mark of how little face-to-face interaction they've had recently that Merlin doesn't even notice how forced the smile is that Arthur puts on when they talk on the phone.

On the few occasions when they do see each other, Arthur puts on a brave face and psyches himself into thinking only about how much he enjoys spending time with Merlin. Surprisingly – most of all to himself – Arthur never even once rolls his eyes in annoyance when Merlin insists on talking more about Lance on those occasions, despite the fact that Lance is sitting right next to him.

The only, incredibly short, reprieve came during Merlin's birthday party at the end of October. Lance had been late to arrive, and Arthur got an entire hour to talk to Merlin without his annoying appendix. Arthur didn't waste any time before giving Merlin his birthday present.

It's a heavy wool coat, dark grey with a diagonal zip and a high collar, and it fits Merlin perfectly, Arthur noted with satisfaction when Merlin tried it on. A long, tight hug followed during which Arthur resisted the urge to bury his nose in Merlin's hair and never let go.

The moment ended when Lance arrived only moments later, and Merlin dashed off to show off his new coat, and gather up all the compliments Lance was undoubtedly dropping. Arthur might agree that Merlin looks amazing in it, but the purpose of gifting Merlin this coat was primarily so Arthur could stop worrying about Merlin freezing to death. Admiring Merlin's good looks was only the second part of Arthur's motivation, and he didn't much enjoy sharing it with Lance.

To be honest, Arthur's grateful that Merlin's too wrapped up to notice anything wrong with Arthur. In fact, Arthur prefers it that way. If Merlin knew that Arthur is jealous, he'd want to know why, and then Arthur would have to explain. Merlin might start to think that Arthur doesn't want him to be happy. Or, worse, he might remember that Arthur all but confessed that he has feelings for Merlin when he rejected him a couple of months ago. Arthur takes it as a sign that Merlin never brings up Arthur's feelings for him as a sign that Merlin has pushed that night to the back of his mind, if he hasn't entirely forgotten about it by now.

Arthur pushes the report he's been reading away, and gets up from his desk. He ends up pacing the floor in front of the enormous window pane behind his desk.

*I should never have rejected him. What if being Merlin's rebound was the only chance I had? What if Merlin's going to marry Lance now, and they'll adopt adorable puppies and be happy for the rest of their lives?*

Arthur swallows thickly.

*No*, he reminds himself. *This is better*. By the time Merlin and Lance's relationship cools down enough for them to want to spend time with other people again, Arthur's going to have a much tighter grip on his reactions. It's just the time until then that's going to be completely shit.

*Maybe I should go out and find a date too*, he thinks vaguely, but dismisses the thought almost as soon as it occurs to him. He'd had fun with Connie in Munich, sure, and he could have fun with someone else in London, but Arthur knows it could never be more than that with someone else.

Not that there's anything wrong with rebound shagging. It's just not Arthur's style, is all.

He forces himself to go back to his desk and finish reading the files Fred handed him this morning. She'll be quietly disapproving if she comes back in later and sees that he hasn't finished any of his work and Arthur absolutely does not want to have to deal with another of Fred's rants about how she's unable to run his office efficiently if he's not doing his share of the work as well. The irony of the situation doesn't escape Arthur either. A year ago Fred reproached him for working too much.

Now her rants about Arthur's inefficiency always end in Arthur apologising, and buying her any office supplies and appliances she wants in an effort to make up for his tardiness. He fears he'll run out of things to pay for sooner than later, especially if he keeps going at the slow work pace he has been maintaining for the last couple of weeks.

He sighs, picks up a highlighter pen, and starts marking up columns on the expenses report where the numbers are too high. One of them is the one for office supplies for the executive floor.

~\*~

Towards the end of November, Gwen moves in with Leon.

Morgana, who has been alternating between crying and laughing, is appearing completely happy and serene at the farewell party she's throwing Gwen.

Gwen, for her part, is glad when Morgana announces halfway through dinner that Freya will be moving into the spare room. The most concerning part about moving out of the cottage was the fear that Morgana might be lonely. With Freya in the picture, Gwen can stop worrying.

The one thing that dampens her mood is Arthur's face. He tries to hide his discomfort behind smiles and by laughing too loudly, but Gwen has known Arthur a long time and she isn't fooled for one second.

Arthur is pining, and Merlin is entirely oblivious to how his relationship with Lance is hurting Arthur.

When Arthur makes the rounds to say his goodbyes, Gwen pulls him aside.

"Maybe you should try dating too," she suggests as gently as she can. "I hate to see you like this."

Arthur flinches visibly. "I'm fine, Gwen, I promise. I'm happy for Merlin." He forces another smile but drops the act after just one stern look from Gwen.

"Don't do that," she admonishes. "I know you better than that. I can see that you're hurting." She cups his cheek in her hand. "You miss him, it's obvious."

"Apparently not that obvious," Arthur says quietly. "Merlin hasn't noticed."

Gwen huffs. She likes Merlin, she really does, but when it comes down to it, she's always going to be on Arthur's side. Her disapproval must've shown on her face because Arthur actually breaks into a real smile – albeit a small one.

"The relationship is still new. I'm sure in a few more weeks they'll grow out of the honeymoon phase," she tries to reassure him.

Arthur nods in agreement. Up close Gwen can see the bags under his eyes.

"I'm sure you're right," he says in an apparent attempt to make her stop fussing over him. He gives her another smile, this one already bigger than the last. She smiles back for the first time.

"You're welcome to have dinner with us whenever you want," Gwen offers. She'll talk to Leon about it later, but she's sure he won't mind. "And I've already talked to Morgana about Christmas," she adds. "Leon and I are hosting this year."

"Sounds great," Arthur says, almost sounding enthusiastic. "I'm looking forward to it. At least your place won't have weird coat racks masquerading as Christmas trees." He gives her a meaningful look.

Gwen laughs. "Don't let Morgana hear you say that."

Arthur grins back. "I won't. I prefer my head where it is."

She smiles up at him, and then goes in for another tight hug. "Take care, Arthur. And the invitation for dinner stands," she says after pulling away again.

"Thanks, Gwen." He bends down to kiss her cheek. "I'm sure I'll take you up on it sooner rather than later."

"Be sure that you do," she says, giving him another stern look. He smiles back with real amusement, and Gwen finally lets him leave.

She watches as Merlin breaks away from his conversation with Lance only long enough to give Arthur a hug goodbye. She notices the way Arthur relaxes into the embrace for a moment, and how he smiles softly as he closes his eyes while holding Merlin. She also sees how he forcibly holds onto the smile once they've pulled apart again.

