

Drastically Redefining Protocol

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Drastically Redefining Protocol

by [rageprufrock](#)

Summary

In which Prince Arthur meets Merlin and all hell promptly breaks loose.

Notes

This story absolutely would not have happened without the time and handholding provided by The Hoyden, who fell in love with Merlin with me and warned me not to watch certain episodes without adult supervision; Zoetrope, who made this staggeringly good trailer for the story but—more importantly—laughed at my jokes and Moonklutz, who endured my raving about this story, entertained my more insane flights of fancy, exacerbated the problem, and then helped me populate pretentious Vanity Fair article with images. And then there are the rock stars that helped to turn this story from a tragic, washed-up narrative into pictures with words in between them: Stellarmeadow, who imagined Arthur's iPhone, risked his one-of-a-kind watch, captured his Pudsey-related agony, and then splashed his royal face all over Drudge; Mei laid out the morning papers and then came into tighter focus with the Guardian, The Sun, and inevitably, the New York Times; Vickie jotted up Arthur's—okay, Allistair's—royal diary; Dramaphile showed us that we thought Arthur and Merlin's affair was delicious; Goat_Song gave life to our ALLCAPS with some Oh No They Didn't! action; Sissi seasoned the whole story with Microsoft Art jizz and Xcaliginous brought this to life on the most important media source in the world, Gawker. I hope you enjoyed reading this even a tenth as much as I enjoyed romping through St. Bart's, stealing lighters and expensive watches, sharing first kisses that make you sigh, and choosing, over everything else, to have your happily ever after.

As a rule, Arthur had given up on chafing at the near-constant swirl of people that came along with his shockingly over-scheduled days. Still, once in a while the itch and suffocation of being monitored twenty-four hours a day grew too much, and he found himself tiptoeing down mostly deserted hospital hallways trying to hide from his handlers.

He'd made his break as his entourage had turned a corner, all the press running out ahead of them to capture heroically well-lit images of Arthur striding into the pediatrics ward of St. Bart's—he'd stopped short of going round, pivoted on his heel, and gone for the nearest, darkest hall he'd seen.

It wasn't that Arthur was particularly against bald cancer children or that he was heartless enough to resent how much of his charitable time they consumed, but he'd been around the world already that month and seen too many children with haunted looks on their faces, girls who'd been trafficked into prostitution, boys who'd survived landmines. They'd all looked at him with vague expression of resigned fear when he'd come near them for the photo op. He'd spent too many nights in too many homeless shelters putting on smiles for photographers.

He was, Arthur decided, as of 7:35 p.m. on this particular Thursday night, done.

There was a clatter of feet nearby and Arthur assessed his options. His bodyguards humored his questions when he'd been younger and still convinced that if only he tried hard enough, he could buck all the rules of the peerage and join the active service himself. In that spirit, he pressed himself against a wall, searching for an unlocked door until he finally ducked into a claustrophobically small room—black and smelling like hospital bleach and nicotine.

He'd barely managed to drag the door shut when somebody behind him shouted, "Don't! It—oh fuck. It locks from the outside, you sodding idiot!"

Arthur turned around toward where the voice had emerged, heart wild in his chest, lightheaded in surprise, and groped about for a light switch. "Excuse me?" he demanded.

"It doesn't matter anyway," the voice sulked, and suddenly there was the flicker of a lighter and the glowing orange coal-tip of a cigarette, suspended in the blackness of the tiny room. "We're just going to have to wait until his royal highness is done molesting the patients and hies himself away before we start shouting for a nurse to let us out."

Extremely put out, Arthur growled, "The Prince of Wales does not molest children."

"Right, like his visit to the hospital isn't the most astonishing exercise in royal onanism," the voice snorted, and the orange went obscured by a heavy cloud of smoke, filling the air over the cigarette before it blew right into Arthur's face. "And don't defend him—I know for a fact everybody's rounds were extended for this nonsense."

Arthur opened his mouth to demand just who this idiot thought he was, but all that came out was, "Are you smoking?"

"Chainsmoking," the voice answered, sounding glum about it. "I know. I know, the gross irony of being a medic and inhaling poison—I've heard it all."

"Are you smoking in a hospital?" Arthur demanded.

"Oh, fine, fine," the voice sighed, and Arthur felt, suddenly, a very warm palm, calloused from hard work, press something into his own hand, damp with sweat. "There you are—and don't go being uptight about it, okay? They're the best I can afford on my salary."

Which was how Arthur ended up smoking in what appeared to be a supply closet with some clearly-deserved-to-be-banished-from-the-national-health-system deviant. Who had been right, by the by, because it was a truly, truly foul cigarette Arthur found himself sucking on, and after a fit of somewhat embarrassing hacking, he managed, "Dear God, what are these?"

"B&H, black," the voice answered, harsher now, edged in the smoke.

"They're horrid," Arthur said.

"Not everybody can afford Dunhill, you know," the other man chided, and Arthur saw a sudden square of luminous aqua light, the display of a digital watch, the numbers at an unreadable angle. "Fuck. It's only eight."

Outside, Arthur could hear the voices of his handlers, frantic in a collected, unperturbed manner, walking up and down the halls conferring with the hospital security personnel. He didn't need to hear what they were saying to get the essence: heads will roll; blood will run as rivers into the sea; the fires of hell will lick at your skin for all eternity if Arthur wasn't located immediately. He'd felt bad for them once upon a time, but it'd been harder to work up a proper sense of sympathy for his so-called servants when they seemed to call all the shots. Arthur couldn't remember the last time he'd been in a position to make an independent decision. That morning, he'd woken and his valet had made a snide comment about his boxers.

"So?" Arthur asked. "Isn't the prince still out there tormenting you with his pedophilic masturbation visiting?"

The other man made a choked, high-pitched noise. "Right—I was just thinking that I'd told someone to come let me out at 8:45, and then at least you wouldn't be stuck here, too," he said, and a note of genuine contrition crept into his voice. "I am sorry; I really didn't think anyone would come down this hall."

"Well," Arthur allowed, "no one invited me to intrude on your illegal chainsmoking, so I suppose I apologize as well." And unable to resist, he asked, "You asked someone to keep you locked up in here?"

The other man heaved an enormous, long-suffering sigh. "Well—it's only that the prince is here, and I have something of a—"

And he never managed to finish his sentence, because right then the door to the room burst open and Arthur saw Allistair, flanked on one side by the Pendragon's private physician and the other the head of St. Bart's security, and they all shouted, "Your highness!" and, with extreme quickness, dragged him from the room roughly the same time Arthur's bodyguards tackled the other man to the ground. Arthur saw just enough of him to note slim fingers, pale skin, black hair he shouted, "What! Hey!" before disappearing under a burly, angry ex-servicemen. "I haven't done anything wrong!" the man protested, voice muffled as he was held face down into a mountain of towels—one of which rapidly set on fire, tripping the alarm and starting the sprinklers.

Standing under a cascade of stale water, watching hospital staff run round desperately trying to maintain calm in the chaos, Arthur said to the man, still mostly-crushed beneath his guard:

"Well, to be fair, you were smoking in a restricted area."

*

It was an extremely sheepish and very manhandled Merlin Emrys Arthur found three hours later, after a sound scolding from his guards and the promise of further scolding from his father and accusatory glances from the hospital administrators, who'd been equally sore over the ruckus and abuse over their medic.

"Your name is Merlin?" Arthur asked when the guards brought Merlin to him, instead of saying, "I'm so sorry about this entire affair; please allow me to send our royal physician to look after you. Is there anything I can have done to make up for this?" since being within arms-length of the other man—Merlin?—seemed to strip all the royalty out of his bones.

The man scowled at him, and his eyes were extremely blue when fringed by angry lashes. "Yes, you moron, and before you come up with any clever jokes, I've heard them all before and then some."

Arthur cocked a brow at him.

"Oh God, you really are the prince, aren't you," Merlin said, suddenly looking ill and pale on top of looking bruised.

"It's true," Arthur apologized. "And I'm sorry for your mistreatment—it took some time to convince my men you weren't attempting to kidnap me."

Arthur estimated his little break for freedom (a whole forty minutes of it) would be extensively chronicled in the tabloids by morning, with three speculative sidebars about whether or not he was suicidal and or in the process of separating from a significant other because he was shagging somebody doing their foundation year training.

"Yes, because I cut a terrifically threatening figure," Merlin complained, and Arthur admitted that perhaps everybody had been a bit too enthusiastic about the whole thing. Merlin was wearing soft-looking maroon scrubs and a faded green long-sleeved shirt underneath, at once endearing and an obvious sign of color-blindness. To top it all off, Arthur suspected the boy's trainers were green and bubblegum pink.

Arthur said, "Evil could come in any packaging—or color shoes."

Merlin glanced down and blushed, pink flushing down his cheeks and flaring across the pale wings of his collarbones, and Arthur cleared his throat to say, "What was it you were saying before? Just before the royal guard burst in? It was something about the prince?"

"I really sorry about the wank comments," Merlin hurried to say. "And the implication you might enjoy touching little children in a sexual manner."

"Jesus Christ," Arthur muttered, glancing left and right to ascertain there weren't any salivating photographers bearing tape recorders within hearing before turning back to Merlin, still cowering and wronged-looking but not at all aware of what he'd almost just done. And that was enough to

make Arthur step forward until Merlin was backed up against the wall, eyes wide, and Arthur could put his hand on the wall next to Merlin's cheek, growing still-darker in embarrassment. "Merlin, you are a grade-A idiot."

"I'm going to be a doctor," Merlin protested, voice suspiciously high, and before Arthur could make a comment about what that said about the national health system in general, the royal physician, Dr. Binghamton, burst into the room, furious. "Oh fuck," Merlin said, "no I'm not—I'll be dead."

"You most certainly will, you clot!" Dr. Binghamton shouted, and Arthur wisely made the tactical decision to retreat.

*

By the time Dr. Binghamton concluded bollocking Merlin and been collected to return to the palace and coddle the crown prince, Merlin had gone from suicidally depressed over his year to date and chainsmoking in a linen closet to too suicidally depressed to commit suicide and huddled on Gwen's sofa, eating chips with curry sauce and watching badly-dubbed gay German soap operas.

"You'd think he'd be nicer," Gwen huffed. "Gaius was an old family friend before he was ever the royal physician."

"I called Arthur a child molester," Merlin moaned, trying to fill in the gaping emptiness in his chest with potato. "I called him a pedophile and said that his touring of the hospital was pure onanism."

Gwen replaced the now empty bag of curry chips in Merlin's hands with a fresh one and disappeared into the kitchen where she made familiar sounds of a plastic kettle being filled, which meant there'd be tea, soon, at least. "I'm sure Prince Arthur knew you weren't serious about the whole thing, Merlin, and anyway, you did apologize and he did get you beaten by the royal guards."

"Gwen," Merlin cried, "Gwen—it was Prince Arthur."

It had been yet another stunning moment of many during Merlin's life during which he'd wondered why he could move teapots and freeze water with his mind and not anything useful, like dial back time. He willed the remote control button to increase the television's volume and listened to the lead characters play in the surf together and declare their love, a half-step off from the motion of their lips. Merlin would never play in the surf with anybody, he thought morosely, not only would he wash out of his foundation year, the king would probably send assassins to have him killed. Or worse, he'd strike a bargain with the Americans.

"Oh God," Merlin said, feeling a sudden urgent fear that not only had he made an ass of himself in front of the Prince of Wales, he'd probably offended the entire royal family and by extension most of the more inbred members of the peerage. "What if I'm sent to Guantanamo? What if I'm sent to Guantanamo Bay to be raped by angry rottweilers and waterboarded?"

"No one is letting angry rottweilers rape you," Gwen sighed from the kitchen.

Merlin twisted around on Gwen's ancient sofa, shouting round the corner toward her back, "You don't know that for certain!"

"Merlin, I can say with conviction that I am certain Prince Arthur won't extradite you to be raped by dogs and waterboarded at Guantanamo Bay, all right?" Gwen said, reemerging with two mugs:

milk and honey for Merlin, lemon for her. She gave him a sweet and the tea and brushed his hair back from his face and said, grinning impishly, "Now, more importantly: how did he look?"

"He is," Merlin admitted, and couldn't help the smile that crept across his face, "even more handsome in person."

"Oh, Merlin," Gwen said, smiling at him, "and you always said that wasn't possible."

*

St. Bart's had decided to be more appalled by the prince's behavior than by Merlin's tiny, inconsequential mental breakdown and subsequent chainsmoking on hospital property—in his defense, he'd chosen a well-ventilated room with an opened window—and anybody who may have otherwise been inclined to give Merlin a secondary ass-tearing was distracted by the gossip.

Prince Arthur's interlude at the hospital was well-documented, and the rags vacillated between claiming Arthur was nearly PRINCENAPPED! to exclaiming over his SECRET ROMANTIC INTERLUDE WITH A MEDIC?! THE SHOCKING PHOTOS WITHIN! Merlin would have been more giddy over their imagined romance if the press wasn't universally fixated on some of the more attractive, and female, junior doctors that liked to hang around round back the hospital smoking expensive hand-rolled cigarettes and not, say, Merlin.

Merlin consoled himself by being extra attentive to his patients, choosing to wear the ugliest hat from the costume bin—it was tri-cornered, or had been, once upon a time, and liberally plumed with ugly plastic feathers dyed in garish jewel tones—and trying to conduct his subsequent rounds with a perfectly straight face.

"Mr. Wizard?" Leyna Harris asked. She was five and had extremely bright blond hair, copper-penny colored eyes, and a spot of childhood leukemia.

"Dr. Emrys," Merlin reminded her, and then gave up when she just said:

"Mr. Wizard—was Prince Arthur really here yesterday? Did you see him?" She blushed, the most color that had been in her face in days, as far as Merlin knew, and he grudgingly gave Arthur a silent nod of gratitude for that, at least. "Was he very handsome?"

Merlin set aside his needles and folded away his neon pink and purple polka-dot tourniquet to catch her eyes in a deeply serious gaze.

"Leyna," he said.

She straightened up in her bed. "Yes, Mr. Wizard?" she answered with equal gravitas.

"He was the handsomest prince in the world," Merlin told her, and Leyna beamed at him, releasing a high, soft noise of happiness.

By lunch, he'd managed to reconstruct yesterday's debacle into something much more palatable, and had revised history until Prince Arthur had been a perfect fairytale presence and made Merlin promise to pass on his brightest, most stunning smiles to each of the girls in the ward, and also Rory, who was fairly obvious and twee for somebody who was barely six. At half past nine, he collapsed into a fitful nap in the crash room, and at 9:55 p.m. there was a code pink in the children's ward that ended when Dr. Harbor had said, "All right—Emrys: call it." So like always, Merlin's day

had gone from wretched to improving to shockingly wretched to crying on the back steps behind the cafeteria and wondering why the fuck he'd ever got into medicine if all he was going to do was write down, Amber Tracie Everette, 10:09 p.m. and file it with records.

One of the on-call nurses must have sent for Gwen, because she appeared like magic at 10:30 and ushered him out of the hospital, collected his things from the locker room, and hustled him back to his bedsit where she put him to bed and sat next to his pillow sighing at him with genuine regret.

"You know, Merlin, this was exactly why Gaius told you not to do this to yourself," she chided.

"I don't know what you're talking about as I am perfectly excellent," Merlin said into his pillow. He knew his face would be swollen. He was tired and he felt like he was worn to the bone, all the skin and muscle flayed away so that everything and every touch hurt a little. He glared up at her. "And before you start—I absolutely do not want to talk about Prince Arthur."

She mimed zipping her lips, and said immediately, "The enormously strange thing is how despite how much you love the prince in a tragic, panting-hot-earth Coleridgian sort of way—"

"I do not love him," Merlin scoffed, flushing.

"—You found him immediately irritating," she concluded, thoughtful. "Do you think that means something?"

"Yeah," Merlin muttered. "It means he's a prat. I always knew he couldn't be that bloody good looking and athletic without there being something wrong with him."

Gwen beamed at Merlin, shoving him over on his tiny futon until her curls touched his face and her smile gleamed and filled up all the—limited—empty space in the tiny room, and Merlin thought suddenly that if love was wanting to make someone happy, then he always loved Gwen without reserve.

"And I bet you still think he's lovely," she purred. "I bet you wish you were his princess!"

Protestations of any kind, obviously, would be useless, and had been useless since Merlin had begun issuing them long ago, when they'd met up in college, but that didn't mean he couldn't make a good faith effort at it—even if it did conclude in Gwen smothering him with a pillow until he admitted, gasping, "All right! All right! Fine! Fine! I wish I were his princess! I do! Gwen, let go!"

*

To say Uther was angry was like saying there had once been some animosity between the British and the French, and Arthur spent some time as his father threatened to rip him limb from limb considering whether or not America would embrace him and offer him book deals and let him sponsor dieting programs the way they had Aunt Sarah. This time, he was counting the portraiture on the walls, debating whether or not it was time to begin numbering off the wrinkles of skin and jowls depicted, but zoned back into his father's rant just to monitor its progress; there was a predictable succession of accusations and roars, but sometimes the speed changed and Arthur would hate to lag and nod in contrition at the wrong times.

"Arthur, you are the crown prince and I'll not have you rebelling and shaming the monarchy—!"

He zoned right back out, hands tucked sheepishly into his pockets, and let his fingers run over and over the cool metal sides of the lighter Merlin had tucked into his palm the night before at the hospital.

He'd found it still in his possession long after he'd been fussed at by his handlers and wept over by his valet and warned of impeding death from his father yesterday nearing midnight, and he'd taken it out when he'd finally been left alone in his rooms at Clarence House to study it: gleaming silver with whorls along the sides, the relief of an elaborate sword—Excalibur, Arthur thought, and tried not to perish of the triteness of it all. Morgana must never know, for if she discovered somehow Arthur had been given a lighter of Excaliber by someone named Merlin, the entire royal family would be brought to its knees by her shrieking about prophesy.

On the other hand, he really ought to return it; the thing didn't look cheap, and Arthur was still feeling sort of bad about getting the man attacked by his guards.

"—have you taken anything away from this, Arthur?" his father demanded.

"I have, father," Arthur promised, right on cue. "I won't disappoint you going forward."

"See that you don't," Uther said, and considering his watch, cursed and disappeared from the room in a whirl of perfectly tailored clothing.

For as long as Arthur could remember, everyone in the kingdom had sighed and told him how one day he would be the one wearing the heavy silver watch and carefully-selected silk ties, and for as long as Arthur could remember, his liking or disliking of his fate had never come into play. He was His Royal Highness Arthur William Henry Philip Pendragon, Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall. He had been born to be king, and he would always disappoint his father, Arthur knew—it was only a matter of degrees. Arthur knew he could be a good king; he wasn't certain he would ever know how to be a good son.

"You know your father would be less angry if you did fewer things like this, sire," Dr. Binghamton said.

"My father would also be less angry if he weren't the king of England," Arthur told him. He held up the lighter and smiled winningly. "Now, Doctor, are you going to help me? It was obvious from how he reacted you knew each other, and I'd hate to steal from a subject."

Binghamton scowled at him. "It's too bad you're royalty, your highness," he complained. "I see the beginnings of a stellar politician in you."

An hour later, he was pulling up to the corner of West Hampstead Lane and West Hampstead Mews and feeling distinctly unimpressed. Ten minutes of searching for what Binghamton had described as a "claustrophobic flophouse filled with discarded takeaway boxes and littered with dirty laundry" later, he didn't feel much better, but at least he was looking at the right flat, and Arthur allowed himself to dally for a beat before he gathered up his courage and pressed the buzzer.

"Lo?" someone said upstairs—it may have been the same voice from the hospital, but filtered through through the intercom, Arthur wasn't sure, and he said after a moment of consideration:

"Er, hi—I'm here on behalf of the Prince of Wales."

"Oh, fucking—really?" the intercom cursed.

Arthur frowned at the box and wondered if maybe Merlin was daft. How the hell were they letting people into the NHS anyway? "Yes, really," he ground out.

"Christ," the voice mourned, "all right—all right. Come on up."

And before the intercom cut out, Arthur swore he heard a woman say, "Oh for goodness sake! He is not bringing dogs to rape you!" but reconsidered since it was absurd, and pulled open the door to the building when the buzz tripped the lock. Merlin apparently lived on the sixth floor in a building without an elevator, and Arthur thought that he had to be the stupidest doctor in all of England.

When he was staggering up the last flight, he heard a door open and Merlin call out, down the dimly lit hall and say, "Hello? Do you really work for the prince? Because I already apologized."

Arthur lifted his head and glowered.

"Oh, fuck," Merlin said, face collapsing in despair as he asked, "Where are the dogs? Are they downstairs in some van?"

Leaning heavily against a wall, Arthur said in between catching his breath, "This may surprise you, Merlin, but the monarchy doesn't actually keep a pack of trained rape dogs." He glanced down the stairwell again and back up at Merlin, who looked somewhat mollified but was still more or less hiding three-quarters of the way behind his door. "How can you live here?"

"I just...do?" Merlin tried, and before Arthur could say anything in response, he added, "What exactly are you doing here, anyway?" He paused. "Er, your highness."

Arthur dug Merlin's lighter out of his pocket and held it up for his inspection. "You were carried off by my bodyguards before I could return it."

Arthur could see the moment Merlin realized he'd lost it to begin with, and his face went from puzzled to worried to relieved in the space of seconds. Finally abandoning his defensive position by the door, he rushed forward and pulled the lighter out of Arthur's hands—his own fingers warm—and he inspected it for a moment before looking back up at Arthur and saying, absent a single note of sarcasm or terror, "Thank you, sire."

"Well," Arthur coughed, prevaricating and looking away. The last time anybody had looked at him like that, she'd ended it in the tabloids with equal fervor three months later. "I couldn't very well steal—and from someone who obviously has so little."

Blushing, Merlin frowned again. "I'll have you know my flat is perfectly nice."

"Merlin! For Christ's sake! Stop lying and invite him in—I've cleaned up as much as I could!" came a second voice, and Arthur looked around Merlin's shoulder to see a black woman hovering in the doorway, her eyes bright like polished river stones. She had a squarish jaw and nervous smile, and Arthur could see instantly why she and Merlin liked one another. "Your highness," she said, breathy. "I'm so sorry for Merlin's lack of manners."

He pasted on his most charming smile. "No worries—I see he has his better half to speak for him."

She tittered nervously, blushing, and said, "Oh, no, Merlin—"

"Can speak for himself," Merlin jumped in, scowling. "And who invited you to stay?"

Arthur opened his eyes as widely as possible in perfect innocence. This, he decided, would be fun.
"Why," he said, "the lady, of course."

*

Gwen hadn't been lying when she said she'd managed to hide most of the layer of discarded clothing on the floor of his room, but no amount of last-minute polish would really prepare anybody of good breeding for the wreck of Merlin's flat, he thought glumly, trailing Gwen and the prince inside. Years of sex dreams had all come down to this moment. He finally had Prince Arthur in his flat and what was Arthur doing? He was flirting with Gwen and—oh fuck—he was staring at the Equus poster on the wall.

"Merlin," was all Arthur said, raising one dark blonde eyebrow, before Merlin caught himself babbling:

"It—it—it was a gift! It was a joke gift from Gwen. That is, by the way, Gwen, who you are charming so thoroughly, and this poster on this wall is hers and has nothing to do with—"

But Arthur had already moved onto the collage of stupid photographs, the dozens of pictures of him and Gwen and their friends from school at seaside trips and ill-conceived minibreaks to the more disreputable bar areas of Prague and Paris. If there was any luck, Arthur wouldn't spot the one where Merlin was clearly wearing fishnet tights, so of course, at that precise second, Arthur tapped it with his finger and gave Merlin a curious look.

"I was extremely drunk," Merlin swore.

"He put them on before he got drunk," Gwen supplied, and turning to wink at Merlin, said, "It's not nice to lie to his royal highness, Merlin."

"Haven't you anywhere you're supposed to be?" Merlin demanded, glowering, and Arthur gave them both a look Merlin couldn't decipher.

She grinned up at Arthur before turning back to Merlin and saying, "Actually, I have."

Merlin managed to drag Gwen into the kitchenette (an entire three feet) away from where Prince Arthur stood, examining the remaining photographs—Merlin could only hope they managed to have this argument in near silence and before Arthur found that one, mostly layered over now by newer shots, of Merlin pressing an embarrassingly earnest kiss to a tabloid photo of Arthur from his graduation from Eton—to hiss at her, "Gwen, you must get him out of my flat."

"Merlin, please," she laughed at him, voice pitched low and soft. "This is your perfect opportunity! If you were a woman, I'd tell you to prick holes in your condoms now."

Aghast at her, Merlin asked, "Girls don't do that, do they?"

"No," Gwen clearly lied. "Well, by 'no,' I mean, not a lot. And anyway, it doesn't matter, no one we know very well does it anyway." She checked her watch. "Seriously though, Merlin, I have the late shift tonight and if I don't run now I'll be tardy."

"Take him with you," Merlin pleaded. "I can barely breathe my foot is so far down my throat!"

"Consider it good practice for when you convince him to put his co—"

"I'll kill you," Merlin warned her. "I'll hire someone to do it."

Gwen smiled at him, affectionate, and reached up on her tip toes to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Stop being a coward, Merlin." She pulled away, and clearing her throat, said, "Prince Arthur, it was wonderful to meet you—and thanks so much again for returning Merlin's lighter here. You can't imagine how much it means to him."

Arthur favored her with a devastatingly boyish smile, and Merlin barely resisted the urge to clutch at his chest. His warring feelings of enormous love, remaindered from a childhood in the countryside with too much television and no other tiny queers to bond with, and enormous irritation, as the practical experience of Arthur was nothing at all like watching him handsome and gleaming from a great distance, were very distressing.

"It was a pleasure, Gwen," Arthur insisted, posh. "Would you like an escort to the door?"

"Why," Gwen laughed, "that would be delightful."

Merlin had barely breathed a sigh of relief as they left before there was a thundering of footsteps again, and instead of one of his drunken hooligan neighbors, it was Arthur, bounding up the narrow stairs two at a time, shouting, "Hurry, hurry!" and shoving Merlin backwards back into his tiny flat again, dragging the door shut behind them and throwing the lock.

"What's going on?" Merlin hissed, watching Arthur rush along the wall to the single window, drawing the curtains shut tightly and—and—oh God—turning off the room light. "Arthur?"

"The paparazzi must have followed my car," Arthur said finally, pitching his voice low in the blue darkness of the room, lit only by the orange bulb in the bathroom and the streetlights glimmering outside, and with all the lights in the flat otherwise out, Merlin realized with a growing sense of nausea that it did seem an awful lot brighter on the street level than was entirely normal. "Here, come have a look," Arthur offered, and Merlin went, sidling up close to the prince to peer out from the edge of the curtain to —

To an ocean of news vans and journos, men and women hefting enormous cameras with huge telephoto lenses, each of them shouting into their cell phones and milling around Arthur's gleaming purple-silver Aston Martin coupe and taking notes on the neighborhood, interviewing the woman who ran the shop where Merlin bought his cigarettes and rags for pictures of Arthur and his fucking condoms and KY. The noise outdoors was enormous, even over the din of Merlin's radiator and the stone wall dampening their voices, Merlin could still hear snatches of discussions, speculation about Arthur's latest paramour—could anybody get a comment from someone close with Lady Morgana? What about that Sophie woman Arthur had been seen running round with earlier last year? Was the Aston Martin a new car?

"Oh, my God," Merlin rasped. "Is that a satellite dish?"

Arthur actually had the gall to look disgusted. "Only the one—they must be out chasing Amy Winehouse around tonight."

Merlin began to choke on the panic welling up in his throat. "We've got to get you out of here," he said, drawing the curtains tightly shut once more. "You can't stay here!"

He knew he must look extremely crazy, and Gwen had remarked more than once that when he opened his eyes that wide he went from looking shocked to sort of dumb, like he'd been deprived of

oxygen immediately after birth or some other hideously cruel pediatric death joke that all the women in the neonatal ward seemed to collect like pennies. Still, Arthur being caught here was unimaginably bad; Merlin's life, while extraordinary by default and not choice, was at least quiet. This was so incredibly unfair, every woman and at least ten percent of the men in the world had a bit of a crush on Prince Arthur—how was it his fucking luck he was the only person punished for it?

"Like hell I'm going into that," Arthur told him decisively, pulling a smart looking cellphone out of his pocket. "You'll just have to endure the intrusion until I can have somebody get rid of the crowd."

"And how will you get rid of that crowd?" Merlin demanded, waving toward the curtains.
"Napalm?"

Right then, the buzzer to his front door went off in a long, whining beep.

"Don't," Arthur warned, closing his palm around Merlin's wrist to anchor him there, in the tiny space between the bed and dresser and kitchen nook, and Merlin tried extremely hard not to shove Arthur onto one of those surfaces and have his way with him. "They're just pushing all the buttons for this building."

"Oh God, this is all your fault," Merlin said, covering his face with his free hand. Arthur was still holding his wrist, his fingers firm but soft on the delicate bones of Merlin's wrist, and he tried not to think about how extremely lovely that was, lovelier than all of his Sunday afternoon fantasies had ever been, back when his whole life and all that he'd wanted had been visible only through the television screen and Gaius' occasional visits to their house. "What are we going to do?"

Arthur, sounding confident, said, "We are doing nothing—my father's men will handle this on their own."

*

"What do you mean, stay the night?" Arthur demanded.

"I mean," Allistair huffed, "stay there. No one has ascertained the car belongs to you, and no one will know for sure unless we send any identifiably royal guard after you—we've set up undercover monitors in the neighborhood so you should be perfectly safe for the night." There was a pause. "Provided of course whatever young woman you've gone after doesn't make an attempt on your life, of course."

Arthur hung up on him and turned to Merlin's expectant face.

"Well?" the man asked, hopeful. "When are they coming?"

"They aren't," Arthur snapped, shoving the phone violently into his trouser pocket. "They said no one's identified the car as mine yet, and that if they do, the media will know for sure."

Merlin continued to look puzzled, a fine sheen of confusion over obvious exhaustion. Arthur wondered how many hours he'd worked that week, whether he'd been in the linen closet at Children's Hospital chainsmoking for fun or to wring a few moments of quiet sanity out of his day, the same way Arthur claimed a deep love of swimming and riding, solitary pursuits.

"I don't understand," Merlin said finally, sounding faint. "You—"

"Have to stay here tonight," Arthur bit out, and then collecting himself and feeling a spike of shame for being such a boor to someone he'd more or less barged in on, he cleared his throat and said, "I'm terribly sorry, but there's no way I can make my way through that crowd out there, and I'm sure you can imagine what kind of insane rumors would sprout up."

Merlin genuinely looked like he would cry. "All right," he said after a lengthy, miserable silence.

"Again, my apologies," Arthur tried.

"You can take the bed," Merlin said quickly, adding, "I'm so tired I could fall asleep anywhere now."

Arthur had either caught some sort of stomach bug or that was guilt gnawing at his lower intestines.

"I couldn't possibly put you out," he argued. "You've worked—how long a shift do you work?"

