

The Cat's Meow

**Written by
momotastic**

**With art by
DeHeerKonijn**

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In which Merlin finds a cat, Arthur's lost without his favourite girl, and Morgana doesn't stop rolling her eyes at her brother.

Notes

Written for [Tracionn](#). This is the second of two fics that Tracionn won during the COiNELOT fandom auction back in spring 2017. The first one can be found [here](#).

This is much fluffier than what I normally write, and I hope it'll be the right amount of fluff to excite Tracci :).

Thank you to [Patria Mori](#), and [Tari Sue](#) for the patient beta jobs.

An especially big thank you to [DeHeerKonijn](#) for doing three illustrations for this story. As ever, I'm in awe of your talent, and your generosity and kindness.

Disclaimer: Pumpkin was inspired by [DeHeerKonijn's](#) and [Polomonkey's Pancake](#).

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Merlin always thought he'd do something spectacular with his life. Become an expert in a subject and then wow everyone with his knowledge, maybe. Or possibly find a profession he truly, madly loves, and then immerse himself in it.

Unfortunately, things didn't go quite like that.

Taking a job at his uncle Gaius' little bookshop seemed natural after school – he'd worked there during summer holidays anyway, and this was pretty much the same, only that when summer turned into autumn, Merlin never stopped going to work, and his paychecks turned out higher than when he was a student worker.

And it's not like Merlin doesn't like his life. He's got a cute little two bedroom (sublet from his uncle, too, because who can afford rent in London, let alone Notting Hill?), a short commute to work (ten minutes on the bus is more than bearable), and even his neighbours are nice.

(Merlin suspects that Gwaine from the floor above is either a stripper or an escort – possibly both – but he never disturbs the peace after ten o'clock, and only sometimes flirts outrageously with Merlin. All the other times he flirts with Merlin like a normal person.)

So, yes, life is good, mostly. He's even got a couple of extremely lovely friends.

There's Will, his best mate since nursery school, who's much less straight than he likes to pretend, but who, despite having issues with accepting his own slide on the Kinsey scale, has at least never given a shit about Merlin's sexuality – even when Merlin had that awkward crush on him when they were thirteen and Merlin was properly discovering his prick for the first time.

Then there are Gwen and Freya, two girls he met at secondary school who recently moved in together. Merlin's waiting for the engagement announcement to come any day now, especially after they just bought two cats and a dog to make their three bedroom just that little more crowded. Or "homey," as they call it.

He's got Lancelot, who's his next door neighbour and absolutely gorgeous. Merlin's had a crush on him for the longest time just after moving in, but then decided he'd much rather be Lance's friend than boyfriend. This has nothing to do with Lance falling in love with someone else every couple of weeks (although never with Merlin...) and everything to do with how intense Lance is whenever he's pining. Merlin's not sure he could handle Lance as a boyfriend, and so he settled into their strictly platonic relationship.

So, yes, great group of friends? Check. Paying job that he enjoys (mostly)? Check. Relatively spacious flat in London? Check and check.

Boyfriend?... Permanent work in progress.

It's not that Merlin wastes away without a man in his life. He doesn't need another person to complete him. All the internet memes say so.

And, like his Uncle Gaius always says, everything happens for a reason, so Merlin has to trust that him being lonely must have a reason, too.

That doesn't mean he wouldn't like a person to come home to. It would be nice to have someone else around in the evenings, just to know he's not alone, to share a joke, or to help with making dinner – and by “help”, Merlin means “motivate him to get up and make some.”

It's a drizzly Tuesday morning and he's on his way to work, lamenting his bachelor state at length while walking to the shop.

It's honestly such a cliché to work in a bookshop in Notting Hill, but at least it's not a travel book shop like in the movie. No one's ever asked him if this is where Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant met, and he's grateful for it. It probably helps that Gaius' shop is hidden in a small alley off Clarendon Road, far away from Portobello Road.

Merlin's just about to list all his best qualities (can cook, cleans up well, friendly, funny, loves animals, little bit magic) inside his own mind again to reassure himself that it's not his fault that he's still single, when he hears the voice.

'Help,' a high voice calls, and Merlin stops.

'Where's my dad?' the voice cries, and Merlin can tell that this is not a human voice. It's too much like a hiss or a growl, communicating fear and confusion.

'Arthur!' the voice calls, and yes, definitely a hint of yowl in there.

Merlin slowly approaches the low garden wall to his left and peeks over it. Just as expected, there sits a cat behind it. Merlin's sure it'd be a beautiful ginger cat with nice long and fluffy fur – if it weren't so dirty.

The cat looks at him and hisses more aggressively.

'Don't come closer or I'll scratch!'

Merlin shakes his head lightly and concentrates on the cat.

"It's okay," he tells it. "I can help you."

The cat looks at him in surprise, cocking its head and just watching him for a few uncertain moments.

Finally, it trills back hopefully.

‘You know where my dad is?’

Merlin sighs and shakes his head again.

“No, but you can come with me and I’ll look after you until we’ve found him.”

The cat seems to contemplate that, and then, as if to demonstrate its decision, it jumps up onto the low garden wall and looks at Merlin expectantly.

“Alright,” Merlin says and reaches out to pet the cat. His hand comes away grimey and he grimaces.

Guess I’ll be calling in sick this morning, Merlin thinks, and turns on his heel.

“Come on, it’s not far. I’ll get you home so you can clean up.”

The cat meows its agreement, and together they set off down the street in the direction Merlin just came from. He makes the call to Gaius on the way.



Understanding animals is a gift Merlin’s always had. As a kid, he thought he’d use it to become a vet or do some other kind of work with animals, but it turns out that he didn’t have the stomach for biology. Besides, working with animals might’ve been fun, but how would he have explained that he knew exactly why that red panda was being moody or why the crocodiles wouldn’t breed. He would’ve had to act as if he was as clueless as everyone else – and risk offending the animals – or find clever ways to disguise the fact that he could understand animals.