Gwen sighs. She really hopes Arthur will get over Merlin. It's painful for her to see that as soon as Arthur's learned to open up and trust someone with his vulnerable side (as much as Arthur's ever going to be able to do that), he's had his heart broken, or at the very least bruised.

Leon finds her still watching the door through which Arthur left several minutes ago. He puts an arm around her shoulder and she leans into it, grateful for the comfort. She looks up at him and smiles. It's unfair, she knows, but she's so glad that, at least for her and Leon, things worked out.

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It's early Saturday morning in the middle of December, and Merlin's just waking up. He stayed over at Lance's place, as he usually does on Friday nights, regardless of whether he has the late shift or not.

A glance at his phone tells him it's only gone eight, which would explain why the little light that filters through the curtains is dim and grey. There's still time until he has to get up and head back to his place to get ready for work later.

He stretches comfortably and rolls over to put an arm around Lance for a morning cuddle. Merlin had not expected to enjoy dating Lance this much. He knew that he liked him, and he knew that he was ready to date again, but to have it turn out this well is honestly a surprise.

A good surprise, though. Lance makes everything easy and fun. They go on romantic dates, they talk about everything and anything, and Lance is always perfectly attentive in every way.

Not to mention the fantastic sex they're having.

Merlin knows Lance is more invested in their relationship than he is, but he hopes that the right feelings will come with time. Just because he isn't in love with Lance yet doesn't mean he won't fall for him eventually.

As Christmas approaches, Merlin contemplates asking Lance to come with him to visit his mum in Chirbury. Christmas is still a week away and his mum won't need much warning if Merlin's bringing a guest, but he wants to ask Lance soon.

He feels Lance wake up, and thoughts of Christmas leave him as morning kisses, and more, are exchanged.

Merlin only remembers to ask when they're sitting down for breakfast later.

"I'm going home to my mum's next week, for the holidays," he says casually while buttering his toast.

"She'll be happy to see you," Lance replies, supportive as ever.

"I'm sure she will. I was thinking ... maybe you'd like to tag along?" He looks at Lance to gauge his reaction but for several long seconds, Lance doesn't react at all. He's chewing deliberately before swallowing his bite.

"Well?" Merlin prompts. "Would you like to spend Christmas with me and my mum?"

Lance puts his slice of toast down and pushes the plate away.

"Merlin," he begins.

Merlin's heart sinks. "It's okay if you don't want to!" he quickly interjects. "It was just an idea. I didn't even consider that you might want to spend Christmas with your own family."

Lance smiles and reaches for Merlin's hand, probably to stop him from flailing and knocking over the coffee pot.

"I would love to see your hometown, but I'm leaving on Boxing Day to go to India," Lance explains calmly.

"India?" Merlin squeaks. "For how long?"

"I don't know yet. A week, a month, a year – it's a big country."

"Don't you need special vaccination to go there? I thought they take weeks to—Oh," Merlin abruptly stops, realisation dawning. "You've been planning to leave for a while, haven't you?"

Lance looks at him with his big eyes. "I have," he admits. "I wanted to leave sooner, but then you actually said yes when I asked you out, and then I didn't want to spring it on you right away."

Merlin snorts. "Because telling me a week before you leave is so much better. Would you even have said anything if I hadn't asked about Christmas at my mum's?"

Lance cringes. "Of course I would have. I meant to tell you before Christmas. I bought the ticket only a few days ago. It was a special offer, the cheapest I could get."

"But what about us?" Merlin finally asks.

"You could come with me," Lance offers, venturing a hopeful smile. "I would love that. We could explore the world together." He brings Merlin's hands to his mouth and kisses his knuckles. "I was going to ask you all along."

"You want me to come with you?" Merlin repeats uselessly. "To India?"

"And anywhere we want to go after that, yes," Lance agrees.

"But what about my friends? And my house? My job?"

"There are friends to be made everywhere, and you can always call or email the ones you left here," Lance says softly. "You can rent out your house, earn your living that way, and then you don't need a job anymore. And if you want to work, I'm sure there are jobs wherever we go." Lance is sounding more and more excited with every word he says.

Merlin considers what he's saying. The idea of letting someone else into his space, into his and Will's space, doesn't sit comfortably with him. He hasn't even let Lance into his bed yet, why would he think that Merlin's ready to rent the house to a complete stranger?

He wouldn't be able to stay in touch with his friends long distance either, he knows it. Not with time zones and irregular schedules and entirely different lives. He's already not seeing much of any of them, and the more he thinks about it, he can't even say for sure when he last spoke to Arthur in person.

God. Arthur.

Arthur who helped him out of his hole of grief and depression. Arthur, who, more than being Merlin's support system, has become his best friend. Arthur, whom Merlin hasn't seen in ... he doesn't even remember how long.

This new relationship with Lance has already taken over his entire life and it's only been, what, three months?

Merlin only realises that he's shaking his head when he finally notices the crestfallen expression on Lance's face. He's made his decision though. He pulls his hands back and stands.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I can't."

Merlin almost trips over his own feet in his haste to grab his bag and coat and get out of Lance's flat.

Lance calls after him, tries to stop him, but Merlin repeats “I’m sorry” and “I can’t stay,” until he’s out of the door.

Once outside on the street, Merlin takes a deep breath, and starts walking. He usually takes the bus to his house, but he doesn’t live too far away, and the crisp winter air is helping him clear his head.

The day is gloomy, but dry, and Merlin only stops long enough to put on his coat, hat and scarf. He buries his nose in the soft wool of the scarf. It’s the one that Arthur gave him last year. Blue cashmere, probably worth more than the rest of Merlin’s wardrobe combined.

He smiles into it. Arthur always spoils him, doesn’t he?

What made Lance think that Merlin could just give all of this up, in the blink of an eye? Did he really expect Merlin to jump at the chance to go to India and leave everything behind? Surely Merlin talked about his friends more than enough to make it clear that he wasn’t ready to be away from them? He definitely talked about Arthur often, going by Lance’s frequent requests to talk about something other than what Arthur had said or done the last time they texted.

Merlin sighs. He had known that Lance was more invested in their relationship than he was – and had been since they started dating. Lance had no talent for hiding his emotions, and Merlin liked him all the more for it.

But he has a feeling he would never have fallen in love with him. Lance embodies the opposite of what Merlin wants. There’s no constant, no stability to their relationship – as just proven by the invitation to move to bloody India! Lance might be reliable and trustworthy and honourable to a fault, but Merlin isn’t sure he’s going to settle down and stay in one place for long before he absolutely had to. If Merlin’s honest, he’s surprised Lance has stayed in London as long as he has. From what Lance has told him, once he’s hit six months, he’s usually ready to move on.

Thinking back on it now makes Merlin realise that that’s around the time Lance asked him out. If Merlin hadn’t said yes, would Lance have left already?

