

## This is Why (the Dictionary Invented the Word No)

Arthur/Merlin | R | 22 286

In order to win back the affections of an ex, Arthur has gotten himself caught up in a bet to transform the socially awkward into the socially acceptable. Features evil!Sophia, clueless!Merlin, hippy!Hunith and bit-of-a-tart!Will (in short: the highschool!AU that steals the plot from the She's All That movie)

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Arthur forced himself to smile and nod at the girl who waved at him in passing. There was absolutely nothing about her that would have made him look twice. He didn't even know her name, for Christ's sake, and there she was, expecting him to acknowledge her presence. She wasn't the first one, either. Not even for that day. Ever since *The Incident*, as he liked to refer to his rather public break-up in the school hallway earlier that week, everyone had started acting differently around him. Nice, when before they would have been too intimidated to make eye contact.

"Your stock has plummeted," Sophia said when he pointed out his predicament. "Gwen dumping you, for your best friend at that, has made you more human to them, more accessible."

He mulled her words over, no answer for it. An excited hush fell over the crowd hanging around the lawn in front of the school, all of them sitting or lounging much closer to Arthur's preferred spot than they had ever dared before. He knew what he would see even before looking, and sure enough, there they were: Gwen and Lance walked up with their arms linked together, laughing at some private joke while barely able to keep their eyes off each other. He hoped they would trip and fall going up the stairs.

The thought lasted only a second and then left him feeling guilty. Well, not over wanting Lancelot to fall and scrape his much too handsome face, because really, what sort of knob stole his best friend's girl? Gwen though, completely different story. Sure, she had broken his heart, but she was just such a sweetheart that it was difficult building up sufficient hate. The public element of the break up hadn't even been her fault.

Gwen noticed him staring and smiled; that sweet, shy quirk of lips that had first made him see her as more than just Morgana's shadow. Even after everything it still had the power to make his heart beat just a little faster.

He received a sharp elbow to the ribs.

"Ow! For fuck's sake, Soph."

"Mooning is not going to bring her back. Opposite in fact, it makes you even more pathetic. You see that girl over there?" Arthur followed her motions to see a short, skinny girl with hair so white it had no colour at all and thick spectacles that made her eyes look thrice the normal size. She grinned and waved cheerfully at them. "If you keep this up, she's going to think she has a shot at you."

Arthur shuddered. "So what do you suggest?"

“You have to get back into the dating game and show everyone that Gwen didn’t trample your heart.”

“Date whom? It’s not like there are that many options open.” At least not at his social station. There were only two other girls who came close to Gwen’s level of popularity and neither of them Arthur had any interest in getting up close and personal with. Hell, Morgana was practically his sister! And Sophia... just no.

“I remember her being nobody before you took an interest.”

For the first time Arthur stopped casting nervous looks around and turned to face Sophia. She was sitting so close she was nearly on his lap and there was a dangerous gleam in her eyes. He took a moment to reconsider her, she was certainly beautiful enough to slot seamlessly into his life, but she made a habit of playing games with people and discarding them when they ceased to amuse her or stopped being useful. She did, however, speak the truth. Aside from Morgana no one had even known Gwen existed before Arthur started dating her. That everyone wanted to be her friend now was his doing. Which she had a hell of a way of repaying.

“You’re right,” he said at last. “I can turn any girl into a princess.”

“You know what would work even better? Get all the girls really foaming at the mouth when you walk by?”

The gleam was still there, even gleamier now, if such a thing were possible. Arthur swallowed, not sure he even wanted to know what was going on in that noggin of hers.

“Going gay,” Sophia continued, unconcerned about his lack of response.

“I... what?”

“It’s very trendy these days, you know? Girls love it.”

“Girls like poofs?”

“You have no idea. Not only is it hot, but you know that thing about a guy only being gay because he hasn’t met the right girl yet? Everyone wants to be that girl.”

Arthur stared at her speechlessly, unable to wrap his brain around what she was saying. “You’re off your trolley! I am not getting close to another bloke’s tackle.”

Sophia rolled her eyes and shifted away until her back was pressed against the tree as Arthur’s was. “Suit yourself if you don’t want to be the hottest commodity in these halls.”

“I *am* the hottest commodity.”

“If you say so.”

He growled. How dare she imply that? He was Arthur Pendragon! He was the star player of just about every sport activity hosted, he maintained his spot as top in his class (through very careful use of minions who let him copy from them, but that was hardly the point) and not to sound arrogant, but he had eyes, he

saw himself in the mirror. Not to mention, with the amount of money his father pumped into the academy, he practically owned it. He did not need to prove himself to anyone. He didn't.

"Say I was mental enough to consider this scheme, which I am not, but say I was, do any gays even go here?"

Sophia shrugged nonchalantly, but Arthur had known her too long not to notice the way she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from showing excitement. "Are you saying you're not hot enough to turn any guy into a bender?"

"What? No! I never said that."

"So you think you are hot enough?"

Arthur snorted, unwilling to admit to any such thing. "Don't be ridiculous. No one would believe this, you know, that I'm suddenly into blokes."

"You're right, there is no way you are smooth enough to pull that off."

"Like hell I'm not!"

"No, you're right, forget it, you can't do this."

"Care to wager on that?"

It was possibly the wrong thing to suggest, if Sophia's manic grin was anything to go by, but before he could take it back, she was shaking his hand and making him promise a future favour if he failed. He could not imagine anything worse.

"To be fair, I should pick the victim. Just to make sure it's not someone you already have sway over," she hastened to add when Arthur wanted to argue.

It was too late to wimp out now. "Fine."

Sophia practically crowed, her eyes sweeping the brainlessly chattering student body. Her finger circled and dismissed one random guy after the next. Then it stopped. "Him."

Afraid of what he was going to see, Arthur looked over. Sure enough, she was not pulling any stops to beat him at this. "Dumbo? Absolutely not."

"You did say *anyone*."

Arthur sighed and stared at the kid. Skinny and odd looking, with ears that stuck out like satellite dishes. With absolutely no dress sense and the worst case of table manners ever seen. If ever there were an impossible task, then this was it. "Fine."

"You should go ask him out then, before some other hot stud scoops him up."

He snorted, unable to imagine anyone ever finding that walking disaster attractive. At least the competition would be easy and no doubt Dumbo would be simply over the moon to have someone of Arthur's stature even look in his direction. Hell, he might even piss himself with joy.

Arthur slipped his sunglasses on and shifted to make himself more comfortable. "You should never rush a master at work. Besides, are you that eager to have me win?"

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Merlin startled out of his daydream at the heavy thump of books seconds before someone slid into the chair next to him. He sneaked a peak from the corner of his eye, just enough to make out a ridiculously expensive watch on an arm that could force his head into a toilet bowl.

He hunched his shoulders and turned a fraction away, opening more space between them and thinking invisible thoughts. Even so, he could feel the weight of the stare directed at him. He rubbed his feet together, managing to work his shoe laces loose, and his pencil fumbled out of his fingers.

The body next to his shifted and Merlin cringed. Instead of the expected shove, a hand popped into view right in front of his face. It was well formed, as far as hands go; broad palm, strong fingers, perfect nails that weren't as bitten to the quick as Merlin's own. A gleaming silver ring encircled the index finger. A finger that was now moving, rolling something between it and its fellows. Oh right, his pencil.

"Thanks," he muttered, heat creeping up his neck.

"You're welcome." Oh god, what a voice! Low, warm and if Merlin were anyone else, intimate. Yet with an amused, mocking lilt.

Merlin took a chance and looked up. The sun filtered in from behind the boy, stinging Merlin's eyes, but there was no way he wouldn't recognise the blonde hair, blue eyes and perfect jaw. Or the lips, curling up at the corners. Hell, blast and damnation!

"Hi," Pendragon said, leaning in even closer to bump Merlin's shoulder with his own.

Shite! "Uhm, hey?" Merlin responded, more a squeaked out question than an actual greeting. The grin that had been threatening to break spilled over Pendragon's face. It tempted and teased and Merlin could feel the flush all the way to his scalp now. Could such a thing contribute to early male pattern boldness? He didn't even know if there was a history of it in his family. Sure, his Uncle Gaius had a full head of hair, but having never met his biological father, there was no way to be certain.

Merlin looked away, casting a hasty glance around the class room to see if anyone noticed the interaction. To see if any of Pendragon's lackeys were watching. It smelled like a trap. Like failure and humiliation. Also a little like fear. It was a smell Merlin knew well.

"I'm Arthur," Pendragon continued, cool as you please and just, what the fuck?

Merlin jerked his head in a quick nod. As if there were anyone in Sixth-Form who didn't know him. Still, best to humour the man while planning his escape. It shouldn't be too difficult to confuse him and slip away, considering all the balls to the head Pendragon must have taken during the testosterone infused male bonding experience known as sports. Merlin could be sneaky. He could sneak with the best of them. He could out-sneak anyone. Well, everyone except for that utter twonker Geraint who Merlin was convinced had superhuman psychic-level geek tracking skills.

"You know, it's generally considered socially acceptable to respond with your own name during an introduction."

"I..." Merlin's looking for an exit reached frantic proportions. Itchy sweat beaded on the back of his neck and his hand ached from the white-knuckled grip he had on the desk. The bell rang, signalling the end of class, as well as the school day. His limbs felt heavy with relief, as well as his bladder, which reminded Merlin that he really, really needed to empty it before he made a bigger fool of himself. And then he would hide in the loo for at least an hour, which would hopefully be enough time for Pendragon to get bored with this game.

"Gotta go," he mumbled and raked his belongings together, wincing at the sound of paper tearing. He tripped over his untied shoelaces on his way out, sending him knocking into two girls and then a desk. His thigh burned where a sharp corner clipped him, but that was nothing against the heat in his ears when laughter popped up in the wake of his destruction.

*Fuck my life*, Merlin thought to himself, hobbling down the hall as quick as he could.

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"Not hooked our little prey yet, then?" were the first words Arthur heard when he entered the car park.

Sophia leaned back, her skirt riding up ridiculously high on her crossed thighs. Her lips curled around the tip of a cherry red ice lolly in a way that she no doubt thought was titillating. All Arthur could focus on was the fact that she had her arse planted right on the bonnet of his new car. "I've told you before, don't—" he began, but she quickly cut him off.

"Don't be a bore, Arthur." She slid off the car, one hand pressed to the gleaming silver paint job, leaving sticky trails behind.

He buffed at the smear with the arm of his jacket, only letting up when the shine was restored. Not even a month old and already the car meant more to him than most people he knew.

"Well?"

"Well what?" he asked, turning to look at Sophia again. She was not known for her patience and might even resort to drastic measures if she felt she was being ignored.

"I notice you are all alone."

"Stating the obvious, one of the many services you offer."

Her eyes narrowed in warning, reminding Arthur to watch himself. As frustrated as he was about the brush off he had received, he couldn't take it out on Sophia. She hadn't been wrong about his influence not being as far reaching as it had always been, and already he had reason to question how many of his friends were really his friends, he had to hold on to any of them he could. Besides, his father had business dealings with Sophia's father and there would be hell to pay if Arthur threw a spanner in the gears. He cleared his throat. "All part of my method."

"Your method is to strike out?"

"My method is that of a slow seduction."

Her lips quirked unbelievably, but at least she kept her opinion to herself and only gestured towards the car. “Give me a lift home?”

Arthur nodded, not pointing out that he took her home practically every afternoon. He opened the door for her like the gentleman he was.

“What’s the second phase of your method?” she asked as soon as he slid into the driver seat. Before he even had time to buckle up.

“Well, clearly I can’t just ask him out, he’d be so overwhelmed his head might just explode.”

“Like his head needs to be any bigger.”

“Exactly. We will have to be friends first. Friends with benefits would count as turning him gay, wouldn’t it?”

Sophia considered it while applying her lipstick with help from the rear-view mirror. “If there were literal benefits, yes. Are you actually planning on shagging him?”

“What? No!” Arthur choked.

“Then how will you prove you converted him?”

Arthur grunted, unsure of the answer himself. He pointedly ignored the vaguely predatory look Sophia shot his way. She was getting far too interested in all this gay business for his liking. “Don’t you worry about that, I have a plan.”

“If you say so. Just remember, time is money and you only have a month in which to perform this miracle.”

“What? A month? You never said anything about a time limit.”

Sophia shrugged and idly buffed her fingernails against her skirt. “No point in dragging it out forever, if you can’t close the deal in that time it’s unlikely that you ever will. I would like to cash in on that favour before we have to sit exams, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Fine.”

He pulled up in front of the Tír-Mòr house and drummed his hands impatiently on the wheel. Sophia leaned over to press her lips against his cheek with a sticky slide. She stayed close, her breath tickling against his skin. “Good luck with Mervin.”

It took two seconds for him to figure out what she was talking about and by that time she was already sliding out of the car. “Is that his name?” he called after her. Sophia just shrugged and continued on up the driveway, blonde curls bouncing with each step.

Arthur made a face at no one in particular. Poor guy, had his parents known he would grow up to be an awkward geek and figured they might as well make his life complete hell?