"I lost track," Merlin admitted, and rubbed a hand over his face, and Arthur couldn't help noting the way his shoulders slumped, how his t-shirt seemed to hang too loosely on him. He wondered how Merlin got on, working mad hours at the hospital and living by himself in this tiny attic room, what he might do when he had the time to do anything, where he liked to go, what ordinary boys their age laughed about, what they talked about. Edgar, the current Viscount of Saxonbury and future Duke of Coxe-Bagot, spent most of his time talking about breeding greyhounds and probably spent most of his free hours fucking them; Arthur wondered what reality looked like without a title.

Decisive, Arthur said, "Right—I'll just sleep in the tub."

"Oh, God," Merlin said, looking the same way Arthur's valet did when he declared he could just wear a morning coat over a pair of jeans, "look—I haven't got a tub, and I think Gwen took all the shit that was on my floor and threw it into the loo so I'm not convinced you want to go in there anyway."

Arthur thought about Dr. Binghamton's warning about takeaway containers and dirty clothes and reconsidered. "I could just sleep on the floor?"

Merlin covered his face with his thin hands. "Christ. Arthur, I don't think you really grasp how much I absolutely cannot let the Prince of Wales sleep on the floor," he said, sounding more wretched with each word. "I feel all the British in me would just curdle in protest."

Which was a preposterous claim coming from someone calling him Arthur instead of 'your highness' or 'sire,' but Arthur preferred not to bring that to Merlin's attention and said instead:

"Fine. If you haven't a tub and you won't let me sleep on the floor then we can bloody share your bed, all right?"

"Um," was all Merlin said, and looked very much like he would throw up.

It took another half hour of cajoling and bargaining and dignified royal discussions before Arthur finally tired of Merlin's stuttering terror and shouted, "Look, Emrys, unless you think I'm doing this in an attempt to pin you to your futon and take you against your will then you will absolutely shut

up this minute and go to sleep!" Merlin stared at him, wide-eyed with surprise and propelling Arthur to add just for effect, "And yes, that is a royal order!"

Which was how he ended up on the far side of the thin mattress, surprised by the warmth beneath Merlin's soft, red fleece blankets, eyes closed and feeling all the stress melt out of his body and into the charcoal dark around them. Merlin, despite his best efforts and awkward, jerky movements, followed by attempts to remain preternaturally still, had gone quiet, and then relaxed finally, into labored breathing, and Arthur allowed himself to crack one eye open and glance to his left, where Merlin was half-burrowed beneath his pillow and curled up on his side underneath the bedcovers.

Every inch of him looked tired and Arthur couldn't help but reach out and touch the topmost knob of Merlin's spine through the thin cotton of his shirt and whisper, mostly to himself and into the ether:

"You know, most people like me."

*

The sound of rain woke Merlin, and he suffered one vertigo-inducing moment of terror—had he missed his shift at the hospital? shit! fuck! what day was it?—before he remembered it was Tuesday and that he had late shift that day. He had nearly managed to convince his heart to repair to its usual lodgings inside his rib cage when he realized there was the heavy, warm weight of an arm over his shoulder—that his nose was pressed into the soft, fine skin of a shoulder, his knees knocking against somebody else's.

Merlin couldn't remember being so comfortable for ages, years, maybe, and every inch of his body felt weighted down, sinking into the mattress, beneath the lead weight of another body and the blankets. It was small and safe and contained there, wherever he was, and he moaned a little, pressing his face more deeply into his companion's chest and thought he might just stay there, entangled. He sighed, shifting, sliding his limbs so he could slide more deeply into the embrace, and he felt the hot skin of his belly meet another, his leg fit more tightly between somebody's strong thighs, and Merlin felt himself purring, delighted and let himself open his eyes, sleepy.

At which point he came face to face with the blissfully asleep Prince of Wales, his royal highness, Arthur William Henry Philip Pendragon, and felt every joint in his body lock up in abject terror.

The night before he'd been so tired he'd barely been able to maintain vertical integrity, and whatever remained of his higher brain functions had effectively shut down after Arthur had more or less shoved him down onto the futon (teenaged sex dream fantasy number twelve), told him to sleep (not really a teenaged sex dream fantasy, but shockingly hot all the same), and proceeded to strip out of his extremely expensive tailored shirt, the low light from the bank of paparazzi outside gilding his smooth, strong shoulders (teenaged sex dream fantasy number all of fucking them). Then Arthur had shoved him under the sheets and Merlin had been forced to roll over onto his side, pressing as near to the wall as possible to stave off any awkward tenting, and spent a good twenty minutes terrified he might rub one off on his royal highness before he'd simply passed out from a combination of fear, arousal, bewilderment, and exhaustion.

All for want of a lighter, Merlin thought crazily, and vowed he would stop smoking if it killed him.

"Okay," Merlin whispered, very soft and under his breath. "I'll just—" he said, and tried to extricate himself from Arthur's despairingly reassuring and muscled arms, which of course led the bastard to pout in his sleep—oh, God—and clutch at Merlin more tightly.

Merlin was very convinced that this was what hell looked like—all promise of lushness and the fulfillment of adolescent sex dreams before Lucifer came and impaled you with a searing-hot metal trident and laughed as you struggled and wailed. If he hadn't been destined for dog-raping previously, then clearly this was a dog-rape-able offense, wasn't it? Merlin thought frantically.

There were, of course, a number of options for escaping from this sort of situation, but most of Merlin's experience doing so had come after a night of ill-advised and anonymous sex with men who were several degrees of magnitude less attractive the morning after. Arthur, Merlin thought with a sigh, suffered no such deterioration in appearance. If anything, he was more handsome in daylight, the thin sun through the drizzle caught on his gold hair, and Merlin found himself reaching up with the arm curled tight against Arthur's chest to touch the prince's fringe, wondering.

"This is not very fair, you know," Merlin whispered at Arthur's sleeping face, his heartbeat finally slowing, the fearfulness fading into something more curious than scared. "You're not even very likable in person."

The prince didn't wake, he only stirred fitfully, like the words had filtered into his dream, and Merlin couldn't help but trace his fingers firmly down Arthur's cheek, soothing. Merlin had watched Arthur grow up through the television and in the tabloid pages. He'd loved him, fiercely, genuinely in a way, and to see him so close, to watch his lashes flutter against his cheeks, to watch his mouth parted halfway in gray morning light—it felt a little like his heart was breaking. Arthur was real, he was solid to the touch—obviously, Merlin thought crazily—only he wasn't for Merlin to have, and foolish as it was, it still hurt to have a childhood love affair torn up by age and experience.

"Thank you, though," Merlin told Arthur.

For being the picture on his bedroom wall, tucked into his exercise book during long years at school. For occupying the television during his coltish adolescence and as he grew into his dignified suits, graduated from Eton, left for Sandhurst, as he rode horses and laughed and played with his younger girl cousins, a blond giant in an ocean of girls in white dresses, their rainbow of colored sashes fluttering in the breeze.

"Thanks," he said.

To which Arthur opened his eyes and asked, still dozing:

"For what?"

Merlin felt himself go extremely still. "Uh," he said.

The prince blinked lazily once, twice, and in a near-secret hush, said, "You have extremely blue eyes," and closed that last distance between them, his hand sliding up along Merlin's back, sweeping him in so Arthur could press his mouth against Merlin's, to catch Merlin's lower lip in a kiss.

And then it was easy, instinctive, to exhale into Arthur, to cup his cheek and curl his fingers into the fine, soft hair that brushed his neck, to murmur against the dusting of whiskers along his chin, to draw himself even closer for a better angle. It felt chaste, foolishly, and Merlin felt like he'd known Arthur forever, for lifetimes, as he scraped his teeth along Arthur's lower lip, teasing, and felt the prince nip him back, playful, sweet.

The long embrace melted apart after—after Merlin didn't know how long. It scattered into small kisses, just a press of lips against the bow of Arthur's mouth, to the corner of his pink lips, against his chin, and Arthur stroked his hands in large, warm circles along Merlin's back, sighing in appreciation.

"Merlin," Arthur said, voice pitched low.

"Yes, Arthur?" Merlin answered, having decided this must be a dream, his brain fuzzy from sleep and whatever poison Arthur had slipped into his kiss.

Arthur stroked his thumb along the skin behind Merlin's ear, and Merlin arched into the touch.

"What time is it?" Arthur asked, hoarse.

Merlin shook his head, forcing his eyes open to glance at his wrist where it rested alongside Arthur's neck, and said, "Half past eight, I think."

Arthur shoved him away, abrupt and with bruising force, his eyes gone wide and panicked.

"Oh, fuck," he said, and all said, between rolling out of the bed, stumbling round searching for his trousers and shirt—folded over a chair—and calling somebody named Alistair to shout about getting rid of the "fucking paps outside," and giving Merlin a rueful and conflicted smile, he was out of the door by half past eight plus five.

"What," Merlin demanded of his now-empty flat, "the fucking fuck just happened?"

*

Despite Gwen's aggressive text-message based campaign of terror (M WHAT HAPPENED TELL ME ALL TXT BACK IMMEDIATELY PLS and M I DEMAND TO KNOW and OH GOD YOU MADE A TOTAL ARSE OF YOURSELF DIDNT YOU) Merlin managed to give her a wide berth. Given that it had been a roundly shite week, of course Merlin had a DOPS assessment scheduled that he had utterly forgotten about, originally meant as an opportunity for his supervisors to see how far he'd come along in collecting spinal fluid, but that got a quick turnaround to a study on his skills intubating young children when there was a code called down the hall.

"Excellent, Dr. Emrys," his examiner said, inspecting his handiwork, hovering. "The patient seems to be doing very well."

Merlin swallowed hard. "Her name is Leyna," he croaked. The luster of her hair was fading, and Merlin wondered what that meant; she'd been so happy when the chemo hadn't made all of it fall out.

Dr. Garrison just gave him a tight smile, jotted down a few notes and said, "I'll just file this, and have a copy sent to you for your portfolio then, all right?"

"Thank you," Merlin croaked.

The day didn't approve appreciably, neither did it decline any worse, and Merlin was luckily in the ward and nearby when Leyna came out from sedation and managed to keep her calm as they removed a mass of tubing from her and traded it out for oxygen. She managed to stay that way until

her parents showed up, at which points all bets were off and Merlin snuck out, choosing cowardice over finding more and more vivid reasons to hate this rotation above all the others.

There were another half-dozen text messages from Gwen by the time he was digging around in his trouser pockets for his oyster card (including HAS THE KING ORDERED YOUR DEATH FOR DESPOILING HIS SON? and IS HIS ARSE AS PERFECT NAKED AS IT APPEARS DURING PARADES?) and while Merlin wasn't suffering exact sense of profound shame and personal sliminess he usually got from spending the night with someone he barely knew, he felt scummy all the same. The fact that he hadn't actually managed to gain any carnal knowledge of the prince didn't seem to be helping with the ulcer eating away at the lining of his stomach any—it only reminded Merlin of how ridiculously soft Arthur's mouth had been, how his muscles had felt, hot and moving beneath the smooth gold of his skin.

Everyone left and right on the tube seemed to be reading The Metro or The Sun or the Daily Mail, which was sometimes little better than either of the former, and Arthur was still splashed across the front pages of each.

The photographs were blurry, but definitely of Arthur in his navy blue suit, tie loose around the neck, being escorted out of Children's Hospital amidst utter pandemonium, a thousand photographers who tracked the moments of the royal family to the second. He looked bleached out, haloed in the pictures, his eyes supernaturally blue, just a chip of ebony pupil around a flare of cerulean, the pout of his mouth pink and familiar.

"Oh, God," Merlin said to himself, and forced himself to keep his eyes closed until they reached West Hampstead and he nearly died trying to keep them shut and mind the gap at once.

He stomped into the Basket Grill for a kebab and then stomped into Oddbins for a bottle of cheap Cabernet and went home to his flat, where he promptly tripped over a pair of his own boots and a stack of books from med school when he stomped into the bathroom to take a piss.

He was lying there, contemplating all that had gone wrong with his existence—it was a long list, and it started with his being rubbish at cricket and broadened until it included all the other sport at which he'd failed and then his utterly deplorable decision-making skills that had drawn him to study medicine despite Gaius' continual, repeated dissuasion—when he spied the watch, lying abandoned on the floor.

It was platinum and studded in tiny diamond chips and the watchface—aside from being inscribed with the word HERMES—was dominated by a gemstone inlay of the arms of Prince Arthur of Wales.

Merlin pulled it close to his face and studied it a long while, staring at the rearing lion against a red background that dominated the first and fourth gules and the blue harp representing Ireland in the third, the lion against gold that signified Scotland. He thought about Arthur casually doing the clasp of the watch each morning, checking his shirt collar in the hall mirror. Merlin wondered what Arthur's day was like, if he came off of it feeling defeated and drained, and if Arthur had ever had a crush, or funneled all his awkward teenaged feelings into somebody he couldn't have, and then dismissed that line of questioning as entirely too depressing and rolled onto his back.

He stared at the ceiling for a while, studying the cracks in it and mused that all in all, he was sort of crap at life.

"I think," Merlin told his ceiling, "I'm doing it wrong."

*

Arthur's ears were still ringing from the dressing-down his father had given him in his private study, and the last thing he wanted was for Morgana to be waiting for him at Clarence House, so of course that was exactly where she was.

"Dear God, Morgana, not today," Arthur pleaded, leaving a trail of discarded clothing as he walked through the private quarters—windbreaker, jacket and tie, one shoe and then another. Except the click-click-click of her terrifyingly expensive Italian high heels continued to follow him until he was barefoot in the kitchen drinking straight out of a box of wine and she was frowning at him, the dark red moue of her mouth disapproving.

"I thought you were finished with that," she snapped at him, snatching the wine away.

Arthur rubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand. "What? Drinking?" he asked.

"No, sleeping with anybody willing," she said.

Scowling, Arthur said, "Morgana, I know you're under the impression we have a relationship where we can have an honest discussion of our mutual feelings, or whatever, but I feel obligated to say that between us, you're really the only person who thinks that way."

Morgana held the wine box threateningly at him.

"Arthur—I have known you since you were a fat child, do not force me to take extreme actions here," she warned him.

"I was never fat," Arthur sulked, slumping onto a kitchen stool.

Wisely, it seemed, most of the house staff had fled for safer quarters, which appeared to be the general protocol for whenever the Duchess of Kent appeared. Arthur couldn't remember a time when she hadn't hovered around the edges of his life, either thrust together to smile obligingly at cameras for cheery photographs of royal cousins in harmony or hiding from their elders together in cloakrooms and sneaking gin in their grandmother's powder room.

"You could barely run and you know it, you tiny pig," Morgana told him, but sounded somewhat kinder about it and set down the wine box. "What happened at the hospital?" she asked him after a long moment. "It's not like you—and I don't believe a word of what the tabloids are saying."

Arthur felt a corner of his mouth draw up. "What, don't believe I could have spent last night shagging some medic's brains out?"

"I have it on good authority that the only person you ran afoul at the hospital was male and smoking in a linen closet, if I interpreted Dr. Binghamton's infuriated shouting correctly," Morgana said tartly. "So unless you spent last night fucking him in an ugly block of flats then—"

"Oh, my God, Morgana," Arthur said, horrified.

Looking pained, she said, "Arthur, trust me when I say there's little I'd like to chat with you about less than whatever goes on in your trousers, but—"

"Then let's stop, immediately," he pleaded.

"—But it's not like you to act like this," Morgana concluded.

Arthur had kept England on the edge of its seat with one full year of teenaged rebellion before his father had come to him and spat out in fury he'd never been so ashamed, that if Arthur still wanted to be any son of his, he'd keep out of the clubs and be nearer at hand for state business. It would probably be much, much worse, Arthur thought philosophically, if he were to say, admit to possibly liking boys over girls.

"All right," Arthur sighed dramatically, "you asked for it."

Morgana looked wary. "Yes?"

"I did, indeed, meet a medic at the hospital," Arthur told her. "And she was—what's the crudest way of putting this?—stacked and bloody eager to get some royal in her."

She cocked a dark brow at him. "Is that so," she said, voice flat.

"Oh, yeah," Arthur pushed on. "She was just panting for it. And anyway, I had to run out to her flat yesterday night to return the knickers I ripped off of her in the midst of our passion. Just the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Of course," Morgana agreed. "Why, I know I expect to be treated with such care when I have an illicit shag."

"There you go," he replied.

Pushing away from the marble slab counter, Morgana said, "Well then, I suppose that answers that." Pausing, she added, "Of course, I'll be happy to alert your father."

Tensing, Arthur said, "Excuse me?"

"Well, he should be informed, shouldn't he?" she asked sweetly. "It's standard protocol to let someone know there might be a royal by-blow. I'd hate for Uther to wake up one morning and come face to face with *The Sun's* exclusive coverage of the blessed birth of your illegitimate offspring."

"My God, Morgana," Arthur sputtered. "We used protection."

She looked intrigued. "Did you? You mean you slipped a condom in your pocket before going to the pediatric ward?"

Gritting his teeth, he said, "She had one."

"Why would she?" Morgana asked reasonably. "I assume she was on a shift."

Arthur hated her, hated her.

"Or did you feel round a bit just to ascertain she had her diaphragm in?" Morgana asked, at which point Arthur threw her out of Clarence House, which was a common enough occurrence that the quartet of photographers just took a few vanity shots of her exiting the premises and didn't send anybody any frantic emails.

There was nothing particularly sordid about the truth, and that made it even stranger that he couldn't bring himself to tell Morgana any of it. He'd run into a junior doctor at the hospital and accidentally taken what looked to be a valuable token in the ensuing madness, he'd returned it last night and been trapped by photographers who'd also scratched his gorgeous new car. There'd been no shagging or drug use and it would have been a charming anecdote even, for an interview somewhere down the road.

Maybe it was how Merlin had looked, curled into himself and sleeping in his tiny bed, trying to maintain as much distance between them as possible. Maybe it was the way Merlin had seemed at once overwhelmed by Arthur and unimpressed by his pedigree, or how his mouth had been, curious and lush against Arthur's own, the next morning, when he'd sighed into a kiss with no resistance.

Merlin had been easy, not in any of the disparaging ways Arthur had used to describe Morgana in the past, but just easy, and he'd made Arthur angry and made him laugh and had been a pale, slight, and very warm companion that morning in bed, listening to rain streak the windows. Something had felt very slotted into place, and Arthur remembered thinking that kissing him had been the only possible course of action, and loved how his hand had fitted across the dip in Merlin's back—large against the curve of his spine, the tips of his fingers sliding just beneath the elastic of Merlin's shorts—how Merlin's fingers felt warm in Arthur's hair.

Arthur was twenty-six years old and he'd never had a lie-in with anybody before; at least now he knew why workplace productivity was so bloody low Monday mornings. He'd never haul himself out of bed to go punch a timecard or build computers or file papers either, if he could pull Merlin more tightly against his chest and kiss him instead.

"Christ," he said to himself, and reached for the box of wine again.

The next morning, Dr. Binghamton looked about as unhappy with Arthur as Arthur was with his boxed wine experience.

"Doctor," Arthur scraped out of his throat, "what brings you here?"

"Your valet wept at me on the phone about alcohol poisoning," he said.

"It was just a little sick," Arthur argued, slouching against his kitchen counter and narrowing his eyes against the midmorning sun. His day's appointments had mostly been canceled, in part due to his being partly pissed and in part because nobody cared about his touring of a military museum if they were busy trying to divine where his cock had gotten off to earlier that week. "Nothing to cause any alarm."

"From the way Allistair was carrying on, I would have thought you a Regency heroine fetching up her accounts," he sniped, taking Arthur's temperature with a free hand.

Frowning, Arthur asked around the thermometer, "Did you just imply I'm with child?"

Binghamton cocked an eyebrow. "Are you? Because my idiot protégé tells me you've left your watch in his possession—why not your virtue as well?"

Arthur glanced immediately at his left wrist and found it naked, a lighter strip of skin where his watch was absent. His father had given it to him on his eighteenth birthday, and Arthur hadn't been without it since; he'd even given an interview about it, once, to explain what each of the marks on the platinum watchband meant, what the lily on the clasp signified.

"Merlin has my watch?" Arthur asked, and then, reconsidering, asked instead, "Wait—Merlin is your idiot protégé?"

Looking pained, Binghamton said, "Your highness, that was my unsubtle way of asking whether or not I need to have you checked for any venereal diseases."

Ignoring the conversation since it was entirely too horrifying to process, Arthur thought instead about Merlin and his watch. He should ask for it to be returned, maybe write Merlin a note of apology for all the complications Arthur had added to his life—but mostly, Arthur felt oddly like he had as a teenager: a bit reckless and indestructible.

Making a dismissive motion with his hand, Arthur said, "I need you to pass a note to Merlin on my behalf, then."

"Prince Arthur," Binghamton said, disapproving. "You haven't answered my—"

"No," Arthur sighed, searching around for a sheet of paper and a pen, "and for the record, if anybody would be weeping over being ruined, it'd be Merlin."

*

Merlin—Dr. Binghamton tells me you've my watch in your possession. Keep it, let's say as an apology for all the recent unpleasantness and complications.

Arthur.

*

"—And then! And then he writes: 'for all the recent unpleasantness and complications.' I'm sorry, your royal bloody majesty! I'm so sorry that kissing me is such an unpleasant complication—!"

Gwen just stared at him, stunned, a piece of fried fish halfway to her mouth. They were sitting in her flat eating really terrible takeaway Merlin had bought her in trade for listening to him rave about the note Dr. Binghamton had passed to him earlier that day. He'd been a zombie for most of his afternoon rounds, busily composing the furious rebuttal he'd send Arthur—that royal cock-up, Merlin couldn't believe he'd ever wasted teenaged masturbatory fantasies on that prat.

"Wait—what did you say?" she demanded, seizing Merlin's wildly waving hand and staring at him intensely. "Did you say that Arthur kissed you?"

Freezing, Merlin stopped flapping the note about. "Er? What? No," he denied.

"OhmyGod," Gwen squeaked. "You did. He did. He kissed you."

"What!" Merlin cried, alarmed at how his therapeutic shout at Gwen had spiraled so violently out of control. "No! I lied! You know me! I lie about these things!"

Gwen ignored him and said, "Oh my God—you're going to be a princess!"

Saying, "No, I'm not!" to that was petty and childish but most importantly useless, which was how Merlin ended up being forced to provide Gwen a full account of the night's events. She required extensive convincing Arthur that hadn't exercised any of his royal rights to Merlin's body—"Of

"which he hasn't got any," Merlin argued, mortified, not that Gwen listened—and then made him go over his estimated length and relative nastiness of the kiss at least a half-dozen times.

"Did he touch your hair?" Gwen asked, starry. "Did he like, stare into your eyes and tell you he loved you even though you were all wrong for him and he ought to marry a peer?"

Merlin pointed at her fiercely. "I am burning all your Mills and Boon novels."

The next day, Merlin spent part of his morning composing his reply to Arthur instead of doing his paperwork, and marched to Gaius' administrative offices in order to give the prince a piece of his mind by-proxy.

"No," Gaius told him, glaring over his half-moon spectacles.

"No?" Merlin asked, deflating. "Why not?"

"It may have escaped you, Merlin," Gaius said sarcastically, "but this isn't actually secondary school and I'm not your complicit and slightly fey go-between for your illicit schoolboy homoeroticism."

Automatic, Merlin blurted, "I don't want to be a princess."

"Dear God," Gaius said, reaching for his prescription pad and scrawling something hastily across it before sliding it across his desk. "Take this."

Glowing, Merlin said, "I don't think you can medicate my rage, Gaius."

"That is Arthur's email address," Gaius snapped back, shooing him away. "Now leave me to my work and we'll never talk about this again."

In the end, Merlin wrote:

Your Royal Highness Prince Arthur of Wales:

Thanks, but no thanks on the watch. Please tell me where I can have it sent.

M. Emrys.

"You, Merlin," Gwen said mildly, leafing through his earlier, handwritten, five-page response, "are an utter girl's blouse."

"I know," Merlin admitted, covering his face with his hands and agonizing over hitting the 'send' button, "I know."

*

Arthur got more spam advertising penis enlargement—unnecessary, thanks—than anything else at his private email account, so he was surprised to note that in between deleting missives subject lined, "!!! ARTHUR OPEN THIS YOU BASTARD" from Morgana, there was a note from "m.emrys."

Everything about the email was lacking, from substance to content to the fact that Merlin had managed to botch Arthur's correct title for official correspondence—not that this could be

considered official, and so Arthur typed, "Stop being such a giant girl about this and take the bloody watch," in response.

The answering note came two hours later—in between shifts? during a short break to snatch lunch? or was he done for the day, already lounging about in his sty of a flat in an old shirt and worn shorts?—while Arthur was en route to a global, nonprofit summit about the spread of AIDS.

"MY GOD YOU'RE A PRAT. Take it back, or I won't be responsible for the consequences," Merlin wrote back, and Arthur was puzzled for a half-beat before the attached photograph of his watch, held by one familiar, thin hand above a hospital toilet completed loading on the screen of Arthur's iPhone.

The surge of affection he felt at that couldn't possibly be healthy, Arthur decided.

He informed Merlin with his thumbs that if his watch was either flushed or besmirched by hospital toilet water he'd send ninjas after him, to which Merlin retorted—halfway through the introductory comments at the summit—that if Arthur hadn't any rape-dogs Merlin seriously doubted the royal family kept ninjas, either.

Arthur was too well-bred to continue the conversation through the panel speeches, but he did sneak away to the toilet before the seminars began to take a picture of his 900 pound loafers and tell Merlin where exactly they'd kick him in the arse with them if he wouldn't shut his fat mouth about the watch and keep it.

"Hasn't anybody ever given you a present before?" Arthur typed.

It was long after the champagne was uncorked and everybody had made small talk—Arthur tried not to calculate how many doses of antiviral cocktail each bolt they'd opened that night could have paid for—that he finally had an opportunity to check his phone and found Merlin had written back, "Yes, but usually not as hush money after somebody has a regretful evening with me."

"I've never paid anybody hush money in my life," was what Arthur said when Merlin answered the buzz at his building with an exhausted-sounding, "What?"

"Haven't you got things to be doing?" Merlin demanded.

"Yes, I have," Arthur replied, "so unlock your bloody door and let me up so we can clear up this misapprehension and I can get back to being very busy and important."

Merlin looked despairing by the time Arthur made it up the six flights of stairs to his flat, standing framed in the doorway and looking wronged.

"Is there going to be a small army of reporters again, then?" he asked, snippy.

"I came in an unmarked car and had the driver sent away," Arthur asked, and when Merlin continued to look confused, explained, "That means 'no.'"

Shifting uncomfortably, Merlin said, "Oh," and added, "Well, come in, then, before my neighbors report you and we start the entire cycle of pain over again."

Merlin locked the door, and Arthur kept his eyes fixed on Merlin's hands against the grain of the cheap wood veneer. Arthur had faced down his father in a fury and screaming photographers and

angry countrymen and surging crowds at airports around the world, but he lacked the exact measure of courage he needed to say, eyes opened:

"It wasn't a regretful evening."

Hands frozen, Merlin said, "What?"

This was always where there was a convenient scene change in every Georgette Heyer novel he'd stolen from Morgana to read while bored shitless on long flights, so Arthur was somewhat at a loss as to what the appropriate next step was. Risking a glance up, he saw Merlin's stunned-fish expression, his mouth slightly open and his eyes extremely blue, and Arthur cleared his throat to repeat, "I said, it wasn't a regretful evening."

"I—am not actually sure what that means," Merlin replied, looking odd.

"It means keep the bloody watch!" Arthur shouted at him. He couldn't imagine any other member of the royal family suffering so enormously to convey such a simple request. "Or I'll go find ninjas and have the royal guard train rape-dogs!"

Merlin persisted on looking gobsmacked, but at least he said, "All right."

"Good!" Arthur answered, still shouting, and taking a deep breath to moderate his tone, added, "And now, I'm going to do this," and took Merlin's face in his hands like so many covers of so many paperback romance novels to kiss him, closed-mouthed and yearning, and thought, yes, as he felt whatever had been missing all that day lock back into place.

Most of the kissing Arthur had done to date had been as a prelude to more nude pursuits, but kissing Merlin—just like that morning—felt a lot like a field of study itself. Merlin tasted like cigarettes and cheap tea leaves and his lips were chapped, sharp underneath Arthur's mouth until he smoothed his tongue over the pout of it, cupped Merlin's chin in his hand and tilted his head back, searching.

Merlin made a soft, sweet sound like, "oh," and Arthur pulled away long enough to fit their mouths together better, and circled Merlin's waist with his arm, palming Merlin's back and scraping his teeth along Merlin's lower lip. Arthur felt every inch of Merlin pressed up along his chest, the soft thrumming of his heart through the cotton of his t-shirt and the line of his sternum, and Merlin closed his hands—cold, bad circulation, a doctor should take better care of himself, Arthur thought absently—along Arthur's biceps and drew him even closer.

And then it only made sense to press his thumb, hard, against the skin behind Merlin's ear, since Arthur remembered how he'd purred at that this morning, and then to drop kisses to the corner of his mouth, the bow of his lip, to secret a kiss at Merlin's temple, and then let his lips trail to his lashes, studious, before returning to Merlin's lower lip.

Merlin just clutched at him more tightly, biting at Arthur's mouth with something like possession, and whispered, "Arthur—Arthur," and did it again, smoothing the sting with his tongue, the stubbly whiskers on his chin a burn against Arthur's cheek—another new thing, something else he hadn't anticipated.

"Yes, Merlin?" Arthur asked him, and slid a hand underneath Merlin's shirt to stroke along his spine, the hot, soft skin there, his stubby nails scraping at the convex of Merlin's back, leaving a trail as Merlin shuddered.

Merlin kissed the line of Arthur's jaw, and adoring was the only word for it, and something in Arthur's chest seized tightly enough he was forced to kiss Merlin's extremely irritating mouth again—just to keep him from doing anything else that created a hitch in Arthur's throat.

"If you don't mean it," Merlin managed between gasps, between small, closed-mouthed kisses, "Arthur, if you don't mean this, then—"

"Christ," Arthur interrupted, and decided to suck a kiss into the hollow of Merlin's throat, where the skin was pale and unmarked and was hot with the blood running just underneath. "I don't know what I'm doing, but I do. Why do you think I wanted you to take the watch?"

"Fuck," Merlin swore, only it came out in four syllables, extended as Arthur sank his teeth into Merlin's skin, humming. "What—was it to mark me?" he gasped.

Arthur grinned, nosing underneath Merlin's chin and following the line of his jaw until they were eye to eye again—blown pupils and blue irises and damp lashes and all—and said, "No, the watch wasn't to mark you."

Merlin smiled at him, wild and glassy-eyed. "You're very strange and inbred."

"I'm not strange at all," Arthur countered, and was debating how deep his well of courage went for the night—and how much more could be coaxed by his extreme interest in stripping Merlin out of his shirt and leaving another series of mouth-shaped bruises down his front—when his bloody phone started shrieking.

Merlin's eyes widened. "Arthur," he said, "no."

Wincing, Arthur said, "I did say I was very busy and important."

"So is this," Merlin protested, rubbing himself in a long, lithe tease against Arthur.

"Stop that," Arthur hissed, and fished his phone out of his pocket while giving Merlin a warning glance. "Hello?" he said, trying not to watch Merlin lick at his mouth, all swollen and red and clearly in need of further investigation.