He exhales, watching the cloud of his breath dissipate into cold air.

Merlin knows he left the situation in the worst way possible with Lance. Running out of his flat like that must have hurt a great deal.

He groans. He’ll have to break up with Lance now. Merlin doesn’t want a long-distance relationship. He wants someone to come home to, someone he can see every day.

Once he gets home, Merlin will call Lance and apologise for leaving like that – and then he’ll end things.

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Unfortunately, there is no time to have a proper pub night with everyone before Christmas. Arthur doesn’t even have time to come over to Merlin’s place, or meet him for just a coffee at their usual place because of the pre-Christmas rush.

Merlin tries not to be too disappointed. For weeks he all but ignored Arthur, and reading back over their texts now, Merlin realises that all he's been doing is keep Arthur updated on his relationship with Lance, and their sex life.

*God, I'm such a pillock*, Merlin thinks. It's no wonder Arthur wasn't exactly Mister Approachable any time he saw them in person.

Merlin sighs. He's got no right to be disappointed that Arthur's already made other plans (involving work, as far as Merlin can tell) in anticipation of Merlin not having time for him.

At least it's Friday now, almost an entire week since he broke up with Lance.

They met again two days ago to say goodbye properly, and afterwards Merlin felt better about it. He made the right choice, he knows that, and Lance will be happier for being free from responsibilities to another person as well. No one will hold a grudge and no one will put blame for ruined chances on the other.

Merlin checks his phone for messages as he waits for the train to pull out of the station. He received a short text to wish him happy holidays from Gwaine, Percy and Mordred, and another text from Freya wishing him merry Christmas as well. Nothing from Arthur, though.

He's probably busy this close to the holidays, Merlin thinks.



He types out a message and sends it off before he can think too hard about it.

When Arthur's reply doesn't come immediately, Merlin puts his phone on silent and pulls out one of Will's books he brought for the journey.



On Boxing Day, Merlin receives a text from Lance to say his final goodbye. He sighs heavily and stares at the message until the screen turns itself off. Suddenly the quiet evening in front of the fire is a tiny bit less peaceful.

“Boy trouble?” his mum asks, perceptive as ever. She’s sitting on the couch behind him, knitting away on a new beanie hat for Merlin, while Merlin sits on the floor in a nest of cushions and reads another one of Will’s books.

“Sort of,” Merlin admits. He marks the page and sets the book down on the floor. “I told you about Lance, didn’t I? We broke up last week.”

“I’m sorry, cariad.” Hunith’s hand lands in Merlin’s hair to stroke it gently. Merlin smiles.

“Thanks, mum,” he says, and fixes his eyes on the fire. By tomorrow, Lance will be in India, and Merlin might never see him again.

The idea makes him sad, but at the same time, he doesn’t regret not going with him. His life is here.

Well. Not here in Chirbury. It’s in London with all of his friends and his house, and the no longer painful memories of Will.

Hunith finally stops stroking his hair and gently tugs on a strand instead. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Merlin says. “I am.”

He watches the flames in the fireplace for a while, until he hears the knitting needles make the rhythmic click-click sounds that signify that his mum has gone back to her project.

“He wanted me to come with him to India,” Merlin says.

“On holiday?” Hunith asks sceptically. “Because going on holiday is not a reason to break up with someone.”

“No, mum, not on holiday. He’s travelling the country for who knows how long, and he wanted me to come with him.” Merlin picks absentmindedly at a loose thread on a hole in the carpet. That hole’s been there since the last years of school, Merlin remembers. Will had dropped the fire poker pointy end first on the floor one night and created a small hole. Over years of sitting on the floor instead of on the couch, Merlin has worn out the hole and by now it’s as big as a two pounds coin.

“Oh,” Hunith says. “That’s different, then.” There’s a pause, then: “Why didn’t you go with him?” Merlin doesn’t have to turn around to know that his mum is frowning.

“How could I? I can’t just leave everything behind,” he says, pulling on the thread until it comes away from the carpet.

“Why not?” Hunith asks.

“Because I can’t.” Merlin says. Why’s his mum in favour of her only son moving across half the world? “I’ve got a job, and a house.”

“There are other jobs, and you can always sell the house,” Hunith says, sounding alarmingly like Lance.

“What about my friends?” Merlin counters. He leaves the carpet be and picks up the pillow he used as a book-rest earlier again, hugging it close to his chest. It’s one of his favourites, with an old pillowcase that’s been embroidered by hand by his mum when she was a young woman.

“You’ll email. Or skype. I hear it’s all the rage these days,” Hunith says easily.

Merlin snorts. He had explained skyping to his mum once and didn’t get more than a “that’s nice, cariad” out of her then.

“It’s not the same,” he says. “I’d miss them all too much. And you.”

Hunith smiles. “You’re a sweet boy.” She leans down to kiss his cheek.

“Besides,” Merlin adds a moment later. “Arthur would probably revert back into a giant, rude pillock if I left him to his own devices.”

Arthur would probably like the pillow. It’s got a dragon on it, after all.

“Oh, that changes everything, of course,” his mum says, and Merlin can’t read her tone at all. He raises his head and turns around to look at her. There’s a sly smile playing around her lips even as she keeps her eyes fixed on her knitting.

“What?” Merlin asks slowly.

“Nothing,” Hunith says. “It’s just that I thought that that might be how the wind blows.”

“What?” Merlin asks again. “How does the wind blow?”

Hunith gives him a look that Merlin knows means ‘You know what you did.’

“No,” Merlin says emphatically. “I didn’t not go because of Arthur! I told you, it’s because of my job, and the house, and my friends. All of them.”

“Mhm,” Hunith hums, and Merlin again thinks about how Lance frequently requested to change the topic so Merlin would stop mentioning Arthur. He winces.

“Well,” he amends. “Maybe a little bit. But he’s my best friend. Of course I’d miss him the most out of the lot.”

“Of course, cariad,” Hunith says, sounding much too smug. “And that’s why he’s the centre of almost every story you tell.”

“He isn’t. I talk about Gwaine and Percy, and Freya!” Merlin protests.

“Yes, usually when you tell me about how they reacted to something you and Arthur did together, or what they thought of something Arthur did by himself.” Hunith’s smile is turning smug, and Merlin doesn’t like that look on her one bit. It’s the same look she had when he’d told her that he and Will had started dating, and she had told him that it was about time they got there.

“What are you even trying to say?” Merlin asks, feeling exasperated.

“Nothing,” she says innocently. “Only that I’ve noticed how attached you are to Arthur, and that you talk about him a lot. Did you realise that I didn’t know your boyfriend’s name until now, but I know

every single thing Arthur has done since you got here because you keep updating me the moment you receive a text from him.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Merlin corrects quietly.