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“Wanna get high?” Will asked, tilting his head back to look at Merlin upside down. He was flat on his back on the floor, with his legs draped over the foot of the bed. A bed containing the sprawling figure of Nimeuh who shifted to the side in invitation.

Merlin shook his head in answer to both questions. He was not in the mood for the first and still had the fuzzy memories from the last time they had all smoked together. He shuddered at the ghostly reminder of Nimeuh’s hands under his shirt and her hot breath against his neck. She had been odd around him for days afterwards, acting like a few sloppy kisses meant something, like they would be the new power couple. The new Pendragon and Gwen.

He snorted and dropped down on an old sofa on the opposite side, the cushions too flat to provide much of a bounce. Or cushioning, for that matter. He grimaced and dug a rectangle of plastic out from underneath his kidney.

“You found my cellphone,” Will chortled. Clearly they had gotten started without Merlin. “Been looking for it for months.”

“You called me from it yesterday,” Nimeuh pointed out.

“You sure?”

She kicked half-heartedly at his shin and then left her foot there, resting on Will’s leg. Merlin cocked an eyebrow at her; last he heard she was getting up close and personal with that Tristan fellow. Then again, Nimeuh was a bit of a slag.

“Just as well,” Will continued as if the conversation hadn’t hit a lull. “Am all out anyway. Wanna go see a film?”

“No,” Merlin and Nimeuh answered together and then grinned at each other, any possible awkward forgotten.

“How was your day, dear?” she asked with a curiously sharp look and no small amount of fake sweetness.

Merlin shrugged and flung an arm across his face, hiding any possible traces of red as he thought about it. The darkness was comforting, the air sweet with traces of smoke. “Fine.”

“Better than that twat Prince High and Mighty, right?” Will asked, his voice rising in pitch and the giggle about to burst out plainly evident. “Did you see the row he had with his bird? Well, not his bird anymore, but did you see it? I never saw anyone turn that red. Thought his head would explode. Shower us all with slimy pink goo.”

“Gross.”

“Nah, would serve him right, prancing around like he owns the bleeding place. Who does he think he is, anyway? Not like he ever accomplished anything in his life other than to ride his dad’s coattails.”

Merlin smirked and pretended he didn’t hear the rustle of cloth and the squeak of old springs. “Don’t hold back, Will, tell us how you really feel.”

He didn’t, of course, and when a few minutes later the sounds of slick sucking noises filled his ears, Merlin dug his earplugs out of his pocket. His fingers moved sure over the buttons, switching on his

favourite band loud enough to drive out any other unpleasant sounds. With any luck he would fall asleep and they would wake him when everyone was fully clothed again and it was time to go home.

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Arthur avoided eye contact with the students who halted their studies to turn and stare. He imagined he could feel their curiosity like a wave pressing against his back. Ignoring it, he gritted his teeth and continued making his way through the library.

He followed the directions the library assistant had provided as best he could, but the numbering system had never made much sense to him and it was more through sheer determination that he eventually found his target.

The kid was seated on a tiny stool, his legs pulled up to almost under his armpits and a book balanced on his bony knees. His lips moved, soundlessly forming the words he read, and his index finger tapped almost impatiently against the page.

Arthur hung back, not wanting to disturb him just yet. Instead he took a moment to really look at this guy he was going to have to pretend to be madly in love with. There were so many improvements that needed to be made before anyone would even believe Arthur would be interested in him. The hair, for one. Also, the clothes, the choice of after school activities, the posture—how was Mervin even going to walk after sitting stooped over like that?

“We should go shopping first, I think.”

Mervin screamed—not a yell or a grunt, but an honest to goodness high pitched girly scream—and snapped his book shut, with his finger still in it. Then he promptly tumbled off the stool.

Arthur choked back a laugh, covering his mouth with his hand to hide the grin he could not stop.

For a moment, Mervin stayed where he was, flat on his back with one leg still dangling over the stool. He stared wide-eyed at Arthur. Then he started swearing.

Arthur winced. It was an impressive stream of profanity, no doubt, but that would need to be addressed as well, there were certain standards to maintain, after all.

As a show of friendship, Arthur held out a hand to help him up. Mervin stared at it like it was the foulest thing he had ever seen. He made no move off to get off the floor. Arthur sighed. “Perhaps the manners should take priority. Really, Mervin, are you that socially inept? I am merely trying to help.”

“*Merlin*,” he hissed between clenched teeth.

Arthur’s mouth formed a quiet “oh”. As names went, it was not actually an improvement, but the expression on Merlin’s face clearly said that pointing that out would be very much unwelcome. “*Merlin*,” Arthur said instead, inclining his head as was proper when making acquaintance. He turned his hand palm up to draw attention to the fact that it was still out stretched.

Instead, Merlin scrambled back on his elbows and pushed himself up with a grunt. He grabbed the dropped book and stuffed it back into the bookcase with short, jerky motions. Then having shot Arthur another dirty look, he attempted to shove past him.



Having none of that, Arthur blocked the exit with his arm, sure that the skinny fool wouldn't be able to budge him. "Are you always this rude or is it me specifically you have a problem with?"

"What's my problem? What's yours? What. Do. You. Want?"

They were nearly nose to nose by then and Merlin's eyes were a wonder to see lit up with anger. Up close he was actually not as unfortunate looking as Arthur had first thought. There was definite potential just waiting to be unleashed. It was also the first time Arthur had seen him completely still and not in some sort of twitchy motion.

"I extended a hand of friendship, in case you were not aware of what that was."

"Why? You don't even know my name! Why would you possibly want to be friends?"

Arthur opened his mouth to say something, but Merlin was not done talking yet and simply cut him off.

"I can't tutor you if that's what you're after. Just because you found me in the library doesn't actually mean anything, I am not actually that good in any of my courses."

"Please, like I need any tutoring," Arthur huffed. Merlin made a 'well then?' sort of motion, prompting him to get to the point. Oh well, might as well come right out and say it, it wasn't like he had a whole lot of time for beating around the bush. "I've noticed you around and I wanted to meet you."

"*You noticed me?*"

"Yes. Also, you are kind of cute when you're angry."

"Cute?" The high pitch was back in Merlin's voice, sounding like his vocal cords had seized up and were trying to claw their way out of his throat. He backed off, not far enough or fast enough to be offended like everyone else Arthur knew would react. Interesting.

"I... you... cute?"

And what a good thing it was he didn't need the tutoring, the kid clearly had difficulty rubbing two brain cells together. Arthur took a deep breath and reminded himself that this was a necessary evil and that the end result would make it all worth it.

Outwardly he made himself smile. It wasn't the usual flirty smile Arthur would have used on a girl, but it would have to do. "Think about it. Maybe next time we meet you'll actually say hello."

He left Merlin like that, eyes still wide with surprise and mouth hanging open. There was no need to fake the grin when Arthur walked away.

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Merlin didn't say hello the next time they met, less than twenty four hours later. He didn't say anything, just stood there like a rabbit caught in the headlights, heat creeping up his neck.

Pendragon's, "Morning Merlin," sounded sincere enough and was accompanied by a wide smile and a lingering gaze. His eyebrows lifted challengingly when Merlin said nothing back and just kept staring like

a fool, but instead of taking it to heart, his smile stretched impossibly wider. "I am not giving up hope," he said and then he was gone, swallowed up in the throng of his mates.

"Did Pendragon just eye-fuck you?" Will asked incredulously.

"What?" Merlin squeaked and by then the blush was all the way to his ears, he could feel them glowing. "No! He probably just mistook me for someone else."

"Like who? His ex? Oh yeah, because you look just like her. You know, aside from the face and the hair and the clothes and the complete lack of tits. Also, he said your name!"

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"Merlin—"

"It's nothing!"

Will shared a look with Nimeuh, who had been uncharacteristically silent throughout the whole exchange. Merlin ignored them both and walked away as quick as he could without it looking like he was running. How could he possibly explain what was going on to them when he couldn't even explain it to himself?

Pendragon was fucking with his head, that was all it was. All it could possibly be. None of it meant anything because there was just no way... was there? Merlin shook his head to himself and slipped into the class, early enough to be the first person there. No, it was definitely a trick. Something Pendragon and his mindless hanger-ons were probably laughing themselves blue about right that minute.

Prat.

He took his seat, staring at his clasped hands on the desk. Merlin didn't notice the other students arriving and milling around him. Nor would he be able to recall later what the lesson had been about.

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He found Merlin in the library again, books spread out in a half circle around him and his head hanging forward, the hands in his hair the only thing to support it.

"I couldn't help but notice you violated the terms of our agreement this morning," he said as he slid into the empty seat next to him. "Do I need to explain the concept again? You did mention learning is not your forte, after all."

Merlin looked up, eyes bugging in a way that said he still couldn't figure out just where the universe went wrong. Arthur sighed. Clearly he had his work cut out. "Good afternoon, Arthur," he said, badly imitating Merlin. It didn't so much as earn him a smile; Merlin went right on staring. Arthur sighed again. "We don't have to do this the hard way, you know?"

At a table across from them a girl lifted her head to give them a withering look. "Shh!"

His top lip curled in annoyance, but she had already turned back to her work. Arthur huffed and scooted closer so his elbow was pressed right up against Merlin's. Merlin jerked away like he had been burned, shoving his books off the table with a loud crash.

"Shh!"

"Shush yourself!" Merlin snapped. He retrieved his books and shot Arthur a sideways glare. "This may be funny to you, but this is my life."

Arthur's mouth dropped open. "What's your problem?"

"You. You're my problem. Don't you have a ball to throw or kick or something?"

"No, I don't actually. There's nowhere else I need to be right now."

Merlin sighed heavily as if the universe was conspiring to make his life difficult. Across from them, the girl gathered her things with a mutter about the lack of respect for rules and other people. Arthur watched her leave with no small amount of relief. "Cunt."

There was a snort from next to him, and he could have sworn he saw a smile teasing at Merlin's lips, but when Arthur turned to look at him fully, there was nothing there but a scowl. It looked wrong on him. Arthur cleared his throat, pointedly not thinking about how much he would rather like to make Merlin laugh. "Owain is having a party this weekend, would you like to go with me?"

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Merlin's head snapped up at the invitation. There was a vague hopeful expression on Arthur's face. Fake innocence, Merlin told himself. *Very come into my den, said the spider to the fly.* The end scene from *Carrie* flashed through his mind. Only in his case Arthur and his friends would be more inventive than pigs' blood and it wasn't like Merlin had super powers of his own to defend himself with. Oh, how he wished he had.

He reigned himself in before his imagination could go off on a tangent of what he could accomplish with a magical ability. "No. Definitely no. Hell no, even."

Arthur's eyebrows dropped and his lips thinned out. Which Merlin did not notice because he wasn't staring, thank you very much. "Why not?"

"Would there be adult supervision?"

"No," Arthur replied, soft and confused and not at all kind of cute.

"Exactly."

"Are you only allowed to go to parties where there are chaperones?"

"I don't go to parties where your tosspot friends have the luxury of beating the blue stuffing out of me without someone running to fetch the Headmaster. My life may not seem all that exciting, but I'd rather not lose it, if it's all the same to you."

The confused wrinkle between Arthur's eyes was still there. Merlin looked down at his textbook, trying to will the words to stop blurring so he could just bloody concentrate.

"My friends are not... they wouldn't do that."

Merlin snorted. “They would. They have!”

“No one will try anything, I promise.”

“Oh yeah, that puts my mind right to rest. Because you have never picked on any of my friends. Never humiliated Will.”

Arthur’s hand appeared in his line of vision, unceremoniously plucking the book from Merlin’s hands and closing it. He leaned even closer and Merlin could feel the puffs of air against his neck with each exhale. A hand grabbed the back of his chair, just holding on, not touching Merlin in any way, but it was *right there*. Merlin swallowed thickly.

“It was just a game, Merlin, I didn’t intend any harm.”

“You pulled his trousers down. In front of the entire netball team!”

He turned to glare then, catching Arthur having to bite back a grin. Fucking prat.

Arthur’s face smoothed out, back into that fake innocence that made Merlin’s teeth ache with the need to punch him in the nose. Forgetting for a moment that Merlin had never punched anyone in his life and would probably do more damage to his hand than Arthur’s face, which was likely made of rock.

“That was a long time ago.”

“It was last week.”

“Look,” Arthur began, clearing his throat. Merlin couldn’t pinpoint whether it was out of discomfort or amusement. Neither would surprise him. “I am sorry, it was wrong of me and I would very much like to make it up to you. To him. To you both. You are more than welcome to bring your friends.”

Oh yes, because wouldn’t that be a fun conversation to have.

He shook his head again and quickly gathered his things.

“Planning on running away again?”

That stopped Merlin half way out of his chair. It was exactly what he intended to do, but the words were a taunt and Merlin was not exactly known for his self control. “From you?” he asked.

Arthur spread his hands noncommittally and smirked. Actually fucking smirked like all the power was in his hands. Merlin completed his rise and looked down his nose at Arthur. “Fine, we’ll be there.”

The answering smile had absolutely nothing to do with the ache Merlin suffered in his belly for the rest of the afternoon.