However, saving a sweet kitty off the streets of London was not a hardship, and no one would get too suspicious. Hopefully.

Merlin closes the door to his flat once the cat’s inside, and kicks off his shoes.

“First things first,” he says. “My name’s Merlin, and who are you?”

The cat sits down in Merlin’s tiny hallway and looks at him with such an expression of superiority that Merlin’s rarely seen – even on cats.

‘My name is Pumpkin,’ the cat trills. ‘But my dad always calls me Princess.’

Merlin suppresses the snigger that's threatening to burst out of his mouth, and instead nods.

"Pleased to meet you, Princess Pumpkin. How do you feel about taking a bath?"

Pumpkin gets up and turns away, raising her tail high. Merlin's not sure if that means that she is in favour of a bath or mortally offended, so he heads to the bathroom regardless.

He finds his stash of animal care products and comes back to the living area armed with a brush. Pumpkin, meanwhile, has found the bowl of water he keeps on the windowsill to keep the air humid for his plants.

Merlin sighs and heads over.

"Mind joining me in the bathroom when you're done? I'd like to brush out your fur before we bathe you properly." He doesn't say that he hopes he can save it from having to be shorn off. Pumpkin looks like she might be a Somali cat, so her fur's not too long, but also not as short as would be useful in a situation like this.

Pumpkin trills in response, and Merlin leaves her to drinking up as much of the water as she likes.

It only takes a minute before she follows him to the bathroom, and then sits patiently while he brushes out her fur. It's slow going, but he manages it without having to grab the scissors even once. The floor around her looks dusty once he's done, and a few clumps of dried dirt have already fallen out. It's a good sign that it's coming away so easily, he thinks, and at last he can see the true colours of her fur peeking through the dirt. She's indeed a lovely ginger shade, just her neck and the underside of her tail a darker shade. One of her hind legs is a darker colour as well, and it almost looks like she's wearing a sock.

He fills another bowl with water for her, and finds a second bowl to fill with some food. He doesn't have any cat food in the house, but there is leftover chicken breast in the fridge from last night, and he cuts that up into small pieces and serves it to Pumpkin. The way she meows at the food tells Merlin that she's accustomed to finer cuisine, but too hungry to care about it right now.

He fills the bath tub with warm water while she eats, and finds his stack of towels dedicated to caring for dirty strays. He also locates the bottle of animal shampoo he's got stashed away for such emergencies.

Once the water's high enough, he turns off the faucet, lays down towels in front of the tub, and inside it.

"Are you ready for your bath?" he asks Pumpkin, and she trills back a 'Yes.'

If Merlin didn't know better, he'd think she's looking forward to being bathed.

He picks her up and gently lowers her into the tub, making sure to support her the whole time.

Pumpkin is remarkably calm throughout the process, and so Merlin grabs the cup he's prepared and begins to gently pour water all over her.

Once she's completely wet, he grabs the shampoo and starts to massage it in. That's the point when she begins to purr in earnest. It's amazing how relaxed she is.

Merlin's never met a cat who enjoyed being bathed so much.

"Does your dad bathe you often?" he asks conversationally.

'Yes,' Pumpkin purrs. 'Arthur's the best dad.'

"Your dad must love you very much if he takes care of you like that," Merlin says. The sooner he learns more about Pumpkin's owner, the sooner he can return her. It would've been easier if she had a collar with her owner's information, but what can you do? Her owner probably never expected her to run away or get lost.

Hopefully she's chipped, Merlin thinks, and decides to take her to the vet later to have her checked.

'He does,' Pumpkin say, purring even harder. 'Arthur says I'm the only woman he needs in his life.'

Merlin chuckles, and nods to himself. He's already assembling a picture of this Arthur inside his head. Maybe a hipster guy owning a coffee shop or something like that. He's probably painfully shy and awkward, and bad at talking to people. Hm, maybe not a coffee shop, then. Possibly some kind of online business.

He'd be a sweet guy, though. Gentle, and dedicated.

Once Merlin's sure he's shampooed every inch of Pumpkin, he picks up the cup again and starts rinsing it all out. It takes a while until he's sure there's no soap left anywhere, especially in the long fur, but Pumpkin's a complete angel throughout the whole thing.

When Merlin's sure he got all the suds, he lifts her back out and sets her down on one of the towels. He's got a couple of soft towels to dry her with, and once they've done all they can, he grabs the hair dryer.

"Is it okay if I use this to dry you the rest of the way?" he asks, not wanting to scare Pumpkin. Not all cats like the hair dryer and he'd hate to startle her now that she's been so amazing and calm the whole time.

She yawns and it's almost as if she's shrugging.

'Dad uses it,' she says, and Merlin takes that to mean that he's free to dry her fur with it.

He turns it to the lowest setting and gently blow dries Pumpkin's fur. She never once stops purring, and even turns this way and that, moving into the warm air.

Once he's done, he picks her up and cuddles her for a few moments, enjoying the feeling of her soft, clean fur against his skin. He spends some extra time nuzzling into the fluffy neck fur. He does like Somalis.

"You really are a pretty princess," he tells her. "It's no wonder your dad loves you so much."

Pumpkin purrs with satisfaction and lets him give her a kiss on her head.

He sets her back down a few moments later.

"Go and explore a little bit. I need to clean up in here. When I'm done we're going to look for your dad."

Pumpkin meows back at him, and walks out of the bathroom, tail held high again.



After a hefty negotiation, Merlin convinces Pumpkin to let him take her to the vet. She's not thrilled about being stuck in a cat carrier, but Merlin can't very well explain that he knew that she wouldn't run away from him because he talked to her and got her consent to come willingly.