He wants to protest the rest as well, but thinking back on it, yes, that’s exactly what he’s been doing. Since Merlin broke up with Lance, Arthur has initiated more conversations again, and because there was no one else to share the news with, he told his mum – apparently every single time.

Merlin winces. He and Arthur hadn’t been in touch as much as they were before Merlin started dating Lance. That had been all the more reason to share Arthur’s texts with Lance whenever he got one. He’d done it because Merlin wanted Lance and Arthur to get along. Of course, in hindsight, sharing details about how great in bed Lance was probably wasn’t the best way to get the two of them to be friends.

Which is probably why, when they all went out together, and Merlin tried to mediate between them, Arthur wouldn’t open up at all. Lance only ever nodded and smiled politely but ultimately made as little effort to engage with Arthur as possible.

It had been incredibly frustrating, truth be told.

Hunith sets her knitting aside. “I’ll make us some cocoa,” she says, and gets up, ruffling his hair affectionately.

Merlin hums in agreement but stays where he is, turning back to the fire.

He really is talking about Arthur an awful lot, isn’t he? Come to think of it, his mum probably knows more about what’s going on with Arthur at the moment, than what’s happening in Merlin’s own life.

That doesn’t mean that Merlin has feelings for Arthur though.

*It’s a good thing she doesn’t know I tried to sleep with him,* Merlin thinks, then winces. Not talking to anybody about it doesn’t make it any less true that Merlin tried to sleep with him.

*But that was for comfort,* he tells himself, and then grimaces. That had been an incredibly awkward morning after, even though nothing much had happened. It’s a good thing Arthur stopped him from making that particular mistake.

Merlin thumps his head back against the couch.

Arthur is attractive, Merlin has always known that. Apart from Merlin’s reasons for trying to shag Arthur, whenever Merlin thought about that night later he couldn’t help but feel some disappointment beneath the shame that it hadn’t gone further than the kissing. The feelings only got worse when he thought about how Arthur had admitted to wanting to shag Merlin too.

Merlin swallows. With what his mum just inferred, that night, and the regrets Merlin has about it, there’s suddenly a whole new perspective to everything.

The scent of cocoa brings him out of his thoughts, and he accepts a mug from his mum.

He takes a sip after blowing on it to cool it down enough to drink, all the while careful not to spill anything on his scarf. It’s the one that Arthur gave him last year, and the one that Merlin’s been

wearing since he took off the one he got from Will. It's just one more way in which Merlin had been putting Arthur above everyone else without even noticing.

"Cariad," Hunith says softly. "I can see the cogs turning in your head. Did you not realise that you liked Arthur?"

"No," he says, leaning his head back against the couch again. "I mean, maybe? Of course I like him. He's my best friend."

"But maybe he's something else as well?" Hunith prompts gently.

"Yeah," Merlin says slowly. "Maybe."

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The new year arrives the way it usually does: at Morgana's cottage, in the circle of friends they accumulated over the years. As it is, Merlin is the only one missing as he chose to stay in Chirbury for New Year's.

Arthur's not exactly bored at the party but he's not having as much fun as the rest either. He's the only person who didn't arrive with a significant other. Even Morgana and Freya, even though they aren't exactly dating, are basically a couple.

When, a few minutes before midnight, his phone rings, Arthur's so glad to have a distraction from the excited anticipation of imminent New Year's kisses. Ignoring Morgana's murderous glare, he answers his phone.

"Hello, Merlin," he says loudly enough for Morgana to hear. She huffs, but backs off.

"Hey," comes Merlin's voice, slightly muffled. "Are you at Morgana's?"

"Where else?" Arthur says. Morgana and the rest of her guests are moving to the terrace to toast the new year and watch fireworks. Arthur hangs back in the living room and finds a seat. "Why's your voice muffled? Are you hiding in the broom cupboard?"

Merlin snorts. "No," he says emphatically. "I'm outside, and it's cold, so I'm wearing a big scarf."

"Ah, I see," Arthur says as he settles into one of the armchairs. "Did you like your Christmas present?"

"I did," Merlin says. "But what is it with you gifting me items of clothing? My fashion sense is not that awful," he says, sounding just a tad indignant but with no real heat to the protest.

"It's awful enough," Arthur replies. He's glad Merlin can't see him just then because he'd probably be able to read Arthur's real motives for giving Merlin clothes off his face. "Besides, blue suits you and it won't hurt you to wear a jumper that's tailored for once." And that would be his motivation for gifting Merlin wearable things: Arthur wants him to look good, because Arthur likes looking at Merlin.

Arthur decides that it's high time he has another drink, and levers himself out of the chair again. All the liquor is lined up on the breakfast bar in the kitchen and Arthur picks a bottle of the expensive vodka Morgana likes.

On the way, he only registers Merlin's quiet protest about how likes his clothes "practical and comfortable, thank you very much," enough to formulate a reply.

"Fine," Arthur says long-sufferingly. "I can return the jumper if you want," he offers as he falls back down into the chair.

There's a long silence on the other end while Arthur tucks the bottle between his thighs and undoes the cap. He didn't bring a glass but as he has every intention of finishing the bottle, he won't need one.

"You're wearing it, aren't you?" Arthur asks after his first sip.

Another silence, followed by a quiet, decidedly more muffled "Yes."

"Stop hiding in your scarf," Arthur tuts, then takes another swig while Merlin makes an offended noise that Arthur chooses to ignore in favour of thanking Merlin for his gift. "Although I'm not sure your reasons for paying a year's subscription to Netflix isn't at least partly motivated by the fact that you're using my account at least as much as I am, if not more."

Merlin makes another noise that could mean anything from "So?" to "Eep, you caught me!"

Arthur smiles to himself. "But thank you anyway. I'm sure I'll be making good use of it for the next twelve months."

"You're welcome," Merlin says sounding only barely sheepish. "And thanks for the jumper. It's not so bad." This comes out much more cheeky.

Arthur snorts. "It was my pleasure," he says and realises belatedly that that sounded entirely too much like a come on. "How's your mum?" he asks quickly to change the subject. Any more talk about Merlin and his clothes and the alcohol will make sure that Arthur's tongue loosens up some more on the topic of how nice Merlin probably looks in his new jumper, and how much Arthur would enjoy peeling him out of it.

"She's well, thanks," Merlin says, jumping onto the new course with eagerness. "I think she's going to enjoy being rid of me for a little while again soon," he adds, smile audible in his voice.

"Are you bugging the poor woman?" Arthur asks, frowning at the bottle in his hand as if it were Merlin.