"It's Allistair, your highness," his valet said, nasal and disapproving. "Are you done with what I sincerely hope is a double-bagged tryst?"

Arthur sighed and pulled his hand away from underneath Merlin's shirt, which led to a significant amount of pouting on Merlin's part. Clearly, this bit was the same with both men and women, which Arthur found more disheartening than anything else.

"That is disgusting, Allistair," Arthur told him.

"Yes, sire," Allistair agreed. "The car will be waiting downstairs for you in five minutes—please be ready, and pass along my apologies to your...companion, sire."

"Who was that?" is what Merlin wants to know after Arthur has resisted the urge to fling his phone across the room. He looked mostly recovered and unlikely to extract any further revenge for the impromptu conclusion to their earlier activities, for which Arthur was both grateful and regretful; the life of a prince was marked by many trials.

Arthur said, "My valet—my transport will be here shortly."

"You have a manservant?" Merlin asked, eyes rounding and mouth stretching into a smile with utter, evil delight. "Does he dress you? Does he draw your bath?"

Arthur glowered at him. "Allistair has been with me since birth, Merlin."

"Oh, 'been with you,'" Merlin crooned.

"Maybe I should have let you flush the watch," Arthur mused.

Merlin leaned in closer again, sliding his hands into the back pockets of Arthur's expensively-tailored trousers, and the tease of his fingers through the fine wool was enough to make heat flare up Arthur's chest again, to have it spread through to his fingers and toes and pool in his belly. He wanted—more than anything right now—to pin Merlin back to his messy futon mattress.

"Oh God," Arthur realized, "I've taken up with a horrible tart, haven't I?"

"And you're stuck with me now," Merlin cheered, not at all perturbed. "You've given me the watch —no taking it back."

Arthur found himself searching Merlin's guileless blue eyes, looking for triumph, for anything that might come round in the end and hurt after all and only saw happiness there, huge and unafraid and wide enough to swallow them both.

"No," Arthur said, and his voice was strange with wonder as he said it, "I suppose not."

*

Merlin floated through the last week of his pediatric rotation, and no fewer than three of his colleagues and two of his examiners asked him if he was going slightly mad while staring suspiciously at the smile he couldn't seem to wipe off of his face.

Gaius cornered him in the cafeteria, holding him at bay with a steaming mug of tea and a half-eaten crumpet. "What's going on with you?" he demanded. "You haven't stopped smiling in a week and it's beginning to frighten me."

"No, I'm just...happy to be here," Merlin told him, beaming. "Happy to be alive."

"Dear God," Gaius said, and shuffled away before Merlin could elaborate any further.

Arthur had been late for his driver by the time Merlin had seen fit to release him, he'd been a good deal more wrinkled and breathless than before as well, escaping down the stairwell of Merlin's block of flats—but not without a backward glance and a smile, something small and not at all like the thousands of gleaming grins seen on television and magazine pages all these years, something just for Merlin.

If that had been everything, if he'd never seen or heard from Arthur again, he might have been all right—eventually, anyway—with just the memory of that evening and proof it had actually happened in the glimmer of platinum from Arthur's watch, settled carefully atop his wardrobe next to a photograph of his mother.

But less than halfway through his sleepless night of obsessively rereading stories on the Sun website about Arthur, the postage stamp at the bottom of his computer screen had started bouncing at him frenetically.

My God, if my valet could personally administer you a pregnancy test, he would, Arthur had written, and attached was a poorly-exposed photograph of who must have Allistair, looking bleak and fretting, mouth half-opened.

Merlin stared at the message for a long time before he let out a bark of laughter, out loud and surprisingly surprised. Because, yes, Arthur was a prat, but he was good, underneath it all, and Merlin thought that if ever there was time, if ever he got the opportunity, to strip away Arthur's button-down shirts and well-choreographed haughtiness, he might find something honest and golden and shining hidden below.

So even though it'd started drizzling, one rushed trip down to the corner shop and a (foolishly) anxious 10 minutes later, Merlin was taking a photograph of the cheapest pregnancy test he could find, its enormous blue minus sign prominent.

There, he typed to Arthur. Tell him to breathe.

And out of a misguided surge of residual boyish love, for sure, he tapped out his mobile number as quick as he could and hit send before could reconsider. In the interest of actually being functional at the hospital the next day, he'd taken an antihistamine and chased it with a shot of jaeger and collapsed into the sleep of the heavily medicated, only to be woken the next morning before the alarm by Katy Perry's ode to exhibition lesbianism.

Bloody hell, he needed to change that back to something that wouldn't humiliate him in front of ordinary humans soon, Merlin thought, groping about for his cell phone until he could shut Katy's wretched cockteasing. He mulled throwing the phone out of his bedroom window, but considered the hospital might be calling about a patient or to let him know he was being sacked and flushed out of the program, so he answered it in a grunt, "Nrgh?"

"Unless they taught an entirely groundbreaking stream on pregnancy in medical school they declined to advance in our health classes, I wasn't terribly concerned either way," came Arthur's voice, wry.

Merlin rolled over until he was staring at his ceiling, feeling lost for a moment.

"I dunno," he said, voice scratchy from sleep. "But I'm starting my obstetrics rotation next week—I'll report in what I discover on the job."

Arthur made an amused noise. "See that you do," he said and then apologized, "Sorry—I'm being hailed. Apparently the Moroccan prince is here early."

And that's when the smile had hit Merlin like a category five hurricane, unstoppable and like an involuntary muscle reaction, and he'd said, "Oh, naturally," and murmured, soft and too-intimate, too soon, "Have a good day, Arthur."

"Stop smoking at work," Arthur had advised and hung up.

After that, it was a series of irritated text messages at random intervals complaining about his fascist tailor and Merlin dutifully asked if anybody was getting handsy and should he alert the ninjas and rape dogs. Merlin managed to get to work, but it was a near thing, and the usually-stressful transition between rotations melted around the aggressive happiness that he couldn't, and didn't want to, shake.

"You have got to stop," Gwen pleaded with him his second day of his obstetrics rotation, shortly after Gaius had fled. "You're starting to embarrass yourself."

Merlin smiled at her some more. "I actually can't stop it," he confided. "I think my face has frozen up this way."

Covering her face with her hands. "Oh God, you look like you're simple or a pervert or something, Merlin, you can't prop yourself up between a woman's legs with that horrid look on your face," she mourned.

"I doubt they'll care if they're in labor," Merlin assured her.

By day three of the rotation, four separate women had asked if they couldn't switch him out with somebody who wasn't smiling like a fiend, and Merlin was finally forced to admit, "Er, I'm trying to stop, but I think I'm a bit, um, in love," which of course created this entirely new problem where everybody said things like, "Oh, how sweet!" and looked at him with fond amusement like he was a puppy navigating on his own four legs for the first time.

At night, he lay himself on his bed and drew Arthur's watch to him with a flick of his wrist, holding it up over himself, suspended midair and hovering and watched the fingers of it tick second by second. He knew he was ignoring a well of doubt and question, but there would be too much time for that later, when Arthur inevitably came to his senses and Merlin grew boring, and for now, Merlin floated the watch back to the wardrobe and chose happiness over wisdom.

No one's told you to stop smiling, have they? Merlin emailed to ask Arthur at the end of his first week in obstetrics, after Gwen had finally broken his unbreakable smile by implying filthy relations between Gaius and the head urgent care nurse, which was an image so foul and unnatural Merlin had seized at his head to try and force the demon pictures away.

Arthur wrote back a day later, and even the words across the computer screen looked tired as they lettered out, Merlin—nobody's ever told me to stop smiling.

*

Really? Because Gwen tells me that I look like an utter fiend and all right, so did a few of my patients this week as well and at least three members of the downstairs clinic staff have told me to give it a rest. Have delivered now four babies, which are actually hideously slippery when they just come out and three of the maternity services nurses teased me about dropping one for so long I nearly did the first time the attending physician told me, "catch." But assorted wrongness and blood and afterbirth and shit aside, it was sort of lovely when I handed her (it was a girl, 6lbs 5oz) over to her father; I've never seen a rugby player cry so much. Oh, so, as requested, as far as I can tell, no secret developments regarding human reproduction as earlier discussed.

M.

*

Merlin—if you drop any babies I will personally recruit the ninjas that come after you. You'd think the NHS would have done a cost-benefit analysis of allowing you to handle infants and the potential for lawsuits therein before putting you on a bloody obstetrics rotation. And please, please tell me no one actually said "catch" to you.

And why on earth can't you bloody stop smiling?

Arthur

*

Er, no one actually said "catch" to me?

And well, you, really.

M.

*

And what the hell was Arthur supposed to do with that, he wondered, sitting in the expansive guest suites that had been prepared for him at Moltke's Palace. His room was primarily cream, with scrolling embroidery across the heavy brocade upholstery on every solid object—Arthur's chair, the lounger, the bench across the foot of the enormous bed, the curtains, the fucking rug. The first thing he'd done upon taking official residence at Clarence House and being alerted to the fact he wasn't to make "significant" changes had been to take out an inconspicuous flat elsewhere and fill it with furniture that didn't make him feel like a bloody girl.

He remembered Allistair going on (and on) earlier that day about how Moltke was the finest remaining example of Danish rococo and felt a pang as he realized yes, yes it was, and he was doomed to live within its confines for two weeks while Uther and the Queen of Denmark feted something or another.

Arthur had been extensively briefed on the cultural elements at play during their two week tour but he'd been distracted at the time, mostly by the memory of Merlin's skin underneath his fingers, at how unafraid he'd felt after so long wondering whether he was doing the wrong thing or the right thing or if he was mad for even thinking it. It had been, in the end, like so many other things, just a matter of taking a deep breath and jumping into the deep end, of licking Merlin's mouth open.

It had all been so extraordinarily unextraordinary, Arthur mused, spinning his phone across the writing desk and staring out the two story windows that stretched across a wall. Ordinary people met one another in awkward, embarrassing ways all the time, and eventually fumbled themselves into relationships and marriages and lifetimes spent together and apart, happily or angrily with no interventions by a concerned tabloid public or the political machine of the monarchy.

"Sire?" Allistair called from the doorway. "His Royal Highness King Uther is requesting your presence at dinner with Her Royal Majesty the Queen of—"

"Yes," Arthur interrupted him, unable to bear it another moment, and scowled at Allistair by way of a convenient and hideously gilded wall mirror roughly twice his height. "Fine, I will attend. Until then, leave me."

Allistair nodded deferentially. "Of course, your highness," he said, and then dropped a stack four inches thick on the writing desk, reporting cheerfully, "I'll just leave these photographs Clarence House agreed to have you autograph as a goodwill gesture after the unfortunate incident at St. Bart's here for you then."

"In theory," Arthur reminded him, "I could still have you beheaded."

"Naturally, sire," Allistair said, and retreated back to the hallway without a single note of fearfulness or cowering.

Arthur wished, suddenly, that he could pick up the phone and dial Merlin's number and ask if he'd been cosseted during his lifetime, if when people asked his opinion, did he believe they actually wanted it, or was it a gesture? Had his father, his mother, been both demanding and overprotective? Had he wanted to be a doctor, or had he been born into it, and always expected it to be so? Arthur didn't know that he didn't want to be a prince, but he hadn't ever dared to think otherwise, and the absence of self-reflection couldn't be considered affirmation.

Merlin might say he'd been loved and let go as a child to do whatever he wished, that he felt a passion for medicine and that every day was a reward, and that he'd never had an uncertain moment in his life, all good of course, except that Arthur would never be able to speak with him again for fear he might murder the man.

Just as likely, Merlin would reply with a photograph of a sticky note with a sad face on it, so that might be a dead end either way.

Of course, the worst part of all of this—aside from the jet lag, the rococo disaster of the palace, the fact that he was caught up in a minor sexual crisis here—was that Arthur was somewhat terrified of the Queen of Denmark. She'd always harbored an extreme interest in his life and usually drilled him about his direction and goals as she chainsmoked and glowered at him with a mild disappointment he was most used to seeing in his father.

"I could have been a working artist, had I not been queen," she told him later that night, as first course was being bussed away. "Now, young Arthur, have you thought about what your life would have been like had you not been a royal?"

Across the table, Uther had that pained expression on his face that manifested mostly as a dark line between his brows and mostly in the presence of the Danish royal family, and Arthur could sympathize.

"I'd I think I'd be a pilot, actually," Arthur said, in a sudden fit of honesty he hadn't actually anticipated.

The queen raised her brows at him. "A pilot? You want to fly?"

"I want to protect people," Arthur told her and studiously didn't watch his father's face.

It would neither be against royal protocol nor out of the ordinary for Arthur to have taken an active commission with the RAF, and it had been floated as a possibility as he'd graduated from Sandhurst. He could never be dispatched to the front lines of America's war of gray morals, but he could do something other than tour sick wards and smile for a camera. But his father had gone a bit funny after his mother's death and had a fit and forbidden it outright and refused further discussion. It wasn't until years later that Arthur had harangued Dr. Binghamton into revealing that when his mother had died due to childbirth she'd nearly taken Arthur with her.

"The King will not yield on this, Arthur," Binghamton had told him, kind but firm. "You are all he has left, and your safety is paramount to him."

Out of spite, Arthur had visited every corner of the globe blighted by infectious disease that year and ignored Binghamton's knowing look of irritation each time he returned to his father's white-

knuckled concern.

Queen Margrethe's brittle, polite expression of interest thawed into something more genuine, and she snubbed out her cigarette as the next course was wheeled into the room—something that smelled salted and fishy and awful.

"That is commendable, young Arthur," she said approvingly.

"Thank you, your highness," Arthur answered.

"What is lacking, however, is that you still remain unmarried," she sighed, fickle, and Arthur forced himself to count to ten before he began stabbing at the second course—the last time he'd been here, he'd broken a plate.

*

The ignored email resulted in an utterly shameful two-hour conversation with Gwen wherein she swore she was recording his wrecked, horrid, morbid wailing so she could blackmail him into forcing Arthur to make her a Countess someday.

"Arthur doesn't care what I want," Merlin moaned. "Arthur is probably off frolicking with some French prostitute supermodel and has come to his senses about the whole thing and will send a courier and demand his watch in return."

"What, no rape ninjas this time?" Gwen asked, sounding unconcerned.

"It's rape dogs, Gwen, Christ, get it right!" Merlin yelled, and hung up.

Merlin forgave Arthur—if not himself and definitely not Gwen—when Arthur mailed him a picture of himself with a Pudsey bear perched on his shoulder. He was in a white button-up shirt and blue jeans and a camel-colored jacket, casual and still princely, smiling at the camera, his eyes shockingly blue. Attached was the note:

Merlin—I've now signed +100 glossies of this [miserable photograph](#) in apology to Children's Hospital and to prostitute myself for Children in Need. I'm told some of them are to be distributed to all the children I "traumatized" that evening. Have you any brats who want one addressed directly?

Arthur

"Oh, so no supermodel prostitutes then?" Gwen asked, snatching the photo out of Merlin's hands since she had no concept of personal space and all the other male doctors were too frightened of her to kick her out of the locker room. "My goodness, but he is a handsome one, isn't he?"

Merlin took the picture back and taped it to the inside of his locker door, the centerpiece in a crinkling collage of sticky notes and schedules and cut-outs of Arthur and smiled as he said, "Yes, he is," and shut the door.

He sat in on three antenatal sessions, including one with a half-dozen women and a specialist there to discuss their high-risk pregnancies, and did one pelvic exam on a teenager wearing six pounds of eye makeup there for birth control pills.

"So!" Merlin said. "Who're you hoping to shag?"

Tragically, it didn't even rank very high on his list of most inappropriate comments, and at least it got a laugh out of her—bubbling out of her in surprise that widened her sweet, brown eyes. Her muscles loosened enough that Merlin stopped worrying she would snap the speculum, and she said, "Er, well—there's this boy in my class."

"I know exactly how that goes," Merlin told her cheerfully, and then said, "All right, things are about to get a bit slippery and cold down here," and went about trying to warm up the gel between his gloved palms as best as he could.

It was long after 6 p.m. by the time he finished up his last rounds and had a quick consult with one of his supervisors—another CbD down—and got the opportunity to run back over to Children's Hospital, a notepad and pencil stuck in the back pocket of his scrubs. He made a quick stop-in with the costume bin for his now-signature hat and marched right into the pediatric oncology ward, calling out, "Who wants a signed picture from Prince Ar—" before the words died on his tongue.

There were a half-dozen nurses and doctors at Leyna's bedside, her monitors and IVs being unhooked by one terrified-looking F2 doctor while a pair of nurses counted off, lifting her by the sheets from her bed to a gurney—the three other children in the room staring, wide-eyed and scared.

"Get her out of here," someone shouted. "She's in asystole!" someone else said and then Merlin saw someone dive for the paddles—tiny, scaled down for small hands and feet and smaller hearts.

He dropped the pen and rushed over, barely managing to say, "What's happened?" before the wheel locks on the gurney were disengaged and they were pushing into the hall, down toward an unused trauma room, a doctor kneeling over her, paddles prepped and demanding they push it up another fifty.

But Merlin could only see her face, bloodless, her mouth opened and her eyes shut, lashes sweeping dark over her sweet, linen-white cheeks. Her whole body shook and seized whenever another charge ran through her, and Merlin stood in the doorway, frozen and ignored as the nurses pushed another unit of epi and the doctor paused a moment before trying once more, saying, "Let's give it another shot," and Merlin thought no—no.

Leyna's heart didn't restart, the whine of the monitor stayed flat, and the time ticked from thirty seconds to sixty seconds to ninety to whatever it was now, and Merlin saw Doctor Washburn running his forearm cross his forehead, one of his tells, one of the ways Merlin had always known he'd be asked to call it, and he could think nothing at that moment but live—please, live as loudly as possible.

The heart monitor fluttered, paused, and then like magic, a beat. Another. Once more.

"We have sinus rhythm," one of the nurses sighed, and Dr. Washburn frowned down at Leyna, like he didn't know what had happened for a moment. "Doctor?"

Merlin let out a gasp of air, lightheaded all of a sudden in the face of a miracle, of something. One of his professors in medical school had talked about seeing the impossible in the halls of hospitals, but he hadn't really believed it until that moment, and Merlin went out of the room, covering his face with shaking hands and knew somewhere in his chest, buried underneath all the rationalizations and years of schooling, that he had done it.

Live, Merlin kept chanting to himself, out loud into a chasm somewhere between himself and wherever Leyna was sleeping, please, just live, and she did.

*

And she kept living until the first time Merlin tried to catch ten minutes of uninterrupted sleep, and then the second time, and then the third. It felt like every time his eyelids drifted closed his pager went off again—code pink, code pink.

Nerri, the late-night pediatric trauma nurse, was at tears by then, when Merlin stumbled up the hallway to spy on a wreath of doctors, standing baffled by Leyna's bed, speaking in grim and grimly irritated terms. "I don't understand," she said, looking miserable, "I just don't understand! Every time I page you, she stabilizes, but she won't stop crashing, either! I just—it doesn't make any sense."

Except of course it did, Merlin realized with a wave of nausea. It made perfect sense.

*

First, Arthur sent a photograph of the fucking mermaid, mostly because they always dragged him out to see it every time he was in Copenhagen and he imagined Merlin would enjoy it in a very plebian way. Then, as he was led on a tour of some of the finer furniture markets in the city, he was struck with a sudden sense of whimsy and bought a coat rack for Merlin and had it sent, express overnight. In the same package he sent Merlin a bauble from the Lego theme park, Viking jewelry for Gwen studded in amber that caught the light from any corner of the room and glowed from the inside out.

On the third day, he wrote:

Merlin—What's going on? Have you been killed by Binghamton?

Arthur.

On the fourth, Arthur saw his father's jaw go tight as they passed a couple on the street, holding hands and window shopping at Peder Hvitfeldt street, pointing at bottles of elderflower cordial and smoked venison. One of the men smiled at the other, and righted his partner's collar, teasing, and Uther turned back to Queen Margrethe to inquire about something Arthur couldn't hear over the roar of blood in his ears.

He snuck out that night to a sleek, upscale skybar and watched the icy, glittering spread of Copenhagen at night as a girl with red hair the color of gold floss kissed her way down his chest, eyes smoke-colored and fringed in kohl. He kissed her, made it messy and hot and needy, biting at her mouth and cupping her small breasts in his hands—just to see if he could, if maybe after all it was all right—and pinned her to an exorbitantly expensive art-piece sofa in the back and fucked her over the back of it, shoved her black miniskirt up her razor-sharp hips and buried his face in her hair.

She was beautiful and a laugh caught in her throat, underneath the skin of her swanlike neck, when she came, and Arthur gasped and followed her over, hands knotted in her long, silk-like hair, and wished he were in London smoothing Merlin's t-shirt down his too-thin sides. It was the morning of the fifth day by the time he made it back to his suite, ignoring Allistair's despairing looks as he

stripped off his shirt and trousers and lay on his back, staring up at the rococo gilding on the ceiling and hating himself.

"You look perturbed, Arthur," the queen said to him the next day, snubbing out her cigarette and trading it out for another. "And you're quieter than you've been before during our visits."

He flashed her a tight smile. "Just thinking, your majesty."

She arched one perfect brow at him, and Arthur thought that of everybody he's met, he thought Queen Margrethe had this royalty business down.

"Of?" she prompted.

Arthur winced. "About responsibility," he invented rapidly. "Royal obligation."

"Oh, that," Margrethe dismissed, blowing out three smoke rings in rapid succession. Arthur remembered thinking that was the most enormously fascinating skill in the universe when he'd been a boy, and of how Margrethe, then younger, still mostly the same, had smiled at him with a practiced calm and offered to teach him. "You're to be an example, Arthur, not a monk. No one will mind about the girl last night."

"I beg your pardon," Arthur choked.

Margrethe smirked at him. "You're not subtle, Arthur," she scolded. "And the security detail does report to me."

"Oh my God, you old harridan," he said, before any of it could make its way through his brain to royalty to mouth filter, and Margrethe burst into peals of laughter, curls of cigarette smoke blossoming outward, and said:

"Oh, Arthur, how I've missed this you!"

He scowled at her and leaned back in a blue-upholstered, scalloped chair. "You know, most people don't encourage bad manners," he told her snippily.

He remembered Uther's face like thunder when he'd walked in on an eight-year-old Arthur smoking furiously and coughing with just as much enthusiasm as Margrethe critiqued his smoke-ring technique.

"You were more fun before you managed to varnish everything you did with them," Margrethe countered, looking speculative. "What is troubling you, Arthur? I haven't seen you so quiet in many years."

Arthur thought about asking her if it was normal or at least not preposterous to be suffering some sort of personal epiphany this late into his twenties; or about whether or not she'd ever chosen something she knew would make her happy over what she knew was required by the monarchy; or how she dealt with disappointment on the face of somebody she loved.

"How long," Arthur asked, hesitant, "before my father forgave you after that time you taught me to smoke?"

Margrethe's eyes softened. "Oh, Arthur," she sighed. "He refused to visit me for half a decade over that nonsense."

"I see," Arthur said, swallowing hard.

"But," she said, "he did forgive me. Now—" she offered him a plate of cookies"—eat one of these to make sure they haven't been poisoned, my pastry chef has been in an utterly foul mood this week."

And so it wasn't until the sixth day, when he couldn't stand it any longer and after a number of baths, that he actually picked up his cell phone and dialed Merlin's number. It rang straight away into his voice mail, and when he tried again an hour later, the same thing. He sent a series of increasingly annoyed text messages, and when those yielded nothing, either, he decided that Merlin could just go fuck himself and went to play poker with Margrethe's head pastry chef, who was, indeed, enormously pissed with her.

"You aren't actually trying to poison her, are you?" Arthur asked in unimpressive Danish.

"She's wearing the silver jewelry this week," the man cursed at him. "She'll know. It wouldn't be worth the effort."

On the seventh day, instead of resting, Arthur was woken up at arse o'clock when his cell phone started ringing off the hook. A bleary glance at the call screen told him it was Binghamton, and it took Arthur three tries to unlock the phone to answer it, and even then, he only croaked, "What the fuck?"

"Sire, I am about to ask you something and I want you to answer honestly," Binghamton said, sounding entirely too awake for whatever-the-fuck-o'clock it was.

"Christ, I do not have a VD," Arthur shouted.

"You can't know that for sure unless you let me test you," Binghamton contradicted, and then added, "And I'm calling because a young woman named Gwen has stormed into my office and demanded I call you about Merlin."

Arthur snapped awake and sat straight up in the bed. "Yes, I'm listening," he said.

"Oh God," Binghamton moaned. "You two haven't actually—?"

"For fucks sake," Arthur heard Gwen shout in the background. "Give me the sodding phone!" she added, and suited action to words when there was a sound of struggle before Gwen came on the line, panting as she asked, "Your Highness—is that you?"

"Yes, Gwen," he said, and knew somehow that something was terribly wrong. Binghamton wouldn't agree to call him otherwise, and there was a note of slight hysteria in Gwen's tone, and for a moment Arthur thought, oh God, he's died, and felt gravity give way until Gwen said:

"Sire—there's something wrong with Merlin."

Arthur shoved the heavy blankets away. "Has he been hurt?" he demanded.

"No, I mean—Arthur, he won't sleep," Gwen said, and Arthur could hear the tears in her voice, that narrow edge of fearfulness. "I don't think he's really slept in days but I didn't figure anything out until last night when he walked off the fucking curb and he won't leave the hospital and I don't know what to do and I can't tell his Mum because she'll just cry and Merlin would kill me and—"

"Right," Arthur said, cutting her off as he reached for his trousers. "Look, get Binghamton to sedate him or something."

Gwen was silent for a long moment. "Just sedate him?" she asked, and it was a layered question if Arthur had ever heard one. "We've tried, your highness."

"Try again, just sedate him if you can," Arthur said, pulling a hoodie over his head and tossing a few things into a shoulderbag. "I'll be there in the morning."

"I'll see you then," Gwen said, but at least she sounded approving. "I'll text you my number—call me when you get into London again."

Arthur toed into a pair of trainers.

"Will do," he promised, and threw open his suite door, stuffing the phone into the pocket of his khakis as he broke into a run.

*

Everett Washburn had been a slapper at uni, too, but he was a slapper with a fucking private jet, and to his credit, he only complained about ten minutes when Arthur called him and told him to come pick him up in Copenhagen.

"What?" Everett balked when Arthur called to wake him. "Sod off, Arfur!"

"I'm taking the Queen of Denmark's pastry chef's car and I'm driving to the airstrip right now," Arthur told him calmly, belying the epic struggle of contorting himself into the man's damned Smart Car, which was clearly designed for fucking hobbits. "If your fucking tin can isn't there in an hour I will personally distribute the photographs of you from that party that never occurred with that thing that never happened."

"You're a fucking cunt, mate!" Everett shouted at him, and said, "I'll see you in like, forty minutes, yeah?" and hung up.

Of all the people Arthur had spent time with and disliked in college, he disliked Everett the least, Everett was funny and crass and loyal possibly to a fault. His family was loud, nouveau riche, and not at all ashamed of it, which had made them Arthur's favorite people to be around at snotty school events.

Driving the smart car wasn't much better than getting into the cursed thing, and Arthur had far too many narrow-misses on his way to the private airstrip. The gulfstreamer he'd come in on gleamed from inside a guarded hangar, and he spared it a guilty look as Everett pulled his twin-engine up again, an hour and a half later.

"What the fuck is this all about, anyway, Arfur?" he asked.

Arthur slapped him upside the head. "I thought I told you to stop calling me that."

"Yeah, but the royal family's all but neutered these days," Everett grinned. "No Tower of London for me—so whatsit, Arfur?"

He looked out the window, at the orange lights dotting the European countryside and the water, vast and blue and opaque from so high up, and said, "A friend's taken ill—I don't have time to go

through proper channels."

"Your life's always been a bloody mess," Everett sighed, and winged to the left.

Rose-gray light was reaching fingers out over London by the time they touched down, and Arthur helped himself to Everett's car—"You fucking bastard!" Everett wailed at him—and was driving it as if he'd more or less stolen it, more or less because he had, when Gwen called to let him know Merlin had declined once more to be sedated.

"Well, tell him he has to be!" Arthur yelled, jockeying for space on the narrow side roads toward St. Bart's. "Tell him he's clearly gone mad and that he's not to make any more decisions on his own!"

"Yes, I'm sure that'll go over well," Gwen said to him, dry. Merlin's insubordination was apparently contagious.

Arthur resisted the urge to shout anything at the other drivers out his window, mostly because with his luck it'd end up all over the front page of the Sun tomorrow as a sidebar to a story about his ESCAPE FROM COPENHAGEN and speculation over whether he'd gone off as a PRINCE ON THE LAM?

Arthur wondered how long a person could last without sleeping, whether or not Merlin had cracked or something from the pressures of medical school and all his rounds. "Have you figured out what's wrong with him yet?" he asked.

Gwen fell silent. Arthur figured that was answer enough. By the time he managed to bully his way into a parking space and locate the main entrance to St. Bart's, the sky was more strongly pink and blue, and Arthur pulled his hood up at the last minute before he bounded into the lobby and then up two flights of stairs to find Gwen and Binghamton standing sentry in front the pediatric on-call room.

"What's happened?" he asked, breathless, trying to peer through the glass window into the mostly-black room. Inside, all he could see was the shadow of two pale hands knotted in dark hair, Merlin rocking back and forth on one of the lower bunks and it made something in Arthur's stomach twist painfully.

"He shoved us out of the room and barricaded himself is more like it," Binghamton told him, voice pitched low. "He won't tell us what's wrong, but I'm worried about him, sire—he looks unwell."

Arthur glowered at him. "If he hasn't slept in days that's not exactly a surprise."

Binghamton glowered right back. "I had always hoped you'd grow out of this, sire."

"One of his former patients is really badly off," Gwen cut in, standing on her tip-toes to peer into the on-call room, brows knit together. "A little girl—one of the pedes oncology cases. The on-call nurses told me he's been running here all week, every time he's had a free moment on his own rounds."

Binghamton's face grew volcanic. "That is absolutely not an excuse for—!"

Arthur got the feeling they'd had this conversation a half-dozen times already while Merlin held the on-call room hostage and sat in the dark. Worse than state banquets heavily centered round

vegetarian meals or smoked fish, Arthur hated inactivity, uselessness, and lip service when he could be doing something.

"Right," Arthur decided and tried the door handle—locked—before pulling his wallet out of his pocket and fetching a credit card. He gave Gwen a sideways look. "You didn't see me do this, by the way."

She just grinned at him, manic. "Of course not, your highness," she whispered.

"Oh, dear God," Binghamton muttered.

Ignoring the doctor, he grinned back. "Call me Arthur," he advised, and picked the lock.

*

He'd learned lock-picking mostly through trial and error. There were dozens and dozens of locked doors at Buckingham Palace, at Windsor Castle, and Balmoral, almost as many as royal secrets. His nannies had despaired of keeping him in one place, and when he'd grown older, they'd passed that duty onto his tutors. Most of the housekeeping staff charged with keeping him from sneaking round the castle spent a lot of time grateful that at least the royal residences were closed to visitors while occupied, or God knew where Arthur would have gone off to.