Unfortunately, Pumpkin has not been chipped, so Merlin has to amend his mental picture of Arthur to 'Loves his pet but is clearly a berk'. It doesn't help that he almost called her by name a couple of times at the vet's clinic. Not that anyone there would know that it's her real name, but he's paranoid about this kind of thing and would rather not chance being questioned. Forget exposing his secret and being stamped mentally ill – unfair as that would be to actually mentally ill people who have to deal

with that kind of bullshit stigma all the time anyway – they might assume that he catnapped her to demand ransom or something.

“Guess we’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way,” Merlin tells Pumpkin on the way home.

Once they’re back at Merlin’s flat, he rewards Pumpkin with a few treats and extended play time until she’s relaxed again. Even being able to communicate with animals doesn’t change the fact that doctor visits are stressful for them, and Pumpkin has been on her absolute best behaviour the whole time, despite being tense and uncomfortable.

He lets her nap on his lap for a while before deciding that they might as well get a head start on finding her owner.

Unfortunately, it’s exactly as difficult as Merlin had anticipated.

Pumpkin doesn’t know his last name, or the street he lives on. She doesn’t even know what part of the city they live in. She does know that it’s not this part of London but she can’t explain how she knows that beyond “It doesn’t smell right.” At least she’s sure that Arthur’s somewhere in London, even if she doesn’t know exactly where.

What she does know is this:

- His name is Arthur.
- He’s got light hair. (Pumpkin can’t say what colour exactly, but she knows it’s not like her fur, nor like Merlin’s hair.)
- He’s much bigger than her, and somewhat bigger than Merlin. (Merlin could not find out if that meant he was taller or bulkier.)
- He’s busy with work a lot but he always makes time to play with Pumpkin, or pet her.
- He has nice clothes. (Nice, as Merlin finds out eventually, means that they’re soft and perfect to sleep on. Pumpkin has no idea if they’re actually expensive or fashionable.)
- His home is much bigger than Merlin’s.
- Sometimes he has to go away for a while and then a woman called Morgana stays with Pumpkin.
- Morgana is Arthur’s sister.
- She’s got dark hair like Merlin and doesn’t look much like Arthur at all, apparently.
- She’s nice but not as nice as Arthur. (That means that she’s stricter with Pumpkin and won’t let her have as many treats as Arthur does.)

- Even though he loves Pumpkin and often tells her that she's all he needs, he continues to look for a mate but always comes back unhappier and feeling lonelier than before.
- Sometimes Arthur talks on the phone for hours and gets really aggressive.
- He sometimes scares Pumpkin when he's like that because he shouts.
- He always apologises to Pumpkin afterwards when that happens, and cuddles her extra long and gives her even more treats, so Pumpkin always forgives him eventually.

After she's told him all of that, Pumpkin yawns and insists on going to sleep again for a while. Merlin can't argue with that and lets her doze on his window sill where he put a pillow for her. It's directly above the radiator and a fairly warm spot despite the grey weather outside. It's also the best place to watch the street, which he thinks Pumpkin might enjoy.



Unfortunately, he hasn't learned much that would help him locate this Arthur guy. His image of the man has slightly shifted. He's clearly a workaholic, and a rich one at that, albeit one who clearly loves his pet. But without a last name, there's not much hope of finding him.

Of course a google search for Morgana and Arthur only brings up pages upon pages of Arthurian legend references. Whatever parents decided to call their children by these names must've had a sadistic streak.

Merlin considers taking to twitter and maybe get #PrincessPumpkin trending, but there are several problems with this plan.

First of all, since Pumpkin isn't wearing any kind of tag or collar, and hasn't been chipped, there's no way for Merlin to know her name, as previously established. Second of all, there's no guarantee Arthur even uses Twitter, let alone that the hashtag would cross his feed if he did.

Merlin takes a picture of her on his window sill anyway, and posts it to twitter with the tag #LostPetLondon. It definitely won't hurt to have her picture there, just on the off-chance that Arthur's using social media.



The next day, Merlin has to leave Pumpkin to go to work, but he promises to play with her, and look more into how to find her dad, once he gets home.

All morning, Merlin keeps thinking about Arthur, and the things Pumpkin has told him last night.

Merlin's rarely met such a chatty kitty. Often it's like pulling teeth to get anything out of them, but Pumpkin seems more than happy to talk about herself. She says it's because Arthur always talks to her too, and she considers it polite to answer him.

At least now Merlin knows why Pumpkin ended up in Notting Hill. She said that strangers forced their way into Arthur's home and took a bunch of things. She was scared by them and hid inside her pet carrier. Unfortunately for her, the thieves took her carrier, too, not even realising that it was heavier than it should be. Merlin can only assume that it was a designer model and they thought it was a woman's handbag, and therefore weren't surprised by the weight.

They dropped her off on a street corner once they realised that they took the cat with them, but not before removing her cat collar.

At least Merlin found out that she had one. Unfortunately, going by what else he's learned about Arthur, it was probably expensive, just like the carrier, and therefore removed to be sold. Or maybe just removed to not leave a trace of the fact that Arthur was robbed. Not that anyone besides Merlin would be able to find out anything from the cat about the burglars.

Merlin sighs. He'll have to have a serious conversation with Arthur about chipping his pet, and making sure that her accessories are practical rather than fashionable.

At the moment, however, Merlin's back to square one.



Two days later, Merlin still hasn't made any progress in finding Arthur. Pumpkin has been increasingly anxious to get back to her dad, and there's nothing Merlin can do to soothe her.

He tries to spend as much time with her as he can, cuddling or playing with her whenever possible, but eventually, she always flops back down onto the window sill in a miserable heap and yowls for her dad. It's heartbreaking to the point where Merlin printed a bunch of flyers and posters and went out yesterday afternoon to plaster them to lamp posts and notice boards as far as he could walk.

A few times a day, he posts new pictures of her on Twitter, always with a variation of the lost pet hashtag.

It's through that that he eventually receives a message from @MorganaPenn.

@MorganPenn

I think you found my brother's cat.