"Not in the least," Merlin protests. "But I think she's so used to living alone that having me stay with her for so long is a strain on her established routine."

"Hm," Arthur hums between sips. "I think that's universally the case with parents. Father never much liked having his routine disturbed when I visited. And his house was big enough so that if you're intent on staying out of each other's way, you won't have any difficulties accomplishing it."

"You're slurring your sh-sounds. Are you drunk?" Merlin asks.

Arthur sighs. "Not yet but I'm well on my way, yes. I've had enough to slow my reactions and impede my enunciation," he says, deliberately taking time to pronounce the last word. "But you'll find I'm as eloquent as ever."

Merlin laughs. "I can hear that. Did you have to attend lessons on how to sound posh even when sloshed?"

It's Arthur's time to laugh. "Not exactly," he says. "But it was drilled into me from when I was a teenager that I should always behave dignified, no matter the circumstances. As you can hear, the lesson stuck."

There are more giggles on the other end. "Remind me to get you really, really drunk, to the point where you forget that you're a posh snob."

Arthur smirks. "You're welcome to try, but I haven't found that line yet, and I daresay neither will you." He takes another long pull from the bottle. It's nearly empty now.

"Anyway," Arthur says to change the subject yet again. "How are you?"

"I'm alright," Merlin says slowly.

Arthur wants to ask if he regrets breaking up with Lance, but doesn't. Or maybe he did, his tongue developing a life of its own thanks to the vodka, because Merlin answers him.

"I made the right decision with Lance," he says, and he certainly sounds sure to Arthur's (biased) ears. "It just sucks that I had to hurt his feelings in the process."

"He's a grown man, he'll get over it," Arthur says, and then immediately winces. It would seem that the alcohol is not exactly helping his sensitivity. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound so callous."

"It's okay," Merlin says, smiling again.

Arthur knows it's not actually okay. Merlin probably misses Lance a great deal, and going off what Arthur knows about Lance, Lance probably feels much the same, if not worse.

"I'm sorry anyway. Breakups aren't easy," he amends therefore.

"Yeah," Merlin says. "But I wouldn't have been happy in India."

Arthur smiles. "Just think of how heavy your backpack would be with all the bottles of sunblock you'd have to carry around all day," he teases.

"That, sadly, is true," Merlin says, laughing.

They fall silent for a few moments, only interrupted by Arthur's friends cheering on the terrace, and the last bit of vodka disappearing from the bottle.

"Happy New Year," Merlin says, and Arthur smiles as he sets the bottle down on the coffee table.

"Happy New Year," he says back. "And for what it's worth, I'm glad you decided to stay. I would've missed you a great deal."

"Yeah," Merlin says, and Arthur can tell by the cadence of his voice how he's smiling: warm and affectionate, and happy. "Me too."

At the end of January, Arthur signs the contract for his new place. He hires a professional moving company to move all the furniture and things he wants to keep, the rest will stay in the house, either to be sold along with the house, or separately. There's nothing much of sentimental value left here. Gwen took everything she wanted to keep when she first moved out, and she refused to receive half of the proceeds from selling the house.

"You paid for it, Arthur, it's only fair that you get your money back," she had said when Arthur had asked her how she'd like him to pay her. When he tried to argue that he didn't need the money and that she had been living there as well, she only huffed. "I live comfortably, thank you. If you have no better use for the money, donate it to a charity. Or give it to Merlin. Just don't try to sneak it into my bank account, I'm warning you."

And that had been that.

Merlin wouldn't take any of Arthur's money, Arthur knows that. All he wants to do is to help with the move. Consequently, he's sorely disappointed when Arthur tells him that with the exception of a few photo albums and a handful of old books that are too fragile to be entrusted to anyone else, the movers will pack up everything else that's coming with Arthur.

"You can help with decorating the new place," Arthur promises. "Besides, almost all the furniture will be sold with the house. I'm going to buy everything new."

The entire move is completed by the end of the first week in February, and Merlin spends his days off for the rest of the month helping Arthur to fill the shelves, organise books and shop for missing furniture.

The first new piece, though, comes from Merlin the first time he sets foot into Arthur's new flat.

"It's a cactus," Arthur says as he takes the plant from Merlin and heads towards the terrace. Arthur knows nothing about cacti, but he assumes that out of the wind and into the sun will be good options. He'll ask the building's gardener who looks after the rest of greens on the terrace next time she stops by.

"Cacti are forgiving," Merlin explains. "I don't think you're fit to care for complicated plants yet, best to start you off small."

"You do realise that I don't look after any of the plants on this terrace, right? I have someone come in every week to do that," Arthur says.

Merlin snorts. "Of course you do, you posh prat. Nevertheless, the cactus suits you. Prickly at first, but give it time and you'll learn to appreciate its merits."

Arthur has nothing to say to that, but later he reads the label that's stuck in the soil of the pot. Apparently this cactus is an *echinopsis exyгона*, and if cared for correctly, it'll bloom in the summer sun and live forever. Arthur tries to see the meaning behind it, but other than a cheesy reference to his mythical namesake, nothing comes to mind.

After that, Arthur begins to fill the place with furniture. A living room suite, a couch table, some shelves ... Merlin manages to tut only a little bit at him for basically recreating the sleek, lifeless look of his house in Mayfair.

That's when Arthur finally makes good on his promise and takes Merlin along when he goes out to buy new things for his flat.

That's also how he ends up purchasing a set of antique armchairs simply because Merlin falls in love with them straight away. They don't fit in with the rest of the décor at all, but Arthur thinks that the breach of style indeed adds to the overall look. Something about the cosy feeling of the chairs, the cheesy, blue and grey tartan pattern on one of them, and the equally kitschy red and yellow on the other promise comfort.

"This does not make us the old couple from 'Up'," Arthur informs Merlin, who bursts out laughing the moment he sees them arranged in a semi-circle in a corner of the room. They'd watched the film the other night after Arthur had refused yet another re-watch of 'Galaxy Quest', and Merlin hadn't been in the mood for 'Star Trek'.

"I wasn't even thinking that far, but now that you've said it, it *totally* makes us the old couple from 'Up'," Merlin says between bursts of laughter.

Arthur grins. "And I guess I'm the grumpy old man, and you're the quirky old woman, eh?"

That sets Merlin off again, and it's quite a while later when they've calmed down enough to appreciate how good the chairs actually look, contrasting the otherwise minimalistic furniture of the rest of the room.

It took Arthur a while to get them set up in the perfect angle to make it a cosy, secluded corner in the room, while still affording a nice view out of the window for Merlin whenever he occupies his chair. (There's no doubt in Arthur's mind that the blue and grey chair is Merlin's, and the yellow and red one his.)

"All you need now are stag antlers or a boar's head on the wall behind them," Merlin jokes.