At twelve, the thought of sneaking away into London had been just as charming a prospect as it would be at twenty-six. Of course, Arthur thought ruefully as he heard the lock give way and the door handle began to move freely, he'd never considered fleeing Copenhagen for Children's Hospital to be on that list of adventures he'd take one day.

"This is turning out to be a really creepy habit of yours, Emrys," Arthur said, stepping into the room and pulling it shut behind him. He could hear the beginning of Gwen's protest and locked it once more with a silent apology.

Merlin's head jerked up, ash-white even in the dim light, eyes supernaturally blue.

"Arthur," he said, and he was slurring all his words heavily—the sort of thick, swallowing exhaustion Arthur remembered from long junkets when sleep was impossible between all the time changes and temperature differences and all the angry silences between himself and his father. "What are you doing here?"

Something tart and funny was right on the tip of his tongue, but Arthur was suddenly tired about all of this, and said, "Merlin, how long has it been since you've gotten any sleep?"

If possible, Merlin grew even more pale. "Arthur, you don't understand."

"I really, really don't," Arthur agreed. He walked over, and after a minute of internal debate, crouched down and tipped Merlin's chin up—hissing at what he saw.

Merlin smiled feebly. "That bad?"

"You look like a fucking heroin addict," Arthur bit out at him. He wished he knew how to do any of the doctor things he'd seen actors do whenever they found anybody near-death from exposure, but all he could do was take Merlin's hands—they were shaking, helplessly and endlessly—into his own and hold fast as he said, "Are you on something?"

"What, like PCP?" Merlin laughed, eyes widening. They were red, shot through with burst blood vessels, as red as Merlin's mouth wasn't. "Like, drugs?"

Arthur cocked a brow at him. "You're the one refusing to sleep, Merlin."

Frowning, Merlin said, sounding blurrier by the second, "Aren't you supposed to be in like, Copenhagen or something this week?"

Snapping his fingers in front of Merlin's face, Arthur commanded, "Focus, Merlin, and tell me why you aren't sleeping."

Merlin's eyes went from far away to fearful, and he said, "Arthur, I can't. I'm not—I'm not—" and gave up, shoulders slumping and eyes damp and utterly miserable as he said again, "I just can't—I know it's stupid. I know it won't work, but I can't let her die."

Outside the door, Binghamton shouted, "What?" and Gwen said, "Gaius hush!" and Arthur ignored both to ask, in his most soothing, diplomatic tone, "Of course we don't want her to die, Merlin; but how will you help her if you don't sleep?"

Merlin made a noise that sounded uncomfortably close to a sob, heaving for breath and curling in on himself, starting his rocking again, and it was hard not to seize him by the shoulders and start shouting at him to stop it.

"If I sleep, she'll die," Merlin said, and it turned into a chant, words running together—but no less distressed—in his exhaustion and under his breath. "If I sleep, her heart will stop beating and she'll die and it'll be my fault."

Arthur had a brief, hysterical thought that of course, even in the midst of a mini-psychosexual crisis he would end up being the more mentally stable one in this...whatever it was. Sometimes he wished he could abdicate the throne and run away to join a monastery.

"Merlin, this is a hospital—people die, it's not your—"

"It will be if she does," Merlin wailed at him, and this time, when he looked up, Merlin was openly crying, tears rolling wet and messy down his hollowed cheeks. "Arthur," he sobbed, "I know it sounds crazy and I don't know how but she almost died earlier and I stopped it and now if I sleep her heart stops and I can't—I just can't do it—I can't be responsible for—"

"Merlin, that's ridiculous," Arthur told him, and under his palms, he could feel Merlin's hands begin to shake even harder. "There is no way you can be keeping her alive or be responsible for her death."

"Watch then," Merlin spat at him, and his panicked blue eyes went funny and nearly golden for a moment and Arthur shook his head and said, "Look—Merlin, see, nothing's happening—" which was when he heard a ruckus in the hallway, a nurse shouting: "I've got a code pink! Code pink!"

Arthur's jaw dropped.

"See?" Merlin whispered, before his eyes flared gold again and everything outside went quiet and Arthur thought he heard Gwen say something about "it's happened again—they've got sinus rhythm now though."

"That's impossible," Arthur told him. "There is no way."

"I can't explain it either," Merlin told him, still vague and not all there, and Arthur had a funny, sick feeling that if Merlin weren't so tired and strung out they wouldn't be having this conversation, that it was only feverish exhaustion that had pushed the admission out of Merlin to begin with. "It just is—it's always been like that with me. When I lost my virginity I moved all the furniture in the room a foot to the left."

"That good?" Arthur heard himself quip, digging out from under all the implications, and Merlin managed to dig up a smile and say:

"Well—that bad, really."

"So," Arthur started, "you're—I guess—a bit magic, then."

Merlin gave him a doleful look. "No jokes, I beg you."

"There's really nothing funny about any of this," Arthur told him honestly, in a softer voice than he'd used in years, and that was all it took to wipe the any remaining color from Merlin's face. "You can't keep doing whatever it is you're doing, Merlin—it's wrong. That girl is—"

"What?" Merlin interrupted. "Supposed to die?"

"Apparently," Arthur forced himself to say, because the living couldn't give that up for the dead, and if he had learned anything his father had taught him by omission, it was that. "You can't keep this up and you shouldn't."

"She's only five," Merlin croaked. "She has a crush on you," he added, as if that changed the way his skin was waxy and his forehead beaded with sweat, or how he looked like he'd lost a stone since the last time Arthur had seen him, just two weeks ago, or that Merlin had decided—Independently—to trade his health and sanity to keep her suspended on a quickly-fraying thread.

Outside the room, Arthur could hear the shuffle of feet, Gwen making excuses for them to curious passers-by, the eternal sounds of hospital monitors and the overhead intercoms. The window in the on-call room was cracked open, and a thread of bitter cold was trailing in to the now-oppressive heat. Arthur wished there was something he could do other than to tell Merlin he had to make an impossible decision, or that he could make it for him; but Arthur—apparently, unlike Merlin—was only human.

"There is a lily inscribed on the clasp of my watchband," Arthur murmured, running his thumbs over and over the back of Merlin's hands, because it was all he knew how to do. "It was my mother's favorite flower. My birth went horribly pear-shaped, apparently, and while I survived she lingered in a coma."

Her hospital room had been sunny yellow and always filled with flowers from Uther, and some of Arthur's earliest memories had been peering over the railing of her bed to her smooth, untroubled face and wondering if—like some of the shut-in palaces—anybody was home inside. She'd had hair the color of his and apparently eyes the color of his but mostly Arthur had watched her hands, perfectly still on the white sheets, and sometimes he'd had nightmares they might move one day, and the ivory statue of his mother—lying entombed in a hospital like a knight—might come alive and not recognize him. He'd been four when an infection had seized her and she'd died after living so long as a ghost.

"My father couldn't let her go," he continued. "She died, eventually, when I was four and of natural causes."

Merlin just stared at him helplessly. "Arthur—"

"It's not the same thing," Arthur admitted. "But I don't think my mother wanted that, and I don't think this girl, whoever you're keeping here, would want it either."

Merlin started to cry again, hiccupping, defeated tears, and Arthur hated the way his whole chest tightened to the point of pain when that happened and all he could do was wipe at Merlin's face with the wrists of his fucking sweatshirt and make hushing noises, pull him in closer until he could press kisses, apologies against Merlin's mouth.

"Come on now," he said in a hush against Merlin's temple. "It's time."

Merlin only cried harder and fisted his hands in Arthur's hoodie, buried his face in Arthur's shoulder, and for a long minute he thought Merlin wouldn't be able to do it—but then he let out a tight, desperate gasp and there was shouting in the hall again, a rush of activity and somebody crying "code pink!" once more. Only this time the noise kept on, and Arthur put his arms tight right Merlin, covering his ears, and said, "It's all right—you're doing the right thing, it's fine," until it went quiet again, more slowly this time, and Merlin let out one last, choking sob and whispered, hoarse:

"It's done. She's gone."

*

Merlin remembered next to nothing of the next three days—just snatches of waking restlessly and of Arthur's blue, blue eyes, of being comforted and cared for and of grief, like razors under his skin.

One time, he opened his eyes to stare at an unfamiliar ceiling, at whitewashed ceiling beams criss-crossing, gleaming in midmorning sun, and thought Leyna died and it's my fault and closed his eyes again to go back to sleep, feeling hot tears seeping out anyway, guilt punching its way through numbness. He felt someone's fingers stroking through his hair, soothing, and fell asleep thinking he didn't deserve it, whoever was watching over him. The next time, he heard the murmur of voices in the room and the thought, "I wonder why I'm still so tired?" before drifting off again.

The third time he woke, it was dark all through the room, and he pushed himself up—enough to note his muscles were sore from long sleep, that parts of him felt numb from lying still too long, that there were pillowcase creases on his cheek—and saw Arthur, asleep on top of the covers next to him, a book on city infrastructure opened on his chest. Outside there were orange street lights and the faint murmuring of the city and inside, there was Arthur, Merlin thought in wonder, who had come for him at the hospital and kept him, apparently.

Merlin watched the way the nightlights gilded the planes of Arthur's face, cast long shadows beneath his dark blond lashes and remembered Arthur's chubby cheeks from a long childhood of sweet photographs, caught up in the king's arms on the green grasses outside of Windsor Castle. Now, he couldn't resist the urge to brush his fingers over Arthur's mouth, just to ascertain this—like everything else—was real. He was doing that a lot these days, trying to pinpoint the beginnings and ends of hazy dreams.

"You're awake," Arthur said, voice hoarse from sleep, before his eyes opened slowly, just a glimmer of sapphire blue in the dark.

Merlin stared at him a long time before saying, "So that all really happened?"

"It did," Arthur confirmed, voice still low. "I thought you'd never wake up."

"How long have I slept?" Merlin asked, and lay down again, curled up on his side, and in a moment of half-lucid courage, he reached over and curled his fingers into the cotton of Arthur's black t-shirt. "You're supposed to be somewhere else, aren't you?"

"Three days, and yes, although that's largely a moot point now," Arthur told him, turning so he could close his fingers over Merlin's, and the weight of their hands together were warm over Arthur's heartbeat. Maybe that's what Merlin had been looking for to begin with. "You looked like you needed it," he added after a beat.

Merlin closed his eyes, mostly so he didn't have to look at Arthur's face as he said, "So you're not—freaked out or anything?"

"What, by you refusing to sleep and my being forced to flee Denmark?" Arthur retorted.

Scowling, Merlin said, "The—the little bit magic thing."

"Honestly, no," Arthur said, yawning. "But I think Gwen and Binghamton and I would all appreciate it in the future if you ceased to use it in ways that made all of us mad."

Merlin narrowed his eyes at Arthur. "Honestly?"

"Really, Merlin," Arthur answered, smiling and being completely distracting by running his hand through Merlin's hair, "have you seen some of the hats at Royal Ascot?"

The rest of what Arthur said finished processing, and Merlin tightened his grip on Arthur's shirt. "You fled Denmark?"

Wincing, Arthur said, "Yeah, and believe me, the press has had a fucking ball with it."

"Are you—I mean, is it all right?" Merlin asked, feeling all the color draining out of his face. The last thing he'd been late for was a meeting with someone at the deanery and that had already been epically bad; he couldn't imagine the consequences of running from a state visit. "Shouldn't you, you know, go back?"

Arthur snorted in a distinctly unprincely way. "Actually, Queen Margrethe sent me a bloody gift basket of cigarettes and expensive Nordic vodka and a card with her best wishes so I think I'm in her good graces."

Merlin felt, at that exact moment, that Arthur was a bit frustratingly wonderful.

"What about your father?" he asked, hesitant.

His only response was Arthur's steady, blue-eyed gaze searching his face until he sighed and said, "Go back to sleep, Merlin, we can talk about this when you're feeling better," and because he hadn't even realized he'd been growing tired again, Merlin agreed, but not before he murmured, "Where

am I, anyway?" and Arthur smiled down at him, drawing the covers back up over his shoulders and didn't answer.

On the fourth day, Merlin woke to the sound of rain and felt, for the first time in ages, alive and well and like some place in him that had been empty and echoing was all filled up again. He turned to his left and saw Arthur propped up on a mountain of pillows reading a book, and thought, maybe he was responsible for that feeling, too.

"You know, you're sort of a prince," Merlin told him.

Arthur glanced to his left, arching one dark blond brow and clearly convinced Merlin was slow or something. "So I have been informed."

"I meant you're nice, you bastard," Merlin told him, but without any real heat, and Arthur's affectionately mocking smile tilted more toward affectionate. He set his book aside, marking the page by folding down the bottom corner, and said:

"Good morning to you, too."

It was a good morning; Merlin was with Arthur and the ache of memory from the hospital had paled now, at least enough for him to smile back and say, "Good morning."

The flat turned out to be Arthur's getaway—a hidden flat with a private entrance along the pedestrian walkway between Long Acre and Floral Street, next to the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. The wood floors were old and worn and creaked when Merlin walked over them, an imperfect touch that seemed unsuited for Arthur, Prince of Wales, but made perfect sense for Arthur, Prattish Reader of Books About Public Transit. It was the top floor of an old banana and walnut warehouse, which made Merlin think instantly of banana and walnut bread and realize he was famished.

They made eggs for breakfast. Or rather, Merlin made eggs after Arthur botched the process not once, but three times, and Merlin was forced to threaten him with an eggy spatula until Arthur agreed to observe without touching.

"I wasn't doing it wrong," Arthur sulked, peering over Merlin's shoulder, his chest warm against Merlin's back.

Merlin gave him a look from the corner of his eyes. "Those eggs were crunchy."

Arthur looked stubborn. "I like them that way."

"You're lucky you're gorgeous," Merlin muttered turning off the hob and scraping the eggs into a dish. He'd meant to add, 'Or obviously someone would point out you're mentally deficient,' but his mouth went dry when Arthur hooked his fingers into the belt loops of Merlin's jeans and said, hazy, against the curve of his neck:

"I'm gorgeous, am I?"

Merlin fumbled as he set the pan down, the heavy bottom clattering against the range.

"You know you are," he said, feeling shy.

Arthur turned him round with insistent hands, so that the rest of the flat felt far away compared to how close and blue Arthur's eyes were, shining with something unidentifiable. His hands were huge along Merlin's hips, warm through his jeans.

Merlin suffered a sudden moment of awareness that he was in Prince Arthur's flat, that Arthur had left a state visit in Denmark to come and fetch him from the on-call room at St. Bart's, that Merlin—who'd come from nowhere and from nothing and who was an entire ocean of complications all on his own—was now making eggs with his royal highness' expensive Calphalon pans, and that he'd had to rinse the dust of disuse from it before setting it on the stove. When Arthur had sent him to shower and brush his teeth, there'd been a stack of horrendously luxurious Egyptian cotton towels folded next to a brand new toothbrush. He didn't belong here.

But I want to, Merlin let himself think.

"There's something about you, Merlin," Arthur told him, his voice as hushed as the sentiment, searching Merlin's face for something he hoped Arthur found. He didn't belong here, but maybe wanting it enough was enough to make up the difference—maybe wanting Arthur enough was enough to make up the difference. "I just can't put my finger on it."

"You should try to, though," Merlin suggested, and told himself to be brave. Nothing worth having was ever won through cowardice, and looped his arms round Arthur's neck, fingers stroking through the hair at the back of his head—soft.

The smile that stole over Arthur's face was dirty and secret, and Merlin added it to his private catalogue, tucking it away as Arthur leaned in and kissed him.

This kiss, too, like the smiles Merlin put away for safekeeping, was different than the others, different even than all the ones Merlin had imagined during his life. Arthur seemed thoughtful, proprietary, intent, and he cupped Merlin's face in both his hands and tipped Merlin's head back, and surveyed his new claim, mapped out Merlin's chin and neck in smaller kisses, studied the divot between his collarbones with his tongue.

"You're not what I thought you'd be like at all," Merlin admitted, walking backward across the room, dragging Arthur by the waist of his trousers, which made Arthur look up at him, eyes suddenly shadowed with something wary. "What do you mean?"

The only possible answer was a smile and the truth, and Merlin said, "You're better—I like you real," and whatever had shaded Arthur's expression disappeared and he shoved Merlin onto the bed. Arthur crawled over him, hands over knees, and smiled, and to Merlin it felt like staring into the heart of the sun and going blind with happiness.

"I suppose you're not so bad yourself," Arthur told him, and the fight Merlin felt inclined to start over that was derailed mid-protest when Arthur caught his mouth in another kiss, pressed Merlin deep and soft into his bed, his fingers sliding in between Merlin's own until he was pinned to the mattress—conquered.

Merlin felt Arthur let go of his hands in favor of skimming his fingers underneath Merlin's t-shirt, slid them up until the shirt went over his head, and Merlin returned the favor—arms and legs and trouser-legs tangling until they were a laughing mess of half-discarded clothing atop the bed linens.

Merlin wanted to ask, "have you ever done this before?" and "are you sure?" but Arthur kept interrupting him every time he built up the courage and coherence, smoothing away his worry and

distracting him, wrapping his arms around Merlin's thin body to press flat and warm and reassuring along his back, against his shoulder blades, holding him close. I guess that's an answer, too, Merlin thought, and leaned over to bite at Arthur's chest, to scrape his nails through the wispy blond hair there.

"I've never," Arthur said suddenly, an admission against Merlin's mouth, and Merlin pulled away to look at him, the way his blue eyes took on a note of panic as he added, "It was never worth the risk. Before."

The unspoken but you are was probably what was making Merlin's chest seize up and all the words fall out of his mouth. He settled on trying to convey his whatever he was feeling with his lips instead, tracing out gratitude and happiness and you won't be sorry as he rolled them over, mouthed his way down Arthur's sternum, along the flat plane of his belly, hands working at the buttons of Arthur's jeans.

"Merlin, you don't have to—" Arthur started overhead.

"Oh," Merlin argued, dragging the trousers down Arthur's hips and peeling away his gray boxer-briefs, "but I really do."

Arthur made a choking noise. "Oh, by all means then, don't let me stop you."

Merlin laughed, and closed his fist around the base of Arthur's dick. It was hot and the skin silk-smooth under the pads of his fingers, and he let himself make a soft noise of appreciation before he licked a long stripe from base to tip, just teasing, and gave Arthur a smoldering look from beneath his lashes.

"You," Arthur growled, "are a horrid tease."

"You knew that when you didn't bring any rape dogs," Merlin replied, pressing soft, exploratory kisses to the base of Arthur's dick, the soft skin where high thighs met his buttocks, rolling Arthur's balls gently in his free hand.

Arthur groaned, hips restless. "And I regret that decision more each day."

Taking pity on both of them, Merlin sucked the tip of Arthur's cock into his mouth, running his tongue underneath the crown and up so he could draw it through the slit before Merlin sucked in a breath through his nose and sank down, taking Arthur's dick as far in as he could, letting his teeth graze the spot just beneath the head—which sent Arthur's hips jerking, rocking up into Merlin's mouth as Arthur cursed, "Fuck! Merlin!" and Merlin pulled off with a pop—gasping—just long enough to say, "That's lesson two," and diving back in.

Arthur groaned something long and wanting and filthy, and Merlin applied himself to trying to suck his brains out through his dick. It was sloppy and wet and Merlin hadn't really ever thought himself a cockhungry slut, per se, but apparently he was, and every time Arthur moaned or whimpered or when he slid his fingers into Merlin's hair, fisting two handfuls of it and trying so hard not to tug, all Merlin could do was groan and think more, more. Arthur was stronger than him—all lean muscle and scars on his elbows and knees, rough golden hair on his thighs and calves—but Merlin held him down with his arms, pinned him by the hips, and leaned in and in and in until he had Arthur halfway down his throat, his lips tight around the root of his cock.

"Shit," Arthur gasped, and tugged at Merlin's hair, warning. "Merlin, I'm—" to which the only appropriate response, Merlin felt, was to hum around the dick in his mouth and run one finger behind Arthur's balls, curve it and stroke the spot just behind them, encouraging, darting his gaze upward, hungry to watch Arthur come apart.

When Arthur did, he was wordless, fingers curled tight in Merlin's hair, eyes shut tight and mouth opened—his body one long, beautiful arch, and Merlin had to close his eyes against it to swallow and thought, this is it—this is it for me.

Then Arthur was dragging him up, pulling him, urgently, saying, "Merlin, Merlin." Merlin went, feeling Arthur's come still smeared on his mouth as he was collected into his arms and shoved into the pillows, held down by Arthur's wrecked expression and then his mouth and then by the way Arthur closed his fist around his cock, jerking fast and rough—the way Arthur was whispering, into Merlin's mouth, biting at the lower lip, "Come on, come for me," so he did, Arthur's name hoarse and pleading on his lips.

They slept, and then Arthur returned the favor with less finesse but commendable enthusiasm, and showing a total lack of appreciation for the afterglow, started making a list—out loud—of things to keep in mind the next time he got around to sucking anybody's cock.

"This is going to be a really irritating part of you I'm just going to have to deal with, isn't it?" Merlin asked the ceiling, sprawled sideways across the bed and listening to Arthur make a mental note about being less ambitious initially because "not everybody can be absolutely gagging for it like you, apparently."

Arthur appeared in his line of vision, hair a disaster, his smile wild.

"I like being good at what I do, Merlin," he scolded. "Of course, I could always practice on someone else and then you wouldn't have to hear this."

"No, no," Merlin said, pulling Arthur down on top of him again, a reassuring weight. He wondered how the girls who'd loved and lost him had dealt with it, the absence of this. "I wouldn't want to encumber anybody else with that responsibility—I can handle it."

"Are you sure?" Arthur teased, settling himself on top comfortably, his shifting his weight to his left hip and tangling their legs together. "I wouldn't want to impose."

Merlin grinned back up at him and couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so happy—it was too much, so big and so bright in his chest he thought he might burst.

"It's an honor to serve my country, Arthur—I'll just lie back and think of England," he said, and Arthur rolled his eyes and tried to smother him with the nearest available pillow, which of course deteriorated into one of those unwinnable tussles in bed that Merlin lost anyway. Arthur had a good two stone on him and he was a filthy cheat.

The eggs, by the time they got to them, were cold, and Arthur made tea and they sat in the bed, dividing up the Daily Mail, the Sun, and The Mirror ("Are you sure you want to—" Merlin asked; "Trust me, it's better to know what I'm to be shouted at about going in than be surprised," Arthur told him with grim determination) between them.

The rain had stopped and the sky had cleared, sunlight pouring into the flat and blanketing the bed in fuzzy midwinter warmth, and Merlin looked at where it highlighted the patchwork of gossip and

lies and implications in the rags. Arthur hadn't said anything, but Merlin had heard a whispered argument when he'd been in the bathroom earlier, had seen Arthur slamming his phone down on the table, cutting off its insistent ringing. He'd seen—from the window—men in dark suits patrolling the area.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly, sitting cross-legged in Arthur's bed, watching his golden head haloed in the light, bent over a copy of the *Guardian*. "About everything—I didn't mean to cause so much trouble for you, and—"

Arthur cut him off with a look, barely lifting his head.

"Merlin," he said, patient and surprisingly kind, "don't worry about it."

"But your father—the king—he must be angry with you," Merlin persisted.

The last time his mum had been mad at him, she'd alternated between bursting into tears every time she saw him and throwing things; Uther had to be worse. That was like having all of England mad at you.

Arthur looked equal parts resigned and amused and Merlin wished he didn't already know that expression so well; Arthur deserved better and more.

"My father is always mad at me," he said, and setting away the page—there was a headline screaming, PRINCE ARTHUR ABANDONS STATE VISIT WITH DENMARK; MYSTERY WOMAN TO BLAME?—and reached over, hooked the collar of Merlin's shirt and tugged him close, kissing him soft and slow and unexpectedly sweet. When Arthur pulled away again, he said, eyes-open and honest, "I'm glad I came, Merlin."

And all Merlin could say was, "Oh," and turn back to the newspapers, fingers skimming the crackling gray pages, silent as Arthur read story after story after story.





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Prince Arthur — On the Rails?

AFTER more than a half-decade of being on his best behavior, first in line to the crown Arthur, Prince of Wales, has taken a sudden and dramatic turn. Almost a month ago he disappeared during a routine visit to Children's Hospital in London and the following day there were unconfirmed reports Arthur had made a stop to a private flat for what we can only assume was a private chat.

Clarence House has remained frustratingly closed-mouthed about the business but that didn't keep royal watchers and speculators from heated guessing games about whether or not Arthur has found a paramour at last; the King had to be despairing of his son.

Only exclusive reports trickling in from gossips further eastward are now reporting that Arthur has vanished, disappearing in the midst of a long-planned state visit along with King Uther to Denmark. The monarchy, of course, hasn't said a word on the subject either way, but our sources in the Netherlands assure us that Arthur wasn't present at any events today or indeed yesterday. More details as they emerge.

Wednesday, December 10 2008

BIRMINGHAM 1
PLYMOUTH 0

"If you're gonna lose, that's the way to do it"



Amy's day of shame

SEE PAGES 8-9

DIRTY WAR

Labour back

in 'Dark Ages'



FURIOUS Brown accused Tony Blair last night of leading a DIRTY WAR to force him out of No 10 NOW. See page 24.

ARFUR ABSCONDS WITH SECRET SWEETIE?

First in line to the throne, our very own Prince Arfur, has been struck by cupid's arrows, explaining his dash from Denmark and overall erratic behavior this week, sources inside Clarence House tell THE SUN in an EXCLUSIVE.

Details are sketchy but sources say Arfur met and became besotted with a medic during that fateful trip to Children's Hospital and has

been orbiting her ever since — the prince earlier this month was reportedly at a private flat in London overnight and then abandoned a state visit with the Queen of Denmark earlier this week. Although royal watchers haven't managed to spot Arfur since, speculation is high he is holed up with his new lady love.

"Arthur is just mad about her," inside sources tell us.

"He's all lit up!"

We at THE SUN say: About time Arfur found love once more.

But we can't decide if the fact that our normally ultra-responsible prince can be driven to abandoning state responsibilities for his new squeeze means we should be wary, or planning our wedding coverage!

“January’s GQ, Arstotz said she and Mayer ‘care deeply for each other, and we’re just trying to figure it out.’ She joked, “I am not having his baby. And I have not popped the question.”

us 132 / comment

ONTD ALERT: HELLO WOT? ROYAL NEWS? 1:55PM / 12.12.2008

Despite the fact that technically, we at Oh No They Didn't! weren't around during the period when Prince Arthur was caught repeatedly falling out of Whiskey Mist with his pants more or less undone and three sheets to the wind or streaking at St. Andrews University or sleeping with supermodels a decade older than himself, we all mourned that he turned all responsible and shit and could never shake the habit.

Arthur, first in line to the British throne, is mostly seen these days on goodwill tours, christening things and generally being excessively handsome and gracious to foreign heads of state and things—except those in Denmark apparently, because instead of being, you know, there at all the events to which he was scheduled for his and King Uther's two-week stint in that country he's vanished.

Europe's been in an insane snit about this for almost three days already, ever since Arthur failed to show up for some sort of breakfast event, and the mystery is only deepened if you add in the fact that this morning he was a guest on a TV show, disappeared again, and was discovered lying drunk in a hospital in London. Rumors and speculation run wild as far as SECRET LIFE THREATENING ILLNESS to HOT NEW ROMANCE to the requisite ILLEGITIMATE ROYAL BABY scenarios, and most of England is apparently biting their nails down to the nub trying to figure out if Arthur's been boning anybody on the side and/or is dying tragically of some sort of wasting disease.

X-17 apparently has a fucking bounty out on the first photos of the Prince—the first guy to get a confirmed shot of Arthur will be looking at a \$20,000 award for their efforts and will probably become famous overnight for their efforts and subsequently be offered Britney Spears' vagina of shame.

And lacking any further content,

(CLICK HERE FOR BEEFCAKE PICTURES OF ARTHUR!)

572 / comment

Rihanna's forehead attacks London 10:19AM / 12.12.2008

Uther was refusing to speak with him, which was technically worse than Arthur had thought it could get, but also comforting, because if his father perished from rage at least succession would remain safe as Uther couldn't strangle Arthur to death.

Queen Margrethe had refused to hear any suggestions of Arthur's shamefaced return to Denmark, she'd only asked, "Was it important?" and Arthur had only been able to say, "Yes, very," and so she'd said something encouraging-sounding in Danish and informed him she would make one of her idiot sons test all her food for deadly compounds for the time being. Her approval hadn't exactly lessened the misery of the icy call he'd endured with Buckingham Palace and its phalanx of media personnel, who'd shouted at him without shouting and then more or less interrogated him for an hour via phone.

Arthur learned very young it wasn't worth the effort of lying to your handlers, especially the ones most comfortable lying on your behalf, and he'd grudgingly said he'd returned to England, drawn by a friend in distress, to which Rosa Barringer, his lead publicist, had said, "Right, so you ran back to England from Denmark for a shag, basically."

He'd looked across the room to where Merlin was similarly engaged, chatting on the land line all white-knuckled and miserable-sounding as he spoke quietly with Gaius. Merlin had funny ears and was too-earnest and a bloody chainsmoker and too skinny and sweet and male and Arthur wanted him anyway—all the awful and funny and inappropriate parts of him.

"Maybe not just a shag," Arthur admitted quietly, and Rosa was silent for a beat.

"Don't let her break your heart, Arfur," Rosa told him, sounding disturbingly gentle.

"Fucking stop calling me that," Arthur growled.

Laughing, Rosa said, "I should meet this girl then? If you're serious."

Biting his lip, Arthur glanced over at where Merlin was now—fucking Christ—was now making a pair of teacups circle round and round midair by waving his finger, apparently as a nervous tick.

When Rosa said, 'meet this girl,' she meant measure her up. She'd done the same with Sophie, years ago, when Arthur had met her and fallen hard and been convinced she would be his princess, that he loved her without reserve—maybe he had, but he must have been the only one between the two that did.

Rosa would want to know where Merlin had been schooled, what his family was like. Did he have any nobility in his past? Or would he need to be schooled in the airs and graces of the court? Did he dance? Would he know how to play music or converse intelligently? Did he have the bearing of a princess—one day, a queen—and most importantly, would he have the mettle to bear the scrutiny and isolation that would come with her jewels and crown? Merlin would be terrible at all of these, Arthur knew, even if he had the second X chromosome to fit the first and most primary criteria, he would never fit the tiaras that had been gathering dust with the rest of the royal jewels.

But more than that, Arthur didn't want Merlin to learn etiquette and study the proper way to wave, what exact degree of smile he should reveal. Arthur just wanted Merlin.

"Er, I'll consider it," he said, and hung up.

*

They hid away until that afternoon, at which point Merlin noted that the number of text messages from Gwen and missed calls from Gaius on his mobile seemed to be asymptotically approaching infinity and he said, "I suppose I shouldn't hide any longer," and went to face his fate. Arthur sent him away with the very minimum of affection—obviously, Merlin had gotten pinned to the doorframe and trapped by a long, lingering kiss mostly of his own volition and probably with a heaping helping of magic on his part and nothing to do with Arthur at all—which left Arthur with nothing to do but to return to Clarence House.