Merlin is excited beyond measure that his mass-tweeting apparently helped. It's the right name and sibling relationship, and Merlin's confident that this is the right Morgana. (Again, how many people actually name their child that?)

Unfortunately, he'll have to play it tough for a little bit because there's no way for a normal person to know that Pumpkin's dad's sister's name is Morgana.

@MorganPenn

I think you found my brother's cat.

Why's he not contacting me himself?

He doesn't use twitter, the nitwit. If he'd checked the tags like I told him, he would've found Pumpkin days ago. o.ô

Merlin's getting more excited by the minute. It must be the right Morgana, no doubt. Luckily, Merlin has experience with feigning ignorance when it comes to pet owners reclaiming their furry companions. He's already scrolled through Morgana's feed and checked her profile to see what she looks like.

(The answer: Absolutely gorgeous. Long, dark hair, brilliant green eyes, pale skin. She's so beautiful, it's intimidating.)

@MorganPenn

Do you have pictures of yourself with the
cat?

It only takes a few moments before Morgana sends him a few pictures of herself with Pumpkin. They're all selfies but Pumpkin is clearly distinguishable.

@MorganPenn

Okay. Tell me more about the cat.
Anything that's unique about her.

If Morgana's annoyed that Merlin's making this so difficult, she's not showing it. It takes a little longer to respond, but eventually she writes back.

@MorganPenn

You realise that she might behave
differently around you, a stranger, than
us, her family?

Merlin smirks. He was counting on Morgana catching on to that.

@MorganPenn

You realise that she might behave
differently around you, a stranger, than
us, her family?

Ten points to Ravenclaw. Tell me
something about her markings that's not
visible in the pictures.

That reply takes a little longer again, probably because Morgana's checking what pictures she's sent and which ones Merlin posted. Merlin's made sure to post only pictures where some of Pumpkin's more distinct features wouldn't be obvious.

@MorganPenn

She's got a few lighter spots of fur on her belly. She's also got a "sock" on her right hind paw, same colour as the dark fur on her tail.

Full marks. Send me the address of your brother. I'll come by this afternoon after work. If possible, be there. Let me know if you can't make it.

I'll be there! See you then. Arthur will be ecstatic.

Merlin grins, and sets the phone aside. He's still got a few hours left on his shift, and he's glad that for once the morning turns busy so he doesn't have to worry about killing the time until he's able to head home and get Pumpkin.

He has to put her back in the carrier, which she still doesn't like, but endures much more gracefully than last time now that she gets to go home to her dad.

Merlin tells her on the way to Mayfair (of course that's where Arthur lives), that he'll have to pretend that he doesn't know yet that Arthur's her dad, even if she confirms it. Pumpkin's not happy about it by the growl she uses to respond, but Merlin insists and eventually she stops complaining.

The house is one of the ones you typically see in the upstairs/downstairs telly shows: White facade, columns on the portico, stairs off to the side leading down into the basement. Merlin's not that impressed, honestly, but Pumpkin becomes a lot more excited in her carrier, going on and on about how happy her dad will be, and how grateful that Merlin brought her back.

Of course Merlin's been curious about Pumpkin's dad. The way she describes him, Merlin imagines a middle-aged man who wears cuddly cardigans and corduroy trousers, despite his money. (Morgana must be his much younger sister, clearly.)

Pumpkin's told him how devoted Arthur is to her, and how loyal he is to his family, and to his friends. Merlin knows already that Arthur lets his friends stay at the house whenever they need a place to sleep, be it because they had to move out of their own place after breaking up with their boyfriends or girlfriends, or because they're in between jobs. Merlin also knows that Arthur doesn't always agree with his father, even though he loves him genuinely.

From what Pumpkin's said, Arthur's kind and generous, and the kind of friend or family member anyone wants in their life – which means that Merlin expects a man in his forties or fifties with a kind face and soft eyes as he rings the doorbell beneath the plaque that proclaims this to be *A. Penn's* home.

It comes as a bit of a shock, therefore, when the man that opens the door, is not only approximately Merlin's own age, but also fit as hell, golden blond, and absolutely gorgeous.

Oh no, he's hot, Merlin thinks. The combination of everything he learned about Arthur from his cat, and the visual of the most beautiful man Merlin has ever seen – including every celebrity he's ever had a crush on – has Merlin half in love with Arthur in three seconds flat.

Luckily, Arthur's eyes narrow, and his tone when he speaks, betrays what an utterly arrogant prick he is right away, so Merlin's save from the fate of the hopelessly pining after all.

"Where's my cat?" Arthur snaps, and Merlin physically steps back from the threatening tone of his voice.

"Where's the proof that she's yours?" Merlin responds coolly.

Arthur's nostrils flare, and Merlin takes another step back to make sure Arthur can't reach him easily should he decide to punch Merlin and just grab the carrier.

"Arthur!" a voice sounds behind him, and a moment later, Morgana squeezes through the door beside Arthur.

"Oh, you must be Merlin," she says in a much friendlier tone than her brother. "I'm glad you found the place alright. This one's been a right pain in the arse ever since Pumpkin went missing."

As if on cue, Pumpkin meows in her carrier. Merlin's watching Arthur for any kind of reaction, and he thinks that maybe Arthur twitched just the tiniest bit as if he wanted to uncross his arms and step forward. He does neither, instead opting to continue looming threateningly in the doorway.

Merlin sets the carrier down and coaxes Pumpkin out, and even when she's in his arms, Arthur doesn't move from his spot. At least Morgana comes closer to pet Pumpkin's head and scratch her chin in welcome. Pumpkin makes a few happy noises, but never quite stops looking at her dad – who still hasn't so much as twitched.

“Arthur,” Morgana chides finally. “Don’t you want to say hello to Pumpkin, and thank Merlin for bringing her back?”

Arthur clenches his jaw, but uncrosses his arms at least.