"I think not," Arthur says, grinning. "But maybe a nice rug."

Merlin contemplates the suggestion. "Hm, maybe. And doilies." He grins, anticipating Arthur's protest, but even before Arthur can say anything Merlin holds up a finger, mouth open wide. "Footstools! You definitely need footstools," he says excitedly.

Arthur sighs, and pulls out his phone. "I'll put it on the list."

The happy smile he receives in return makes the hassle of having to look for the perfect matching footstools already worth it.

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**Cactus** <*Cactaceae*> Commonly found in dry areas, like deserts. **Echinopsis oxygona** are low-sitting, round cacti. The name derives from Greek <ἐχίνος> *echinos* (hedgehog), and <όψις> *opsis* (appearance). According to the Victorian interpretation, cacti stand for *Endurance*, and say *My Heart Burns with Love*.

*Mona's Complete Guide to the Language of Flowers, by Mona Williamson*

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Arthur can't celebrate his birthday on the day because it's a Sunday and nobody likes to leave a party at nine in the evening to get home and into bed before an early work day.

Instead Merlin picks him up at nine in the morning for a breakfast in the neighbourhood, and then an escape room game on the edge of London Fields for which they're joined by Percy, Gwaine and Mordred to complete their team.

After lunch, *Morwaincy*, as Merlin calls the three of them, leave, for which Arthur is grateful. He likes Percy, Gwaine and even Mordred well enough, but Gwaine is unbearably chatty sometimes, and Arthur would much rather spend the rest of his birthday alone with Merlin.

They walk through the park to Merlin's house, where Merlin leaves Arthur waiting outside (and calling for a cab) to pick up an honest to God picnic basket and blanket from inside. The original plan, so Merlin tells him, was to have a picnic in the park, but as it's April and the weather unpredictable at the best of times, there's a light drizzle. Instead they'll picnic on Arthur's terrace. The weather won't be nicer, but the architect built in an extendable glass ceiling for just such an occasion.

The insides of the picnic basket, Arthur discovers once they're settled in comfortably on the blanket with a few extra cushions, contain a birthday cake, sausages, sandwiches, several scotch eggs, and some fried chicken.

Merlin swears that everything is home made, and that it took him all of yesterday to prepare it.

"Probably because you burned the first batch of everything," Arthur teases. Merlin gives a token protest, but going by how red his ears have turned, Arthur is sure he's right on the mark with his comment.

To appease Merlin, Arthur tries everything, and is pleasantly surprised when all the food tastes good. He eats at least three scotch eggs, and half the sandwiches. He pays Merlin compliment over compliment for his cooking skills, and by the time Arthur has finished eating (and praising Merlin), Merlin's ears are still red but now he's smiling happily.

They drag themselves up long enough to clear away the dishes and put the leftovers in the fridge. The weather's only become worse and now there's a steady drumming of raindrops on the ceiling of the terrace. Arthur and Merlin decide to stay inside the flat. Instead of moving to the couch, Merlin curls up in his tartan armchair. He made a big show of taking a gift bag with him and setting it down on Arthur's chair so of course Arthur has to follow.

He picks up the bag before sitting down. Merlin's looking at him expectantly, and so Arthur reaches into the bag and draws out a rectangular box. It's wrapped in Merlin's usual messy style of lots of sticky tape and mostly ripped wrapping paper. Arthur smiles and begins to carefully undo all the tape before unfolding the paper.

Several minutes, and impatient huffs from Merlin, later, Arthur lifts the lid of the box to find a wide leather bracelet inside. Arthur picks it out of the box to have a closer look. It's a wide strip of dark brown leather with metal fastenings. On closer inspection, Arthur notices that just above the fastenings are engravings of the Pendragon family crest.

"Do you like it?" Merlin asks, and when Arthur looks up at him, Merlin's biting his lip nervously.

Arthur nods. "I like it," he says, and immediately puts it on.

"I thought," Merlin says as he watches him struggle with the fastening one-handed, "since you always buy me clothes, I should buy you some jewellery."

Arthur laughs. "Touché." He finally closes the bracelet around his wrist. It feels good, the leather on the inside soft and comfortable against his skin. He might not be able to wear it to business meetings, but he's got a feeling he's going to wear it any other time now, much like his mother's ring.

"Thank you, Merlin. That's a very nice present," Arthur says with a smile. "But don't think I'll accept earrings or necklaces as well."

Merlin laughs. "I'd bet you'd look lovely with a string of pearls around your neck, though."

"Oh, I would," Arthur agrees with a smirk.

The blush that returns to Merlin's ears looks just as lovely, in Arthur's opinion.

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Arthur has put off throwing a housewarming party for months just so he can combine it with his birthday party two weeks after the actual date, thus saving time and effort in arranging two parties. He would have celebrated the week after his birthday, but Merlin had the early shift at work and couldn't get the weekend off.

Morgana is, as always, offended by the lack of two separate parties, because she thoroughly enjoys invading Arthur's personal space.

In the last couple of months Arthur may have regretted moving to Islington every time Morgana has used the relatively close proximity for surprise visits, but at least she can't just come and go as she pleases without him knowing about it first, as the only spare key he gave away went to Merlin.

Merlin never tries to foist artistic monstrosities on him. Morgana swears they will go well with the architecture of the room or the atmosphere of the building, or just work well with his furniture. So far she hasn't shown him anything he would want to display in his home, and he dreads receiving something artsy from her on this double-occasion party. No matter how hideous it will be, Arthur will feel honour-bound to display it somewhere. If he's lucky he can hide it in the guest bedroom, then only Merlin will have to endure it on the rare occasion that he stays over.

Luckily, for every time he's regretted moving because of Morgana, there are at least two instances that make him pat himself on the back for being so clever as to buy this particular property.

His commute to work is significantly shorter, for one. It's barely even twenty minutes (with traffic) where before it was an hour.

The other one is Merlin, who's much closer now than before. Arthur still goes over to Merlin's place several times a week, but Merlin spends a lot more time at Arthur's flat too, now that it doesn't take him over an hour and several changes in public transport to get there. (It's 15 minutes, and he rides his bicycle.)

Arthur truly loves his new home, even when Morgana annoys him with horrendous paintings. The flat's got an open living room and kitchen, both facing the terrace and window front that looks out over the city – and being on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor definitely affords him a spectacular view, weather permitting. The master bedroom and the study have large windows as well. The promise of that much natural light is part of what drew Arthur towards this flat. That, and the exclusive, luxurious feel of the building, and the view over London.

There's also a communal spa and gym area (that Merlin takes full advantage of on his Sundays off work), and a number of concierges (all of whom Merlin already befriended) that work around the clock at the building to secure the lodgers' comfort.