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It came as no surprise that Sophia was once again lounging by his car when Arthur finally finished up, with her bum blessedly off the paintjob this time. The sight of her was not enough to bring his spirits down. Not even the strain in his bowling arm from cricket practice could do that.

“Looked good out there today,” she said by way of greeting.

Arthur grinned. His wrist spin had been a thing of beauty and Lancelot had never learned to successfully bat against his leg break. Life was good.

“My, my, we are certainly in high spirits today. Now if only you managed to snag your prey, then we would have real cause to celebrate.”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

“Not a chance.”

Arthur shrugged and ran a loving hand across the door of the car before snagging the handle. Sophia moved around him, so close that her breasts brushed against his back. She took her sweet time stepping out of his space to give him enough room to open the door.

With a clenched jaw, Arthur waited her out. Another of her games, and he was not going to give her the satisfaction of getting to him.

“Well, what do you know?” she asked, syrupy and amused and still not getting into the car so he can drop her off and have some peace and quiet to himself.

Arthur followed her gaze.

Merlin crept out through the gates. His head swung like a snake’s as he gazed both ways. Having judged the coast clear enough, he hoisted a bag over his shoulder, staggering a little before trudging towards them in an excellent display of horrible posture.

“Not going to give your boy a ride, Arthur?” Sophia asked. Loudly.

Sure enough, Merlin’s head snapped up and his eyes widened when he caught sight of them. An embarrassed flush spread over ridiculously well-shaped cheekbones. Arthur found himself smiling. “You offering to walk home so I can?”

He didn’t turn to see, but he could feel the heat of Sophia’s glare. It was of no consequence, Arthur was transfixed by the small smile curving the corners of Merlin’s lips. Which were also ridiculously well shaped. How had Arthur not noticed before? Not that he spent a lot of time checking out other guys, but still.

Merlin greeted him with a nod and an, “Arthur,” before continuing on his way, head lifted this time and his shoulders a straight line.

When Arthur turned, Sophia looked completely gobsmacked. He stifled the urge to cackle like a warty cartoon witch and prodded her in the side to get her moving. She was quiet the entire way to her house.

Life was good indeed.

::

“You agreed to *what*?”

Merlin cringed, his ears ringing from Nimeuh's shriek. Her face had turned red and she looked three seconds away from throttling him. Merlin took a step back. Will was not much help either; his mouth was pinched and he kept shivering like he was about to vomit.

Just to be safe, Merlin took another step away from them.

"He promised nothing bad would happen."

"Pendragon? And you believed him?"

Merlin smiled uneasily and rubbed the back of his neck. There was no way to explain why exactly he had said yes, he certainly wasn't going to admit that he had been taunted into it. "He even apologised for the thing with Will's trousers the other day."

Will's face crumpled together even more. Nimueh absentmindedly patted his arm, muttering something about his blood pressure. She took a deep, calming breath herself. "Merlin, I know you mean well—"

"I know, all right? There's an a ninety nine percent chance that we show up and they are all waiting for us with their fathers' golf clubs in their hands. I know, I do. It's just... we can't keep running and hiding from them."

"Don't see why not," Will muttered.

Nimueh ignored him and took Merlin's hands in hers, squeezing gently. "If we die this weekend, I am going to haunt you. I will rattle chains and move furniture. You will never get another night's sleep."

Merlin snickered, half amusement and half relief. "If we die this weekend, I'll be dead as well; I don't think I will care about sleep."

"In the next life then."

"You cannot be serious!"

Nimeuh rolled her eyes at Will's outburst, sharing a conspiring look with Merlin. "We shouldn't go into the dragon's den unarmed."

Merlin nodded along, just happy that he wouldn't have to try and convince them. He didn't worry about Will, one way or another Nimeuh always managed to get him to agree to her schemes. And did she ever scheme. Very few of them worked out to her advantage, but she didn't let that stop her from trying.

It was only three minutes later that her words actually sank in. "Wait, what? Armed?"

::

Arthur was drunk. He knew this, could tell by the way his lips tingled and the lack of feeling in his fingertips. That last shot Kay had given him didn't even taste like alcohol anymore. "Burned my taste buds off," he said to the person nearest him, some random pretty girl he didn't know. Possibly she was Percival's date.

He smiled at her. Her fingers tugged on a lock of hair, pushing it behind her ear, and she smiled back. Yeah, he still had it.

"Have to pee," he told her, struggling to his feet. He kept one hand on the wall to keep his balance and so he could find his way down the hall. Occasionally he came across someone who used the said wall to lean on. He shoved them unceremoniously out of his way, barely even hearing the angry shouts in his wake.

Afterwards, he had trouble getting his trousers zipped up. "S the fingers," he complained to no one.

He washed his hands. Got them wet, at least. The image staring back at him from the mirror made him cringe. He looked crazed. His mouth was open from having lost his ability to breathe through his nose and his pupils were so blown even he had difficulty telling that his eyes were blue.

One foot in front of the other, he told himself. Easier said than done when the carpet was bumpy and uneven. When last had the house been cleaned?

Hands settled on his hips and Geraint let out a bark of laughter right in his ear. Sophia crowded in from the other side, her perfume making Arthur's stomach twist and her mouth shining from too much gloss.

Arthur watched her lips part and had a fuzzy thought about what it might be like to kiss her. Then she spoke and shattered the moment. "New boyfriend stand you up?"

Geraint laughed again, still clinging to Arthur like a barnacle. "And after you gave us that speech about making nice."

"Have you seen Morgana?" he asked, ignoring their taunts. "Think I've had enough, I need to go lie down."

"We found an empty bedroom," Sophia whispered. A key dangled from her fingers. "You could join us, there's a nice big bed."

Ooh, bed. Wouldn't that be heavenly? If the attached price tag was less steep. He shook his head, disentangled himself from their grasping hands and continued his stagger down the hall. He made it so close to the front door, could see it within reach if he took just three more steps.

"Just gonna rest a bit," he promised himself. His back thumped against the wall and that was the funniest thing ever. He slid down, still laughing.

The closed door mocked him and he shut his eyes to block the sight.

Every so often some climbed over him to get in or out the door, but Arthur ignored them. There was absolutely nothing that could get him to move, he refused.

Hands grabbed him by the upper arms, tugging. Goddamn Geraint. "Don't wanna have sex," he growled, shrugging the touch off.

"I wasn't offering."

That...was not Geraint. Arthur cracked one eye open and blinked rapidly to focus his vision. "Merlin? You're late."

"And you appear to have had one too many."

"One. Five. 's all the same." He didn't resist again when Merlin pulled on his arms. Rising took much more effort than sitting down had. Arthur decided he didn't like it much.

Merlin staggered a bit under his weight. Arthur hooked an arm over his shoulder helpfully. Merlin buckled again, but did an admiral job of keeping them both upright.

"Get a room," some random little snot said in passing. Quite snottily at that. Also, not a bad plan.

Arthur snickered. Merlin's skin was warm against his face, dampening where his breath touched. Arthur snuffled and forced his neck to carry his head's weight. No napping yet, there were snots to convince.

"Have you met my boyfriend Mervin?" he announced to the room at large. Those closest to them turned to stare.

"Merlin."

Arthur nodded. "Right, Merlin. My boyfriend Merlin."

"What? No, that's not what I meant. Arthur!"

Something wasn't right. Wasn't Merlin happy? No, Arthur decided, leaning closer until they were practically nose to nose so he could see Merlin better, that was definitely not a happy face. It was kind of an indigestion face. Maybe Merlin hadn't realised he was Arthur's boyfriend.

He smiled. "Merlin, my... er, my lamb," he whispered and seized the back of Merlin's head. Hair curled messily around his fingers. It was oddly... nice. Merlin didn't think so; he kept looking at Arthur like he'd gone mad. Like everyone else, he needed to be convinced.

Arthur dragged Merlin closer and pressed their lips together. It was off centre and Merlin was taller than any of Arthur's girlfriends had ever been. Had lips just as soft, though. Arthur still couldn't taste anything and he was barely aware of what his numb tongue was doing, but it was still the best kiss ever.

"Am just gonna rest my eyes a bit," he told Merlin when he pulled back. His chest burned and his head spun. There was a voice in the back of his mind that told him he needed to breathe through his nose while kissing, but it was faint and far out.

He dropped his forehead onto Merlin's shoulder and then there was nothing.

::

Merlin stood as if rooted to the spot. There was a strip of bare wall that if he just kept focussing on, he might be able to forget what had just occurred. A task that would be exponentially easier to accomplish if Arthur wasn't draped over him like Merlin was his favourite pillow.

There was only shocked silence beneath the pounding beat of the music, but Merlin could hear the spectators loud and clear. They were wondering what the hell just happened. He wondered that himself.

"Little help here," he begged when Arthur's dead weight became too much, threatening to drag them both to the ground.



Tristan surprised him by uncoiling himself from around Nimueh for the first time since he had picked them up, and grabbed hold of Arthur. Merlin wriggled out from underneath Arthur's arms and took a step back. His breath raced. Bewilderment, he told himself. Definitely not the kiss. It wasn't even a kiss, really, it was just...

He lifted his fingers to his mouth, still damp; a drunk Arthur was a sloppy Arthur.

Merlin caught Will's narrowed gaze and wiped at his lips instead. Will just smirked knowingly. "You still say I was wrong about the eyefucking?"

It was not a conversation he wanted to have in the middle of enemy territory. Hell, it was not a conversation he wanted to have ever. Instead Merlin cleared his throat, flattened down the hair Arthur's fingers had burrowed in and squared his shoulders. "What do we do with him?"

"What do you mean?" Will asked. "We leave his arse here and get out before any of his mates come looking for him."

"We can't, what if something happens to him?"

"What if something does? He's a wanker, who cares?"

Merlin sighed and looked at Nimeuh, who only shrugged and motioned to him that he was on his own. She crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her bottom lip out in a pout, clearly miffed that there would be no opportunity to unleash her plans for violence. Or hopefully non, if Merlin moved quickly enough to herd them back out before she could pick a fight and make Tristan feel compelled to come to her defence. He was a trained boxer, and everyone else was tripping over their own feet drunk; it could only end in a bloodbath.

"Fine," he muttered. "Just look after him for a moment so I can find someone to help him, then we'll go."

Gwen smiled when she saw him and waved him over to where she was holding court. As always, the sight made him smile. Gwen was the best person he knew and if anyone deserved to have the world at their feet, it was her. Of course, she had been the first person Merlin met when he started Lower Sixth, so he might be biased.

He grinned widely and nodded at the few faces in the group he knew the name of. "Gwen, could I perhaps speak with you? In private?"

A blonde girl he didn't know giggled like it was the funniest thing she ever heard. Gwen rolled her eyes like she couldn't believe she had to put up with such stupidity. "Of course."

She squeezed Lance's shoulder on the way up.

"Er, perhaps you as well, Morgana, if you don't mind?" he asked uncertainly. He had met her through Gwen, but they weren't exactly friends. At least not the kind that knew each other well enough to be on favour asking terms.

She frowned and stood up as well, not pausing to say goodbye to anyone. Merlin wiped damp on his jeans. Her expression was hard, more closed off than he had ever seen. For the first time, he wondered if she resented Gwen's rise to fame.

"I hate to ask this after everything," he said as soon as they were out of earshot.

"You can ask me anything, Merlin." Gwen's face coloured at her own words and her eyes cut shyly away. "Well, not anything. Obviously not anything."

Merlin smiled and quickly continued before Gwen could say anything more awkward. For someone who had a way with people, she often seemed to find it difficult to chat with him. "It's Arthur."

"Of course it is," Morgana muttered.

"He's pissed. I mean, he's really, really plastered. Like, do something he'll regret in the morning levels of sloshed. I can't just leave him here."

Morgana looked at him closely, nodding just as Merlin considered shifting his weight nervously. "You can't take him home, his father will kill him if he sees."

"Could you...? I mean, living next door and all?"

She shook her head. "My father practically lives in Uther's pocket, if we get caught he'll kill us both."

Merlin cast a hopeful look at Gwen, but there was no luck there either. "I can't. Lance."

The three of them sighed as one. After a moment's silence, Merlin realized the girls were looking at him pointedly. "What?" he asked suspiciously. "No. Oh no."

"It's the only way, Merlin. None of his friends will be bothered to take care of him. They're kind of bastards, if you hadn't noticed."

"And it's my problem?"

"You could have left him there," Morgana pointed out.

Merlin sighed again, knowing she had him. "Fine, but he's sleeping on the floor."

::

He was dying. Or possibly already dead. Please let him be dead. Unless this was the afterlife and he faced an eternity feeling like gum on the bottom of someone's shoe. Gum that had been chewed in a mouth full of rotten teeth. And then post getting stuck on the bottom of said shoe, was used to walk through a chicken coop.

"Will you be quiet?" someone bitched.

Arthur groaned, the sound amplified in his head until he thought his brain would escape out his nostrils. He rolled over to bury his face further in the pillow. The lumpy pillow. On a bed that was most definitely not his own luxuriously comfortable one. That wasn't a bed at all, come to think of it.

He was on the floor! He tried to vocalise as much, but all that came out was, "mmetheflr."

There was a rustle of covers when someone turned over.