“How do I know he’s not the one who stole her in the first place?”

The dirty look that goes with this suggestion surprises even Morgana. She gasps, and turns around, ostensibly to give Arthur a lecture on etiquette.

“It’s fine,” Merlin says, cutting her off before she can start, even though it’s anything but. “I’m sure he’s just been worried about Pumpkin. It’s okay to be sceptical.”

He lowers his head to nuzzle Pumpkin’s fur.

“Are you ready to go home?” he asks, and the soft trill he receives in reply is more than enough confirmation.

“Okay,” he tells her, not worried about being found out as a secret animal whisperer. He’s done this with every pet he’s ever returned so far, and no one’s ever questioned it until now. He sets her down, and before letting go of her completely, says: “Go on, then. You’re home.”

Pumpkin hesitates for just a moment, but then she quickly crosses the small distance between Merlin and the front door. Arthur’s actually crouched down to catch her just in time as she jumps, and it’s Merlin’s first and only glimpse of the Arthur that Pumpkin described.

Unfortunately, it only lasts a few moments. Once Arthur straightens, with Pumpkin securely in his arms, he glares at Merlin again, turns, and disappears into the house without another word.

Merlin is so surprised by that much rudeness that he just stares in blank disbelief at the open door.

Morgana sighs heavily, and then hugs Merlin without warning.

“Thank you for bringing her back. My brother is awful at being a decent human being most of the time, but you really have saved his life by returning Pumpkin.”

She pulls back and smiles warmly at Merlin.

“Is there anything I can do to repay you? Will you take reward money?”

Merlin shakes his head. “It’s fine. I’m glad I could help.”

He manages a smile for her in return, and then bends to pick up the carrier.

“He really should get her chipped though. It was lucky you found my tweets, but not everyone might think to use twitter, and she could end up in a shelter, or a stranger’s house as their new pet if no one knows how to contact her owner.” He closes the door of the carrier, and straightens again.

Morgana frowns. “That’s what I keep telling him, but until she went missing, he never thought he’d ever lose her. It’s not like she’s an outdoor cat. I doubt Arthur ever considered that someone might just steal her.”

Merlin sighs at so much ignorance. “Well, maybe this scare was enough to teach him otherwise.”

“Yes,” Morgana says, smiling warmly. “Are you sure there’s nothing I can do for you?”

“Yep,” Merlin replies. “Like I said, happy to help. Say hi to Pumpkin for me, yeah? She’s a sweet girl, and she clearly missed her human. I’m glad she’s back home.”

“So are we,” Morgana says earnestly.

Merlin turns and heads back down to the street, waving back at Morgana as he heads back the way he came. He took a cab for part of the way, not wanting to make Pumpkin have to ride the bus, but he figures that he might as well take one now to get back home. He could get off a stop early and get some curry for dinner, maybe.



Arthur has never been so relieved in his entire life as when Pumpkin’s finally back home. It has been the worst week of his life while she was missing, and not just because it started with him getting robbed.

He doesn’t care that people stole his flat screen telly, his gaming consoles and laptop. (Okay, maybe the laptop’s a problem because there’s all his work things on there.) He also doesn’t care that the date he was on during which his house was cleared out was an absolute disaster. (So what if the guy was tall, skinny and had nice hair, just like Arthur likes them? He only talked about the history of the world wars, or, for variety, about how good he is in bed.)

What he *does* care about is that they stole his cat.

What kind of thief steals a helpless little kitty?

While she was gone, Arthur imagined the worst of things. What if they hurt her? What if they sold her to someone else? What if they abandoned her on the streets

and she ran in front of a car? There are so many ways for a spoiled (and yes, he knows she's spoiled, that's how he likes her!), indoors cat to come to harm in the outside world.

It's therefore not unusual to be mistrusting when someone claims to have found her just by luck, and to return her for no other reason than to do a good deed. Arthur's sure that this Merlin person just wanted to get paid for Pumpkin's return.

(Not that Arthur wouldn't have paid any ransom for her. It's just that he doesn't want to encourage catnappers by playing into their scheme.)

So what if Morgana told him that Merlin didn't want any kind of reward, and even refused money when Morgana offered it to him?

The first thing Arthur does, is call in the vet for a house visit to take a look at Pumpkin. She's fine, apparently, and has been under good care.

Arthur's glad to hear it, and this time when the vet brings up microchipping, Arthur promises to at least think about it. He hates needles, and he's sure that Pumpkin, who, in many ways is like him, hates them, too. But if the chip means that Pumpkin's safer, then maybe the pain would be worth it in the end.

So, yes, all should be well again. All the stolen items have been replaced, and it's only a matter of time until the insurance pays for everything. Most importantly, Pumpkin, the light of his life, is back home and unharmed. Arthur should be ecstatic – and so should Pumpkin.

Reality, however, is different. Pumpkin's home, yes, and when Arthur comes back from work, he'll often catch her playing with one of her toys or chattering away at the window while watching a bird.

As soon as he goes to her to say hello and cuddle her in welcome, though, she gives him the cold shoulder. She doesn't talk to him anymore, no matter how often he directs questions or statements at her, and she can't even be swayed by treats. It's so bad that she doesn't even want to play with Arthur, instead opting to play by herself or not at all.

(That she continues to play with any of Arthur's visitors just drives the knife deeper into his heart.)

What she does do, when he's around, is sit in her favourite spot on the deep window sill with all the fluffy cushions and woolly blankets, and stare out onto the street.

“What if she’s been traumatised, Morgana? What if this Merlin did something to her? Or the robbers?”

Morgana sighs exasperatedly and Arthur can practically hear her rolling her eyes at him. He wonders why he even called her in the first place.

He’s sitting on the window bench next to Pumpkin. She won’t let him pet her, but at least she tolerates his presence. That’s about all she’s been doing ever since she returned home.