Not settling on the first flat he saw back in October certainly paid off for Arthur. His only regret is that he looked at all these other places and never once had Merlin tag along after all.

At the moment though, Merlin's busy decorating Arthur's home for the party. They're expecting almost all of their friends, except Elyan who left on a trip only last week. They'll still be almost a dozen people as everybody else has promised to be there, and even though Arthur's place is big, not everyone will fit at the dinner table. How Morgana manages to host all of them is a miracle, truly.

In the end Arthur decides not to have a sitting down dinner. There'll be a buffet in the kitchen and anyone can grab what they like and find a seat wherever they want. They're all friends and family, and there's no need to be so formal with them.

Not that Morgana's dinner parties are all that formal. The topics of conversation and the general company don't really lend themselves to formal, boring affairs, but there's no reason why Arthur has to imitate Morgana's style.

In fact, the longer he thinks about it, the more he wants to do something different, lest Morgana call him a copycat.

When he invited his friends (mostly by group message on his phone), he told them explicitly that presents weren't a requirement – but of course everyone shows up with at least one wrapped parcel, and most of them bring even two.

"They're for two different occasions! One is from Leon, the other from me," Gwen argues when Arthur half-heartedly complains that she really shouldn't have bought him anything, let alone two gifts.

"The party is for two different occasions," Arthur argues. "I told you that you didn't have to bring any gifts."

Her face falls, and she turns her head to look up at Leon with that disappointed look in her eyes that Arthur knows only too well. Leon turns towards Arthur and gives him a look that clearly says 'Why are you upsetting Gwen?', so Arthur sighs and says thank you properly.

As he turns away to put the presents on the coffee table (where gifts from Morgana and Vivian are already sitting), he thinks he hears Gwen say "I told you I could persuade him to accept both," in a tone that sounds incredibly smug.

It takes another hour before everyone's arrived, Gwaine, Percy and Mordred being the last to show up, and by that time Arthur has almost as many gifts to unwrap as there are people occupying his flat. He complains to Merlin about this, but Merlin just shrugs. "They're your friends. You can't expect them not to get you anything."

Arthur presses his thumb against one of the dragons on his leather wristband, and replies: "I suppose you're right. I just hope the painting Morgana brought is nicer than the godawful paper she used to wrap it."

Merlin chuckles. "Maybe the wrapping paper *is* the painting," Merlin teases, and Arthur groans quietly "I hope not."

The wrapping paper isn't the painting, and the painting turns out to be a modern piece kept in purple and yellow tones that swirl in and around each other. It's much nicer than any of the paintings Morgana suggested before, and Arthur's already picking out a place in his study where to hang it.

He should have trusted Morgana not to get him something he'd hate. Although she always lectures him about how art can be anything that's created with artistic intent, Arthur has yet to see the appeal in randomly assembled pieces of metal, or creepy installations consisting of dolls heads.

This painting, though, is beautiful, and he hugs Morgana in thanks – a move that surprises both of them. Morgana hugs back for a moment before gently pushing him away.

"Don't be such a baby about it, Arthur," she chides, albeit with a smile. "It's a young artist who needed the confidence boost. It wasn't even all that expensive."

Which is Morgana's way of saying "You're welcome."

Arthur promises to hang it up the next day, and Morgana gives him a pleased smile and a nod.

All the other presents are less nerve-wrecking. Books, DVDs, gift cards – Arthur's glad that none of them went to any extra lengths to get him something special. He finds it much easier to accept these mundane gifts.

When everything's unwrapped, and after Arthur has thanked them all for their thoughtfulness, he opens the buffet. Gwaine's the first one there, which comes as a surprise to exactly no-one. Arthur's not worried though. There's enough food to feed twice as many people, and alcohol to match.

It's after midnight when Vivian's the first one to say goodbye and head home. Morgana and Freya follow soon after, and then it only takes half an hour for Gwen and Leon to head out. Gwaine, Percy and Mordred are the last to leave, and by two in the morning, only Merlin and Arthur are left.

Arthur's not in the mood to clean up but he knows he'll be glad for it in the morning if he does some of it now. While Merlin packs up the leftovers and stores them in the fridge or the freezer, Arthur loads the dishwasher.

"Next time we're using paper plates and plastic cups," he grouses. "And everyone will have to take home food."

Merlin chuckles. "They all did take home food," he points out. "It's not their fault you ordered too much of everything."

Arthur doesn't argue the point. He did order too much food, he knows it. He'd rather have leftovers than not enough, though.

"You're staying, right?" he asks to change the subject. "The guest room's yours, as always."

Merlin has been the only one to sleep in there so far. He's got pyjamas in there, and a change of clothes in the dresser, just in case. The cupboard in the guest bathroom has an entire section filled with Merlin's toothbrush, comb and razor. Arthur likes it that way.

"Yes," Merlin says. "I'm staying. No point in going home when I'd have come back in the morning to finish cleaning up."

"You don't have to help," Arthur points out, but Merlin shrugs.

"I want to. I'd be spending the weekend with you anyway, might as well help you tidy up," Merlin explains matter-of-factly.

Merlin sounds entirely casual, but Arthur's heart picks up speed anyway. Ever since Merlin returned from Chirbury at the start of the year newly single, Arthur feels like they've become even closer than before.

Merlin spends all his free time with Arthur, unless Arthur can't see him because of his own work. They regularly stay over at each other's places, leave their things in the other's home – if Arthur thinks about it for too long, he'll come to the conclusion that they're in a relationship just without any romantic displays of affection.

Not that that's a problem in itself. He's happy to stay Merlin's friend like this – but can they keep it up? At some point Merlin's going to meet someone else, another Lance, and Arthur doubts they'll keep up what they have now then. It had already fallen apart when Merlin dated Lance, and Arthur can't even really fault him for putting a romantic partner first. He'd probably do the same now.

With the difference that, ideally, *Merlin* would be his romantic partner, so he wouldn't have to choose between his best friend and his boyfriend in the first place.

"I think this is all we'll get done tonight," Merlin says, interrupting Arthur's train of thought.

Arthur looks around. The dishes are cleared away, the food's taken care of, and Merlin even stacked and set aside the trays that are going to be picked up by the caterers tomorrow afternoon.

"You're right. Let's go to bed," Arthur agrees.

They say goodnight outside Arthur's bedroom door. Merlin's face contorts with a big yawn, and then Arthur follows suit, of course.

"Night," Merlin says, sounding much more tired than before.

"Good night. Thanks for all your help," Arthur replies.

Merlin waves his hand dismissively. "You'd do the same for me."

"Well," Arthur draws. "I'd hire a cleaning company, probably." He frowns. "I should've done that in the first place."