Arthur reached out a blind hand, too afraid of what would happen if he opened his eyes. His fingers encountered something soft and springy; a mattress. He bit back the relieved groan, sure that his own breath would knock his lights out, and dragged himself closer. He snagged his pillow as an afterthought and hoisted himself onto the heavenly softness, sprawling face first over it.

“What are you doing?” the voice screeched again, right in his ear.

He turned his head slowly, more in an attempt to burrow closer to the heat pressed up all along his side than wanting to answer. He made a shushing noise. Or thought he made it, couldn’t really be sure. A wave of nausea gripped his stomach and it took a couple of heavy inhales through his nose before it settled. He could taste bile at the back of his throat, but as long as he didn’t have to get up to vomit, everything was right in the world.

The heater next to him squirmed, threatening to make Arthur’s stomach rebel again. With a pitiful groan, he draped an arm over it and pinned it to the mattress. It... them, because even with his head pounding and what was left of last night’s dinner attempting to crawl up his throat, he could still tell that the squirming thing was definitely a human body.

Not Gwen, because she would never and even if she would, not with him. “Soph?” he mumbled.

“No, you prat.”

Ah, a bloke then.

Wait, what?

Arthur’s head snapped up, feeling like it wanted to snap right off. The urge to puke was almost overwhelming. His memory of how he had come to be in this state was fuzzy at best. Sophia was always trying to set him up for shit, but if she had managed to talk him into getting in bed with Geraint, he was going to kill her. Then himself.

Only, it wasn’t Geraint staring back at him with wide, horrified blue eyes. Geraint didn’t have blue eyes.

“Oh, it’s you. That’s all right then.” The relief of it all sapped the last of Arthur’s strength and he dropped back onto his stomach, shifting slowly to make himself more comfortable and tightening his arm around ribs sorely lacking in padding.

::

Merlin stayed stock still. Arthur’s arm around him was heavy and the drool puddling against the shoulder Arthur’s face was pressed into, more than a little disgusting. He had to get out of there. There were no other options; just because a drunken Arthur couldn’t be arsed with who he fell on didn’t mean a sober and hung over one won’t freak out and attempt to throttle Merlin. He was under no delusions about who would emerge victorious from a fight between the two of them.

He gently placed his thumb and forefinger on Arthur’s wrist, one on each side, and tried to shift it. Slowly so as not to disturb Arthur.

Arthur snuffled, rubbing his nose against Merlin’s shirt. Merlin froze again, heart hammering in his throat. He did not want to look and see if there had been reason for Arthur’s wipe. Really, he didn’t. He looked anyway.

One of Arthur's eyes cracked open—or possibly both, Merlin could only see the one—and glared at him. Very ineffectively due to the redness and slight tearing action.

“Stop wriggling,” Arthur said, his vocal cords sounding clogged with phlegm.

“Arthur—”

“Or I will roll over you and pin you to the bed until you pass out,” he continued, paying no heed to Merlin's attempted interruption.

Merlin bit his bottom lip to hold back the groan, and swallowed thickly. His heart still pounded, but not so much out of fear anymore. Arthur was a bit of a mess and the breath escaping his parted lips was potent enough to make Merlin's left eye twitch uncontrollably. Still, he was *Arthur*, and Merlin wasn't blind.

“I don't think,” he began, his own voice taking on an embarrassing scrape.

“Too early for thinking.” Arthur shifted, pushing up even closer against Merlin. His hand came up to cup Merlin's face, palm sticky with God knows what. “Sleep. Why are we on the floor anyway?”

“I... my mother's going through a redecorating thing.” He left it at that, not wanting to explain how said thing had led to his bed being broken and the kitchen almost burning down.

The new position put Arthur's hot, damp exhalations right against Merlin's neck. Neither of them said anything else and Arthur's breathing evened out, his body loose limbed and sprawling. There was absolutely no fucking way Merlin was getting any shut eye for the rest of the night.

::

The hand holding the spoon shook when Arthur brought it to his lips. The milk had a peculiar taste. It was fresh, Merlin's mum had said when Arthur commented on it, milked that very morning. He forced the spoonful of porridge into his mouth and tried his best to keep any of it from touching his tongue. Just the thought of the lack of pasteurising and preservatives made his stomach clench up.

Another reason to want to puke was the last thing he needed, not with the taste of whatever the fuck he drank still sour in the back of his throat. Or Merlin's mum's watchful gaze on him. Just how awkward was that?

She had caught him sneaking out of Merlin's room in the pale pre-morning light and while Arthur had stood rooted to the spot, his life practically flashing before his eyes, she had looked neither surprised nor mad. Instead she had smiled and ushered him into the kitchen and started questioning him about his education and what he wanted to do with his life. It was... nice. She actually listened without simply assuming he would follow in his father's footsteps.

He ignored the cup of tea at his elbow; while black, it had the distinct taste of being burned. Arthur wasn't sure how in the process of boiling water and dropping in a tea bag one could burn the brew. He had watched her do it and still he could not figure out which step was the one to go wrong.

Still, the sitting at the kitchen table having a gab thing was pleasant. He wondered if this was what it felt like to have a mother. His own had died at childbirth and none of the string of stepmothers he'd had knew

what the words 'maternal instincts' even meant. The current one, Catrina the Flatulent, had no time in her busy gold digging schedule for anything other than shopping and cheating on his father with her creep of a boytoy. The one before her, Helen the Gap-toothed, had simply freaked him out; he had been fourteen at the time and in no need for her to sing him lullabies before bed.

Arthur forced another spoonful of the porridge into his mouth.

A door banged, signalling that the other occupant of the house had finally dragged himself out of bed.

Merlin joined them a few minutes later. If by joining one meant stumbling into the room with his eyes only partially open, hair standing straight up on one side and pillow creases on his cheek. He had a hand underneath a far too big T-shirt, scratching his stomach.

Arthur grinned, momentarily forgetting about the bowl of unwanted goop. The kitchen was brighter and there was even a bird singing outside the kitchen window. The gobsmacked expression on Merlin's face only made it better.

"What are you doing here?" Merlin all but growled.

"Merlin!"

The one word from Hunith was all it took for the fight to drain out of Merlin. His shoulders slumped and he hung his head like a dog expecting to be thwapped with a rolled up newspaper.

Still Arthur could not stop grinning. "Join us for breakfast?" he offered, pushing his three quarters full bowl across the table when Merlin collapsed in a chair.

Merlin rubbed at his eyes and glared blearily and completely ineffectively. Arthur stared in surprise when instead of complaining about it, Merlin dutifully finished the porridge. Using the exact spoon that less than five minutes ago had been in Arthur's own mouth.

Arthur gaped. He tracked the path of the spoon from bowl to parted lips and then back again to the bowl. It was only when he felt a heavy gaze that Arthur realized Hunith was watching him with nearly as much interest as he watched Merlin.

His cheeks unaccustomedly hot, Arthur looked down and distracted himself with playing with his teacup.

"You're still here," Merlin said, breaking the heavy silence that had fallen. There was no trace of accusation in the words, merely curiosity.

Arthur glanced up. A trickle of milk escaped due to Merlin speaking with his mouth full. It beaded at the corner of his lips and left a shiny trail when gravity got the best of it. Merlin's tongue peeked out, catching the drop before it went too far.

The air was too thick; Arthur had difficulty dragging a sufficient amount of it into his lungs. He shrugged and choked out, "So it seems."

Merlin kept looking, expecting a better explanation. Arthur ignored him, fingers clenching around his cup. His palms slid damply against the ceramic. His cup had large pink flowers painted on, cheerful and messy and quite possibly the ugliest design he had ever seen. Hunith's was a drab brown, clearly not part of the same set.

"What are you boys planning to do today?"

"I..." Merlin began.

"Shopping," Arthur rushed to cut him off. "It's Morgana's birthday soon and if I don't get her something brilliant she will never let me hear the end of it, it being her eighteenth and all."

Hunith nodded like she completely understood. She didn't ask who Morgana was, just as she hadn't enquired who Arthur was when she first saw him. What had Merlin been telling her? Arthur smiled, the one he used on Teachers and other authority figures, the one that ensured that he hadn't been in any significant trouble since he was eleven. "Merlin promised to help me pick something out."

Merlin's jaw dropped open.

"Then you should get cleaned up," Hunith chastened gently, patting Merlin's hand.

"Shouldn't you clean up as well?" Merlin asked through clenched teeth.

Arthur kept the bright smile in place. "I've been up for hours, I'm as clean as I'm going to get. I have a change of clothes at Owain's house and we have to swing by to get my car anyway."

Merlin's eyes narrowed even further, but he kept quiet and let his mother nudge him out of his chair.

::

He hated Arthur. Loathed and detested even. Not for being an absolute prat, though he was. Nor for looking energetic and well groomed despite wearing the clothes he had slept in and nursing a hangover, though that was true as well. No, the biggest reason Merlin hated Arthur was because everything came so easy to him.

Case in point, they had arrived at Owain's house—a long ten minutes walk during which Arthur griped continuously about Merlin's lack of car—and all it had taken was a, "You all know Merlin, right?" and a heavy hand on his shoulder for Arthur's friends to stop looking at him like they were mentally cracking their knuckles.

An entire year of trying to make nice and then hiding when that had failed, and Merlin had been unable to make any of them like him. Not that he thought they liked him now, but Geraint had smiled at him. Fucking smiled! At least that's what Merlin assumed the baring of teeth when he lifted his head from the table had been.

One of the girls placed a carrot and pecan muffin in front of Merlin and the rest of them went on chatting like he broke baked goods with them every day. Only the blonde who usually shadowed Arthur—Sophie or Sylvia or some such—seemed less than pleased to see him. In fact, she downright scowled, but no one paid her any attention.

He shredded the muffin into crumbs, looking for razor blades or discolouration that could be possible signs of arsenic or hemlock. Neither of which he would have been able to identify, but that was not the point. The point was there was no way Merlin was sticking anything they gave him in his mouth. He probably needed to wash his hands before they left as well.

“Ready to go?” Arthur asked right next to his ear.

Merlin jumped. Blood rushed to his face in a heated wave, prompted both by the fact that he had yelped a little in fright and the fact that Arthur leaned over his shoulder to snatch a piece of the muffin, his chest warm against Merlin’s back. God, he smelled good. Merlin’s mouth watered in a way the treat on his plate failed to inspire.

“Where are you off to?” Sophie-Sylvia-Some-Such asked, the sour expression completely wiped off her face. She was sweetness and light all of a sudden. It was possibly the scariest thing Merlin had seen all week.

“Shopping.”

“Fun! I’ll get my bag.”

“Two seater, Sophia,” Arthur reminded her, not sounding the least bit regretful of the fact. Having finished chomping his stolen treat, he prodded Merlin to get a move on.

Merlin swallowed thickly. Arthur’s hand was on his waist, pinkie finger brushing his hip with the lightest of touches. His knees felt weak and trembling—from the long walk, of course—and Merlin was only vaguely aware of people calling out goodbyes. He wasn’t even sure if he replied in any way.

As Arthur had said, his car was only a two seater and it clearly cost more than Merlin could ever hope to make in a life time. Merlin didn’t consider himself very knowledgeable about cars, but even he could tell that the flat, silver beast was of the highest quality. As were the leather seats, black with red trim, that hugged him like he had finally come home.

Arthur grinned at him, all sparkling blue eyes and imperfect teeth. “She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

Merlin nodded dumbly and tried to surreptitiously lift his feet to check if he had accidentally tracked dirt in.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the drive. Arthur tapped the steering wheel along to music Merlin couldn’t even identify, so he slouched down in his seat and picked at the frayed edge of a rip in his jeans. It was a reminder of how following along with one of Will’s plans could only lead to disaster. It was also oddly resistant to needle and thread; he had attempted to sew it up twice and both times the jeans just ripped again in the exact same place.

He jerked out of his thoughts when the car came to a sudden halt. The ride hadn’t felt nearly as long as it usually did when he made the trip with his mum. Mind you, she had the bad habit of stopping to admire peoples’ gardens.

Arthur was out of car in a flash and Merlin hastened to follow him, nearly smacking Arthur with the door when he reached for the handle at the exact time Merlin tried to clamber out. Arthur yelped and jumped back, then reached a hand up to rub at the back of his neck, not making eye contact.

“I... were you...?” he began, but Arthur shook his head without even waiting for the question.

“So I was thinking jewellery or maybe some shiny hair decorative thing. What do you think?”

Merlin shrugged. “I don’t really know about girl things. I’m not even sure Nimueh brushes her hair.”

Arthur's gaze lifted to Merlin's own head, a silent accusation that maybe Merlin and Nimeuh had that in common.

He thrust his hands into his back pockets to resist the urge to reach up and smooth down his hair. God, what an arse, Arthur didn't even need to speak to insult.

"Are you... you know?" Arthur asked.

"What?"

"You and... Nimeuh?"

Merlin stared at him blankly, not catching on until Arthur made a rude hand gesture, then he blushed so hard even his ears felt like they had caught fire. "No! I can't even... I mean... just no."

"Oh, good."