They'd been cocooned for so long; four days seemed like a geologic era in days for Arthur, and he was at a loss for a moment what to do, left alone in the flat without Merlin. There was no thin, pale-skinned body to touch for reassurance, no one to inspect for signs of weariness or recovery or sadness, nor anyone to kiss, indulgent, to draw their mind away from other things. The nut factory—"It was formerly, emphasis formerly, a warehouse," Arthur had sighed; "But you admit it has housed nuts," Merlin had said—had always been a place where Arthur could be prince without anyone watching. Now, if it felt as if inside its walls, lined with old maps, was a place where he wasn't a prince at all, and he stared at the door warily, trying to remember the motions.

There were lawyers and publicists and furious staffers waiting for him at Clarence House, all of whom would demand to know what and where exactly he'd fucked off to and what exactly he'd been doing. In the past, during his wilder years, Arthur hadn't cared about the consequences, and he'd told them the name of the girl (as he remembered it) and the location of the club (where it, inevitably, had started) and where he might have been photographed (this was usually a long list).

He had absolutely no point of reference to explain whatever this was, or how it happened, and he was sitting on the edge of his bed staring at the copy of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Merlin had dog-eared at page sixty-four when Allistair coughed and said, "Sire, the car is waiting for you."

There were lawyers and publicists and furious staffers waiting at Clarence House, and they attacked him in ordered groups like good Tories, Arthur thought with grim humor. As soon as the lawyers fell back—convinced no legal ramifications would come of his disappearance and after repeated promises he hadn't impregnated anybody—the publicists came after him like wolverines, chasing him through the entry hall into the drawing room until they circled him in the kitchen, scowling.

"You know, I've already spoken with Rosa," Arthur snapped.

"We work for your father, your highness," one of them told Arthur. Of course. "Sire, your father is very upset about your decision to abandon the state trip and—"

"I did it for good reason," Arthur interrupted, head throbbing. He wondered where Merlin was, if he was being shouted at; he wished he knew why when he'd shagged a heiress in an alleyway the matter was always concluded so much more swiftly than this. "And I do not regret it—my father will just have to find something to calm his stomach."

In tandem, all the staffers in the room made a face like Arthur had invited them to go fuck themselves, and a cacophony of voices broke out again.

It was dark by the time they left and Arthur felt as tense as a piano wire. He was on restriction, was the implicit message they had left him; he would do and go where his father required and say not a word about it. The media would be handled.

Merlin called at half past nine, after Arthur left Rosa where she was drafting a statement from Clarence House on his behalf to hide in his bedroom at the nut factory, sit on the floor, leaning against the side of his bed.

"Was it terrible?" Merlin asked, voice quavering. In the background, Arthur could hear street noises, and wondered if Merlin wasn't standing in the freezing wind outside his drafty building like an idiot. "Did he shout? Have you been sacked?"

"Crown princes can't be sacked," Arthur sighed. "And my father doesn't shout when he's at his angriest—he has his people shout at my people, who in turn speak very angrily with me and then trap me in my home and force me to help them write press releases."

Merlin was silent for a long time before he said, quiet and tight, "Gaius convinced the deanery there was some sort of emergency in the family and that I went slightly mad; I'm on enforced sabbatical until the end of the year."

Arthur thought of Merlin's face, drawn and half-crazed, and said, "That might be good."

"I'm sorry," Merlin burst out, suddenly. "I'm so sorry about all of this. This is all my doing—if I hadn't been such an idiot—or if you weren't so lovely—and if—"

If Arthur hadn't made his great escape at Children's Hospital. If Merlin hadn't been hiding in the linen closet smoking the worst fags in all creation. If they'd simply parted ways; if Arthur had kept Merlin's lighter or had remembered his watch. If there hadn't been something there always anyway, a flicker of doubt in Arthur's mind, if it hadn't started to burn a little harder at Merlin's nervous smiles, his shockingly blue eyes. If Merlin weren't such a soft fucking heart, if that girl in the

hospital hadn't died, and nearly taken Merlin with her. If Merlin had not looked so dear, the misery wrung out of him, flushed and asleep in Arthur's arms in the nut factory as the rain had blurred all the windows.

Arthur had spent his life discarding possibilities, the demarcations of all that could be drawn by his lineage; he was tired of being denied.

"I'm not sorry," he told Merlin, feeling fierce and angry and selfish. His father and the crown and all that they entailed could burn; Arthur would have this—just for himself. "I'm not sorry at all. About any of it."

"Oh," Merlin said, and it sounded sort of choked. "Good—because it's freezing and I'm standing in front of your nut factory."

When Arthur opened the door, still hiding in its shadows, to see Merlin standing there, eyes wet but smile bright like a hundred thousand clear mornings, sun breaking over clouds, he swallowed hard and barely managed to say, "It was a warehouse," before Merlin threw both arms around his shoulders—tackled him backwards into the doorway.

*

Merlin tasted like all the dirty promises Arthur had spent all day imagining him making, and when their teeth clacked together—after Arthur had dragged Merlin up the steps and slammed him against the slammed-shut door to his flat, rough and careless and desperate—it made Arthur think about the click of Merlin's fingers on his belt, his mouth hot on Arthur's dick.

"Fuck, yes, yes," Merlin was saying, and Arthur didn't even know what he was agreeing to, only it sounded a lot like everything, so Arthur just growled something low in his throat and decided to bite Merlin there—sinking his teeth make mark his place for later. Merlin was scraping his nails down Arthur's back, scrabbling for the hem of his t-shirt and dragging it up over his shoulders, leaving it in a heap by the door and pushing Arthur—hard—back toward the bed.

"Bossy," Arthur said, letting Merlin shove him back down onto the mattress, hand seeking and nimble at the zip of his trousers.

Merlin favored him with a smoldering look, eyes luminous and golden.

"I've been thinking about this since I was a little boy," Merlin told him, near-purring, rolling his hips and grinding his dick against Arthur's thigh where he straddled it, rubbing like a cat, choking off the breath Arthur was fighting to gather.

"Pervy," Arthur observed, reaching out to haul Merlin's jumper over his head, leaving his dark hair wild. The color was high on Merlin's cheeks and his lips were wet, swollen—he looked ravished, or in desperate need of it.

"You have no idea," Merlin told him, a filthy smile stealing across his mouth, which obviously forced Arthur to reach over to the man, rub a thumb teasingly down the zipper of his trousers, pressing too-lightly against the hard line of his dick and say with mock seriousness:

"Then you'll have to tell me, Emrys—" Arthur moved his knee, just enough so Merlin was forced to ride it, his head thrown back and mouth open in shock a moment, a shuddery breath bursting out of him—"I want every detail, consider it an order."

Arthur had spent so long not even know what exactly it was that he wanted, only that he wanted, and now he wanted to know what Merlin had thought about—when he was younger, when he was still just as strange and wonderful and fey with his dark hair and brilliant eyes, in the dark of his own room. He wanted to see how much of it they could do right now, wanted to know what Merlin had thought when he'd touched himself.

Merlin leaned over, his hair soft against Arthur's face, so he could press his mouth to Arthur's neck, lavish it in teethmarks and with his tongue—rubbing up against Arthur's thigh, greedy—as he said, "I thought about you—when I was fourteen—"

"Extremely pervy," Arthur told him, sliding his hands down Merlin's back, stroking his spine through his fine, smooth skin, down until he could push his fingers beneath the waist of Merlin's jeans, scrape his nails against the swell of his ass, territorial.

"—I used to lie in my bed at night with stolen hand lotion and think about you," Merlin told him, quiet, but not at all a secret—like a tease, and Arthur felt his breath hitch as Merlin added, "I used to push my fingers into myself and wish it'd be you—that it was your hands, that you were there holding me down on the bed."

"Jesus Christ, Merlin!" Arthur swore, shoving Merlin off so he could attack the man's jeans with renewed intent. Arthur pinning him down to the bed, holding Merlin's wrists down with one hand as he pulled at his trousers and pants with the other, dragging them down sharp hips and trying his hardest to avoid Merlin's eyes, still golden with something he knew had to be supernatural, and warm with something else that was much more human and far, far more frightening.

Merlin just smiled at him, seducing, and said, "I used to think maybe you'd like to shove me up against walls and take me—or if maybe you were too posh for that? Maybe you'd only fuck me on silk sheets, tie me to the headboard."

Arthur glowered at him. "What the fuck were you reading at fourteen?"

Merlin just smiled at him, eyes sleepy, surrendering. "I've wanted you my whole life," he said, unembarrassed. "Since even before I knew what I wanted, really, I wanted you."

And Arthur felt suddenly deprived, to know that Merlin had burned with this for so long when Arthur was only starting to understand it, only now knowing it hot and wanton under his skin. But he thought that what he lacked in historical precedent he made up for in volume, and the need that was immolating him inside out was volcanic, felt like tectonic plates shifting and like undersea earthquakes—like tsunamis and twenty-foot waves that leveled entire cities, like an act of nature or action of God.

"I want you now," Arthur answered, and the words felt stupid and small in the face of how Merlin felt, hot and alive and just for him, stretched out beneath Arthur's hands, held down to the mattress, his to keep.

But Merlin just beamed up at him. "I know," he said and threw a leg over Arthur's hip, rolling his hips so his bare cock rubbed against Arthur's opened jeans, the head of his dick just a sticky-slick tease against Arthur's belly.

So Arthur dove in to capture Merlin's mouth again, before he could spill out any more dirty secrets, and he let himself fall, heavy and possessing on top of him, pressing Merlin down into the linens

and feeling Merlin wind his arms round Arthur's chest, legs wrapped round his hips, their bodies pushing together until Merlin pulled away, gasping, "Arthur—Arthur—wait, wait—"

And then—because even though Merlin was roughly the human equivalent of a whippet, he was strong, probably from wrestling rugby player fathers in the maternity ward—Arthur found himself flat on his back, watching Merlin search through his discarded trousers before emerging with plastic packets and a triumphant look on his face.

Merlin stayed there, kneeling over Arthur's hips for a moment before he said, "Excellent," like he saw something he liked, dropped his finds next to the pillow, and manhandled Arthur's remaining clothing until it was scattered on the ground next to the bed—t-shirts and jeans crumpled together.

Arthur admitted, "I'm not sure how to—" before Merlin cut him off with a finger and an absolutely wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Arthur," he confided, "trust me when I say that I have worked out all the logistics."

When Merlin rips open the condom packet with his teeth and then proceeds to roll it down Arthur's dick—red, straining against his belly, leaving a gleaming wet smear against his stomach—with his fucking mouth Arthur is forced to concede that point.

Between that and Merlin's extensive and supremely filthy teenaged fantasies Arthur was starting to worry that he'd been some sort of child prostitute, but then that line of consideration evaporated when Merlin knelt up, his body one long, lean tease, and reached behind himself with slick fingers to—Jesus fucking Christ—stretch himself open, moaning as he fucked himself slowly loose.

Arthur decided then he didn't care if Merlin had a plan that involved some sort of second-by-second itinerary, he was going rogue. He dragged Merlin closer, fingers digging into Merlin's hips, until he could suck a wet, dirty kiss to his sternum, until he could slide a free hand around Merlin's back and ghost his hand to where Merlin's skin was slick and hot and stretched tight around Merlin's fingers. Then it just seemed easier to let one of his own fingers join Merlin's two, pressing slow and teasing inside until there was just the slick heat of Merlin's body and the now-familiar skin and bones of his fingers, until all Arthur could hear was Merlin's guttural, low whine, and the blood roaring in his ears.

Merlin was shoving back now, against Arthur's hand and his own, rubbing his dick into Arthur's hip and then back again. Arthur thought that he would be happy just to watch this, just to lie here and let Merlin rub one off on him and feel Merlin go tight like a fist around his fingers—three now, to take up the space after Merlin let out a particularly loud shout and pulled his own hand away, glistening fingers tight on Arthur's sides, leaving shiny smears as he looked for traction—but then Merlin looked at him through the dark brush of his lashes, his mouth bitten red and near-bloody, and begged:

"God, please, fuck me, I've got to get you inside me."

Merlin was the one who reached behind himself and guided Arthur's dick inside—Arthur's hands were shaking too much, too busy grasping rubbing his thumb over Merlin's left nipple and worried he'd hurt the man—and Merlin made a sighing sound as he slid down until Arthur's balls were hot and tight against his ass and Arthur thought his fucking head was going to explode.

All Arthur could do was drink in the sight of Merlin, head thrown back and mouth open, grinding himself down, his skin gleaming the color of moonlight in the dark of his flat. Arthur had been

lucky enough to see all sorts of beautiful things, beautiful women, to kiss them and leave bruises on their hips and on the insides of their thighs, but this was something entirely different, and everything he wanted to say melted on his mouth and all Arthur could do was grip Merlin by the waist and fuck him in earnest, try to pour out all his gratitude and wonder and budding devotion and happiness and fear.

Merlin kept whispering something that might have been his name, but it choked off every time Arthur's hips slammed into his ass, lost again, and then it stopped being enough—that teasing burn of being held tight inside wasn't enough—and Arthur had to flip them over. He wasn't careful, not at all, and Merlin gasped and cursed and his eyes went wide—still golden, Arthur thought, that can't be normal—when Arthur slipped out, and then went lazy and half-lidded again when Arthur pushed him back against the disarray of pillows and thrust back in, shoving Merlin's knees apart and closing his teeth over his shoulder, hands fisted into the blankets.

"Arthur," Merlin begged, looking wrecked, looking like he was glowing from the inside-out, and Arthur didn't know if that was just happiness or magic, "Arthur, Arthur."

"Tell me what you want," Arthur gasped, loving the way his hips slapped against the backs of Merlin's thighs—loving the way they went tight and needy up around his back, holding him close. "Merlin, you've got to tell me what you—"

Merlin wanted to kiss him, apparently, but that must not have been it, entirely, because even as Merlin scraped his teeth over Arthur's lower lip and sucked on his tongue, greedy, he kept making pleading noises, rolling his hips up to meet Arthur's. So Arthur fucked him harder, going down on one elbow, closing the other hand around Merlin's cock and jerking it—rough, the way he liked it, with a twist at the head—and kept shoving, deeper and deeper into him, whispering into Merlin's mouth, "I want to feel you come for me."

"Fuck," Merlin cried, hoarse and sincere, "fuck, Arthur," he said, and his whole body went tight like a piano string, head flung back, and Arthur leaned in to suck a kiss into Merlin's throat and felt Merlin clamp down hard and hot and fucking impossible around his cock.

Arthur cursed, heartfelt, and felt all his muscles go tense as he tried to push his cock deeper once, twice, three times—Merlin's voice a high-pitched wail with every thrust—and came, babbling promises and profanity and praise into the skin over Merlin's heart.

*

It wasn't until Arthur tripped and nearly killed himself on the way back from the bathroom in the early hours of the morning that he noticed it.

"All right then," he said, surveying his flat and all the books that had liberated themselves from their respective shelves to scatter across the floor. The sofa had shifted several feet and Arthur had a terrible suspicion it'd fallen onto its side after falling from a not-insignificant height, if the broken beam in his exposed roof was any evidence. There was a fire burning in the fireplace, merrily crackling over the false logs. His rug was hanging from his ceiling fan.

Merlin, where he was still a lazy sprawl in the bed, lifted his head from the pillows and said, "Huh—that's never happened any of the other times."

"Obviously, you'll need more practice controlling your reflexive reactions." Arthur swallowed the last of the water in his glass and left it on a tabletop before advancing toward the bed again. "It

would be remiss of us to leave you this kind of vulnerability."

"It would be terribly annoying to explain it to every new lover," Merlin chirped in agreement, lacing his fingers in between Arthur's as soon as he was near enough to touch. "Some of them might even try to force me to do lewd things with it."

Arthur nodded solemnly, climbing back onto the bed. "Obviously the answer is just to prevent that kind of abuse of your powers altogether," he suggested.

"Have you any ideas how exactly to go about doing that then?" Merlin asked, eyes wide with false innocence, surprisingly convincing given the excruciatingly dirty rundown of his pre-teenaged sex fantasies he'd shamelessly moaned the night before, riding Arthur's knee like an adult film star. "Any suggestions would be appreciated, your highness."

"No new lovers," Arthur told him, leaning over to press a soft, slow kiss to the corner of Merlin's mouth. "Just me, then."

It was meant as a joke, of course, but it felt nothing like one at all.

Merlin smiled at him, but it looked faintly resigned, sad already. "You'll tire of me."

"I won't," Arthur replied, and realized he was telling the truth—possibly about all of it.

And Merlin must have realized, then, because his eyes went round with realization, like the weight of all that Arthur was implying had suddenly sucked all the oxygen out of the room, and he said, "I can't be a princess, Arthur—" he laughed, a little hysterical"—much less a queen, and you need both of those."

"No," Arthur disagreed, "that is not what I need at all."

*

Merlin had declared a cease-shagging Friday and said, wearing one of Arthur's dress shirts and nothing else, "I want to try something," which at that point Arthur already had the muscle memory to agree with, automatically.

Unfortunately, Merlin's latest flight of fancy had nothing to do with asking Arthur to demonstrate how many knots he'd learned to do up while at Sandhurst or seeing how many fingers Arthur could slide in alongside his cock while he fucked Merlin in his bath and more to do with Merlin being a bit magic.

"Do you trust me?" Merlin asked.

"People usually ask that just before they shoot the hostage in films," Arthur told him warily.

Merlin made what Arthur was fast-growing to accept was his Annoyed Now face, and said, "Right, so I have a theory that I can make you sort of invisible."

Arthur stared at him a long, long time before he asked, baffled, "Why?"

Here, Merlin threw a wadded up sock at him from his strategic position near all the abandoned clothing and shouted, "So you can go outside and do things like a normal person, you prat! And no one will chase you around with cameras or speculate on whether or not you've gotten fat again!"

"It was a childhood phase," Arthur snapped, and blushing, he said, "Fine."

Even after they managed to walk past a gaggle of girls in their school jumpers and camera phones, it still took Arthur an hour to stop cringing and trying to hide his face with his free hand and a baseball cap. At the nut factory—"Hah! The name is growing on you, admit it!" Merlin had cheered—Merlin had stared at him this way and that and then, satisfied, had said, "Come on, let's try just round the Covent Garden."

He'd said it with the casual air of a man who'd never been chased through Thailand's airport, and Arthur had pulled on a leather jacket over his hoodie and his best pair of trainers, since Merlin was probably slightly mad on top of being a bit magic and Arthur was going to end up running from a tsunami of paparazzi, he just knew it.

Only he didn't, and really, no one did notice, and after a while, he stopped walking around hunched over and started to stare at the crowds, wondering. He kept being distracted by the things in all the little booths, at the mess and noise and shouting and the number of people on their cellular phones—life usually paused a bit when he or his father arrived anywhere, and he felt like an anthropologist now, studying reality in medias res.

London in mid-December was gray and damp, and Arthur saw his breath come out in clouds—distracted for a moment—before Merlin shouted something in delight and seized his hand, dragging him over to one of the stalls in Apple Market.

Merlin's hand was absolutely icy on Arthur's so he made the executive decision to lace their fingers together, to give Merlin a little tempering jerk back from running headlong into a crowd of Japanese tourists, and steer them round the group. Merlin only clutched Arthur's hand possessively—a surprisingly heated touch for someone so chilled—and dragged him over to the table, exclaiming over something or other that gleamed enticingly in the orange gaslight.

"It's wonderful," Merlin sighed, admiring the small, beautifully ornate dagger.

The hilt of it was crusted with dark red stones, blood-colored, fringed in pewter, styled like a dragon curled waiting and watching with glittering black eyes at the root of the blade, measuring.

Arthur gave Merlin a querying look. "Is there something you're not telling me?" he asked. "First the lighter with the sword—now this?"

"All the better to stab you with," Merlin answered brightly, and turned back to the indulgent-looking woman manning the booth. It was strange, and Arthur wasn't exactly invisible, as people kept making brief eye contact before turning away, like they'd noted him and didn't recognize him at all. Merlin promised he'd intended that, as a sort of blessing of anonymity, but Arthur couldn't help the way his heart caught in his throat every time, and even now, as the woman gave him a fond look and asked:

"Well? Are you going to buy it for this lad of yours?"

Choking, Arthur said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Ignore him. He's daft," Merlin supplied readily, and started to rifle round his pockets with his free hand. "Too many years on the playing fields of Eton."

Merlin deserved the shoving he got for that, and Arthur liberated his hand, produced his wallet and paid the woman. She wrapped it first in old copies of the Times and then set it in a flat, long box before tying a curly length of red ribbon horizontal across it and said, "Happy Christmas, then, you two," and Arthur found himself, knee-jerk, saying, "Happy Christmas to you, as well."

"My God," Merlin laughed later, huddled into Arthur's side, as they stood in line in the packed-to-the-gills Caffe Nero, "you just can't help how posh you are, can you?"

Arthur had never actually felt ashamed of that before. "Sod off," he muttered.

"I like it," Merlin went on to declare, looping his arm in Arthur's, dropping his chin on Arthur's shoulder, playful. "My mother always wanted me to meet a nice young man."

It was the sort of sentiment a normal parent was supposed to have about a normal child, Arthur reflected. When he'd been seventeen, Uther had taken him aside to his private chambers and discussed with him the importance of upholding the great tradition of the British monarchy, and how it was all well and fine for Arthur to be affectionate and to indulge in adolescent romances, but that his marriage would be a state matter, and to keep that in mind before falling headlong into something poorly thought out. "Something you might come to regret," Uther had elaborated, and then dismissed him to take a call with the prime minister.

"Am I nice young man, then?" Arthur couldn't help but ask.

He had been called many things, but never that; Sophie had liked when he was wild, preferred when they roared into and out of nightclubs like typhoons. Arthur would like to think he hadn't really loved her, and then at least the lingering ache of it would only be humiliation, but he knew better.

Merlin, solemn, told him, "You are the nicest young man, Arthur, I have ever known."

"And that is wonderful, we all agree," interrupted the barista, a terrifying-looking girl with dark eyeliner and sharp, pink spikes of hair, "but the queue's out the door, yeah? So order your drinks and make cow eyes after you pay."

Arthur drank his coffee black with three sugars and made a silent apology to the East India Shipping Co.; Merlin had some great heaping cup of whipped cream and frothed milk and sugar syrups and things and then had asked for chocolate scrapings over top. All in all, it cost more than a fucking pint had when Arthur had been at St. Andrews.

"No wonder you live in squalor," Arthur sighed, watching Merlin warm his hands around his coffee, near-purring in satisfaction, "you spend all of your non-disposable income on bloody coffee."

"It's a latte drink, thank you very much," Merlin corrected.

Merlin took him to all the places he'd never really gone—Trafalgar Square, the National Portrait Gallery, where Merlin made a series of unsavory, inappropriate, and probably treasonous comments about incest and Arthur's lineage. They went to the Tate Modern, which Arthur had never seen while it was packed with tourists and schoolchildren and effete, black-garbed art students from Kings College. On the fourth level, naturally, Merlin had to start a row about the cock-and-balls drawing and what the name 'Proper Man' might mean about the artist before Arthur hauled him off to go find the Warhols.

On the first floor again, they stood and stared a long time, silent and considering, at the deep, ugly crack that split the length of the concrete floor. Arthur thought about its name—Shibboleth—and then about the spontaneous creation of similar schools of thought, about the great and near-mystic coincidences, about how without any intention at all two things might happen independently and then fit like puzzle pieces when brought together—two people might happen independently—and felt very small and grateful for things he didn't quite have the courage yet to say out loud.

"How long do I have to stare at the giant arse crack in the floor and pretend to be spellbound?" Merlin asked. "I'm cold and famished and I need to take a piss."

Arthur lifted his eyes to the ceiling.

"Right," he said, "so this is just something about you I'm going to have to endure then."

"We all have our crosses to bear," Merlin replied and grabbed his hand, tugging him bodily away from his thoughts. "No come along."

Merlin tried first to get him to eat Afghani food and then food from a chain restaurant and then from a highly questionable hole-in-the-wall curry shop that Arthur nixed on sight. There was a small shouting match over whether or not a certain unnamed party of the duo was a snob or whether the other was a bloody rubbish bin before Arthur had pointed at random at the nearest restaurant and said, "There. We're going there."

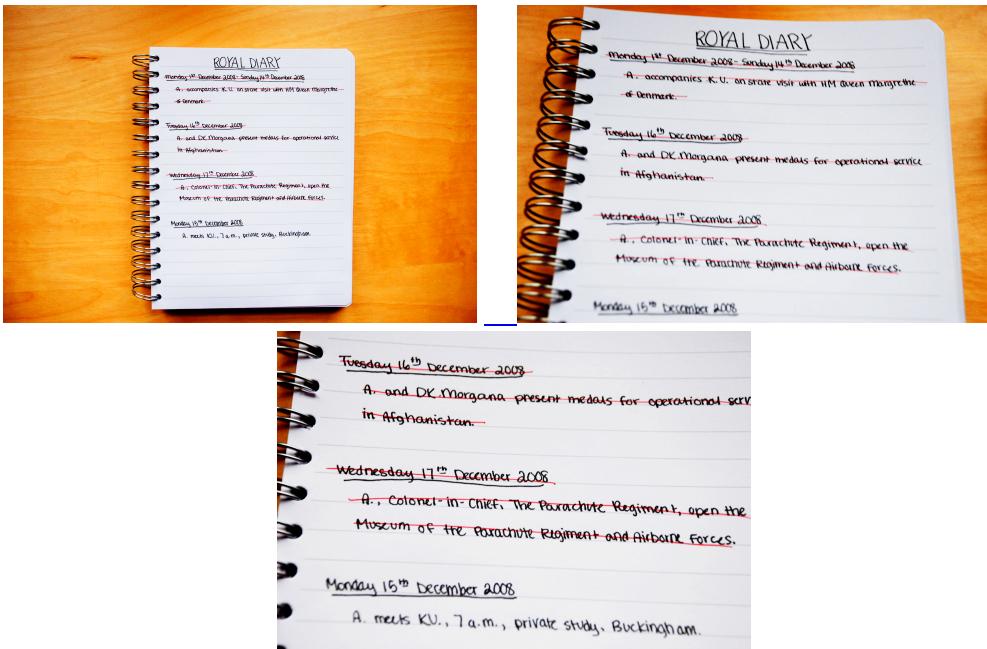
They were crammed into the last open table, in an overly dark corner near the bar, and Arthur's knees kept knocking into the woven basket table, it's peaked dome shaking precariously, all the colors braided into the flax-color riotous. He ordered Ethiopian lager and Merlin ordered selata aswad, a fried eggplant salad with tahini and yogurt sauce and devoured it with all his fingers and pieces of spongy injera. They asked for doro wat and stewed lamb and stewed lentils, rich, sweet sauces seeping into their carpet of injera, and Arthur rushed to eat it all before the bread turned to mush.

He'd eaten Ethiopian food in Ethiopia before, had the finest their tables had to offer, but it was different here, without having to worry about staining his jeans or getting doro wat on the corners of his mouth, three beers in and laughing at Merlin's progressively more filthy fingers.

It was dark by the time they left, the wind whipping ruthless over the city, blanketed in street lights, and Arthur kept Merlin clutched close at his side, their steps falling together, their bodies, resonating—like a secret, approving hum.

"Thank you," Arthur said to Merlin later, helping him tug off his jumper and jacket and socks, rubbing heat back into Merlin's stiff fingers. "For today."

And Merlin only smiled back, sleepy, and pressed a kiss to Arthur's fingertips, conveniently brushing Merlin's fringe back from his face. "It was a pleasure," he promised, and dragged Arthur down to the bed with him.



The call came Sunday night, Allistair's bland, uninflected voice all but an absolute declaration of chaos.

"His Majesty said he will expect you at seven in the morning," Allistair said.

"Of course," Arthur agreed, light, his voice practiced. It was the same way he had said, "of course," all the other times his father had called for him at early hours in the aftermath of an indiscretion.

Merlin, in a singular, prescient moment, remained silent as Arthur had concluded his phone call (having Allistair arrange a security detail, a replacement driver as Roy was ill) and after a long time of watching Arthur brood over the fireplace, drew him to the bed and curled round him like the warm weight of a promise.

"It's okay," Merlin hushed him. "I won't be mad."

Arthur stared at him from a very close distance, their heads on neighboring pillows of his bed, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"What will you tell him?" Merlin asked now, still whispering. He ran a hand through Arthur's hair, his nails scraping softly along the scalp, affectionate, like he was studying all of Arthur's geography and elevations to burn to memory. "If you don't tell him about me, I won't be angry with you, Arthur."

No, Arthur thought, unbidden, you would be sad, and he knew he was utterly fucked when it was that sentiment, not his father's inevitable and volcanic rage nor the fact that there was no possible way this could conclude in anything but disaster, that made something in his chest turn uncomfortably.

Arthur hadn't, in his cosseted and uncomfortable life, had many opportunities for bravery, but he thought he might have it in him, to be brilliant and unafraid and to recognize there would be consequences and push forward anyway.

"What shockingly high expectations you have for me," Arthur said, feeling not a little bit annoyed. It was strange always to live with such high expectations for oneself as prince and such low ones for Arthur as a person.

Merlin's eyes went wide and instantly apologetic. "I didn't mean it like that," he protested. "Just that I don't want to be any more of a burden than—"

"Will you shut up?" Arthur interrupted. "If you're a burden you're a welcome one."

And that, thankfully, was the end of that, since Merlin only gave him a long, lingering look before he found better distractions for both of them other than the reality outside the four walls of the nut factory. God damn it, Arthur spared a second to think, before he pushed Merlin onto his back and fucked him, slow and savoring every hitched breath, the wet slide of skin, how Merlin's fingers felt, digging bruises into his back.

He let it carry him through the long hours of the night, lying on his side of the bed and staring into his ceiling, listening to the even sound of Merlin's breathing, the faint murmur of voices outside the window. First it was eight hours until, then six, then four and two, and after that Arthur just climbed out of the bed to wash and dress and try to think of something, anything, to say.

Arthur settled, in the end, after Allistair had come to fetch him and the replacement driver had taken two wrong turns and his father's secretary had favored him with a look Arthur had previously thought only convicted child-molesters deserved, with:

"I've met someone."

The long and icy-cold hallways of Buckingham Palace had been just as Arthur remembered from visits with his grandfather, when he was still king and then later after they'd moved in and taken it up as official residence after Uther's coronation. The Palace had never felt like a home so much as Uther's place of residence, and while Arthur loved his father, wanted from him things Uther would likely never surrender—affection, pride, understanding—Arthur had no desire to waste any more time eking out territory in Uther's lands.

If he was not the prince Uther had wanted to raise, then at the very least Arthur was the man he'd wanted to become, and that was more than he had thought he would have.

"Shocking," Uther growled at him, installed behind his desk and wearing a dark, tailored suit, his best-liked armor for all of his and Arthur's most violent battles. "The same way you met Sophie—or any of those other girls in—"

"He's not like them," Arthur said, and it felt like he'd thrown down the gauntlet, issued a challenge. He'd expected to feel sick but mostly he felt limitless possibility.

He could be disowned, which would be irritating and probably very public and loud and time-consuming but probably freeing, ultimately. His father could order Arthur never to see Merlin again, which would be futile. Uther could threaten any number of things, but none of them were important, Arthur realized. None of them really mattered, and it felt, suddenly, like the cloud he'd been living under his entire life dissipated, vanished.