“Has it occurred to you that maybe she liked Merlin and misses him? Or that she wants to go out and explore now that she’s seen a bit of the world outside of your house?” Morgana says in a tone that suggests she’s merely humouring Arthur by telling him something obvious.

“No,” Arthur says. “That can’t be it. She doesn’t try to escape. She just sits around and ignores me. I know she’s still playful because I can hear her playing with her toys when I’m working in the office, and she played with you a few days ago, and with Gwen when she came to visit yesterday. It’s just that she doesn’t want to be around *me* anymore. It’s like she doesn’t like me anymore.”

“Oh, Arthur,” Morgana says, and this time she actually sounds like she’s pitying him.

“Maybe I should see a cat psychologist. They exist, right?” Arthur ventures. The moment he says it, he regrets voicing his thoughts because—

“Oh my God, Arthur. Don’t be so melodramatic,” Morgana groans.

Yes, he really should’ve known that Morgana would not agree with him.

“I’m not!” he defends. “Pumpkin’s been through a stressful ordeal. Of course she’s traumatised by it. It’s probably some kind of, I don’t know, reverse Stockholm Syndrome!”

Morgana doesn’t even say anything to that, but Arthur can imagine the look she’d give him if she were here. She’s probably doing it anyway.

“Fine, you don’t want to help, don’t help,” he snaps, and hangs up without waiting for a reply. He slowly reaches out to pet Pumpkin, hoping that if he doesn’t startle her, she might let him do it and then remember how much she likes his pets. Before he even gets close enough to grace the fur on her back, though, she twists out of his reach and wanders off into the house to find another spot.

Arthur sighs, and dials the number of his vet again.



Two days, and an indefinite amount of calls to his vet – who’s losing his patience more and more with every one of Arthur’s calls – later, he caves and asks Morgana for Merlin’s contact details. Pumpkin’s still giving him the coldest of shoulders, and the vet, too, has suggested that maybe the young man who returned her might be of help.

(The vet also implied heavily that Arthur’s calls will be ignored and his number possibly even blocked if he calls again for a non-emergency. Arthur thinks it’s frankly rude how much the vet stressed that it ought to be a *real* emergency, not an imagined one.)

So, Arthur squares his shoulders, and texts Merlin.

Merlin

I’d like to ask you a few questions about Pumpkin’s time with you. Please come to my home at your earliest convenience.

There. That sounds polite enough.

To his surprise, Merlin answers almost right away.

Merlin

I’d like to ask you a few questions about Pumpkin’s time with you. Please come to my home at your earliest convenience.

Is this Arthur The Prat? Did you finish counting the hairs on her fur, found one missing, and now suspect me of forcefully removing her coat to make a pelt for myself?

Arthur’s first instinct is to shout at Merlin for his rudeness, but he forces himself to breathe deeply a few times until he can respond calmly.

Merlin

Very funny. I simply want to ascertain in what kind of home she's lived while she was gone.

Nice way of saying that you want to know how poor exactly I am and how much she had to slum it for a week. Maybe if you offer a meal you can lure the starving pauper in.

He's not sure if he should be offended, or feel guilty. It's not often that Arthur feels chastened anymore, but Merlin's tone reminds him a lot of Gwen, who's been his friend since Uni and who's often told Arthur in no uncertain terms that his arrogance and elitism make him sound like an ass.

He grits his teeth and types.

Merlin

Please come to see Pumpkin. Something's wrong with her and the vet suggested that you might have observed this behavioural change in her as well. Finding out how different her life has been might help to shed some light onto why she's behaving like this.

I'll be there in an hour.

Arthur blinks at his phone. He expected more mockery from Merlin, honestly, but the response suggests that Merlin's just as worried about Pumpkin as Arthur is.

He swallows. Maybe Merlin actually is a decent bloke after all, even if he makes inappropriate jokes about skinning Arthur's precious darling girl for a winter coat.



An hour later, the doorbell rings, and Merlin steps inside. He looks much the same as he did a fortnight ago, only this time with a bit of stubble on his jaw. It makes him a lot more attractive than Arthur remembered him being.

“What’s wrong with her?” Merlin asks before Arthur’s even shut the front door.

“She’s been distant,” Arthur says tersely, not yet willing to completely rule out the possibility that Merlin’s conning him. The thought that Merlin’s brought Arthur a cat that looks exactly like Pumpkin but isn’t has crossed his mind. Then Morgana, who’s eerily talented at guessing what Arthur’s thinking, said that it would be hard to find a cat that looked exactly like Pumpkin,. She also said that he should’ve just microchipped her when he got her because then he wouldn’t have to wonder now.

“Distant, how?” Merlin asks. He slips out of his shoes without being asked, and wanders down the hallway, softly calling for Pumpkin as if this were his home and not someone else’s.

Arthur’s about to protest, when Pumpkin comes running down the stairs to greet Merlin with happy trilling meows. She rubs against his calves until he picks her up so she can headbutt him.

Jealousy is an ugly thing, but Arthur feels it deep in his stomach in this moment.

Merlin’s murmuring quiet words into Pumpkin’s neck, and Pumpkin continues to make noises back at him. Arthur moves closer, and reaches out to touch Pumpkin’s head, fully expecting her to twist out of Merlin’s arms to get away.

She doesn’t, though, and Arthur swallows thickly as he carefully pets her head.

“Why does she like you more than me now?” Arthur asks quietly after a few moments. Pumpkin’s purring, and Arthur hadn’t even realised how much he’s missed hearing the sound. It’s been almost three weeks.

Merlin hesitates visibly before he shrugs. “Maybe she’s been upset because you were such a prick when I brought her back. Cats are pretty perceptive and you radiated aggression when we arrived. Maybe she thought you were angry with her or didn’t really want her back.”

“No!” Arthur says much too loudly. Pumpkin flinches but thankfully doesn’t jump out of Merlin’s arms.