"Why is that good? Do you fancy her?" And wouldn't that just be perfect; the only thing better than being Arthur's charity project would be to be used to get close to Nimueh. "She has a boyfriend," he pointed out with more force than necessary.

"Nothing like that." Arthur smiled, a gentle curve of lips that gave away absolutely nothing and made Merlin's stomach contract sharply.

Arthur started walking before Merlin could get any additional questions in and he had to scramble to keep up.

::

"I mean, I could buy her a foil, but Morgana is dangerous with a sharp object in her hand," Arthur babbled, brought on by the obsessive need to fill the pressing silence that had fallen on them around the third shop they entered. "When we were younger, we took fencing lessons together that still feature in my nightmares. Not that she ever beat me, of course, but she was ruthless and rarely obeyed any of the rules."

"So the two of you really did grow up together?" Merlin asked softly. He was once again not making any eye contact, but there was a small smile playing along his lips.

"We did. You know we're neighbours, right? Well, Gorlois—that's Morgana's dad—moved in next door when I was around three. His wife had just left him to run off with their banker so our dads bonded over single fatherhood. There was no escaping her."

"She does seem like something else."

"She's the best. Don't get me wrong, she's a giant pain in the arse, but I really can't imagine my life without her. Just don't tell her I said that."

Merlin smiled again and fingered a three layer necklace with so many shiny bits that Arthur had to squint to look at it. "How about this? It would match her eyes."

"Her eyes?"



“Yes, the colour.”

Arthur cocked his head to the left and grunted. He supposed Merlin might have a point, though he couldn't be sure on the exact specifics. She had lightish coloured eyes, at least. He thought. But not quite as sparking as Merlin's. He pressed a fingertip against one of the shiny baubles.

“Will you please just make up your mind already?” Merlin snapped next to him, then had the grace to look embarrassed for his outburst. “Sorry, I didn't mean to yell. It's just we've been here for three hours!”

Was that all? Arthur checked his watch to confirm. Indeed, only three hours. He frowned at Merlin and received an adorably mulish glare in return. “You don't just buy the first best thing you see, Merlin.”

“But we've seen at least a hundred, isn't that enough to just buy something before we keel over dead?”

“You are exaggerating. Also, no one just dies from having to walk a couple of hours.”

“I will! First recorded death by tagging-along coming right up. My feet hurt and I'm thirsty.”

Arthur rolled his eyes at the dramatics. He ignored the fact that it was a similar complaint he received from everyone else he had ever brought along. People just did not have the stamina to keep up. Pitiful, is what it was.

He took pity on the groaning beanstalk next to him and gestured to the salesperson to ring the necklace up. Merlin made an audible sound of relief and leaned heavily on the counter, his elbow digging painfully into Arthur's ribs. Arthur didn't move away.

“Fine, I guess we can break for lunch, if you absolutely insist.”

Merlin was silent while they made their way over to Arthur's favourite café, but there was more of a bounce in his step. It made it painfully obvious how badly he was dragging his feet before, and Arthur wanted to smack himself on the forehead for not noticing.

He opened his mouth to say something—apologise, joke it off, anything—and then just stopped. “Shite.”

The problem with having a favourite hangout was that one's friends became masters at predicting just where to find you. And find them they did, the entire caboodle of them, too many to comfortably fit into Arthur's favourite booth, but doing a damn good job of trying.

“Maybe if we quietly slip away no one will notice,” he offered upon seeing the tightening of Merlin's jaw.

“Arthur!” No such luck.

Of course it was Sophia who spotted them first; the girl had fucking radar, Arthur was sure. He sighed and lifted a hand to wave half-heartedly back. She had a smirk on her face and gazed pointedly at the two of them, or more accurately, the space between them. Behind her Geraint climbed over the booth, disturbing a family of three, to fetch a couple of extra chairs.

Not about to let her have the last say, even if the words were silent, Arthur pasted a bright grin on his face and snagged Merlin's hand. His fingers slid into the spaces between Merlin's. Merlin's fingers were

longer than any girl whose hand Arthur had ever held, wider knuckles and a much rougher palm that caused a tingling everywhere it brushed Arthur's own.

He was vaguely aware that Merlin's mouth had dropped open, but ignored it in lieu of tugging him over to the overstuffed booth. Arthur was a tactile guy by nature and Merlin would do well to get used to casual touches in public.

Kay and Owain shifted to the empty chairs, opening enough space on the booth bench for them. Arthur inclined his head in silent gratitude, the motion so practiced he barely even noticed.

Though Merlin had met the gang earlier that morning, it wasn't like Arthur had taken the time for proper introductions. An oversight he quickly remedied by rattling off the names of his friends, whom all lifted their drinks in salute as they were called. That done, Arthur dropped onto the bench and pulled Merlin in next to him, letting go of his hand to drape an arm over his shoulder. "And you've all met my boyfriend, Merlin."

::

Boyfriend. *Boyfriend*. *Boyfriend*. Boy. Friend.

The word repeated itself over and over in Merlin's head, the pitch going higher each time until it sounded like the bad Bee Gees impression Will had done the last time they had all been high enough to think having a karaoke night would be fun.

Boyfriend.

That was what Arthur had called him. In front of all his friends. While holding his hand. Or right after holding his hand, but it was not the time to get technical. Arthur had given him a title. A title with meaning. A meaning Merlin had always thought he knew, but clearly he didn't because surely his view of what a boyfriend entailed could not be the same as Arthur's because there was just no way.

"Breathe," Arthur whispered in his ear, all warm puffs of air and much too close. "What's wrong with you?"

Merlin's mouth opened and closed like a fish's, but the words would just not come. Not with them all squished together so much that he could feel the entire length of Arthur's body against his side; chest to ankle. And most certainly not with a heavy arm pressing against the back of his neck, or with Arthur's fingers tapping lazily against Merlin's shoulder like everything was right in the world and Merlin was not two minutes away from a full blown panic attack.

The others were talking. Merlin had no bleeding idea what about, but their voices rose and fell in conversation, only barely heard over the sound of his own heart hammering in his ears.

He jumped when a cold glass was pressed into his hand.

"Drink," Arthur said, taking up his whispering again and making Merlin shiver. "They're really not that bad, no need to look like a rabbit caught in the headlights."

A hysterical giggle lodged in Merlin's throat. Arthur thought he was freaked out over hanging out with people who hated him. Arthur didn't see anything wrong with hanging off Merlin like... well, like a boyfriend.

His hand shook as he brought the glass to his mouth, bypassing the straw so he could gulp the banana milkshake—which, gross—down.

He drank until there was nothing left to drink and only then sat the glass back down, forcing his fingers to unclench from around it. His gaze lifted to find Sophia staring at him, eyes hard and mouth an ugly twist. He had never been so glad to see a look of hatred directed at him. It was enough to calm his nerves and stop his stomach from trying to crawl up his throat.

When next Arthur threw his head back with that booming laugh, Merlin even managed a small smile instead of the full body jerk it had caused the first time. Which is not to say that he didn't nearly bite through his own lip when the tip of Arthur's nose brushed against his ear.

Heat curled in Merlin's belly and leaked up into his face. He crossed his legs against the growing ache between them and tried to shuffle a bit further away from Arthur before anyone noticed. Why the hell was Arthur so close? And did he really need to be touching Merlin all the time?

The waitress came and went with Merlin having no clue just what he had ordered. He forced himself to focus on what was going on around him; the only thing more embarrassing than having Arthur paw at him would be to sit there like the socially awkward wallflower he actually was.

Arthur's friends responded favourably to his strained smile and attempts to make eye contact. The one Arthur had introduced as Kay kept looking right at Merlin while he told a story about what a fool Arthur had made of himself over one of his father's business acquaintances.

"That never happened," Arthur insisted, though he was laughing right along with the rest of them. "She was at least thirty five years old, I would never."

The group smirked knowingly and Arthur turned to Merlin and rolled his eyes to include him in the joke. It was surprisingly non-awkward after that. His order turned out to be the same salad Sophia had ordered, much to the laughing delight of everyone other than Merlin and Sophia, and with him paying attention now, the horrible milkshakes stopped in favour of soft drinks.

Merlin's side hurt from the laughing. Arthur was funny. His friends were funny. Who knew?

He was leaning into Arthur, the arm across his shoulders shifting every so often to squish Merlin companionably. He tilted his head back to better see his "boyfriend", cheek resting on Arthur's shoulder. Across the table someone cooed, reminding Merlin of what a complete lovesick twat he must look. He wanted to shift away, to straighten up and get some of his bearings back, but Arthur was returning his stare, eyes dark in the low light. Dark and promising, if Merlin read the heavy lidded expression right.

His hand moved before he even realised it, dropping away from the table and onto Arthur's leg. Rough denim tickled against the pads of his fingers where they slid over the material, tracing the curve of thigh to the seam running up the inside. Arthur's lips pursed and his eyes sparkled. Merlin couldn't breath.

"Hey now, none of that homo at the table."

Arthur's head snapped up and he glared at the speaker. Merlin dropped his gaze and squirmed back as far as he could go, not wanting to even know who it was that had broken the moment. His face burned and his hands shook when he wiped dampened palms against his shirt. What the hell was that? No, he knew

what it was, but what he couldn't figure out was if he was relieved to have been interrupted before they did something stupid or disappointed that the opportunity had passed.

::

Arthur was still bristling over Gareth's ill-timed commentary by the time the group broke up. He had done his best to laugh it off, but Merlin had gone stiff and silent next to him. Arthur could practically feel him over thinking and worrying.

Geraint hesitated before sliding out of the booth, head cocked and forehead furrowed in the silent question: *so, you're a poof now?*

Arthur twitched his shoulder and tilted his chin, so slight that it could mean nothing at all, but Geraint understood. He nodded once and that was it, the only conversation they would ever have on this topic. At least until such time that Geraint looked too deeply into the bottle again and on encouragement from Sophia, decided to get a little handsy.

That was a pitfall for another day, though, and for now Arthur was just glad to have jumped the first hurdle. Things had not gone nearly as badly as it could have and with his attentions made clear, no one would question what he was doing. Afterwards he planned to wave it off as a little harmless experimentation. And if they knew what was good for them, everyone would just keep their gobs shut.

He prodded Merlin out of the booth, but kept a hand wrapped around his wrist to keep him from making a break for it. They stood toe to toe, Arthur's friends milling around them, goodbye calls loud and heavy handed claps on the back. Arthur kept his gaze on Merlin until he raised his head and looked back challengingly. It was not as electric as it had been before the interruption, but there was still definitely something there.

Merlin had performed his role to perfection, had settled in and sold the relationship completely. Even the embarrassed flush to his cheeks at Gareth's words only lent credit to their newfound closeness. There was an angry narrowing to Merlin's eyes that told Arthur he did not appreciate being the centre of attention, but he kept his head up and didn't cower in a situation that had left Gwen a stuttering wreck the first time she had met his friends.

No, Merlin would not back off now. Arthur had him. He bet he could lean down for a kiss right then and there and Merlin would just let him. It should be a disgusting thought, though Arthur had made peace with what he might have to do to pull the scam off, but all it did was leave Arthur's mouth dry and his pulse racing. He was good. So good that apparently he had even managed to convince himself it was a real date.

"You did better than most," he told Merlin. There was no need to lean in without almost a dozen voices competing for attention, but he could not resist getting just that little bit closer.

"Boyfriend?" Merlin asked, breath smelling slightly of the banana milkshake Arthur had forced on him. It had been Kay's girlfriend's drink and the bint had pouted at Arthur for a full five minutes before ordering another.

"Are we not there yet?"

"Are you mad?" There was a definitive hiss to Merlin's voice, but still he didn't try to move or pull away from Arthur. "You can't just assume these things."

Arthur shrugged and wiped away a non-existent speck of dust from Merlin's cheek. Merlin stayed exactly where he was. Arthur was that good. "You agreed to go to my friend's party with me. We kissed."

"You were drunk!"

"You were late. You took me home with you."

"Only so your father wouldn't kill you or disown you or whatever you people consider the worst."

Arthur grinned. "You care about my well-being. Thank you for that, by the way. I don't think he would have resorted to killing or disowning, but there would have been a very tedious lecture and I am glad to have skipped it."

Merlin's eyes narrowed and he leaned even closer. Their chests brushed. Arthur could feel the hitch in Merlin's breath.

"The point being you shared your bed with me and then agreed to this date. In conclusion, we are now dating, that makes us boyfriends."

"You... no! I didn't share anything, you dragged your pissed carcass onto my mattress and were too heavy to shove off. Then you forced me into this, which is most definitely not a date, by putting me in a spot where I couldn't say no."

"Hmm," Arthur purred, stroking his tongue out to lick his bottom lip. "You know what they say about love and war."

"This is not love!"

"Not war either."

They were so close that Arthur's eyes crossed trying to focus on Merlin and he could no longer see most of his features, but the heat coming off Merlin's skinny body spoke volumes. It was exciting, a challenge that made Arthur want to storm the castle. Arthur forgot they were in a public setting, surrounded by people attempting to keep their lunch down. There was nothing else, only Merlin's defences. Arthur wanted to invade and conquer.

He crowded Merlin against a decorative pillar, half-expecting him to make a last bid for freedom; to turn his head or duck or something. But Merlin didn't, he held his ground and then their mouths pressed together.