It took long, too-long, moments before something like understanding washed over Uther's face, and he leaned forward to rest his elbows on the desk, rubbed at his temples as he echoed, "He. He isn't like them."

Arthur closed his eyes. "No, he isn't."

Uther rose up to his feet, hands anchored to his desk and his face a mask of fury, and—here it comes—just as he was opening his mouth, the door to his office burst open and Rosa all but fell into the room, saying, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm fairly sure you'll want to see this," and turned on the television tucked away into the corner—a sudden explosion of noise and color in the room.

*

"How much, do you think?" Gwen asked.

Merlin closed his hands round the chipped mug of tea. "How much what?"

She'd said he was mad for coming to the hospital when he had such a bloody perfect excuse to be away until the new year, but Merlin hadn't wanted to spend a second longer alone in the nut factory. Without Arthur, it felt like an intrusion, and honestly, any minute all the kings men and probably several ex-special forces officers—likely the same ones who'd roughed him up at his and Arthur's first meeting—would be bursting into the loft to erase all homosexual traces, Merlin being chief among them.

His flat, after spending so long rolling around Arthur's bed naked and more or less adored, felt even sadder and more like the untended tomb of a doomed singleton, so he'd gone the only place he knew he'd be fully occupied and got himself put onto the emergency rotation for the shift. The trauma nurses had looked at him like he was soft in the head, but they were too grateful for the help to cast (many) aspersions on his sanity, and just shoved a handful of charts at him and ran lest his change his mind.

"Do you think Uther'll offer you to you know, leave Arthur," she said, eyes darting left and right, conspiratorial. The always-loud roar in the hospital canteen more or less swallowed her words before they got much further than their corner of it, but they seemed to echo in Merlin's head, and he choked as he asked:

"Excuse me?"

"That's how it always goes in the books," Gwen explained, going back to plucking at her sandwich. "The duke or the wealthy mother or—" she offered Merlin a deferential nod—"the king, in this case offers the impoverished waif some insane amount of money in order to drive her away from her lover."

"I'm not impoverished," Merlin muttered into his tea. "And I'm not a waif."

Gwen smiled at him kindly. "Still," she pressed. "What's your price?"

"I'd naturally want my own country," Merlin answered tartly, and refused to make eye-contact with Gwen, who already had that wise look on her face.

There were some days Merlin feared he and Gwen knew one another too well. She'd held his hand and brought him cool towels after Will had died and left him hollowed out and bereaved and

drowning in his own grief, but most of all, left him. He'd sat with her as she'd cried outside a terminal at Heathrow after Lancelot had flown off on deployment and abandoned her with little more than a quick kiss to the mouth and a promise to return. They'd been study partners at uni and unfortunate in love together, shared—briefly—a flat and probably forever—hopefully—all their most embarrassing stories; Gwen was his best friend, and the best person he'd ever known.

"I doubt Arthur would even let him make the offer," Gwen told him, voice soft.

Merlin turned back to his tea. Trying to divine the future from a bag was a frustrating and profitless business, he concluded. "It might be out of his hands," Merlin said finally. "He is the prince."

One who hadn't even woken him up before leaving that morning.

Merlin didn't know what he'd been expecting, exactly, but to melt slowly into awareness late in the morning alone in Arthur's bed hadn't been it. There hadn't been a note, letter of apology, an envelop stuffed heavy and full of money, anything—just the smell of Arthur on the pillow and his shaving kit a mess on the bathroom counter, a few discarded shirts slowly developing wrinkles by the dresser.

It'd felt domestic, a half-finished thought, and Merlin had tried not to let the implied promise of an eventual return seduce him. He'd meant what he said the night before (sort of), and he wouldn't blame Arthur when the inevitable denials came. When Arthur took to the steps of Westminster with a fittingly beautiful princess, he already had plans to be blind drunk—emphasis: blind.

"He's also just a person," Gwen argued. "He's allowed to have you."

Merlin made a face. "Thanks."

"And you are allowed to keep him," she pushed on.

Which was so stupid and impossible that Merlin felt first a flare of anger and then a swallowing wave of sadness, the nauseating roll of regret that he'd known would be unavoidable from the start.

"It's not that simple," Merlin whispered.

"You should trust him," Gwen counseled. "Arthur is sort of a good person."

Merlin felt his mouth twitch into a smile.

"He is," he sighed, knowing he looked obviously and shamefully besotted, "isn't he."

Gwen was still laughing at his mooning by the time they'd gone to the locker rooms and changed out of their scrubs and gathered up their things, heading toward the hospital exits. It was mid-afternoon, and the thin winter sun came was filtering through the clouds in only the most niggardly amounts—a day unworthy of being out-of-doors, so Merlin turned the Gwen and was just about to ask if she'd endure a three-thousandth viewing of Pride and Prejudice if he bought dinner when his phone rang.

"Hello?" he asked, flipping it open.

"Where are you?" Arthur demanded.

Merlin paused in the hallway, one hand on the staff exit. "I'm at the hospital, why?"

"Fuck," Arthur said, and Merlin replied to Gwen's curious look with a shrug and pushed open the door just as Arthur said, "Whatever you do, do not go outside."

*

At first Merlin was just frozen, blinded by an ocean of white and white noise, and it took long, long second before it resolved into individual flashbulbs, individual shouts. There were vans banked around the back of the hospital with great looming satellite towers and photographers gathered round the door, their enormous lenses and flashbulbs blotting out the mid-afternoon gray skies, reporters with their microphones and men hefting enormous cameras pushing them into his face—and everybody's questions melted together until all Merlin could pick out were individual phrases: Arthur, Prince, gay tryst, do you deny it?, where is Arthur now?

"Oh, bloody hell," Gwen said, and grabbing him by his collar, dragged him backward into the hospital—which didn't keep a literal wave of people from following them in.

Merlin was too numb to do much more than whatever Gwen was steering him to do, and somewhere in the shuffle he'd lost his grip on his cell phone in favor of running as fast as he could through the hallways, throwing terrified glances over his shoulder at the horde. They were slamming nurses and hospital staff against the walls as they bottlenecked from the relatively wide hallways into the narrower, more claustrophobic corridors winding toward the emergency room and triage area.

"Merlin, this way!" Gwen shouted, and he followed her, taking a sharp right into a secondary waiting area and yelling a pre-emptive, "Sorry!" to everybody they startled before they darted off again, the roar of reporters behind them still close on their heels.

There was the sound of outraged yelling behind him and then the inevitable crunch of breaking furniture and camera equipment, and Merlin saw, of all impossibly stupid things, Gaius waiting for them at the end of the long corridor, by the emergency exit, waving as he shouted, "This way, Merlin! There's a car waiting for you!"

He and Gwen burst out the building into the freezing cold air, more or less tumbled down a half-flight of stairs and were stuffed by obliging hands into a dark-windowed sedan before Merlin thought to ask any questions, still heaving for breath, trying to stave off a cardiac incident as Gaius climbed in after, dragging the car door shut.

"What," he managed, half-collapsed against the door as the tires shrieked and the car lurched into motion, "the hell was that?"

"That," Gaius yelled at him, with more breath than somebody that old should be capable of having, "was what happens when you and the crown prince of bloody England are outed you bloody idiot!"

Gwen, lying across the seat and fighting for breath, said, "Jesus, what?"

"Oh, God," Merlin whispered, feeling his eyes round, "rape ninjas."

"Now is not the time for your particular brand of foolishness, Merlin," Gaius growled at him, retrieving a mobile from the pockets of his white lab coat and casting Merlin a foul, foul, truly foul look. "And do not think that just because you've been chased by the paparazzi you and Arthur are escaping extensive testing."

Merlin whimpered, and Gaius only barked into his phone, "Yes, I have them—we're on our way directly."

"What do you mean, 'outed'?" Gwen asked, pushing herself back to a seated position.

Gaius gave Merlin a dirty look and turned on the small television mounted in between the seats.





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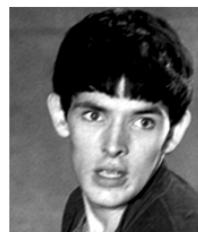
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Prince Arthur Fucks Dudes

Filed under: Prince Arthur Fucks Dudes, Yummy Yummy screw, Anglophilia

Bitches, there is not enough white Microsoft Art jizz in the world to convey to you what my hands and brain and eyeballs did when all 39847239783493 billion of you emailed this tip to my inbox at the same time.

Suffice it to say, thanks God or whatever for making **Prince Arthur**-aka, hottest royal that cesspool of incest has churned out—a giant gay-mo, if the Drudge pictures are true. PLEASE let the Drudge pictures be true, because, okay, as if you needed any more motivation from me to click on this link right [HERE](#) it would be that **Prince Giant Hot Gay Arthur** apparently likes taking sweet photographs of his **(male)** honey while they are being all post-coital and shit in his giant white-sheeted bed.

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Gawker's final Macworld keynote
San Francisco, January 8, 2009 10am PT

Macworld 2009

GAWKER EXCLUSIVE: HIS MAJESTY'S TWINKMAILS!

Drudge has the pictures, Perez drew the baby-making man-batter on them, but only Gawker has the emails and text messages between Prince Arthur and his Lad Love reproduced in their entirety here for you. [More »](#)

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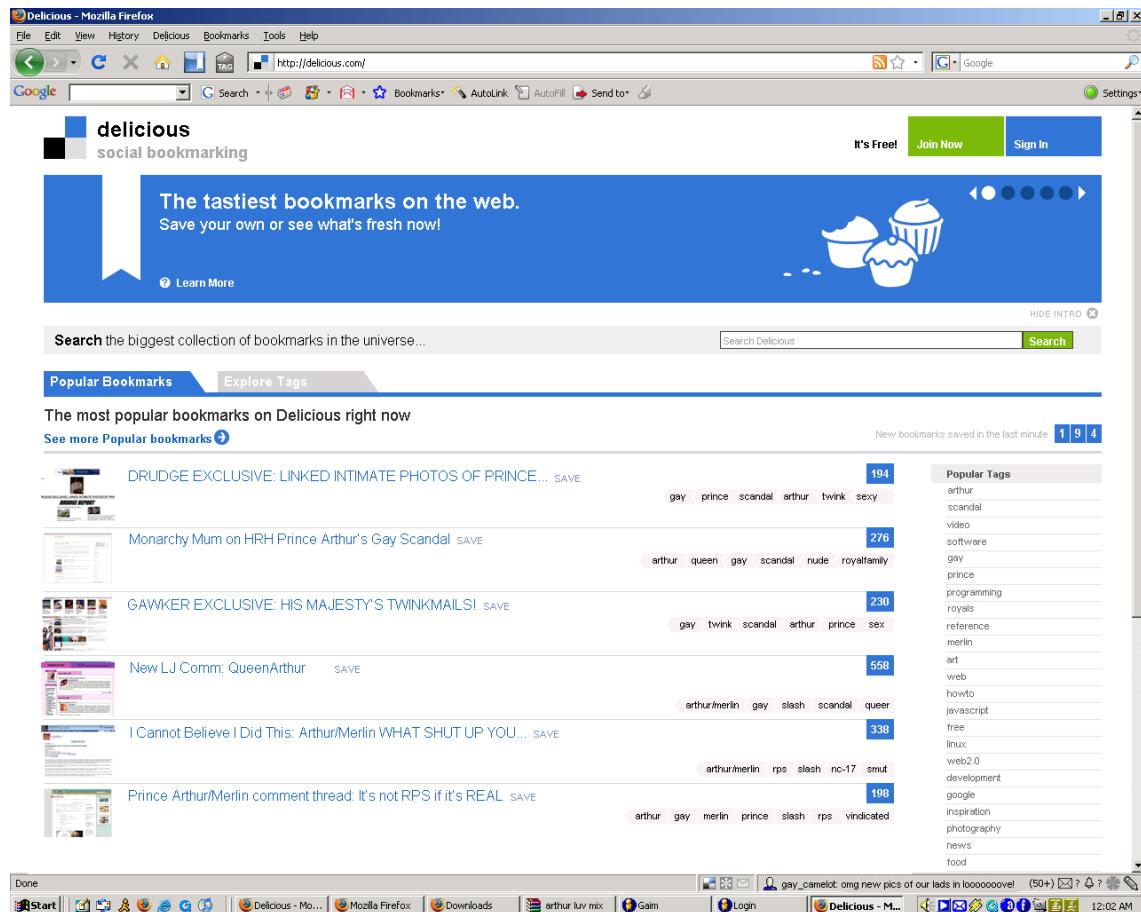
Monarchy mum on HRH Arthur's gay scandal

AP LONDON — Photographs and messages implicating a homosexual relationship between Britain's Prince Arthur, first in line to the throne, and an English junior doctor have exploded onto the internet even as official royal sources remain silent.

The half-dozen photographs and numerous emails and text messages were sold anonymously to the Drudge Report and Gawker Media, which then published the photographs on their Web sites. Matthew Drudge and a spokeswoman for Gawker declined to comment on how the exchanges were made and how much money was paid for the documents.

The images, which depict the prince in bed with a dark-haired young man who has been identified as Merlin Emrys of London's St. Bartholemew's Hospital, which Prince Arthur was touring earlier this year when he disappeared during a routine walk-through. Emrys, in his second intern year as a doctor, may have made a connection to Arthur through his acquaintance with Gaius Binghamton, who has served the Pendragons as a royal physician for more than two decades and maintains a practice at St. Barts.

Calls to Clarence House and to officials at Buckingham weren't returned. Messages with the media office at St. Barts weren't returned. Calls to Emrys weren't answered.



The fact that the volcanically angry expression on Gaius' face began to falter the nearer they drew to the familiar roofline of Clarence House wasn't really much of a comfort to Merlin, especially since he was literally crying by the time they managed to pull into the gated drive and get him inside.

"I haven't even really shouted at you yet," Gaius pointed out awkwardly.

"Oh my God," Merlin heard himself sob. "My mum's watching this."

"Merlin, it's all right, hey, come on now," Gwen said, stroking his back soothingly.

They were sitting in one of the many thousands of receiving rooms in Clarence House, and the walls were a vague, greenish color which Merlin couldn't be certain of because he was too busy crying because his life was over and his mother had seen Arthur's secret post-shag photos and God he was going to destroy that fucking iPhone.

Gwen wrapped an arm round his shoulders, tugging him closer on the cream-upholstered sofa they'd been instructed to sit on and not to move away from by men in dark suits and dark glasses with even dark looks on their faces. "This is the royal family, Merlin, I'm certain they've dealt with this sort of thing before," Gwen told him, "I'm sure they'll have this situation patched up in no time."

"Oh," Merlin shouted, scrubbing at his face, "they've had pictures of naked as arse junior doctors and their bloody crown prince in flagrante delicto on the fucking Guardian web site before then, Gwen?"

"Er," Gwen admitted. "Perhaps that's a bit of a complication."

Merlin resumed his earlier business of weeping quietly and as much into his cupped hands as possible, since Uther was probably going to kill him with some sort of royal musket reserved for those guilty of despoiling heirs-apparent, and he didn't want to look like a pussy about it.

He couldn't help but remember that the last time he'd made his mum cry he'd come out to her, shouting in a fit of teenaged hot-headedness that if she was so upset about his bloody A-levels she was going to absolutely die when she realized he was a cocksucker. She'd thrown half the plates in the kitchen at him and then she'd sat in the back garden and cried a half day before she'd come back in to where he'd been sneaking smokes in the loo and slapped the cigs out of his hand and boxed his ears and hugged him to her chest, saying, "I'm still angrier about your stupid A-levels."

Hunith had probably run out of crockery to destroy hours ago, Merlin thought darkly. There wouldn't be anything to eat off of in the entire bloody house at this rate, which obviously didn't matter since Merlin was so sick in his stomach he would never eat again and hopefully would just waste away to nothingness to spare himself the continued indignity of being alive and seeing unflattering and poorly-lit camera-phone photographs of his arse and his chicken-legs tangled in Arthur's white sheets.

"Gaius," Merlin asked, rubbing the tears from his cheeks with renewed determination. "Have you any hemlock? Or cyanide? Or a moderately large quantity of arsenic?"

The look Merlin received in response was more poisonous than all the above.

"Apologies for the inconvenience, Mr. Emrys, but you shan't be allowed to kill yourself before you've been properly briefed," came another voice, and Merlin looked up and through puffy eyes to a compact, dark-haired woman with tortoise-shell glasses perched on a button nose. She was clutching a BlackBerry, a small but dangerous-looking laptop, a stack of printouts gathered hastily into a manila folder and she was teetering on treacherously high heels.

"Briefed?" Merlin and Gwen asked at once.

The woman gave them a short, false smile. "Briefed, Mr. Emrys," she confirmed, and looking directly at Gwen, she said, "I'm sorry, Miss DuLac, you won't be able to join him. We'll have someone escort you back to your flat shortly, if you don't mind."

Merlin had to fight an instinct to cling to Gwen, which was exacerbated by the fact that it was at that exact moment three more women in dangerous-looking footwear appeared in the receiving room, each carrying matching implements of terror to the first, babbling in synchrony:

"The media line says they've fielded over two thousand calls in the last three hours—"

"Here, Rosa, take a look. It's a draft of the official release—"

"—and we'll need to have something to say soon or the bloody Times and Telegraph are going to start printing whatever they find on websites—"

"—have Merlin take a look and make certain all the biographical information is right—"

Merlin paled. "Me?" he croaked.

The woman—Rosa?—looked at him benignly and said, "Yes, Mr. Emrys, we don't want to add to a vast body of already inaccurate information already available to the public."

Swallowing hard, Merlin repressed a half-mad titter. "No, that would be terrible."

"Yes," Rosa deadpanned in response, but there was a flicker in her eyes that told Merlin she, too, recognized the foolishness of what she'd said, and she nodded toward a half-opened door and said, "Now, Mr. Emrys, if you would follow me."

He did, but barely, and they were just out of the receiving room when she turned to say to him, "I'm sorry about the circumstances of our first meeting, Mr. Emrys, but be assured that we'll do everything we can to manage the situation, now, here—" she stuck a three-page packet of pages in his hands"—can you walk and read? Excellent. Take a look at these and tell me if we've managed any obvious factual errors—anything you're uncertain of we can simply eliminate and introduce at a later date, it's better to be fast now than absolutely global in our introduction of you."

Merlin tripped on a bit of rug. "Introduction?" he gasped.

Rosa gave him a considering look. "Now, Emrys," she chided, pushing open a heavy door and revealing Arthur standing pensive by a window and Uther lying prostrate on a fainting sofa, "now's a bit late to play coy, isn't it?"

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Prince Arthur Confirms Rumored Relationship; Asks for Privacy

15th December 2008

Prince Arthur confirmed today he was in a relationship with Merlin Emrys and asked for the public's respect and for his and his companion's privacy.

Mr. Emrys, in his second foundation year at St. Bartholomew's, is 25 years-old and of Windmill Hill in Sussex. He and the prince first met during His Royal Highness' tour of Children's Hospital at St. Bart's and have maintained a correspondence since; Prince Arthur's decision to leave a state visit with Denmark's Queen Margrethe earlier than originally scheduled was precipitated by concerns for Mr. Emrys' health, which has since improved.

"While I am surprised by the way our relationship has been revealed, I'm glad that we can finally conduct our affairs outside of secrecy," His Royal Highness said. "Merlin is a very special young man and I'm grateful for the opportunity to know him better."

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As soon as Rosa closed the door to the study—Merlin spared a moment between reading the utter tripe that Rosa had handed him to admire the dark wooden paneling, the lovely, old books that lined the walls, the beautiful rug—Arthur whirled round, clutching the same papers and shouted furiously:

"I did not say any of that."

"Yes, but if you were a good, well-behaved young prince, you would," Rosa answered, flip, and turned to Merlin to ask, "Any objections on your part?"

Merlin frowned down at the papers once more. "This doesn't even sound like Arthur."

"For years, Arthur has sounded like me while I am carefully containing frustration and rage," Rosa explained kindly, and snatched the release away. "Without any valid complaints, I'm rushing these away to the wires," she said, and she exited to the left through a secondary set of doors, leaving Merlin and Arthur and—God—the King of England to stare at one another awkwardly.

Merlin wondered if he wasn't supposed to say something, to plead clemency with Uther or blame everything on Arthur or beg to be exiled instead of facing an ugly, public execution of some kind which would obviously upset his mother and be sort of embarrassing on top of everything else. Instead, all Merlin could bring himself to do was stare at Arthur—his tense, blue eyes, the angry slash of his mouth, his straw-gold hair and the familiar planes of his face—and feel sick and exposed and helpless.

"What do we do now?" he asked finally, voice wet and creaking.

Arthur sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "My people will handle it, Merlin."

He rolled the words around in his head. "Handle it?"

"Now that it's out there in..." Arthur trailed off, searching for judicious words and sparing Uther a pitying glance, "...such a graphic way, denying it would be foolishness. At this point, all that can be done is that the situation be managed."

Merlin continued to stare, and the nausea that had threatened him all the way from the hospital to the palace reared its ugly head again. "Managed," he repeated.

"Managed, Merlin, and you'll need to tell us how to contact your mother," Arthur said, sounding resigned. "The media are sure to be looking for her already."

Reaching behind himself, Merlin found something that felt like a sofa and let his weak knees give out, collapsing onto some sort of hideously slippery and probably antique chaise as he whimpered, "Oh God, my mum knows about this," remembering it all over again.

"There's no use wallowing when—" Arthur started, and then stopping abruptly, he strode across the room and took Merlin's chin into his hand, tipping his head up to stare intensely at his face as he demanded, "Have you been crying?"

Merlin glowered at him, shoving Arthur away to rub the back of his hand over his yes once more. "No."

"Christ," Arthur said, and tugged a monogrammed handkerchief out of his pocket. Merlin thought for a minute he was going to dry his tears or something but apparently Arthur's ability to be affectionate had an inversely proportional relationship to his proximity to Uther, so Arthur only handed it over while looking torn, and said, his voice surprisingly hoarse, "Here, take it."

Merlin did, and blew his nose on it as obnoxiously as he could. Arthur looked mortified, and finally Rosa returned to the room, looking just as annoyed as before but no more, which Merlin couldn't place as a good or bad sign.

"Your highness," she said briskly to Uther's prone form, "the Prime Minister is calling—he'd like to speak with you privately."

"Tell him I've died," Uther said tightly.

Merlin was unable to repress the choking noise that escaped from him. Nor could he ignore the look Arthur sent his direction.

"Of course, sire," Rosa agreed. "I've arranged for you to take the call next door."

Uther took a moment to give both Merlin and Arthur a look that should have flattened most of Buckingham Palace before staggering to his feet and then out of the room, leaning heavily on the paneling of the walls and the elaborate molding around the doors.

Merlin stared after the king for a long moment before he said, "I—I thought he'd kill us."

"My father would never muddy his hands doing it himself," Arthur said, his voice strange. "Anyway, he was only in here because it's where he fell down earlier this morning."

Merlin tried his legs and decided he'd better stay seated.

"What happened this morning?" he asked, and then felt supremely stupid. "Er, nevermind."

The smile Arthur eked out was raw with obvious hurt, and he sat down next to Merlin, silent for long minutes as they listened to muffled voices outside the door, the quick thud of feet in the corridors. Merlin couldn't stop staring at everything, the desk covered in papers and the phone, its cordless handset abandoned on a bookshelf. The curtains were a rich, hunter green with faded, brass-colored tassels and the rug was thick, and Merlin's shoes sunk into it. Merlin had grown up in a tiny, ramshackle cottage with his mother and a bevy of wandering, neighborhood cats that had purred and curled up round his too-thin ankles as a boy. The furniture had been a bit threadbare and the wallpaper fading, but Hunith had kept the room warm with her affection, and Merlin, even though he'd been awkward and gangly and had funny ears and seemed to always, always say the wrong thing, had been loved.

This study, with its gilded books and dark colors, was equal parts beautiful and freezing, and Merlin couldn't imagine Arthur, who favored warm reds and umber and the orange-gold of his fireplace, growing up here.

"What," Merlin made himself ask, still clutching Arthur's handkerchief, worrying it in his hands, "what will happen with us, now?"

In history, unfortunate love affairs usually ended most unfortunately for those without royal blood coursing through their veins.

It was strange to think about Arthur's childhood here, although Merlin knew he had one. Merlin couldn't imagine tumbling along these hallways or tearing down the stairs as he had in his mother's home, or what he would have done, as a little boy of six, if he hadn't had the option of digging worms after rainstorms in the garden or chasing bullfrogs or enduring his best friends increasingly vile dares to eat things they discovered underneath park benches. Arthur had made his first public appearance on his seventh birthday, and Merlin remembered sitting cross-legged on a faded rag-rug and staring at the Prince of Wales' gleaming golden hair on the television screen and knowing, the way young children do, that he was in love.

Arthur, even then, had been everything Merlin wasn't and wanted to be; it was only now, Merlin mused philosophically, that it seemed clear Merlin was many things Arthur had wanted as well.

"So," Merlin said, in a sudden fit of stupidity, "how much?"

Arthur blinked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

Merlin waved at the room, its old-fashioned opulence. "You know—is your father going to offer for me to like, fall into a crevasse and disappear from your life?"

Arthur's blinking ceased and turned into a flat, descriptionless stare.

"Gwen said that's what they do in all the books and things," Merlin said feebly.

"Oh, did she," Arthur replied, exaggerating every syllable in a way that let Merlin know Arthur was seriously reconsidering his previously high opinion of Gwen. "And how much do you think you're worth, then?"

Merlin's mouth went dry. This was where, Gwen had explained, in each and every romance novel, there had been a declaration of some sort: he didn't need the money; she could live without the inheritance; they would be impoverished gentility; that love was more important than 100,000 pounds a year.

But of course the stakes with Arthur were higher, Merlin thought, and forgetting himself, reached up to brush his fingers over Arthur's cheek—and felt something miserable in his chest unravel, finally, when Arthur's eyes fluttered shut and he leaned into the touch.

"The only way I'd ever go away is if you told me to," Merlin admitted, because he was tired and frightened and after everything, after all of this, Arthur was worth it, every ache and humiliation. He would lay siege upon Troy for the richness of this, to be able to reach over and touch Arthur as if it were his right.

Arthur's eyes snapped open, blue and glimmering, and he turned his mouth into Merlin's palm, sighing a kiss into his fingers and said, soft and entirely determined, "You're not to go anywhere."

Merlin could feel a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, warmth seeping back into his fingertips in the cold isolation of the room. Arthur may never have run in these halls or skinned his knees in the garden, but Merlin was here now, and he could drive Arthur to photograph his loafers and pout until he bought daggers and make him eat with his hands and the world, as it was, was all brand new with possibilities.

"God knows the last thing we need is more pictures of your arse in the papers," Arthur elaborated, which led to Merlin shouting, a short while later, "Who takes post-shag photos without their

partner's permission you bloody pervert? And how do you lose your mobile?"

At least Arthur had the good sense to finally look miserable. "It wasn't like I intended—"

Merlin threw the handkerchief at him. "I don't know why I even like you! You don't even have a real last name!"

Arthur continued to look wretched, and the moment lengthened until Merlin felt his rage first dissipate into simple anger and then falter into irritated embarrassment, and then he remembered that Arthur's father—who was the king—had seen, too, the photographs, and suddenly felt nothing but sweeping empathy.

"I didn't exactly anticipate those getting out," Arthur complained.

"It's as if you didn't even know what the internet is," Merlin said bitterly.

When Rosa, and her fembot army of publicists returned, they seemed to share Merlin's opinion, and they all had an astonishingly uncomfortable discussion about Merlin's arse in the tabloids while Merlin sat on it and felt naked and embarrassed and wished he was one of those sixteen-year-old twinks from adult films who waxed every inch of his body.

One of Rosa's assistants, a tiny, blonde speck of a woman, collected Hunith's contact information and fluttered out of the room, already dialing on her mobile, and the last thing Merlin heard her say before the door to the study swung shut once more was, "Hello? Mrs. Emrys? My name is Judith, I'm a publicist with Clarence House and..."

Merlin made a series of distressed noises, and must have turned some interesting colors red and then white and possibly green before Arthur sighed and put a hand on the back of his neck, forcing Merlin's head down between his knees, ordering, "Merlin, breathe."

"The first thing we should establish are the absolute facts of the issue," Rosa said, non-nonplussed. All Merlin could see with his head down was the fine weaving of the carpet, and he listened to Rosa's spike heels sinking into the wool as she settled onto a chair and rearranged her skirt, saying, "Starting from the beginning, please, I'll need to know all the details."

When she said, "all the details," Merlin came to understand that Rosa had apparently meant, "everything, everything, including a great number of extremely private things that honestly, Merlin couldn't believe that Arthur would just roll over and tell her about, and which no amount of Merlin widening his eyes at Arthur in warning seemed to prevent or stem." Arthur gave his recounting—which, in addition to hideous violation of their mutual privacy, included some awful character assassination of Merlin—which Merlin had been forced to listen to in seething silence by Rosa's warning glare.

"That is grossly inaccurate!" Merlin protested, after Arthur told Rosa how Merlin had wept in naked, desperate want of him. Oh, thirteen and trapped in bloody Sussex, Merlin had cried his share of tears because nobody would ever love or shag him, but now that he supposed he had the former and definitely had the latter he wondered who'd provide the services after he strangled Arthur.

Rosa, smiling thinly, said, "As I suspected, now, Merlin, your version," as Arthur paled.

Merlin's version tracked much more closely with reality, he didn't care what Arthur shouted, and after Rosa finished taking notes on what was a much less romantic love affair when you laid it all out in discrete pieces and dissected it for foolishness, she said:

"Now, on the subject of public etiquette."

*

Three hours later, Rosa glanced at her sleek, silver, and painfully tasteful watch and declared it was time for tea.

Arthur, perched on a corner of the sofa, his face still the same frozen mask of horror it'd been when Rosa had first uttered the phrase, "Royal WAG, well, I suppose royal HAB, in this case," made a faint, pained noise Merlin echoed in response.

There were rules about everything. There were rules about what Merlin should wear and when to wear it, about where he would be able to go and with whom he should be seen and who he could talk to about what. She talked about scheduling, suddenly, for if he would be accompanying the royal family to certain events, and had Merlin ever attended Royal Ascot? Did he have the proper clothing for it? "Of course," Rosa said, just as Merlin's eyes were starting to cross, "we'll also have to discuss how all of your future time commitments will affect your schooling. I understand you go back to full schedule at St. Bart's in the new year?"

If Gaius doesn't kill me with a shoe, Merlin thought. "Yes," he said out loud.

"Excellent," Rosa cheered. "Naturally, there will be meetings arranged with the deanery and with management at St. Bart's, but honestly, it will be a refreshing change for a WAG—er, well, HAB to actually maintain gainful employment."

Merlin had spent a not-insignificant amount of his life hating the wives and girlfriends and husbands and boyfriends of famous people the world over, and that was what finally pushed him to protest that whatever dalliance he and Arthur had—"Dalliance?" Arthur roared; "I'm trying to make a point," Merlin snapped in reply—hardly counted as royal union and why did he have to make note of any of these ridiculous bullet points? He focused his glare on Rosa to avoid having to meet Arthur's eyes, which were wide and sort of hurt, but honestly, he didn't remember having been signed over to the English in any sort of marriage treaty, and Merlin was hardly an ugly German princess.