That makes Merlin laughs. "You're such a snob."

"Yes," Arthur agrees, grinning at him. "But you love me anyway."

A strange look comes over Merlin's face, one that Arthur can't read. "Yeah," Merlin says at length, then smiles. "I'm the only one who's capable of putting up with you for longer."

Arthur shrugs. "You can leave any time you want," he says, resisting the urge to fall to his knees and beg Merlin to never ever leave him for real.

"Nah," Merlin says as he opens the door to the guest room. "I've just got you trained." He winks, and disappears into the guest room, leaving Arthur to stare at the closed door for several moments before going into his own bedroom.

Before he falls asleep that night, he promises himself to ask Merlin out on a proper date sometime soon.

~\*~

He doesn't ask Merlin out.

Not the next day after they've returned the flat to its proper state, and celebrate by watching one of the DVDs he's been given, nor any day after that. He's close, sometimes, when something Merlin does or says looks like he might be flirting with Arthur. Every time Arthur talks himself out of it, blaming Merlin's behaviour on playfulness and friendship and camaraderie.

That way, weeks pass, and before Arthur knows it, it's time again for his annual round of business trips that take him out of London and to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand for six weeks starting in the middle of June.

The time difference makes it difficult to keep in touch, but he usually wakes up to an email from Merlin, and replies right away even though he knows Merlin's won't read it until it's near afternoon for Arthur.

He returns at the end of July, hair bleached, skin tanned, and ready for some good old fashioned English summer. Merlin picks him up at the airport and takes him straight home to his flat for some much needed sleep after the long flight. At least Fred organised a flight that would land at night so that Arthur could go to sleep right away and wake up slightly less jet-lagged.

He wakes late on Saturday morning, which, as a glance at his alarm clock tells him, is actually a little after midday and therefore technically the afternoon.

What woke him is the smell of food, and investigating his kitchen turns up Merlin, equipped with an apron and spatula, cooking pasta and frying sausages.

Arthur has never loved him more than in that moment, and he's still somewhat groggy from his journey and sleeping for too long, which is why it takes him several seconds to realise that he said that out loud.

The surprised look on Merlin's face is what eventually clues him, and then Arthur blanches. Of all the scenarios he had envisioned, confessing his feelings half-asleep over homemade macaroni with sausages has never been one of them.

*And yet, a voice at the back of his mind chimes in, it suits them.*

Merlin has put down the spatula, and is turning off the stove and removing the pot and pan from the burner. He slowly turns towards Arthur, still wearing the silly apron Elyan and Vivian gave him for his birthday that's got a print of a knight's armour, complete with sword on it. It's too big on Merlin and the sword "hangs" too far in the back, rendering the whole look even more ridiculous than when Arthur wears it.

Arthur's about to take the traitorous words back, blame it on the jet-lag or or call "Aprils Fools", when Merlin rushes forward and pulls him into a kiss.

For what feels like an age, Arthur's too stunned to react, but then he wraps his arms around Merlin and returns the kiss.

It would seem that Merlin hasn't bothered to shave this morning, because it's not just Arthur's stubble making the kiss a tad scratchy.

Merlin's lips are as soft as Arthur remembers, but there's an intensity to the kiss that wasn't there before. Nothing of the desperation that Arthur could feel last time shines through, just the need to kiss Arthur, and kiss him deeply. Arthur, for his part, is only too happy to comply.

Once Merlin breaks away to catch his breath, he says: "Do you have any idea how annoying it is to wait for you to get your head out of your arse?"

Arthur frowns. "What?" he asks dazedly, still not caught up entirely on what just happened, or why.

"I mean, I've only known about myself since New Year's Eve, but you must have the will of," Merlin flounders for a fitting comparison. "Of a thing that has an iron will not to do anything about your feelings," he continues as if Arthur knows what he's talking about. "Why didn't you say anything? I was so close to just dragging you to bed, you know," Merlin rambles on.

Arthur's still staring perplexed, unable to follow the conversation. Arthur wishes he were more alert but his brain's still looping on *I told Merlin I love him, and Merlin kissed me.*

Merlin is unperturbed by Arthur's minor mental breakdown, and continues to complain.

"But I figured you'd think I was just looking for another pity shag so I waited for you to make a move. I flirted, I teased, and I could swear you were about to ask me out, or just bloody kiss me a couple of times but you never did!"

Finally, Arthur's brain catches up with him, and when the meaning of Merlin's words finally register with him, he cuts off Merlin's rant mid-sentence by kissing him again.



“Sorry,” is all Arthur says after a long while. “I get it now.”

Merlin grins wickedly. “You definitely do.”

And with that he drags him back to Arthur’s bedroom where Merlin quickly loses the apron (and the rest of his clothes), and Arthur his pants.

Arthur would’ve liked to just look and touch for a while, but Merlin has other ideas. It would seem that he had a lot fewer qualms about fantasising about shagging Arthur, than Arthur did about him. The moment they’re both naked, Merlin is running his hands over Arthur and it doesn’t take either of them long to come that first round.

The second time is when Arthur gets to indulge himself by touching and kissing all the parts of Merlin he’s always wanted to touch and kiss but never dared think about for too long.

Like Merlin’s neck, or his ears.

Arthur spends an absurd amount of time nipping and kissing Merlin’s neck, or the sensitive shell of his ears. It turns out that both are rather sensitive, which would explain why Merlin wears scarves everywhere he goes, and puts on beanie hats at the gentlest breeze of wind.

It’s not before the sky’s turning red with the setting sun that they venture back into the kitchen on the insistence of Arthur’s grumbling stomach. The pasta’s entirely ruined by now, but the sausages are salvageable, and so they manage to put together something for dinner.



They curl up together on the terrace, making good use of the various blankets and cushions Arthur keeps there, and eat sausage butties.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me that way,” Arthur says after finishing his sandwich. “And I didn’t want to risk what we had in case you truly didn’t.”

Merlin sighs long-sufferingly. “Of course you’d be foolishly and entirely unnecessarily noble.”

Arthur can hear in his voice that Merlin’s not truly annoyed or disappointed. The confirmation comes a moment later when Merlin leans in and kisses him softly. “And that’s exactly why I couldn’t fall for anyone better.”

Arthur smiles, and pulls him closer for another kiss, and another, the taste of brown sauce and sausages barely even registering anymore after several minutes.

He knew at the start of the year that this would be a good one. Everything that’s happened already has led up to this moment, right here and now. When Merlin tells him “I love you, Arthur Pendragon, foolishly noble and posh prat that you are,” Arthur knows that he was wrong.

It’s not just a good year. It’s going to be a good *life*.

~\*~

## The End