There was a little bit of awkward while Arthur adjusted to kissing up instead of down, to the feel of narrow hips without a trace of roundness against his palms. No time to worry too much about it; Merlin's teeth pressed against Arthur's bottom lip, a sharp pressure that hit Arthur like a kick to the stomach, and then his tongue was in Arthur's mouth. It was not like kissing a girl at all, there was nothing sweetly accepting about it. Merlin's hands scrabbled at his shirt, pulling and twisting, and then grabbed Arthur's jaw in a tight grip and forced it wider open. It was not an *I had a good time let's do it again* first date kind of kiss, it was *now, now want you naked now*.

Arthur groaned, the sound muffled between their mouths and tried to press even closer, but there was nowhere left to go and no air remaining between them. Merlin was all hard, sharp angles, ribs and hipbones and oh god, ankle hooking behind Arthur's knee to pull him in even tighter.

A throat cleared behind them, pulling Arthur back to the reality of how this must look. The embarrassed flush only counted for half of the heat in his cheeks. He tried to extract himself, but Merlin had other ideas, his hands fisting in Arthur's hair.

"Merlin," he mumbled as best he could with their lips still smashed together and Merlin trying to suck his tonsils out.

Merlin made a noise that sounded like an honest to God growl. It made Arthur's trousers just that little bit tighter and his hips bucked. An answering hard length pressed against his thigh and that was just... holy shit!

He struggled out of Merlin's clutches, losing a few strands of hair in the process. Arthur didn't want to make eye contact, but there was no way he could look away, not with Merlin's eyes hot and dark and feeling like they were seeing into Arthur's soul. Nor could Arthur resist looking down at Merlin's wet, swollen mouth.

Arthur had kissed him. Really, really kissed him. And Merlin had kissed back! He had trouble processing just what that meant. Sure, it was just another sign that Arthur had the bet in his pocket, but *that kiss*.

"Wow," he whispered to himself.

Merlin grinned, wide and bright and Arthur had never felt so dirty in his life and he wanted more.

He swallowed thickly and turned away before temptation got the better of him. The owner of the restaurant stood watching them with his arms crossed over his chest and his moustache quivering in annoyance. At the table closest to them a young couple stared with their mouths open, the girl a bit breathless and the bloke looking like he wanted to throw up.

Arthur wiped his mouth with his thumb and forefinger and offered his best apologetic smile. "Can't beat this place for entertainment."

Merlin made a soft, choked sound. His face was once again red and his eyes downcast. Even so, that miniscule quirk of lips was definitely a smile.

"I think we have everything we came for, don't you, Merlin?"

At Merlin's nod, Arthur grabbed his wrist and towed him out of the restaurant before any of the patrons gathered enough of their wits together to say something that would only make the situation worse. Arthur kept his purchases firmly in front of him to stave off any further embarrassment and refused to let himself look at Merlin again.

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"I have a boyfriend," Merlin declared as soon as he stepped into mission control headquarters where plans for world domination were underway. In which case headquarters meant Will's garage that smelled faintly of old socks, and if world domination meant getting high and drunk. Also laid, if the state of Nimeuh's hair was anything to go by.

Merlin grimaced and checked the couch for any suspicious stains before he flopped down it. It groaned underneath his weight. Poor thing had been on its last leg for years now and he fully expected it to give out and dump him on the floor one day.

Nimeuh re-buttoned her shirt and moved to perch on the arm of Merlin's couch. It groaned again. "Boyfriend? Do tell. I didn't even know you had your eye on someone."

"I didn't, it was all a bit fast and unexpected."

"Who's he then?" Will asked, having stayed on the bed with his shirt pushed up to below his armpits and only one sock on.

Merlin gnawed on his bottom lip. It was one thing sharing the good news with his closest friends, it was quite another to actually admit to something that was going to earn him a slap to the head. He said, in the softest voice he could muster, "Arthur."

"Mrprh? Speak up, Merlin."

"Arthur."

Nimeuh and Will shared a blank look. "I don't think I know an..." she began and then her eyes went wide and crazed. "Arthur Pendragon?"

"Pisshead Pendragon?" Will choked out.

"He's really not that bad."

"Is this why you made us go to that party? And then you took him home!"

Merlin cringed and lifted both hands to try and ward Nimeuh off when she slid off her perch and onto his stomach. He heard Will squirm around on the bed, but was too preoccupied keeping long nailed fingers from clawing at his ribs to pay it much attention. "Nothing happened," he swore. "We didn't shag or anything."

"He's not even gay!"

"His tongue in my mouth said otherwise."

"You snogged?" This had Nimeuh grinning widely, but the crazed look was still in her eye and if anything, the flash of teeth served to scare Merlin further. "This might be a good thing. We can use this."

"How is being Pendragon's dirty little secret a good thing?" Will asked from close by. He had crawled up next to the couch and both of them were practically in Merlin's face.

"I'm not!"

"Blackmail material?"

"Good thinking, I'm sure he would hate for this to get out to his knobhead friends."

“Will you two please stop with your scheming and just listen for a moment?” Merlin asked frantically. He twisted until he managed to dislodge Nimueh, sending her sprawling onto Will instead. He sat up, pulling his legs up to his chest just in case she had the bright idea to try and clamber onto his lap. “It’s not a secret. We went on, well a date, I guess. I met his friends. He kissed me, in public.”

That quietened both of them and they shared another blank look.

“Huh,” Will said.

Nimueh scratched her scalp for a moment. “So not blackmail then, but this can still be useful. He’s Arthur Pendragon, he can open doors.”

“I don’t want to use him!” Merlin pointed out. He dropped his forehead into his hand, cursing—not for the first time either—his choice of friends. “It was nice. Maybe it’ll work out, maybe it won’t, but I’d like to at least give it a shot, yeah?”

Nimueh nodded, but her gaze was a million miles off and her murmured, “Yeah, yeah,” not reassuring at all.

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Arthur closed one eye and squinted with the other, then repeated the motion with the opposite eye. Depending on which eye was open at the time, the stain on the ceiling either resembled a dragon or a unicorn. He wasn’t even sure where the stain had come from, couldn’t recall having seen it there before.

The door scraped against the carpet. “Are you ever planning on getting out of bed?” Morgana asked, not even bothering to say hello.

“Good morning, Morgana, please do enter my room without knocking.”

“Closer to afternoon. Seriously Arthur, lift your arse, Uther says you’ve been in here all day.”

Arthur sighed, heavy and long-sufferingly. He briefly considered rolling over and pulling a pillow over his head, but Morgana was already next to him, yanking his blankets off.

“I could have been naked,” he grumped.

She smirked at him. “Nothing I haven’t seen before, we did bathe together after all.”

“When we were five!”

“I’m sure it hasn’t changed that much.”

The smirk was still in place and Arthur just knew he was not going to win this round. With a groan, he dragged himself out of bed and grabbed the first t-shirt he found, pulling it on. He padded barefoot to the kitchen, reckoning that as long as he was up he might as well eat. Morgana trailed after him.

Already in the kitchen was his father’s assistant. Leon looked up from where he was fixing tea and nodded politely to both of them. Morgana at least had the courtesy to wait for him to finish and leave before laying into Arthur again.



“What do you think you’re doing?”

The contents of the fridge were uninspiring, to say the least. “Making myself a sandwich?” he asked, distracted by the fact that he couldn’t find the bloody bread. He didn’t look all that hard, too exhausted to put much effort into anything. Despite having spent almost eighteen hours in bed, he hadn’t gotten a lot of actual sleep and there was a headache steadily building at the base of his neck. Chunk of ham, chunk of cheese. That would do until his father got hungry and sent Leon to fetch dinner. That was the problem about Sundays, all the staff had the day off.

“I mean regarding Merlin.”

Arthur sat down and tore some of the ham off, stuffing it into his cheeks like a hamster. “You heard then.”

“How could you?”

“Oh come on, Morgana, you of all people can’t be offended by my same sex tendencies. Or are you and Morgause on the outs again?”

Morgana snorted like an enraged bull and shoved a cup of tea into his hand. “Leave my love life out of this.”

“Why? You’re sticking your nose in mine.” Arthur glared as best he could with the headache, wrapping his fingers around the warm cup. As much as her presence annoyed him, had always annoyed him, there was no doubt that Morgana knew how to take care of him.

“He’s a nice guy, Arthur, don’t do this.”

Arthur took a gulp of his tea, burning his tongue. He swore under his breath and forced the remainder of the cheese into his mouth to help cool down. Taking into consideration Morgana’s delicate constitution, he chewed and swallowed before speaking again. “Why is it not okay for me to have a boyfriend? My father is not going to care that I experimented as long as I eventually settle down with someone nice and respectable.”

“That’s exactly the problem! You can’t experiment with Merlin, he’s just not that guy. If you’re not serious about this than just don’t do it. Real men don’t play with people’s emotions.”

He snorted and set out to ignore both her and the niggling unpleasant feeling in his stomach. Merlin wasn’t helpless, for God’s sake. Sure he might be a little angry at first, but he’d get over it eventually. It was just not that big a deal.

Morgana sighed, her patented *you are too stupid to live* sound. “If you’re going to have sex with him, there are things you should know to ensure the experience is as pleasant as possible for both of you.”

Tea promptly came out of Arthur’s nose.

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Nothing had changed, and yet everything was different.

Merlin still took the bus. Nimeuh and Will still flanked him while they trudged down the corridor, waiting for the bell to ring in another day of classes. He still got the toe of his shoe caught in the crack between the bricks and tripped up the stairs to the amusement of the other stragglers arriving just in the nick of time. Class was still hard and boring for the most part.

Yet instead of having to wait a heartbeat of two extra for the way to clear before scrambling to class, Merlin pushed his way through the crowd. Geraint offered him a quick, companionable nod, none of the expected *gonna kick your arse you just wait and see* in his eyes. Arthur grinned when they passed in the hall, walking by close enough to drag a single finger over Merlin's wrist. They didn't speak, didn't have to, the sure smile and almost wink enough. Will's jaw hung open the entire time.

They didn't meet up for lunch and eat holding hands like the legions of stupid teen movies promised Merlin they would. Hell, he hadn't even caught glimpse of Arthur since that morning.

"He's on the pitch," Sophia said, having crept up behind him. "Football game."

Merlin nodded, casting a glance around for a reason to escape. He didn't like the way she looked at him, all sharp and amused like she knew a secret he didn't. "Right."

"You didn't think he'd give that up so you can make cow eyes at him over lunch, did you?" Her voice was low and deceptively sweet, her lips curled in a way that couldn't be anything other than mocking.

Just his luck that she would find him on the one day his friends had abandoned him to find a quiet corner to snog. "Course not," he said, smiling back equally fake. "He wouldn't want you to get jealous over spending time with me. Arthur is considerate like that."

It was the wrong thing to say. Satisfying, but wrong. Sophia's face shut down and her eyes narrowed dangerously. Merlin had to fight the urge to take a step back; he couldn't give up the small amount of ground gained. Still, it didn't take a genius to know this girl was about to rip a chunk out of him.

"You're so cute, Merlin. So trusting. That's why we chose you."

*Don't do it*, he told himself, *do not give in*. "Chose me for what?"

"For the bet, silly." She smiled at him, all sharp teeth and hungry like a piranha. "Oh, do you mean to say Arthur didn't tell you? Oh my."

"Didn't tell me what? What bet?"

She tapped a manicured finger against her lips, pretending to think over whether or not to tell him. Like she wasn't bursting at the seams to share her bit of bad news. Fucking cunt. "It's all very clever. Arthur would use the most pathetic bumpkin he could find and show everyone that the miracle he performed in turning Guinevere into something half way resembling a worthwhile human being was not just a fluke, that he had the power to do it again. As a nice bonus, he would make you fall for him. It was laughably easy, you are only too happy to have someone like him throw a few scraps of attention your way, aren't you?"

"That's not," he choked out. "Arthur wouldn't—"

"Arthur did, ducky, and now that Guinevere has caught on that he's not heartbroken and pining away for her, she's remembering just what a catch he actually is." Sophia smiled again and grabbed Merlin's

shoulder, turning him to see Arthur and Gwen chatting while they walked side by side. "Guess she's important enough to skip the game for."

The sounds of the other students dropped away. Merlin couldn't think. Couldn't *breathe*. His knees trembled, threatening to give out, and bile rose in the back of his throats. His skin felt like it was stretched so tight over his nose and cheeks that it was in danger of ripping. Burned like it was already torn.

"I must say, I was sure he told you, you played along so well. Have to hand it to Arthur, he really is as good as he thinks he is. Didn't think he had it in him to turn you gay. Then again, more likely it was you who had it in him, am I right? Silly little sod, so pathetically eager to get a taste of the mighty Pendragon sword."

She left him then, walked right away while Merlin stood there with his jaw clenched so tight he thought his teeth might crack. There was laughter around him. Didn't matter who, he just knew it was him they were laughing at. Sophia was right, he had been as stupid and pathetic as all that.