Merlin raises an eyebrow, and Arthur winces. He knows that Pumpkin hates it when he shouts, and it always takes him a while to make it up to her when he’s done it at home.

“But I’ve tried everything since she got back. I tried to cuddle, to play. I even bribed her with more treats than usual. She just... wouldn’t let me touch her or talk to me.”

He realises how pathetic he sounds. A grown man dependent on the affection of his pet – who’s heard of such a thing? Apart from maybe his closest friends, and Morgana, who all know how much Arthur adores his little Princess.

Merlin hums thoughtfully.

“Is that true, Pumpkin?” he asks the cat, scratching her under her chin. “Have you been giving your dad the cold shoulder?”

Pumpkin replies with another trill and Merlin’s eyebrows rise in surprise as if he understood what she said.

He looks to Arthur, then back at Pumpkin.

“What?” Arthur says, trying not to sound harsh or impatient. If Pumpkin’s truly become this sensitive to his tone of voice, then he’ll have to make an effort to sound softer and warmer around her.

“I... Listen, I know this may sound self-serving,” Merlin begins. He furrows his brow and looks up at Arthur. “But I think she’s upset because you’ve been rude to me. Cats are perceptive and smart animals. She’s had it good at my place, believe it or not. My home might be much smaller than yours, but I cared for her while I did everything to find out where she belongs. Pumpkin knows that my intentions were true, and then I really did bring her back to you, proving to her that I’m trustworthy.”

Merlin’s hand has stilled and he’s cupping the back of Pumpkin’s neck just enough for her to rub against it.

“I don’t care if you’re rude to me as long as you treat her well, but I think *she* cares,” Merlin says eventually

Arthur stares at him for several seconds, processing what Merlin’s just said. He looks at Pumpkin, who’s happily using Merlin as her personal petting-dispenser, and the way her eyes are almost entirely shut in bliss. He hears how loudly she’s purring, and how happily she’s started talking to Merlin the second she saw him, just like she used to do with Arthur.

He wants her affection back, and he doesn’t care what this stranger might think of him. He’s okay with sacrificing a little bit of his pride if only Pumpkin will stop ignoring him.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur says, finding that he truly means it. “I’m sorry for how I treated you. Pumpkin wouldn’t be this affectionate with you if you mistreated her, and it was unfair of me to assume that you had anything to do with her disappearance. I was

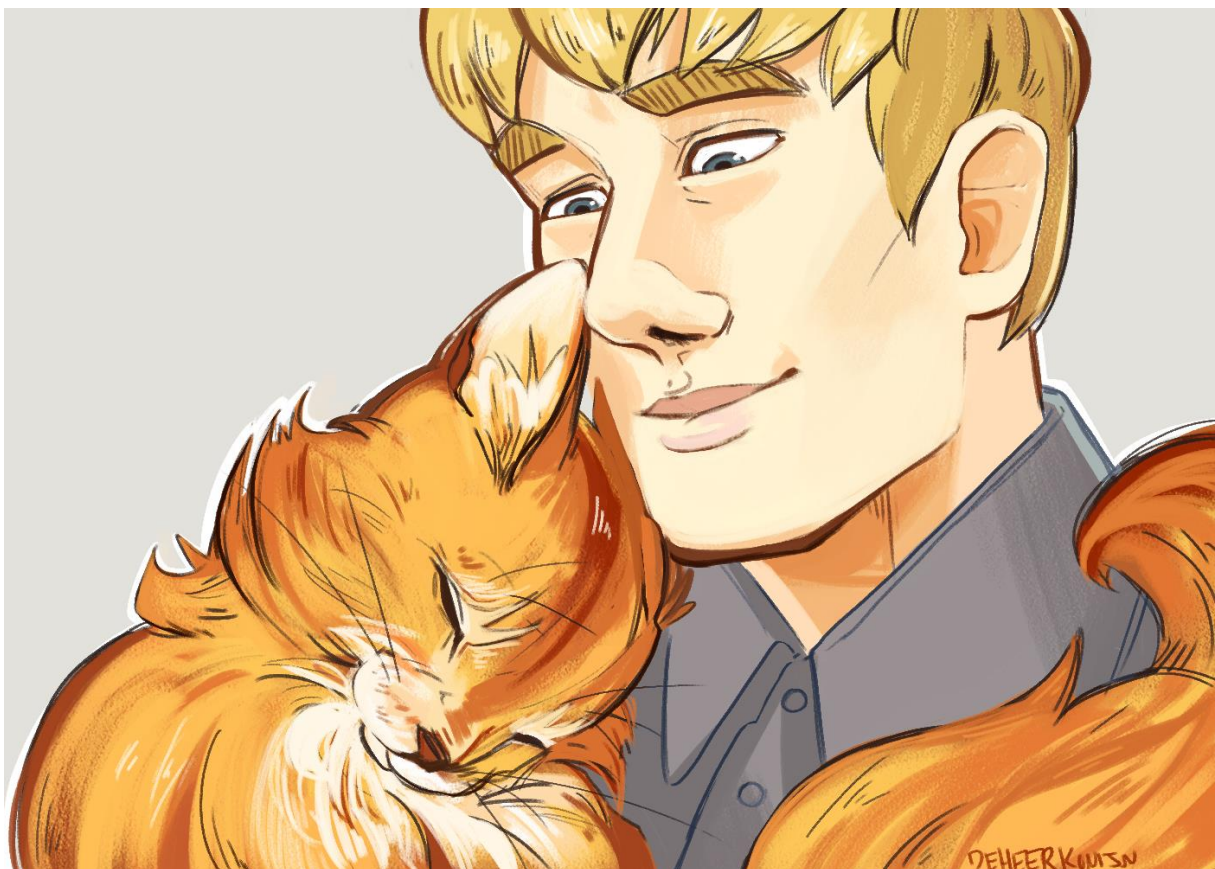
worried about her, and frustrated and angry with myself for letting her get stolen in the first place. I should not have taken it out on you.”