"Mr. Emrys, I recognize his royal highness' overprotective streak has kept you largely insulated from the reality of the situation," Rosa said then, mild and bemused as Arthur flushed deeply, "but I believe it's important you know that the reality of your relationship with his highness is now largely out of your hands."

"What does that even mean?" Merlin asked, trying to reconcile the image of Arthur as overprotective with his tendency to bully Merlin about bloody everything. He concluded, "well, sort of, in a horrid way."

"Rosa," Arthur said, warning, but Rosa informed him, voice firm:

"It means that the time for your private relationship has concluded, and that if you are determined in your affections it is time to consider more practical matters."

'More practical matters' sounded like code to Merlin, and he thought about everything it might mean. There was, in addition to the way Arthur's eyes were a color blue that purportedly existed only in fairy tales, the fact that Merlin's pasty arse was now on the cover of every newspaper and magazine in the world and that his private correspondence was pasted about the internet like some God damn cat picture with a caption in bad grammar. He thought about the way Arthur touched him, not exactly reverent, since no one should molest their saints in such a way, but abashed all the same, and how he and Arthur's happiest moments had been only when they were shut in together, or shut under a seal of Merlin's magic. Merlin remembered the searing heat and then the sweetness of Arthur's kiss, his mouth under Merlin's, and thought of the hospital, how Merlin been chased down hallways and been thrown into a car with tinted windows. He felt Arthur's knee, warm and present, touching the side of his leg, and thought that somewhere in England, his mother was probably camped out in front of a television crying.

Rosa cocked one brow at him, challenging. "Of course, if you're uncertain, now would also be the time to bow out, before anything becomes more complicated."

Merlin could feel Arthur go stiff beside him, drawing away, and he knew suddenly that this was how the last love affair had ended. How smiling, gorgeous, and sexually dangerous Sophia had vanished in a cacophony of media speculation and ugly outbursts on the front covers of trash tabloids. How, after keeping the monarchy on the edge of its fainting sofa and most of the world enthralled with how she seemed to have their golden-haired prince wrapped tight round her little finger, dragging him into nightclubs and letting him fall out of them on his own, she had vanished.

It must have been here, in a drawing room at Clarence House, with a younger, wilder, more cocky version of Arthur, and she must have looked Rosa in the eye and declined participation.

Even Sophia, who had kissed Arthur, told the whole world about it, and then abandoned him in favor of half the cast of the Harry Potter films, had faded, eventually, into obscurity. Merlin could, too, and one day he might work in a quiet village in southern England and give children vaccinations and close up shop at 4 p.m. for tea and biscuits and nobody would even remember him as anything other than the local doctor.

But who would Merlin drink tea with, and who would set out the biscuits? Who would make him laugh and spoil him rotten and bully him in turn, and who would straighten Merlin's collar with a long-suffering sigh, come home from Denmark to rescue him from on-call rooms in hospitals or glower at him in art galleries? Life would be small and tolerable, but only that, and every day Merlin would see Arthur gleaming golden from a television screen, and he would look like all the promises Merlin meant to make and had broken in advance.

In all of Merlin's life, he'd loved his mother and he'd loved three girls in primary school and he'd loved Gwen. He'd loved Will, too, fiercely and with a fire that had burned until it'd immolated into a swallowing grief the day he'd died, his tiny car crushed by a lorry. All along, in the background, he'd loved Arthur the way boys love the idea of a thing—being a fireman, being an astronaut, playing for Manchester United—like a dream real enough to cause an ache, and now he was sitting in Clarence House being asked if he'd like to turn down an opportunity to drive a fire truck, to launch in a rocket, to kick the game-winning penalty goal, and the stupidity of being too scared to take it made his cheeks burn.

"No," Merlin told Rosa, certain.

He could feel Arthur staring at the side of his face, and Merlin forced himself to keep Rosa's questioning gaze as she asked, "No?"

"I—I like complications," he whispered, hoarse, and without his permission, Merlin's left hand went skittering off across the upholstery of the sofa and the trembling in his fingers died down, finally, after Arthur caught them in his reassuring hold, squeezing tight. "Life would be boring without them."

"I see," Rosa allowed, the beginnings of a smile teasing the corners of her mouth. She shut the leather cover over the legal pad and tucked her ballpoint pen behind one small, round ear, and said, "In that case, we're finished for the evening and—" she gave Arthur a meaningful look "—I'm sure Arthur will arrange for your trip home—"

"To the Covent Garden flat," Arthur interrupted, still clutching Merlin's hand. "They'll all know where he lives by now—it'll be safer there."

The look on Rosa's face could only be described as 'charmed,' and Merlin sighed, "There's nothing wrong with my flat."

Ignoring him, Arthur continued, "And also, we'll need to discuss the matter of Merlin's security detail."

"I don't need a security detail," Merlin tried. "And there's nothing wrong with my flat."

Rosa frowned first at Arthur and then at Merlin. "That might be a bit difficult, your highness. Traditionally security isn't assigned or assumed by the royals unless there's already been a betrothal put in place."

"Do it anyway," Arthur instructed, and Merlin jerked his hand out of Arthur's hold, mourned that he'd taken up with such a bloody tyrant, and said loud as he could, voice rising in pitch, "I said I don't need any kind of security detail."

They gave him one anyway, although it was rather hodge-podge and comprised of one of Arthur's own guards and two randomly plucked from a general pool of trained security the royal family did keep on hand in lieu of rape dogs and ninjas. The trio was terrifically forbidding and extremely silent, sitting one on each side of Merlin and a third in front of him, in the backward-facing seat of the towncar, its leather seats butter-soft. Nobody said a word, which was probably for everybody's benefit since when they'd arrived after Arthur had made a short, brusque, and sort of foul-mouthed phone call to somebody with the study telephone, Arthur had Merlin stretched out along the settee, a hand cupping the back of his head, kissing him hot and wet and filthy.

They switched cars, somewhere in the royal Mews, and Merlin found himself in an ordinary-looking black-cab, still flanked by agents, watching London blur in the windows. Everybody looked just the same, all the noises were the same, the traffic was the same, Merlin thought wryly; except that he was in a car with three bodyguards the Prince of Wales had forced upon him en route to a private apartment in Covent Garden, except that all the windows in the taxi were bulletproof and everybody gathered waiting for busses or the Tube were probably talking about him.

It took some doing (and apparently a junior agent causing some sort of nudity-related ruckus on the other side of Covent Garden) to sneak him into Arthur's secluded building unnoticed, but once inside, Merlin dragged gratefully up the narrow staircase into the apartment, opening the door to the flat and muttering:

"Well, I suppose the worst is mostly over."

And then his mother said, "Merlin Aneurin Emrys."

*

Merlin's mum ran a flower shop called Bits and Bobs and he'd grown up there, watching her skimming the thorns off of roses during the February rush and checking over the poinsettias before Christmas. As long as Merlin remembered, it'd only ever been the two of them, and nobody in Windmill Hill ever spoke of Merlin's father, if in fact he had one. Will used to say that Merlin was obviously an orphaned fairy child, exposed at the edge of the fields and forests, and that Hunith had rescued him.

He'd never felt particularly deprived or lonely until the long and lazy days of childhood had shrunk into the tense and tightfisted five-day weeks of his early adolescence, and then he'd been so hungry for everything: for extra biscuits and jam, for skin, for sex, for everything his mum said he couldn't have, for bigger places than Windmill Hill, for something he hadn't quite managed to put his finger on yet.

So he'd eaten and eaten and touched himself until his body felt alien, surprising beneath his own fingertips, and fucked Will, furtive and curious at first, and then once more with feeling. He'd been clever, accidentally, and studied somewhere more posh than he was born for and tripped, headlong, into medical school, wearing fresh scars from Will's funeral and carrying a lighter he'd stolen from Will's room during the wake, feeling sick every time he thought of Windmill Hill and all the memories still buried along with the broken crockery in the backyard garden there.

Merlin knew what Gaius and Gwen had thought about him, about why he'd decided to become a doctor, and they were right, mostly. His entire rotation in emergency medicine during his first year had been spent half-feverish and seeing Will's body beneath his hands, bleeding out with a steering column crushing his chest. But even if it was a shallow and foolish way to try and make up for something that was never his fault to begin with, it wasn't anything Merlin regretted, learning how to make people better, or make dying less terrible.

But sitting in Arthur's kitchen and watching his mother cry was probably worse than all of it—worse than ignoring sleep for three days straight to study for his A-levels, worse than the exams for medical school, worse than the first time he'd intubated a child, worse than the first time he'd called it, the body still cooling on an operating table.

It didn't matter, really, if she was crying because she was happy or if her son had just informed her he was a pouf or if he'd just been outed as shagging the crown prince of England to the entire world—his mother's tears were all the same: horrible.

"Oh, God," Merlin begged, "Mum, stop."

Dabbing at her eyes, she said, "I'm not crying."

"You! You're—you're bloody clutching the tissue box!" he yelled at her.

She'd absconded to the kitchen table after she'd given a considering look to both the bed and the sofa and decided them befouled. Merlin could think of a lot of things that might be worse than that precise moment but most of them involved being captured by the rednecks from Deliverance.

"Don't you dare raise your voice at me, Merlin!" she warned, and Merlin subsided, because after all she had just spent the better part of the day looking at sex pictures of her only child and hiding from photographers who'd barreled into Windmill Hill like the four horseman of the apocalypse. She blew her nose and said, "I just don't know why you didn't tell me."

Merlin made a huffing noise. "Right, and had I called you up in November and said, 'Mum, Mum, guess who I've met, and he's lovely, and he likes me, I think anyway! It's Prince Arthur!' you would have believed me?"

"Well you damaged your credibility a bit with all that hideous mooning you did when you were all spotty and in your teens," Hunith demurred.

"You would have sent me to a mental institution," Merlin retorted.

"Anyway," she said, glowering at him and then growing worried, her face pale, "Are you happy? I suppose you must be happy."

When Merlin had been eighteen, he'd spent three days coaching himself to tell his mother about Will. His lungs had nearly exploded, tearing the secret out of his chest all at once in one long, unbroken string of words mashed together, and Hunith had only smirked at him and said, "You and Will are terrible liars." They'd continued to be terrible liars for nearly two years before Will had been killed on a perfectly clear and starry September night driving back into Windmill Hill after visiting Merlin at uni for the weekend. He'd hung up on his mother three times when she'd tried to tell him and searched through all the television stations, because obviously if nobody had reported it on the evening news then this was just another hideously tasteless joke being played. He'd called Will's mobile a half-dozen times and left increasingly sarcastic and angry messages, and it wasn't until he called Will's house and his sister answered the phone weeping Merlin had believed it.

"If you think this will just make you unhappy," Hunith told him, "it's all right to walk away—a couple of photographs on the telly doesn't mean anything, Merlin."

Of course they did, and naturally it would be easier if he did, but Arthur had kissed him first and called him first and defied his father and did all of it while unbearably posh and royal—it was Merlin's turn to be brave.

"I'm happy with Arthur," he said finally, and when he got up the courage to look his mother in the eyes again, he thought she knew exactly what he meant.

Hunith touched his face, and smiled at him, forgiving.

"I'm glad you found someone," she told him. "I hope he's worth it."

Merlin smiled back. "He is," he said, and there was no doubt at all.

Then she'd lectured him at length about being careful with his magic, being cautious about his so-called gift—something she did while still decimating Arthur's supply of tissues—and said if he failed his exams, she'd kill both of them.

*

Rosa had just concluded a secondary round of shouting-at-Arthur-without-shouting, and explaining to him exactly what 'crisis communications' meant when Morgana stormed into the study, took off

her three-inch high heels and threw them at him, one after another, and it was only his lightning reflexes prevented a succession crisis after he was stabbed through the brain.

"Morgana, what the fuck do you think you're doing!" Arthur shouted, bracing himself behind a conveniently high-backed chair.

She searched around, dark curls flying round her face, before spying a porcelain snuffbox some dignitary had given Arthur once and threw that, too. It shattered slightly to the right of Arthur's head against the back wall.

"I'm assassinating you so I can inherit the throne and prevent you from bringing the downfall of the bloody crown!" she shouted at him, color high on her usually bloodless cheeks, and Arthur spared one insane moment to think she was rather pretty like that before she spied an ornate and extremely pointy lamp.

Arthur remembered fights like this from when they were children, many had concluded with them on confinement at opposite ends of Sandringham Castle under the watchful eyes of their furious nannies. Of course, before they had been subdued and Arthur's fists taken out of Morgana's delicate satin dresses and Morgana's claws extracted from his hair and jumpers, they'd inevitably have tumbled down a medieval staircase and frightened a half-dozen visitors and made three Welsh maids cry. Arthur couldn't actually decide if it was a good or bad thing that he was still so stupidly fond of her, or that he knew exactly what she was thinking and quickly enough that he could rush forward and snatch her hands into his own before she could chuck a bloody light fixture at him.

"You're twenty-fourth in line to the throne," Arthur reminded her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

"You'd have to kill twenty-three other people," Arthur said, "and I know for a fact that you like at least two of them."

"Arthur," she scolded, and he fell silent in the face of her stare, which went from terrifying and angry and sort of like what he'd always imagined epic beasts to look like out of Beowulf or the Epic of Gilgamesh into Morgana, to the girl she'd been after her father died, the littlest duchess, who'd been introduced to Arthur at Easter for the first time and then promptly stomped on his foot when he'd called her a tosser.

"What was I supposed to say?" Arthur protested, releasing her hands, but he made certain to edge the lamp a bit further away from her, just out of her immediate reach, in case he said or did anything else that made her want to kill him.

She flopped, shoeless, her green silk dress an elegant pool around her, onto the sofa and glowered at him through midnight-dark lashes. Morgana had always been shockingly beautiful, but it was his least favorite of all his favorite things about her, possibly because it was the only thing anybody with a camera lens seemed to see in her.

"You should have said something," she said, voice rough. "When we last talked, when you were getting pissed in your kitchen—had you two already...?"

Arthur chose a defensive position across the room, near an exit and next to a suit of armor before he admitted, "Sort of. It's complicated."

Cocking one dark, perfect brow at him, she asked, "More complicated than the harridans you've loved and lost in the past?"

"I didn't love them," Arthur countered.

"What of Sophia?" she said, riposte.

Arthur smiled at her, grim. "She wasn't lost; I was left."

For a moment, Morgana's eyes seemed luminous, gleaming silverlight, all-seeing, and Arthur wondered if this was another moment like so many others during their strange and interrupted childhood of parades and pomp where she would stop in the middle of everything and tell him a truth she'd dug out of his chest somewhere. "Arthur," she'd said when they were both eight, "you mustn't feel guilty about not missing your mother. You never even knew her, after all." When Morgana had turned eleven, two months before Arthur's own birthday, she'd frozen, petit four halfway to her delicate pink bow of a mouth and declared, "Arthur, honestly, if you're not feeling well today, tell your father! He won't be angry with you! Even crown princes grow ill occasionally." He had been angry with her for revealing him, but he'd been too occupied later for revenge, by throwing up miserably in his nursery, his father murmuring soothing nothings and stroking his back with his broad, comforting hand. Morgana always just knew.

"And what of Merlin, will you be left now, too?" she asked.

Huffing a breath, Arthur snapped, "Why don't you tell me? Between the two of us you were always the one who could—"

"I hope you aren't," she interrupted him gently, suddenly remerging warm and alive and something near enough to touch from wherever she went off to in her moods. "Those photographs everywhere were happy ones."

There were six, all in all, in various degrees of incriminating. None were pornographic, of course, and hopefully none were vulgar—Arthur hadn't particularly intended on upsetting Merlin by taking them—but they'd been conclusive, proprietary. Arthur had taken one, at the end, of Merlin's lashes, a sweet, dark sweep over his pale cheek, the tenderness in it, the slight blur around the edges, had been shocking and embarrassing and he'd nearly erased it, hands shaking as he'd gone down to the car that morning.

"I wasn't even in any of the photos," Arthur said, softer.

"You didn't need to be," Morgana countered, suddenly cheery. "This is actually all very exciting. It's been ages since we've had a royal who openly continued the long history of living in obvious sin while maintaining the throne."

Arthur tried very hard not to choke on his own tongue. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, you can be married, civilly, I suppose," Morgana pointed out, "but not in the Church of England, which will of course make it a bit difficult for you to make Merlin your princess—or I suppose he'd be called your prince consort, in this case? And anyway, we don't even know if he's Anglican." She paused a moment, thoughtful. "Actually, it might be valuable to consider whether or not we should make plans in case you're forced to abdicate the throne."

"Are you really talking about this?" Arthur demanded.

"It's only that you're supposed to be the head of the church, too, or at least you can't marry anybody who isn't Church of England," Morgana continued, curling her bare feet beneath the cascade of her green dress. "Which of course brings up the other issue which is worse: if you allow someone to eventually bully you into a bloodless, loveless royal marriage, or if you allowed that and then secretly practiced bigamy and married Merlin on the side like, in Spain or something."

Arthur had never felt like more of a figurehead in his life. For a moment, he felt profound connection with the nutters that ran ThroneOut, because honestly, he could have been a bloody architect or city planner or a fucking detective or something.

"Out," Arthur shouted at her, pointing at the door.

She winked at him, cheeky, and went to collect her shoes. "I'm glad you're happy, Arthur," she said before her face darkened thunderously once more, "But I'm warning you—if I find you've kept any more secrets from me, I swear I'll have you stretched to breaking on the rack, I'll have you guillotined, I'll—"

"You'll get in line, Morgana," Uther snarled, bursting into the room and taking the leather-backed seat behind the writing desk as if he'd never moved from Clarence House. "And please, do remove yourself so I may have a few words with my son."

Arthur desperately, desperately hated his existence at that moment.

"Right, love," Morgana said, kissing Arthur with brief, affectionate heat on his cheek before she toed on her stilettos and sailed out the door. It was like when she'd abandoned him their first year at Royal Ascot all over again, only this time there was no way for Arthur to rip all the marzipan fruits off of her hat in revenge.

In a strange way, Arthur had already used up most of his courage that morning, when he'd finally returned to the cold and suffocating arms of his family prepared to wage war and bloody the streets if necessary; his determination was all bled out of him now.

"Arthur," his father ground out. "Never has the royal family been so humiliated—"

Obviously, that had to be a lie. They were related to King George III, after all.

"—I cannot believe you would be so careless, and over some pretty face who probably just wants his moment in the spotlight," Uther concluded, looking older than his years and defeated by them, hunched over like poorly-cast bronze in the seat.

"Merlin's not like that," he said. "I trust him."

"Do you," Uther repeated, voice flat. "Does he trust you?"

Arthur's mouth went dry at that, his vision blurred. "I love him," he admitted, because he did, and if he had the courage to say it to his father maybe he'd have the courage to say it to Merlin soon—eventually—some day possibly before they died.

"You love him," Uther scoffed, lifting his head to catch Arthur's eyes.

Arthur did. It was too soon, and foolish, and it felt like the chemical rush of a first love, like teenaged fumbling and awkward kisses and searing happiness because you didn't know the

consequences, and Arthur didn't exactly know how that worked when they were both old enough to know better, but clearly stupid enough to ignore it.

"I do," Arthur answered in a hush.

Uther pushed himself to his feet, burning with every year of history and power the crown and scepter and orb had seen in history, and asked, voice quiet and terrible, "Then why is it my secretary told me this morning we were contacted by a girl in Copenhagen demanding compensation to keep quiet about your affair with her in Denmark earlier this month?"

Knee-jerk, Arthur said, "It wasn't an affair," and it was only after that all the words processed and he felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach, winded him, and a sudden, overwhelming sense of nausea crashed over him as he asked, "Is that why you called me in this morning?"

"Imagine my surprise when you storm in with an entirely different set of pronouns," Uther hissed at him, leaning forward, braced with his knuckles on the desk. "Arthur, I won't have us dragged through the mud because you've either reverted to your teenaged hooliganry or advanced to your mid-life crisis—"

"She was a mistake," Arthur broke in, voice shaking.

He'd forgotten her, in all of the rush, and even now he didn't remember her name. Arthur hadn't been a version of himself who made love—fucked—someone and forgot them in years, and it was jarring now, to remember why he'd hated himself so much back then. He remembered she'd been blonde and ethereally pretty and how she'd been there, and easy, still so uncomplicated compared to whatever had been driving the slow burn between he and Merlin, who'd been ignoring his phone calls and dying quietly in England, drowning under his own mountain of secrets.

"A mistake? I'm sorry, did I miss the shocking resemblance between this bottle-blonde Danish woman and your cata—"

Arthur interrupted before Uther could say anything that might turn this into one of those epic fights that concluded in his father having to take money from his private accounts to repair historical relics.

"I wasn't sure then," he said. "I was confused—I'm certain now."

"That you love this boy?" Uther retorted. "The woman sent photos of the two of you."

Arthur closed his eyes. "I sent Merlin a coat rack," he admitted, "from Copenhagen."

It seemed to make his father pause and blink, surprised. "A coat rack?"

"His flat is a bloody mess," Arthur went on. "Coats everywhere, scarves, jackets all over the floor. And then I sent his best friend amber Viking jewelry, and a photograph of the sodding mermaid."

Uther made a face. "You hate the mermaid."

"I thought Merlin would like it," Arthur said in a hush. His stomach hurt; his head was woozy. He hadn't slept the night before, staying up to look at Merlin's face and his hands, the long lines of his body, the white of his skin—there'd been so much to catalogue and keep, just for himself, and plans to make. "Look, I know that you're angry with me, and I know you're disappointed, but..."

Arthur wondered what Merlin would do, if on top of everything that had already happened there were photographs of this, too, Arthur stretched possessive and lewd over a woman in a bar somewhere in Denmark. There couldn't really be explanations, and Arthur thought Merlin might forgive him—after all, it was before everything really happened—but that it would hurt him, a lingering ache. But there was a lot of that going around today, Arthur thought bitterly, and hazarded a look at his father's face, lined suddenly with all of his years, and wished that he didn't always make Uther so unhappy, or that Uther cared less, or that Arthur did, so that they weren't forever like this: standing with a desk in between them arguing in half-finished sentences.

His father cleared his throat, and still hoarse, he said, "She seems to have cashed the check I sent late this afternoon. I've sent two representatives to ascertain she no longer has any video or photographs."

Arthur stared at him.

"The matter should be concluded," Uther said, uncomfortable. "We'll speak no more of it."

Once, when Arthur was still very young, before even Morgana became a fixture in Clarence House and long before Uther was king, Arthur had toppled off of his horse and broken his wrist while showing off for one or other of his six thousand relatives. There had been a great to-do and he'd cried a good deal as his father had escorted Dr. Binghamton into Kensington and monitored while Arthur's wrist was set, expert and clean and without any fuss. He'd fallen asleep, tired and sore and scared into exhaustion in the car on the way back to Clarence House, but Arthur remembered, only very vaguely, his father's arms lifting him out of the seat, carrying him steady and warm against his chest to his nursery. He'd stayed there after tucking Arthur into his bed, all night, maybe, but had been gone in the morning, just a memory of tenderness.

Younger, less forgiving, Arthur had wished his mother had lived, not because he really missed her, but because she might be able to puzzle out the lockbox of Arthur's father—now older, Arthur wondered if this wasn't the only way Uther knew how to be good to someone: without fanfare, without any discussion, and only in the doing.

Swallowing hard, Arthur said, "I'm sorry."

And Uther only smiled at him, rueful, resigned. "Be sorry about the monarchy instead," he chided. "It seems we live in interesting times."

"I do love him," Arthur insisted, and it sounded, more than anything else he'd said, like an apology. He needed his father to know it meant something, that sometimes there were secrets worth keeping.

"I hope you do, Arthur," his father said, making his way toward the door, and before he stepped away, into the hall, he said over his shoulder, "I'll expect Merlin and his mother tomorrow morning for breakfast."

"Oh God," Arthur said, an hour later, still in shock even as Morgana was collapsed in a heap across his bed, laughing so hard she could barely talk. "Oh God—we're fucked."

*

The breakfast was excruciating.

Hunith and Uther appeared to hate one another on sight, or at least decide their mutual offspring ought to be exclusive of one another. Everybody talked at length about the weather, and Morgana's good-hearted efforts to introduce topics like whether or not anybody particularly liked the latest Doctor on Doctor Who were met with Merlin's enthusiastic discussion but otherwise resounding silence. Arthur gathered from the fiercely annoyed look on her face his lack of opinion on the departure of David Tennant would have him soundly thumped later, away from the prying eyes of Uther and the phalanx of royal photographers there to record the meeting for posterity and the carrion-seeking vulture press.

Complicating matters was that the hollandaise on the eggs benedict was apparently a bit wonky and improperly handled and Merlin was forced to do some emergency doctoring on Morgana and Uther after they took to projectile vomiting, at which point Arthur felt comfortable declaring it the least auspicious of all possible first meetings.

"Either make yourself useful or stop talking," Merlin snapped at him in between rattling off an angry, nearly unintelligible prescription on his mobile for a number of anti-emetics. He hung up, stuck the phone into his back pocket, and still maintaining his hold on Morgana's lush, dark hair as she moaned into the toilet, said, "Now go find me some juice or sports drink, and don't come back without it."

Arthur raided the royal kitchens and returned with sparkling apple juice, two bottles of Coke, Red Bull, and some oranges a cook had assured him someone could be compelled to turn into juice form.

"Red Bull?" Merlin shouted at him.

Hunith, whom Merlin had tasked with making certain the king didn't vomit out any necessary vital organs, pinched her son viciously on the arm. "Merlin, stop shouting like a bloody fishwife and pretend you went to medical school," she scolded, and Arthur was forced to favor Merlin with a smug look at that.

"Don't get cocky, she's my mother, she still likes me better," Merlin had muttered, two hours later after Binghamton—"Is there any reason you don't just call him Gaius?" Merlin had asked, curious —had arrived with backup and emesis basins, leaving Merlin and Arthur to retreat to his private chambers. They had abandoned the many sofas scattered about the rooms after discovering they were universally inhospitable to lovers and settled on his bed, Arthur dozing on Merlin's knee and Merlin paging through some hideous report Allistair had left at Arthur's bedside. Arthur hadn't managed to sleep the night before, either, other than a few exhausted minutes when his body finally surrendered to the stress and nervousness, and the last he remembered of the research was something about gynecological statistics in Northern Africa.

"I am very handsome and charming," Arthur answered, half-asleep in a slur.

Merlin stroked the skin of his cheek, soft, and said, "Yes, you are," and Arthur tipped over into dreamlessness in between the sound of Merlin turning pages.

*

The newspapers started their own recyclable version of World War III, and every time Arthur turned on the telly there was someone speculating about the future of the throne who claimed to be extremely close to the Prince of Wales. They wondered about if he would have to abdicate or if he would be able to marry, if Arthur's love affair would force changes in rules about gay marriage in

the church—they all wanted to know what Merlin's title would be if they were married, and there was a vicious debate between the Guardian and The Sun over whether Arthur's newfound love was a FAIRYTALE COME TRUE! or a GAY TRYST SCANDAL! Elton John wrote a song about them.

Arthur received sympathetic and supportive notes from people all over the world and a shocking number of pornographic advances, which he'd been forced to burn after Merlin found the first and started to do it anyway—with his eyes.

Mid-December Merlin retired—plus his entourage of security—to Windmill Hill for the holidays, where he was as much a curiosity there as anywhere else, but better loved, and the little town ignored the possibility of commerce from ravenous paparazzi by banding about him in a protective enclave. Merlin reported, December 20th, that his home was ever the same and that he was busy in the lead-up to Christmas with helping at his mother's flower shop, tying off presents and helping childhood friends pick out apology blossoms after they'd had a row with their wives and been tossed out on their arses.

"How is it that you can walk around unmolested on the streets and I'm still getting bloody phone calls from the global president of the gay-lesbian alliances asking me to come out against policy matters?" Arthur demanded.

Laughing, Merlin had said, "Happy Christmas to you, too. Bring me something from Norfolk."

At Sandringham, in between being very cold and awkward with the rest of his family, Arthur spent a great deal of time secreted away in Morgana's chambers, being tense and worried and generally making a nuisance of himself until Morgana finally demanded to know what was wrong with him.

"There's nothing wrong with me," Arthur said from his sprawl on a chaise.

"Of course," she agreed, "you're only just hiding in my rooms and away from absolutely everybody else in the monarchy."

His head throbbed just at the thought of maintaining a placid smile in front of them, beneath the boughs and ribbons that had been draped all over the castle, the beautiful Christmas trees situated throughout. Everybody was too polite to ask, of course, but no one needed to, apparently Clarence House's public relations had sprung a leak roughly in line with that suffered by the Titanic. No matter how much Rosa seemed to shout at all of Arthur's staff, everything always managed to get out somewhere.

So now, absolutely everybody in the world—many thanks to Rupert Murdoch's empire, may his soul burn in the eternal pits of hell—knew exactly where Merlin was and what he was doing and there was an absolutely mortifying column dedicated to trying to figure out which of the strapping young men Arthur had known in the past had been his secret, torrid love during his Eton years. Everett had called him at 3 a.m. raving about how girlfriend had brought out some sort of terrifying strap-on black rubber dildo and wanted to fuck him against the a fireplace.

"Oh my God," Arthur had groaned, hoarse and trying to wash the image out of his mind.

"She said I could call her Arthur if I wanted, you fucker!" Everett bellowed.

Against his better judgment, Arthur asked, "Wait—does that mean you let her do it?"

"Sod off, Arfur—sod off!" Everett concluded in a shriek before he'd hung up, and then Arthur had very maturely called Merlin the next morning to say: "I hope you're happy: my best mate from school is apparently being pegged by his girlfriend thanks to you."

There'd been a sigh over the line. "Good morning to you, too, Arthur. I'll go wake Merlin for you, all right?" Hunith said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Emrys," Arthur said, mortified.

His own father, on the other hand, had decided that despite the tsunami of global attention the absolute last thing he wanted to do was acknowledge that anything was different. It was so like Uther that Arthur would be well on his way to dismantling certain fundamental rules of the British monarchy and riling the parliament into a froth and he'd want to discuss fucking swan upping instead.

To be fair, Arthur was stupidly grateful for their mutual emotional constipation, as it prevented some of the more horrible conversations Merlin said his mother kept engaging him in and the inevitable aneurysm that would go with it.

On Christmas Eve, Arthur finally lost patience with everybody's whispered conversations and shouted, "Why on Earth does everyone keep asking me how I feel about civil unions? I studied city planning at St. Andrews—not bloody policy!"

Morgana looked at him as if he were slow. "Arthur, you can't be serious."

"It's not like everybody is waiting for Merlin and I to get married!" Arthur retorted, and then faltering, said, "Oh God, is everyone waiting for Merlin and I to get married?"

Rolling her eyes, she stuck another spoonful of stolen mince pie in her mouth.

"That would, actually, be why all the magazines are speculating on if you can get married, you idiot," she said around the neck of the teaspoon.

*

Eight hours later, having evaded most of the Sandringham staff, his father, three second cousins, and that tart clearly trying to marry into the family who'd somehow managed to snag an invitation for the holidays, Arthur was driving into Windmill Hill up an unmarked dirt path, giving the crush of photographers a wide berth.