::

He was the luckiest bugger alive, Arthur decided. He washed and dried his face and raked fingers through his hair. Hair that looked fantastic, if he had to say so himself. It was just another way in which everything was going right. Others included the brilliant grade he had received on a paper and the fact that he had been unbeatable on the pitch. The second team's goalie had looked on the verge of tears by the time they called it quits.

Someone called out to him just as he left the loo. Frowning, he waited for Gwen to catch up. "Can we walk and talk?" he asked. "Am hoping to catch Merlin before the bell goes, make sure he actually eats something."

"So it's true then? You and Merlin?"

"Yeah. Still very new so we're not advertising on anything, but it's not a secret either."

She beamed widely up at him. "I'm glad."

"You...are?"

"Of course! Merlin is lovely and I think you'd be good for each other."

Arthur halted and turned to face her. Gwen just kept right on smiling and even took both his hands in hers. "I..."

"It's okay that you're gay, Arthur. I know you must be worried about what your father and friends think, but you deserve to be happy. You could have told me, you know? We were friends first, remember?"

He gaped at her. This was not at all how he saw this conversation going. Nothing like Sophia had said it would. Also, he couldn't remember ever thinking of Gwen as a mate, she had gone from nuisance to girlfriend pretty much instantly. "I'm not actually, you know."

"Oh Arthur," she said, voice soft and amused like he was a toddler who just did something cute. "It's okay, it really is. Just promise me you will take care of him. You really couldn't have picked a better partner, he has a heart of gold."

"No, it's not—"

She ignored his protests and lifted onto her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. "When it's not all so new and you can bear to spend time apart, we should go shopping."

With that she rushed off, meeting up with Lance who had been staring at them with a frown on his face, but obediently lowered his face for her kiss. Arthur stayed exactly where he was until after the bell had gone and he was late for class. What the hell had just happened?

::

"I don't see the problem," Nimueh said after Merlin finished retelling everything he had overheard. "Aren't you gay already?"

"Merlin is theoretically gay," Will supplied helpfully.

"What does that even mean? Haven't the two of you...?"

"Nothing happened."

Will pouted, overshooting the cutely hurt thing he was going for. "That's not how I remember it."

"Drunken handjob during which you passed out and drooled on my shoulder, doesn't count."

"Your love life is really sad," Will pointed out. No one tried to argue otherwise. "If we're gonna go on what we've actually done, then I'm more gay than you."

Both Merlin and Nimueh turned to stare. Will was a bit of a sleaze at the best of times, but never had he hold out on telling them about one of his adventures, not even the ones Merlin was convinced were completely made up.

"Er, there was that thing. With Mordred."

"Mordred?" Merlin all but squealed. "Isn't he like twelve years old?"

"Fuck you, he's fifteen!"

Merlin rubbed his tongue against the roof of his mouth to get the bad taste out. "You are ill."

Will looked at Nimueh to back him up, but she had a faintly green tint to her face as well. Not for the first time, Merlin wondered what he had done to deserve friends like these.

Nimueh cleared her throat, signalling that it was enough of that conversation. "Still, it's not like Arthur can take credit for you fancying dick."

"That's not gonna matter when everyone pisses themselves laughing at my expense."

"So beat him to the punch."

Merlin opened his mouth to argue and then his brain caught up. "Would that work?"

"Worth a shot, right? He did kiss you-"

"With tongue!" Will chipped in.

It was a gamble, but certainly worth it if he could pull it off; the chances of Arthur revealing the terms of the bet to everyone was significantly reduced if he had something to be embarrassed about.

He flung himself down on the bed, only narrowly avoiding giving Will a boot to the head. He sighed dramatically.

"You actually liked him, didn't you?"

Merlin lifted his head just high enough to scowl at Nimueh. "No."

She stared him down, saying nothing and letting the heavy silence speak for her. She didn't even blink. Merlin squirmed, the guilt creeping like a physical sensation up his spine. He never could lie to her, she had some superhuman bullshit meter.

"For real?" Will asked, disgust clear in his voice. "Why?"

Merlin mumbled something nonsensical, no answer that didn't sound stupid. Certainly no one could accuse Arthur of being sweet and yet there was something endearing about just how big an ass he could be. It was everything Merlin despised. And yet. He sighed again for good measure.

::

"When's he coming back then?"

"Don't know, his note didn't say." Arthur sighed. He was not really in the mood to discuss his father's sudden disappearance. A business trip, the message he had left Arthur said, but he took Catrina the Flatulent with, so Arthur highly doubted it. And with the master and mistress out of the house, there was no need for the full roster of staff, though he had assured Arthur that someone would be in to clean at least twice a week and that Leon could be contacted should Arthur require anything.

Morgana's hand fell on his arm, squeezing to show her support. They were stretched out sideways across Arthur's bed, both on their backs and staring at the ceiling. Arthur needed a second opinion on the true shape of the stain. Morgana saw nothing, just a stain. No imagination.

"I could stay with you if you wanted," she offered.

"Really, Morgana, I do know how to take care of myself. Besides, the only reason you want to stay here is so your girlfriend can come over and you can shag without your father knowing."

She made a choked, yet amused, sound and squeezed again. "Fine then, wallow here by yourself."

"Oh please, you know I'm going to be over at yours every evening for supper. Possibly also breakfast if I run out of cereal."

The amused sound turned into a full-blown laugh. "You're almost eighteen, don't you think it's time you learned to cook?"

“Whatever for?”

“You’re not going to live here forever, surely.”

Arthur thought it over for a moment and then rolled over, flinging an arm over Morgana and pinning her to the bed for a series of big smacking kisses. “Of course not, I am going to marry you and you will feed me and wash my socks.”

Her squeals of horror were music to his ears, and Arthur only let up when the doorbell rang. “I didn’t order anything.”

“Maybe it’s Sophia,” Morgana said in a breathless, giggled-hoarse voice.

“Heaven help us all if it is.”

“Have you noticed her acting especially peculiar today?”

Arthur shrugged. She had been grinning more than usual, but that Arthur had just assumed she was hatching a diabolical scheme that he was better off not knowing about. Nothing new there.

Morgana tailed him down stairs and pushed past to get to the door first. Really, some days she did think Arthur’s house was her own.

“Merlin!” she shouted, just as Arthur skidded to a halt right behind her, bumping her into the door.

Merlin’s mouth was open and his head swung between the two of them like he was watching tennis. Arthur wanted to roll his eyes at how ridiculous it looked, but somehow that translated into a small smile instead. He thumped Morgana between the shoulder blades, nudging her none too gently out. “Don’t mind Morgana, she was just leaving.”

She shot him a dirty look over her shoulder, but was all smiles for Merlin. “So I was.” She slithered past Merlin where he stood in the doorway still looking like he hadn’t expected anyone to actually answer. Morgana spared Arthur another glance. “Remember what we talked about.”

His face felt hot and Arthur shooed her off before stepping back and gesturing into the house. “Come on in. Care for some tea. I also have juice of some sort, I think. Might be the green kind.”

Merlin shook his head and entered the house one reluctant foot at a time. Arthur wasn’t sure whether to find the caution adorable or to be offended that Merlin thought anything inside was going to rush out to grab him. When Merlin was finally inside, Arthur resolutely closed the door behind him just in case he had any bright ideas of bolting.

It was clear that he couldn’t expect much in the way of conversation from Merlin. It wasn’t like Arthur didn’t know his father’s taste in interior decoration leaned towards opulent, but it was always embarrassed him to have someone who wasn’t used to it see it for the first time. He rubbed the back of his neck and bit his lip to keep from apologising. Like it was his fault?

“So,” Arthur said when seconds felt like they were stretching into hours and Merlin still hadn’t opened his mouth. “We could go… upstairs?”

Arthur cleared his throat from lack of anything else to do. Christ, what was wrong with him? He wanted to squirm and fidget. Wanted to check his hair and smooth down his clothes. He was not a girl on her first date, for heaven's sake.

"Upstairs," he said with more certainty. "Come on."

Merlin followed along obediently, still quiet as fuck and freaking Arthur out no small amount. From what he had seen, it wasn't like Merlin to just go along with a plan without putting up some sort of fight. Even if it was just for the sake of being difficult.

"I was looking for you today, but not even your friends knew where you were. Are they together? Your friends, I mean," he all but babbled to fill the quiet, anything to get some response. When he received none, he glanced at Merlin over his shoulder and received an uninterested shrug. "Thought she was seeing Tristan."

"You know Tristan?"

Arthur congratulated himself silently for having broken through. "Everyone knows Tristan, he's kind of a bully."

"That's rich, coming from you."

"Okay, firstly, screw you. And secondly, what's going on, Merlin?"

He pushed his bedroom door open with more force than necessary and then grimaced. When had the room turned into such a pigsty? Arthur led the way instead and tried to kick a pair of underpants under the bed before Merlin saw. The sound of the door closing was loud and he turned to enquire about it, but Merlin seized him by the shirt and yanked him back.

Taken aback by the sudden attack, Arthur let himself be manhandled until he had wood against his back. "What the hell, Merlin?"

Only Merlin was not in the mood to explain himself. Or talk at all, for that matter. Arthur could tell by the way Merlin's tongue was no longer in his own mouth but had found a way into Arthur's. He choked a muffled protest against Merlin's lips, but there was no letting up. Instead Merlin's hands grabbed his head, thumbs digging into his cheeks in a way that was not completely comfortable, and held Arthur in place for more bruising kisses.

Arthur could break free any minute. He knew that; he outweighed Merlin by half at least. Which did not explain why he just stood there taking it.

Merlin's hands gentled somewhat when Arthur didn't fight back. If by gentle one meant they trembled damp palmed and unsure, not that the grip was all that softer. In fact, all of Merlin was shaking a little where he pressed up against Arthur, which is to say chest to thigh. It didn't feel like happy shivers, more like *I don't want to do this but I'm being held at gunpoint*.

He grabbed Merlin's upper arms and forced him back far enough to be able to drag air into his lungs, but not so far that it would count as a shove. "I ask again, what the hell, Merlin?"

"Wasn't this what you wanted?" Merlin asked, voice dangerously low and eyes spitting fire.

It sparked Arthur's own temper. He was the one being assaulted here, what right did Merlin have to be mad? "For you to act like a pod person? I never wanted that."

"You wanted me to want you."

"That is somewhat useful in a boyfriend, yes."

"So why are you complaining?"

"Are you mental?" This time Arthur did shove, sending Merlin stumbling back. "This is not what you do when you want someone. This leans more towards using force than anything. Who've you been dating?"

"Force? Because you don't want me."

"No." Merlin's face scrunched together. Either he was about to hurl something at Arthur's head or he would burst into tears. Both very undesirable courses of action. "I don't mean no I don't want you, I mean..." In truth, he had no idea what he meant, couldn't think much past the sirens going off loudly in his head. He took a deep breath and held his hands up. "Look, I don't know what you heard, but I don't expect anything from you. We just started going out! I always give a two week settle-in period before I demand sexual favours."

Merlin blinked at him, lips parted like he couldn't breathe through his nose. He didn't look like he was getting the point. With a sigh, Arthur closed the distance between them again and snagged Merlin's hands in his—and fuck, the size of them had not yet ceased being weird—and smiled slowly. "You may have noticed, but you're sort of the first bloke I've done this with, so I don't exactly want to rush things."

"What if I want to?"

"You don't."

"You can't tell me what I feel."

"Yes, I can. At least I can when you are trembling so bad it looks like you're on the verge of vomiting." Which once noticed could not be so easily forgotten. Arthur shifted his weight, trying to find the spot that would guarantee the least amount of Merlin's regurgitated lunch getting on him in case of said vomiting actually occurring.

"You're an ass."

Arthur choked on that. "You're the one freaking out and I'm the ass? You're unbelievable!"

"I am not freaking out."

"Could have fooled me."

Merlin's mouth opened and then snapped shut. He floundered for another moment, clearly wanting to continue the argument but unsure of what to say to not dig himself in further. In the end, he sighed and let his shoulders drop.

They stared at each other silently.



Arthur rocked on the balls of his feet. Merlin picked at the cuff of his shirt. Arthur scratched an imaginary itch on his cheek. Merlin sucked on his bottom lip and made fish faces.

"Something to eat?"

"God yes," Merlin agreed with no small amount of relief.

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This was not going at all the way Merlin had pictured it. He had this mental image of him sweeping in smooth and cool, Arthur would fall all over himself trying to ensure his stupid bet kept going and then Merlin would shoot him down and walk away the victor. Instead he was trudging after Arthur feeling all sorts of a daft sod.

It had been a good plan, he was sure of it, but somewhere between ringing the doorbell and being blinded by the shine of the Pendragon house, it all went pear shaped.

Not to say it couldn't be salvaged. He just needed to convince Arthur to go along with the plan. He was a hormone engorged teenage male, how bloody difficult could that be? Merlin had seen enough girls on telly pull off seduction to be fairly well-versed in the art.

What he hadn't counted on was that the only thing Arthur could find to eat where biscuits and tea. Not so easy pouting prettily with a mouthful of crumbs. Sipping his tea daintily also came out as more of a slurp and by the time he had polished his plate of biscuits, Arthur was flat out laughing at him. A deep belly laugh with his head thrown back and his tanned throat bared.