For a few long seconds, nothing happens, and Arthur notices that even Pumpkin has stopped making noise.

Then Merlin breaks into a wide smile that sets off a small swarm of butterflies in Arthur’s stomach. He has just a moment to think *Fuck*, before Pumpkin scrambles out of Merlin’s arms to jump into Arthur’s.

She headbutts his chin vigorously and tries to get him to pet her everywhere at the same time.

Arthur realises he’s grinning happily only when his face starts to hurt from it several minutes later, and then finally, Pumpkin calms down and is content to just lean against his shoulder, her head pressed into the side of Arthur’s neck.



Merlin’s been watching them the entire time, Arthur realises, and a small blush creeps along his cheeks.

“I guess you were right,” Arthur says at length. He carefully shifts Pumpkin to free his right hand, and holds it out to Merlin. “Thank you. It’s like you can actually

understand what she's saying." Arthur chuckles, and doesn't notice the flicker of nervousness crossing Merlin's face.

"Yeah," Merlin says, taking Arthur's hand. It's a firm grip – Arthur approves.

"I've got a good sense for animals, is all. They like me, I like them." He shrugs. "It works out most of the time. I'm glad I could help."

"I'm glad, too. And I really am sorry for how I behaved. "

Merlin waves a hand dismissively. "It's okay. You're not the first prickly pet owner I met."

"Do you take in strays often?" Arthur asks.

"When I find one, yeah. Doesn't always end well. Sometimes I can't find the owners, and then I have to give the pets to a shelter. I don't really have the space or money to keep a pet permanently. And if I kept every pet that I couldn't return, I'd have a menagerie by now."

He smiles a little crookedly, and Arthur has another fluttery sensation in the pit of his stomach. Now that he's allowed himself to look, he notices that Merlin's got lovely dark hair that looks incredibly soft, and that curls around his ears. His adorable, too large ears that make Arthur want to nuzzle the space behind them.

It's almost unfair how much Merlin's his type, now that Arthur lets himself think about that.

"Well," Merlin begins, clearing his throat. "I guess I'm off, then. Good to see you again, Pumpkin." He runs his hand down her back one more time. "You two take care, now." He smiles, and walks past them back to the front door.

"Oh," Merlin says, once he's got his shoes on. "You really should get her chipped. She'll hopefully never go missing again, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Right," Arthur says, nodding in agreement.

Merlin's almost out the door when Arthur realises he maybe doesn't want to say goodbye just yet.

"Merlin!" Arthur calls, and Merlin turns around in the doorway.

"Uh, would you maybe consider occasionally looking after Pumpkin? I work late a few days a week, and Morgana can't always make time either. Pumpkin shouldn't have to be alone for so long, and she clearly likes you."

The look of mild disbelief on Merlin's face is quickly becoming familiar to Arthur, but to his relief, Merlin soon breaks into another one of those blinding smiles and nods.

"Yeah, sure. That'd be great!"

Arthur grins back.

"Excellent. I'll call you to talk about the details another time. I've still got some things to do today." He gently lifts Pumpkin in his arms to indicate that he's going to be busy reacquainting himself with his favourite girl.

"Yeah, sure," Merlin laughs. "You know how to reach me."

He waves, and then pulls the door shut behind himself, leaving Arthur alone with a softly purring Pumpkin.



Merlin visits Pumpkin fourteen times before Arthur finally works up the courage to kiss him.

They've just finished eating – Arthur started bringing home dinner every night that Merlin keeps Pumpkin company while Arthur works late – and are putting away the dishes. They're both bending over the dishwasher and stop just before accidentally knocking their foreheads together.

And then Arthur just leans in the remaining distance to place a gentle kiss on Merlin's lips. It's quick, and chaste, and Arthur pulls away before Merlin can even respond properly.

Merlin's not deterred by that, however. He closes the dishwasher, and steps in close. They're almost the same height, and so it's easy for Merlin to lean in and graze his lips against Arthur's in return.

Arthur's arms go around Merlin's waist, pulling him in closer, and Merlin takes another half step towards Arthur until their chests are pressing flush against each other. His hand finds its way into Arthur's hair, and the other around his shoulder, and then Arthur tilts his head a little to the side, and it's perfect.



Merlin doesn't go home that night, and instead spends it in Arthur's bed, learning the curves of his body, and what makes him shiver and moan in pleasure. He trails fingers down Arthur's back to his arse, squeezing lightly when he gets there, and finally takes both of their cocks into his hand to stroke them slowly. Arthur comes first, gasping Merlin's name and grinding down against him. Merlin follows moments later, adding to the mess between them.

Seven months later – during which Merlin spent more nights at Arthur's house than his own flat – Merlin moves in, and Pumpkins concludes that she would've gone missing a lot sooner if she'd known that it would mean that her dad stops being lonely.

Merlin has to cuddle her extra hard for a few minutes for caring so much about her dad, and also to make sure that she never ever thinks of going missing again.

A year after Merlin's moved in, Arthur proposes, and Merlin takes it as a sign to finally tell Arthur his secret. It takes Merlin a while to convince him, but eventually he believes it.

Unfortunately, that means that Merlin spends the next couple of weeks translating everything Pumpkin says. Arthur finally stops asking for interpretation when the answer to the question "Who's got the fuzzy-wuzziest tummy?" is "You, dad."

Merlin laughs for a whole ten minutes at Arthur's red face, and then makes up for it by kissing him sweetly, and making sure that Arthur knows just how much Merlin likes his fuzzy-wuzzy tummy, and everything else about Arthur.

In the end, Merlin's life might not have been the most spectacular, or glamorous, but at least he's happy now that he's no longer lonely, and his Uncle Gaius was right when he said that everything happens for a reason.

Even fuzzy-wuzzy cats named Pumpkin being accidentally catnapped.



The End