It was barely six in the morning, sky still hung over from night, gray with it, and his breath frosted into clouds in the bitter cold. There were a few reporters, but mostly they were lazy and half asleep, nursing hot teas or sneaking a cigarette. Arthur ducked, quietly and carefully, through the yards and back pathways of the village until he came upon Merlin's house, matching the address to the one he'd jotted on his palm—now damp enough with nervous sweat that the letters were running into one another.

The front door was out—too many people camped round it—so Arthur circled back to the garden, where there was a stout, unforgiving stone wall and miles of ropey green ivy, slick from dew like a cascading green curtain. It took him a few attempts to find foot and handholds on the stone, but after those were determined he made short work of it, throwing a leg over the stone wall and

glancing down the other side only to find one of his ex-security officers staring at him balefully from below.

"Marcus," Arthur acknowledged, perched precariously.

"Your highness," Marcus agreed, long-suffering. "Would you like a hand down?"

Marcus let Arthur into the house before reprising his position at the back door, standing watchful as Arthur navigated through the kitchen, the sitting room. He trailed his hands over the sofas—soft, sat-in—and tabletops—a bit dusty and scratched—let himself look at all the pictures on all of the wall along the stairs.

There was Merlin as a tiny dark-haired infant, sitting on his behind and reaching out for the camera, his eyes already bright with laughter. There was Merlin, his hair a riot of curls now, in short trousers and a jacket and cap, dressed proudly for his first day of school, Merlin grinning at the camera, blue eyes crinkled with laughter. Merlin sitting at Brighton Beach, sunglasses perched on his nose, pink with burn already. There was Merlin smiling at a brown-haired boy with ruddy features and a crooked smile.

Merlin slept with his bedroom door open, and Arthur saw him curled up on his side in a single, buried beneath three separate quilts, just a tuft of dark hair sticking out from beneath the covers as Arthur eased himself onto the edge of the mattress.

Arthur knew so little about Merlin, really, none of the details. He knew Merlin was a bit magic and that Merlin could make him laugh in the most improbable ways, that he was warm and huge-hearted, and that Arthur had never thought he'd know anybody like Merlin, that he was grateful for the accidents and awkwardness and noise. But there was still so much else in the spaces in between, and Arthur wanted to know everything: Merlin's worst fear, his favorite ice cream, his first love, if Arthur would be his last.

He could feel it the moment Merlin woke, the slight tensing, and Arthur tugged the blankets down a bit, enough so he could see Merlin's slitted eyes in the dark of the room and say, voice a murmur, "Hey."

Merlin blinked hard at him. "Did you—have you broken into my house?"

"Marcus let me in," Arthur explained, brushing matted hair back from Merlin's face.

"Your rape ninjas are pants at their jobs," Merlin muttered, yawning.

Arthur ignored him to say, "I never asked you. About us."

"What do you mean?" Merlin asked, voice hoarse from sleep, and as Arthur was opening his mouth to answer, he shook his head and said, "Wait, wait," and slid over under the covers, saying, "Come on, climb in—it's cold."

It wasn't, really, the house was warmer than most of the ones Arthur had grown up in, but he was happy to shed his long, dark coat, the zip-up sweatshirt, discard his jeans—folding them over the back of Merlin's desk chair—and slide under the blankets. Merlin's legs locked into his, a knee warm and bony between Arthur's thigh's, marking its place and Merlin said, finally, "All right—what was it you were asking?"

Arthur put his face in the curve of Merlin's neck, mumbling into his skin, "Us. I just wondered—everybody's made so many assumptions."

"That they have," Merlin agreed, stroking his hand down Arthur's back, comforting.

"But I hadn't asked," Arthur forced himself to say, pulling away to catch Merlin's eyes, still heavy with sleep, dark. "If you still want this, even with everything that's gone on."

Merlin's hands were soft on Arthur's back, belying his annoyed tone as he said:

"Arthur, you are absolutely, without question, the world's most hopeless and appalling prat to end all prats—"

Arthur started to say, "Excuse me, you—"

"—and if by now you haven't realized that I love you and that you're stuck with me then you really are inbred as well as strange."

"—oh," Arthur concluded, feeling suddenly shy.

"Yes," Merlin sighed, dropping a kiss to Arthur's chin. "Now, go to sleep. I'll make pancakes for breakfast."

He did, and Arthur and Hunith and Merlin ate them—soaked with butter and syrup—listening to his father's Christmas Day speech, and Arthur felt, for the first time in a long time, absolutely and perfectly content.

*

January, Merlin went back to St. Bart's, having brokered a humiliating agreement to provide the media with updates about his studies in exchange for remaining unmolested on his way to and from work. It meant everybody cast him thoughtful and speculative glances, and those who'd been friendly before bifurcated into two groups: too interested or openly hostile.

"At least this way, I have plenty of time to prepare for my assessments," Merlin tried.

Gwen glared round the cafeteria all the same. "Still, they shouldn't be like this."

"All that matters is that you're still talking to me," Merlin said, and meant it, because he'd loved Gwen so much and for so long he didn't know what he would have done if she'd been angry with him, too. Three of his colleagues already, had sold stories to The Sun, and when he'd been furious Arthur had just looked resigned and apologetic, as if this was just the way things happened now.

He did his last two months in obstetrics and studied every single free minute, delivered a baker's dozen of healthy, bouncing babies and three stillborn, one girl died in the neonatal ward and Merlin sewed up a mother who'd bled to death on the table before she'd ever seen her son.

It was terrible and real, and on that day Merlin had gone back to the nut factory because he couldn't bear his own flat, still stripped to the bone by his exhaustion and regret, Arthur was apparently contacted by one of his spies and came over to run him a bath.

"Did you want to save them?" Arthur asked, sitting at the edge of the tub.

Merlin closed his eyes, sinking lower into the hot water. "I always want to save them."

"You know what I mean, Merlin," Arthur said, not an inch of give in his tone.

Merlin's mouth went dry, heartbeat racing. "No, I mean. I couldn't, I was scared, and it's just so selfish that I don't want to—"

"Good," Arthur said, cutting him off.

There were two royal weddings between March and May and Merlin had been press-ganged into attending both, uncomfortable in his morning coat and glossy shoes, sticking too close to Arthur's side and too shy to speak with almost anyone at the first.

"I give it nine months, tops," Arthur said to him from the corner of his mouth, studiously pretending to listen to the prayers being echoed through the church.

Merlin quashed the laughter that almost bubbled out of him. "Tennis instructor or banker, do you think?" he whispered back.

"Depends on if it's the husband or wife," Arthur replied, and his eyes were luminously blue when they caught Merlin's gaze, smiling.

There'd been a near riot in the papers the next day, everybody speculating on whether or not this was the first official sign of acceptance from the royal family of Merlin's presence in their lives. Merlin had never seen his own awkward smile from so many different angles, and he responded by being ghastly to Arthur for a week and hiding, forcing Gwen to come over and watch old Fry and Laurie with him.

"You realize it's not, technically, Arthur's fault he likes spending time with you and that you two are the most scintillating story in the world," Gwen pointed out gently.

Merlin chewed angrily on a kebab and imagined it was Arthur's stupidly attractive face.

In April, Gwen and Morgana met and became instant good friends, which Arthur mourned since he claimed that was one more person who wasn't on his side. Merlin said snippily he wasn't aware that there was a running conflict, to which Arthur had replied simply with an eye-roll and, "Please, Merlin, don't insult my intelligence."

For the second wedding, Arthur said, "Why don't you bring Gwen along, too?" and Merlin had loved him unbearably that night, watching him twirl Gwen round the room and making her throw her head back with laughter at the reception. Just past midnight, Merlin had gone and collected his prince, dragging him out onto a balcony and kissed him thoroughly under a blanket of approving stars, hands in Arthur's hair.

"Am I forgiven then?" Arthur asked, in between nipping the bow of Merlin's mouth.

"For now," Merlin said, warning.

June was madness. Merlin was more or less subsumed by the intensive care ward the entire time, over which Arthur fretted incessantly and manifested this concern by starting rows with Merlin at all possible opportunities about his long work hours. The media grew bored by him during this period, in part because at the end of May everybody had decided they'd broken up and that Arthur

was sleeping with one of his school chums named Everett, a conclusion they felt bolstered by the fact that Merlin hadn't made an appearance when Arthur had presided over Trooping the Color.

"How is Everett handling that?" Merlin asked, half asleep in one of the on-call rooms.

Arthur snorted. "Well, he's told me that if I ever want to grab a pint with him again I'll have to shoot him first and or agree to have that pint in a strip club."

"Kinky," Merlin said approvingly, and then fallen asleep, drooling on his phone.

When he emerged out of his hospital-sized cocoon mid-June, it was to finally admit to Arthur he'd signed up to track into emergency pediatrics months before they'd even met the first time, and the subsequent argument it sparked was conducted at Royal Ascot.

Arthur nearly snapped the stem of his champagne flute. "You what?"

"It's just—I like kids," Merlin said, feeling stupid, and seeing a few surreptitious eavesdroppers perk up. "It's not that big a deal, Arthur."

"Do you remember the last time you worked with children?" Arthur asked, voice low and modulated. He set down his drink a little too hard, and the snap alerted the two remaining people who hadn't been trying to spy on them. "Merlin, don't be stupid."

For months, everything he'd done had been passed through the Clarence House publicity team. When he visited his mum, he'd alerted his security. When he worked late, there had to be a note distributed to all and sundry. If he was looking particularly terrible, he had to issue a statement that he wasn't ill, just overworked, not that, of course, it was something symptomatic and bad about the NHS or anything. Everyone from talking heads on morning television to newspapers to magazines to policy wonks had criticized absolutely everything about him and people in Belgium were starting to dress like him, and Merlin couldn't understand how anybody could think his wearing scrubs and a hoodie was a fashion statement and not something tied to his job.

"How is it stupid?" Merlin shot back, heated, annoyed.

Arthur made an annoyed face. "You know how you get," he said simply. "Honestly, I'm not even sure if I like the idea of you putting yourself in a position where you're going to be tempted to use your...you know, anyway."

Merlin felt a sudden flare of anger shoot up along his spine so quickly he thought his vision blurred for a hot, miserable moment, and he snarled out, "That's really none of your business anyway, is it?"

"I'm sorry?" Arthur said, eyes going round, the blue flickering in warning.

"This really. Isn't any. Of your. Business, is it?" Merlin repeated, frustration rubbing hard edges onto each word. "Have I been anything other than 'Prince Arthur's shag' since everybody found out? My bloody deanery sent me letter saying if I needed any particular special treatment, just let them know."

"I didn't do that, Merlin," Arthur warned, his voice dropping an octave.

"But you did!" Merlin insisted. "Just by virtue of being there! And what the fuck right do you have to my decisions? We're not bloody married."

Arthur looked liked he'd been slapped.

"Of course," Arthur said to him, detached. "If you'll excuse me."

Every single female Merlin knew took turns shouting at him the rest of that month, and it was the beginning of Wimbledon before Merlin dredged up the courage to speak to Arthur again, the awkwardness of two weeks of silence a stifling blanket. Arthur would have bolted, five minutes into the conversation, if Morgana hadn't locked them into a room together and then bemoaned their ungratefulness when Arthur sent her away when she came to check up on them and Arthur threw her out.

August vacillated between trying and bland, and they spent a lot of time talking on telephones, which Gwen referred to as the healing process.

"Which, by the way, would go a lot faster if you would talk about your feelings," she said.

"I think we've done enough of that for three lifetimes," Merlin said, signed off on a chart, and darted back into the fray. Pediatric emergency was as terrible as Arthur had predicted but more rewarding than even Merlin had hoped, and if sometimes he was sick to his stomach and needed Arthur to come fetch him from the hospital, at least he could always get up the next day and be glad for the work he was doing.

Mid-September, Lancelot came home, hair shorn and eyes shadowed and suffering from extensive nightmares. But he was still Merlin and Gwen's champion, and still the boy who'd beat off Merlin's bullies when they were in secondary school, the two scholarship students in an ocean of privilege, and in early October, when he was finally ready to see other people, he swapped out a recklessly affectionate hug for ordinary hellos.

"Gwen nearly died of missing you," Merlin scolded, checking Lancelot's heart rate, his eyes—still bloodshot, a bit—and smoothing his hands over his arms looking for scars, anything he knew how to fix. Arthur might get angry with him when he was casual with his magic, but he also loved how Merlin loved, so this was probably a null set. "You made Saturday evenings very boring with your absence."

Lancelot's eyes were soft. "I missed her, too. Both of you."

"Good," Merlin said, around the sudden surge of hurt and fearfulness that balled up in his throat. "Then stop leaving, right?"

"Promise," Lancelot lied, and added, "Come on, Gwen's making dinner, and you, you owe me a story—what's this about you and a prince?"

Blushing, Merlin said, "I swear, he's an utter prat in real life."

He raised his dark brows. "Arthur? Really?"

"God," Merlin moaned, remembering their latest tiff, "you have no idea."

In December, Merlin and his mother were invited to Sandringham for the holidays, where they ate a great deal of Norfolk shrimp and everybody judged one another extensively. But Merlin remembered everybody's titles and styles, and Arthur managed not to purchase Hunith anything made by Wedgewood or studded with diamonds and everybody involved turned a blind eye to the fact that Merlin's guest quarters remained uninhabited the entire stay.

And Christmas morning, long before the rest of the castle woke, Merlin and Arthur snuck down into the kitchens where Merlin made them pancakes drenched in melted butter and syrup, and he thought this—whatever this quiet was—between them was worth its weight in complications.

*

"Have you sat for a portrait yet?" Merlin asked, frowning at one of the gallery paintings, a massive-scale tempura on wooden paneling-and-gesso affair that stretched out a half dozen feet taller than either of them. "Because when you do, you should ascertain that they don't paint you cross-eyed or anything."

Arthur shot him a dirty look.

"I'm only concerned about your legacy," Merlin said, cheerful.

"Yeah, let's go outside," Arthur decided, and dragged Merlin bodily out of the gallery, if for nothing else, his own sanity.

Since he'd made an offhand comment about the poetry of Merlin's soul being composed of dirty limericks, Merlin had exacted his revenge by insisting on long days in art galleries where he asked purposefully daft questions and then used his stupidly beautiful cow eyes to prevent Arthur from thumping him over it.

It was one of those rare, beautiful early summer days, clouds perfect cotton-candy puffs in a cerulean sky, and the Eye ambulated slowly through it. They'd already picnicked on hastily-purchased snacks and cheap French wine by the river, spreading out across the soft, green lawn of new grass beneath a tree, leaves rustling overhead to cast changing shadows over Merlin's face. It was still only two in the afternoon, far too early to return feigning shamefaced expressions to their handlers and too lovely outside to go back in, so Merlin drew on his extensive knowledge of terrible Regency romance novels and hailed a taxi, dragged him out to the bank of the Serpentine in Hyde Park.

"Last opportunity for this in a while," Merlin told him, stripping Arthur of his jacket to use as an impromptu blanket on the grass. Arthur pretended, briefly to fight him for it before Merlin's eyes flared golden, laughing and in warning, and he said, "All right, all right," and subsided, resting his head on Merlin's lap, eyes closed and dozing in the flickers of summer heat that came on the spring wind.

"We'll make time," Arthur said, and decided they would.

The absurdity of their lives aside, it seemed foolish to be able to go about London unnoticed and to waste it, and Merlin seemed his most happy when they were like this, when they could sit in a park without any prying eyes, quizzing Arthur about his favorite types of curry and asking how many times he'd been struck in the head at Eton.

Merlin ran his left hand through Arthur's hair, stroking it into order, fingers organizing Arthur's fringe.

"I hope we do," he said, fervent and already-yearning, so wistful that Arthur was forced to snatch the hand in his own.

He caught Merlin's gaze for a moment, smiling and asked, "You ready?"

"No," Merlin laughed. "And don't lie, neither are you."

"No," Arthur said, "but why wait."

The look in Merlin's eyes could only be called fond.

"Of course," he allowed, and Arthur grinned—wild and young and half-mad, he knew—and pressed a kiss into Merlin's palm, his mouth warm against the cool of the ring tucked at the base of a finger. It was gold from Clogau St. David's mine in Bontddu in North Wales, traditional; the Welsh cariad inscribed inside it was not, and obviously was some sort of horrible, soppy accident.

"Of course," Arthur agreed, and lacing their hands together, he closed his eyes and said, "Another half hour, all right? Then we'll go back."

Merlin smiled at him and said, "Sleep—I've got you," and Arthur did, the sear of sunshine overhead fading slowly to white underneath his eyelids.

THE END

Arthur Bags His Prince Charming: A FAIRYtale COME TRUE!

More than 700,000 people gathered on Sunday to watch Arthur, Prince of Wales, wed partner **Merlin Emrys**. The ceremony took place in St George's Chapel in a civil ceremony. Arthur, in full dress uniform and Emmy wearing a dove-gray Ermengildo Zegna linen suit rumored to have been chosen by Morgana, the Duchess of Kent.

"They're just mad for each other," sources close to the royals tell THE SUN. "Everyone's just so happy Arthur finally found someone. They were

starting to think he'd shrivel."

Emmy, who plans on continuing his work at St. Bart's after the pair return from a **honeymoon** in Spain, is just over 5 feet tall and has never had a band, and planned the wedding themselves with the help of the duchess, who claimed him as a **fast friend** after Arthur and Emmy first made their **love connection**.

People poured out into the streets as the new royal couple traveled along parade routes throughout the city, and

watchers admired the way Emmy and Arthur had smiles for only one another. "Obviously, no one really thinks their crown prince is going to be a poof, but given that his dad's a doctor and everyone thinks Merlin is **better than a lot of the footballers** in this country," said Theresa Hogenboothem, 56, who traveled with a trio of bridge partners and camped overnight along the parade route for the best view. "I wish my daughter would marry a doctor."



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In the Cultural War About Gay Marriage, a Wedding Opens a New Front



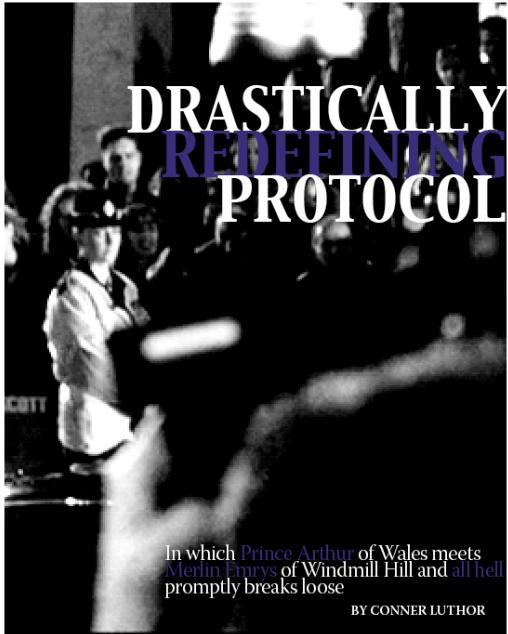
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DRASTICALLY REDEFINING PROTOCOL

In which Prince Arthur of Wales meets Merlin Emrys of Windmill Hill and all hell promptly breaks loose

BY CONNER LUTHOR

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SEPTEMBER 2011

The true origins of their relationship are the subject of much dispute, mostly between Arthur and Emrys.

He revised himself into a model royal after that, passive politically and involved socially. He attended to his many causes without fanfare.

Friends and former professors paint a very different image of Arthur than his publicity materials. Arthur may be tireless but he's by no means pleasant. Considered to be a bit of a jerk, he had a lack of a sense of humor; he had many friends and no confidants, and everyone agreed that underneath his tendency to excel at sport and maths was a tragic inability to analyze poetry or even joke about expense accounts.

Arthur grew up two sessions.

Arthur and in his late 20s, Washburn took over his parents' real estate business after graduating from St. Andrews, and he and the prince met and became fast friends.

Persistent rumors remain that Washburn was Arthur's first male paramour, a secret relationship that paints a look of agency on his face.

"Look, let's just say that even when I was flying Arthur from bloody Copenhagen back into London for a shag I thought that should be it," Washburn concedes. "I should have known the number of women who have agreed to fuck me just to find out what Arthur might have planned previously."

Emrys thinks it's hilarious.

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Arthur, when asked about it, pulls an expression of misery that barely mirrors Washburn's. "It's like when you see St. Laurent's name triggers, where his expression grows flat and unfangible, eyes steely. They were once fond of each other and then they're not, but they still feel so unshaken about them being together, it's all Arthur has ever said about the affair.

"Obviously, I disapprove of Arthur's giant homosexual whatever," Washburn says with no bite, "but they've really got to be doing something wrong if they can't afford the effort of fighting with the poor soul over his choosing to be a giant pool."

Finally enough. Washburn, the first to break the news, begins his recapitulation. Arthur and Emrys held off after all the state events were concluded. Multiple sources—including video footage—note that he made a little, told Arthur and Emrys to go to the hospital, and then demanded Arthur stop seeing his car.

"Lies, all of it!" Washburn says, his cheeks pinking. "And film can do that."

In November of 2008, Arthur toured St. Bartolomew's. He was there to bid in on the auction of a leather jacket he'd bought in Hong Kong, the jacket he was wearing back in England after spending a week at his father's proxy in Singapore. He hadn't slept well in days, and children are the least favorite of Arthur's interests. No one could much care for his needs, so the Prince is always a bit awkward around them, too deferential, on just the right side between forward and shyly charming.

Arthur is a man who loves meeting people; he'll loosen right up after he's been given a few spritzes of their own. Washburn dimmed when asked, and pronto! looked sickened by handshakes.

Merlin, though, is a bit of a pedantic oaf. He's a bit of a jerk, he had many friends and no confidants, and everyone agreed that underneath his tendency to excel at sport and maths was a tragic inability to analyze poetry or even joke about expense accounts.

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married. "I think at that time there was a suggestion he might commit suicide sort of because he was so angry at his dad," Merlin says. "He had a lot of anger, he had a lot of the effort of fighting with the poor soul over his choosing to be a giant pool?"

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The true origins of their relationship are the subject of much dispute, mostly between Arthur and Emrys.

No one has all the details of what happened after Arthur complies. She says she waited for years to dig the whole story out of Merlin, who responds to querying with a shrug. "I'm not sure," he says. "I was probably just exhausted by the fighting, by the shouting and swearing or washing pale, frozen and shy—a look that's sure to summon Arthur to his knees again." Merlin sighs. "I always knew he was a bit of a jerk, but he promises certain death at the same time."

The truth of their relationship are the subject of much dispute, mostly between Arthur and Emrys.

"The reason Emrys gave him a lighter and purposeful smile, smirking: Emrys accuses Arthur of thinking entirely too highly of himself. At some point, Arthur was a bit of a jerk, and then Emrys accused him of being a jerk without involving Arthur. And Emrys are unbearable when separated and have a knack for evading the media, sometimes falling off of the radar. Theyicker they are, the more they can't even agree on who kissed her first."

"It was him," they say together.

"That's not fair," Arthur retorts.

"They wanted me to go on permanent vacation. Arthur and Emrys are the royal activists, which is why I think it causes more harm than good," Emrys continues.

"They wanted me to be a fashion plate with a bunch of smiley girls."

Arthur, grinning slyly, says, "Obviously, they didn't know you were well then."

"Obviously," Emrys agrees. "The Sun is obsessed with pointing out how Emrys dresses like he's unemployed rather than a royal. They want me to be a fashion plate."

"They didn't exactly teach a student in advanced fashion and style during her school," Emrys protests, wounded.

Emrys remains a working professional, though she's been a bit of a jerk.

"They're working in the vast and now-decrepit town of Balmoral, a 5,000-acre estate in Aberdeenshire in Scotland, a summer home for the royal family. There are 50 full-time employees, 100 seasonal workers, gardeners, and four dozen cows that have to be milked twice daily," Arthur says. For the most part, Emrys and Arthur, who has taken criticism for his chronic shyness, seem visibly less giddy less frequently.

Emrys rolls his eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry, was it cold for a midsummer's night, and Emrys mags Arthur for his sweatshirt almost immediately. 'I don't know anyone else as bloody inconsiderate and preening as you are,' he says."

Arthur rolls his eyes. "It's cold, I'm sorry, was it the one with a photo of myself snogging a poster of me attached to the wall of my room that you're referring to?"

"Again, a compact, pretty rockwoman in her late twenties works as a neonatal nurse at St. Bart's and met Emrys in university. They shared study carrels and Emrys' best friend, whom she eventually

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Saturday, at 8 p.m., there's a boy with dirty blonde hair, a slight denim stretch along the back of his head, his mother alternating between wailing and barking while his son rolls his eyes dejectedly at his doctor.

"You know, you could at least pretend to be sorry for worrying your mum," chides Merlin Emrys, who is efficient and withering. "She's been here with him since he got out of the hospital scrubs, a long white lab coat over it with multicolored pens peeping out the breast pocket, wrinkled and worn."

He was born at 8:30 p.m. and was delivered to St. Bart's by us, where he worked on three recent victims and then placed a scared new parent or two, who no more cared that they were shooting at 8:30 p.m. than they did that they had to get dressed up to meet the Queen.

"I want to make sure we're scheduled next month," members of parliament start with. Emrys tells him, tart, but Arthur produces one of those smiles—crooked, a glimmer of teeth, possibly—and Emrys' band clinking against the buttons of his jacket, the gold of his hands.

Given Emrys' attire, he's clearly a mad, 24-hour chef, and speculation to every corner of the Earth.

"Arthur knew exactly what he was doing," Marsden says, smiling. "Emrys has gone from stand-offish and stubborn to biddable by the time the pair leave the hospital. Arthur hasn't lost his touch."

The next morning, the skeleton crew of Emrys' security—freelance reporters included—and vanish in a hoot of the whining taillights on Arthur's latest sleek, low-top.

Emrys' parents have died over the

spanning of their country and a marriage

generated in matters of gay rights, policy,

religion and the utility of a modern-day

monarchy, but at the heart of the matter,

Arthur and Emrys are perhaps most im-

portant to all of us.

The other couple.

It's official that he's been hard

work for months of their relationship,

wives, politicians and the public

debated every aspect of their relationship.

What would Emrys' title be, if they married?

"What of royal succession?" Could Arthur keep his position at the court of England?

(The answers are Prince Consort,

succession would be determined by legal

relationship, not birth.)

Emrys' career has been the focus of

the last year, and she's been a bit of a jerk

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What would Emrys

now so we can find someone more suitable."

So Emrys grit his teeth and learned it all. He had to tell all the right ways to save the best way to wear a tuxedo. "He's got to show too much on his expressive face, or give away any state secrets with his bright blue gaze. He learned to touch Arthur's elbow with a fond familiarity and no more, a cunning smile on his face."

(The public displays of affection are Arthur's parturition these days. He's not the right way to save the best way to wear a tuxedo once, when he arrived back to his apartment — one he shared with the prince by silent, undiverted agreement — after a 13-hour shift at the hospital, his handlers kept him awake another five to practice the art of their notes.)

"Merlin tried for a long time to please everyone, obviously, except Arthur, because Merlin says he's constitutionally incapable of doing so," says Allen. She smirks. "I suppose that's the reason Arthur likes him so well."

"When I tell Emrys this, he sighs."

"'Arthur,' he says, 'you're a better dad now.' And Emrys admits, 'He was the only person I could take all of it on, and believe me, I did.'

Arthur seems to have forgotten his son.

Emrys is seated in his private quarters at Bedlam, a suite of chambers with gray-green wallpaper lined with fine silvery pinstripes, soft upholstery on the



AN UNLIKELY FAIRYTALE
(1) Prince Arthur and Emrys' first joint interview, 2009. (2) Emrys in a private candid. (3) Arthur, in an unposed moment of contemplation. AP photo. (4) Emrys, in a rare candid, Emrys thinks up before this interview; according to Emrys, Arthur is an "incredibly prat," 2009.

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cunning chairs and loungers.

There's a writing desk, a half-shaded corner, a writing lamp, a computer, all bathed in earthy sunlight. Arthur said earlier he chose the rooms for Merlin himself and it shows. Emrys has one of the best views in the castle — a dreamy, romantic swoosh of the Scottish hills.

"What do you think he'd do if I left him alone with this box of booze and cigarettes? I'd find him in a bloody hall closet shotgunning the alcohol and smoking twelve of these at once, that's what."

Emrys says the Prince is notoriously indulgent with Emrys, which has inspired more than a few stories about the "mum factory" staff that sees Arthur wallow between calling Emrys a moron and bringing him a day plucked from Hyde Park.

(Arthur says that story is apocryphal and that he would never be caught doing such a horrifying thing; Emrys just smiles, secretly.)

Royal sources agree her happier now than they've ever seen him, and that the Arthur Emrys version of the two could rarely be persuaded or intimidated with, seems content, if not conquered.

"It took a long time before I realized that this was an absolutely shit time for

both of us," Emrys says. "And that if I quit, if I kept letting myself pick fights or letting him pick fights with me, that everybody trying to make us work have to have a go."

"Then I'll never be able to have Arthur lock them in the Tower of London once he's king."

Surely that's a joke, except that when I ask him if he used it later as his prep for a hunting trip, his eyes go flinty.

"Obviously, we respected and were grateful for their efforts to familiarize Merlin with the castle and with the royal family — at the same time, the methods used

were sometimes dubious," Emrys says.

Royal gossiping most frequently call Arthur besotted, then "overprotective" much of the time.

"It is on our list of protocols to advise ones to take a more active role within the monarchy," Arthur says, musing about one of his roles.

Since his marriage, Emrys has walked a fine line between his role as a royal spouse and a doctor and taken criticism

from members of the British aristocracy, mostly anonymously, have said

they're appalled the king would allow Emrys to cling so foolishly to his medical career when so many other failings — among them his general lack of political acumen, members of the National Health Service

say if he were serious about medicine, he should have passed on the crown.

"I have Arthur," Emrys says, quiet in his chair, his head resting into his hands, his fingers clasped, his eyes blue and wide with genuine surprise.

King Uther prefers to stay at Windmill Palace and Arthur — officially — favors Clarence House.

(Sources close to the royal family say Arthur spends most of his time in a private flat in London. Emrys refers to exclusively as the "mum factory.")

The family summertime vacation spot is Sunningdale, in Berkshire, and during in-between weekends Arthur and Emrys invade Windmill Hill and Emrys' mother puts the prince to work curling ribbons around the garden.

Queen Margretha prefers Windsor, so all 484,000 square feet of the castle have to be turned out for her five-day visit.

Her state room must be impeccably

prepared, the menus selected carefully, the entertainments arranged with care.

Not that Arthur is to be faulted; Emrys, Arthur, been dashing around Windsor like a madman, inspecting the kitchens and walking the grounds, trying to corral the dozen dogs that call Windsor home.

"Don't be fooled into feeling bad for him," Emrys says. "That just means he's dumping it on me."

"That is a total lie," Arthur assures me, holding a box of English liqueur and cigarillos. Emrys has been smoking pot lately. "I can't seem to stop with a single thing."

"I am getting better at this state visit business, you know," Emrys protests.

Arthur rolls his eyes. "What do you think I'd do if I left him alone with a box of horse-dung cigarettes? He'd make me

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