Merlin bit back a groan and forced his eyes down to the tabletop, which was so shiny he could see his own reflection and he looked a complete twat. It was not fair, Arthur was able to turn the tables without even trying.

"Never in my life have I seen someone make such a mess out of such a simple meal. You have real talent, Merlin."

He grunted in response, not wanting to give the prat the satisfaction of getting to him, but feeling his face heat up nonetheless.

"I honestly thought they would have left actual food," Arthur continued as if not even noticing Merlin's discomfort. "I mean, the pantry is stuffed, but it all needs to be cooked or prepared and I am rubbish at woman's work. What about you?"

"What about me?" he asked, looking back up, sure he had missed the train of conversation.

Arthur rolled his eyes. "Can you cook? I planned on heading over to Morgana's for supper, but it would be much nicer to stay in. Just you and me."

"You want me to cook for you? I am not your wife!" That brought forth a snicker. Merlin's fingers clenched around the fine china of his plate. If he hadn't thought Arthur's head was so thick that it wouldn't do any damage, he would have thrown it. "You really are an ass."

"You can't talk to me like that, I'm your boyfriend."

“Oh please, you won’t even put out.” Arthur choked on the last sip of his tea. It was small consolation, but Merlin was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. “I didn’t know when I agreed to this that you’d be so frigid.”

“Frigid? How dare you, I am nothing of the sort!”

Well then, if Merlin couldn’t seduce him, he’d just have to settle for plan B; piss Arthur off. “Snot what I heard.”

“What have you heard?”

“Rumour has it that the reason Gwen left was because Lance is better in the sack.”

Arthur spluttered, his face turning red. Merlin had half a moment to feel sorry for the hurtful words, but then he heard Sophia’s voice again. He steeled himself and looked Arthur dead in the eye.

“Gwen and I never...”

“Because you’re frigid?”

“Oh, I’ll show you how frigid I am not,” Arthur growled. His chair scraped back and he was around the large, round table before Merlin could have second thoughts regarding what he had just gotten himself into.

He tried to jerk back from the hands reaching for him, but Arthur was too fast and had no qualms manhandling Merlin out of his seat and onto his back on the table. He crawled up afterwards and pinned Merlin down when he tried to squirm away.

The kiss pointed out all the ways in which the one upstairs had been nothing but a sad excuse. Arthur latched onto his mouth like he had no plans of ever letting up. He sucked Merlin’s bottom lip until it throbbed and tingled. He nipped at the corners of his mouth until both their breath raced, and when even that wasn’t enough, he licked into Merlin’s mouth until all traces of the sweet tea was gone.

There were no more thoughts of flight and even the plan got pushed to the back of Merlin’s mind as he strained to get more. He fisted one hand in Arthur’s hair and clutched at his shirt with the other. *Don’t stop*, he tried to say, but all that came out was a raw sounding moan.

Arthur must have understood; he blanketed Merlin almost completely, his weight both uncomfortable and yet still not enough. Merlin shifted impatiently, digging his fingers into the back of Arthur’s neck when Arthur’s knee shoved between his thighs.

What a fool Gwen had been. Even with the god-awful personality, Merlin couldn’t imagine anyone willingly giving this up. Especially not when Arthur wormed a hand below Merlin’s shirt. His palm was a huge, hot brand against Merlin’s ribcage, fingers tightening reflexively as if not knowing where to grab first.

He hooked an ankle around Arthur’s thigh to try and pull him in closer. When that didn’t work, Merlin reached down to grab Arthur’s arse.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned into Arthur’s mouth. Arthur was hard against him, straining against his well-tailored slacks and Merlin’s threadbare jeans were still too thick to properly appreciate the feeling. Their hips were not aligned properly, but that didn’t stop them from grinding into each other.

Arthur broke the kiss, his breath coming in “uh, uh, uh,” sputters. He worked his lips down to the hinge of Merlin’s jaw and pressed his teeth hard into the thin skin.

It was enough. Merlin’s eyes crossed and his muscles contracted sharply. He dug his fingers into the hard muscle of Arthur’s bum and held on for dear life as heat spread through his body and left everything tingling in its wake.

There was a crumb gouging his elbow, he realised when he had calmed down enough to be able to drag oxygen into his aching lungs. His jaw burned where Arthur’s mouth was still sealed and oh god, warmth was spreading in his underwear.

“Shite,” he mumbled.

Arthur murmured in agreement against his skin and then thankfully pulled off. Merlin lifted fingers to the wet patch. It ached. “Did you create a bruise?”

“Love bite,” Arthur said, voice thick with smugness. He made no motion to move away, even though his trousers had to be as disgusting as Merlin’s own.

“On my face?”

“Hmm, now everyone will know you belong to me.”

His words created a frisson of excitement in Merlin’s spine and a half-hearted twitch in his trousers. His higher brain functions were returning slowly and with it the goal he had set for himself. He pushed at Arthur’s shoulders and slid out from below him. The sudden shift made black spots dance in front of his eyes and he had to steady himself against the chair.

“Or they will know *you* belong to *me*,” he said when the room stopped spinning. “They will know I turned you into a big homo.”

Arthur’s head snapped up so quickly it had to have hurt. “What?”

“You heard me. Everyone will look at it and know that the great Arthur Pendragon, heir apparent to all that is prat, couldn’t get enough of me. That rubbing up against my dick made him come in his trousers.”

There was nothing attractive about the way Arthur’s jaw fell open or the betrayed look in his eyes. His hands curled into fists by his sides and Merlin knew it was time to get the hell out before he had a black eye to go with the purple bruise on his jaw. He wanted to laugh, to mock how the mighty had fallen, but there was nothing victorious about the bitter taste in his mouth or the way his stomach clenched.

“I’ll see myself out,” he said, neatly side-stepping a gobsmacked Arthur. “And by the way? Tell Sophia that *I* was always gay; you’re not *that* good.”

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Morgana was still the entire way through Arthur's story and then for exactly three seconds afterwards before she said, "You complete and utter idiot."

"I know," Arthur muttered and dropped his head onto his arms.

"What were you thinking? You can't just play with people like that."

"I know."

"And out of anyone you could have chosen, it had to be Merlin."

"Well, that was more Sophia's doing than—"

"Be quiet, I don't even want to know anything else. I can't believe we are actually friends. If we hadn't known each other since we were three years old, I'd disown you."

Arthur sighed and wrapped his arms tighter around his knees. Everything she said was the truth and he deserved to hear it, but that didn't make it any easier, didn't lessen the weight in his chest any. He let her continue on for another couple of minutes, not really listening to the words, but not exactly needing to either. There were only so many ways to call someone a useless waste of space with the mental capacity of an apple until you had to start repeating yourself.

Then there was silence, which could only mean one thing. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I don't know why I even bother; you're just like your father, never listening to a word of good advice."

"Morgana..."

"I asked, how are you going to make this right?"

Arthur lifted his head and tilted his neck back so she could see him roll his eyes at that suggestion. "What do you want me to do? It's not as if any of it actually matters. I'll admit to Sophia that I lost the bet, she'll claim whatever diabolical prize she had in mind and everything will go back to being just the way it was."

"And Merlin?"

"What about him? He's just an outcast with bad hair."

"You don't believe that."

"Jesus, Morgana, what do you want from me?"

She smacked him on the back of the head. "For you to stop acting like an idiot and be honest with yourself. I know you won't admit it, but you care about that awkward kid. If it were anyone else you would have brushed it off and found another sucker to make yourself look good. Instead you are here, crying into your skim-milk smoothie. Which is disgusting, by the way."

"I am not," he started arguing and then wisely shut his mouth when Morgana gave him the evil eye. If the last fifteen years taught him anything it was that some arguments could not be won and that always included the ones where he was up against Morgana.

“So?” she prompted.

“I don’t know, all right?”

“Good place to start might be saying you’re sorry.”

“Oh god,” he groaned and let his head drop again. It was another thing about Morgana’s plans that he hated; they always required some form of grovelling from him.

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It was potentially the worst day of his existence, Merlin decided staring at his reflection while brushing his teeth. Including that day in primary school when that tosser Edwin Meuridin spilled water on him and then told the entire class Merlin had wet his trousers. Or the time he had his wisdom teeth removed and his uncle Gaius sent him to class anyway and everyone called him hamster-face for the rest of the year. Or the time his mother went through her nudist phase. Well no, not worse than that last one, he still had nightmares about that.

He contemplated hiding under the bathroom sink. No one would find him; his mother had already left for work and no one else would care. Unfortunately he couldn’t stay in the cupboard for the rest of his life. Maybe just a year or two? Surely everyone would have forgotten about him by then.

“You are being an idiot,” he told the pale faced boy in the mirror. The bruise Arthur had stared back, the purple smudge a silent judgement. And in one of those areas where he couldn’t hide it without wrapping something around his face. He had brought a faded, old kerchief with him for that exact purpose, but that coupled with the dark circles under his eyes had made him look like a druggie mugger. The last thing he needed was to give Arthur’s shithead friends more ammunition against him.

He sighed and briskly rubbed a towel over his hair, it was all the styling it would get. He sniffed his uniform to ensure it didn’t smell too disgusting and then tried to smooth out the wrinkles by hand. There had to be an iron somewhere in the house, but he couldn’t be arsed to try and find it. Would probably only end up burning a hole through his shirt anyway.

Still feeling sorry for himself, he dressed slowly, not bothering to tuck his shirt in and forced his tie into a haphazard knot.

He locked the door behind him and then started when he turned to face the driveway. Arthur leaned against that slick, silver car of his, hands in his pockets and looking like he had professionals to help him dress.

Should have hidden in the cupboard.

Merlin dragged his feet, not wanting to meet Arthur but not wanting to have a screaming match for all the neighbours to gawk at either. “What’re you doing here?”

“I figured that since it has been established that we both like blokes now and seeing how that is sort of perfect because both of us are blokes, I’d take my boyfriend to school.”

“Your boyfriend?”

Arthur shifted his weight, betraying the first sign of nervousness. He recovered just as quickly. “Would you rather partner? Always thought that sounded stupid, but if that’s what you want.”

“Stop playing games, Arthur, we both know this was just a bet.”

“Fucking Sophia,” he grumbled and looked ready to launch into a grandiose shifting of blame, but Merlin was not having it and his crossed arms and clenched jaw told Arthur as much. “No, you’re right, it’s my fault. It was a stupid thing to do and I’m sorry. It probably doesn’t make it any better, but the gay thing wasn’t so much about you as, it was sort of a side clause about me being able to turn an outcast into someone the majority of the student body wouldn’t mind hanging out with. And I think I deserve a medal for that accomplishment. You can’t honestly tell me you hate having them greet you in the halls, that you would rather they go back to ignoring and picking on you.”

“Of course not.”

“Then what’s the problem? Look Merlin, I...” Arthur trailed off and flapped a hand through the air, clearly unsure of how exactly to express himself.

Merlin kept his cross-armed stance and cocked an eyebrow in a way perfected by his uncle Gaius. Arthur was not getting off the hook that easily.

From his heavy sigh, he understood that. “You are not completely useless as a boyfriend, I guess. I mean, you have atrocious fashion sense and horrible table manners. You won’t cook, your hair is a disaster and you running away after what happened yesterday is very bad form. However, no one else has ever made me come in my pants before, not even when I was thirteen and just learning what my dick was for. And with the exception of Sophia, my friends don’t actually hate you.”

It took Merlin a moment to sort through all the insults and figure out what Arthur was actually saying. “You fancy me!”

Arthur shrugged as if that should have been obvious. If there was any hope of this thing working, they were going to have to work on his communication skills.

“What about Gwen?”

“What about her?”

“I saw the two of you talking yesterday.”

“She gave us her blessing. Thinks we’re adorable, apparently, and I’m betting it won’t be long before she tries to get us to go on a double date with her and Lance.”

The horror Merlin felt over that suggestion must have shown on his face because Arthur burst out laughing in exactly the way Merlin liked. He couldn’t hold back his own smile. “So you’re not still hung up on her?”

“You might not have noticed, being that you are a bit of an idiot, but it’s not Gwen’s house I am standing in front of right now.”

“This going to be a regular occurrence then?”

“Us being embarrassing in the street?”

“You driving me to school.”

Arthur’s lips pursed while he thought that over. “The passenger seat used to be reserved for this meddling bint, but I think alternate arrangements can be made. On one condition; you are never to eat in my car.”

“And what happens when we get there?”

“We walk in holding hands like the queers we are and we find a way to get your friends and my friends to not kill each other.”

Merlin grinned. “Want world peace while you’re at it?”

“Baby steps, Merlin, baby steps.”

They beamed at each other like a couple of right morons. It had started to drizzle, drops clogging up Merlin’s eyelashes and seeping through the thin material of his shirt. Still he could not wipe the dopey expression off his face. “Does that brilliant plan of yours involve kissing?”

“God yes,” Arthur replied with a groan and yanked him closer. It was never going to be moonlight and roses, but when Arthur’s warm hands palmed Merlin’s hipbones to keep him near, Merlin thought it was pretty darn close. Not moonlight, perhaps, but definitely rainbows.