

# One Knight Stand Patreon Drabbles plus One Free by Thomas Bell

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## Protected: It's Murdering Time!



In the end, Adrian blamed his ongoing conversation with the newly declared “MC Benoni” as the distraction that shifted his attention away. The skintight spandex bodysuit they decided to wear that day... for some reason... was also not helping in that matter. Nor the impromptu marriage proposal.

While wearing a tracksuit that left nothing to the imagination.

Yes, he had many explanations for why he didn't notice that something was entirely off with the convenience store that they both stepped inside. Too still. Too quiet. Too heavy an atmosphere that weighed down his shoulders and choked the air at the back of his throat.

No other customers. No lurking attendant to make sure that someone didn't pocket an overpriced candy bar. No sounds at all except the hiss and pop of static playing across the TV monitor fastened to the store's ceiling.

It'd been a long time since he last heard static like this. A lifetime ago. Stations gone off the air and crossed connections now produced blue screens instead of the crackle of snow like old television sets.

He remembered the Blob. Or rather, the remake that his parents hadn't allowed him to watch way back then. The one whose theme song MC had randomly (or rather, not so randomly, wasn't it?) started singing on their way over here.

This wasn't the Blob. There were definitely some resemblances here to the way that the victims had looked while their bodies melted away, covered in the goo of 1980s special effects. Something that always looked more grounded and realistic than even the best of CGI nowadays.

But those old SFX had been nowhere near as gruesome as the quivering pillar of mucous, bodily fluids, and bruised rancid flesh that he and MC now confronted. He froze for half a heartbeat, his friend at his

side, as a debate flickered through his mind.

Which would be faster, safer, fumbling for the shorter knife belted at his waist, loaned by MC last night, or perhaps there was enough time to go for the longer reach of the machete secreted away in his backpack, and then suddenly MC was no longer next to him but instead lunging straight towards the burbling pile of horror as twin glints of metal gleamed within his friend's hands.

Ultimately, he wasn't surprised at the existence of MC's collection of sharp, pointy implements. After all, they'd been friends for years now. And he paid attention. He was, however, somewhat surprised by the sheer size of it. Where had MC been stashing all of them this whole time?

And where the hell had they been hiding that nine-inch hunting knife while wearing body-skimming spandex?!

He only had time to yell a warning, something that sounded akin to the bleating of a startled goat, as MC quickly closed the distance between them and the Blob-adjacent monster. The creature raised a dripping tentacle, an appendage that was quickly cleaved in two as his friend's arm lashed out, an arc of flashing silver through the air, a geyser of gore and spewing fluids, and then MC was skidding past, down the nearest aisle and into relative safety.

For one heartbeat longer, the Blob wobbled where it stood, disembodied handless limb splattering across the floor, and then with a last bubbling burble its entire head region rolled backward and hit the linoleum with a queasy...

**SPLAT**

Beheaded. At least as far as Blobs go. Its entire cranial region...ish... now lay strewn at their feet, bits and pieces splashed across the nearby shelves. He imagined poor unsuspecting customers might be finding gore amongst their groceries for weeks to come now.

His hand dropped away from his backpack.

Yes, in the end, he supposed that he should've expected nothing less than this.

MC was certainly experienced. And this unfortunate thing, which he even now suspected might explain the absence of the cashier, was only human-sized. Well within the other's wheelhouse. Although, it was probably entirely expected for him to act a bit shocked here, right?

It was then that he finally noticed the bits and bobs of blob beginning to dissolve through the floor as MC yelped and pulled frantically at the fabric of their clothing. Fuck, fuck, fuck, the corrosive ooze was burning its way straight through the thin material of the spandex suit which'd become splattered during the attack.

"Dammit! I missed the achievement!" MC bemoaned as they looked down at the ooze that even now was trying to eat its way into the flesh of their arm, while Adrian darted for the nearest case of beverages.

His friend was only lucky that it was water and not Gatorade that he frantically poured over their clothing. Not that it mattered in the end, because this tracksuit was definitely a loss, and would MC STOP SINGING ABOUT THE BLOB RIGHT NOW WHILE ITS REMAINS TRIED TO EAT THEM?!

"Do you think that killed it?" MC finally asked, still warily eying the bulbous creature and apparently content with leaving both first aid and keep-MC-from-being-digested duty to Adrian for the moment. "Its body's just slumping over right now, but it's not like it had a brain in there, right?"

"I'm not so sure about that," Adrian muttered as he continued to wash away all trace of the creature from his friend's body. "That might be something that needs magic to properly defeat."

Yes, MC was more than equipped to handle human-sized opponents.

But that still didn't excuse them from trying to take on the two-story hellhound in the streets last night with nothing but their plucky attitude and a hardbound copy of Stephen King's *The Stand*. As far as books suitably dense enough to act as a weapon went, MC seemingly chose wisely enough there...

...but still!

He dumped another bottle of ice-cold water pulled straight from a refrigerated case on top of a protesting MC's head.



In the end, it came down to fire. As it seemingly always did, as Merlin put the poor creature to rest with magical flames and a last haunting keening cry. He really hoped that thing wasn't what he thought it was. *Who* he thought it was.

But ultimately, being delusional over the reality of the situation never helped at all, did it?

"Merlin, magic my knives so that I can properly fight stuff like that!" MC cajoled, pointing at the Blob's sizzling remains on the floor, after Adrian finally allowed them free of his ministrations.

Half of their spandex suit had dissolved away at this point, but they were now free of any other potential corrosive harm, never mind that HALF OF THEIR SKINTIGHT CLOTHING DISSOLVED AWAY.

"Twould be a waste of energy to enchant such cheap implements. Look, they were melted by something so simple as this creature. Bring me a weapon worthy of my magicry," Merlin idly replied as Adrian very industriously glanced down an aisle in the opposite direction.

And then he, while nonchalantly still looking over the nearby and not-so-nearby products, interposed himself between the incubus and the half-naked “MC Benoni”. Even without turning around, he felt the smirking gaze at his back. He just wasn’t sure if it was coming from Merlin or MC.

He wasn’t even sure which one would be preferable, but simply prayed that MC wouldn’t take this as another perfect opportunity to propose marriage again.

But, no, something else had finally caught the attention of his mischievous friend. A whole lot of somethings. The very same somethings that’d now preoccupied the Royal Court Mage too, as the two of them began dashing around the store, heaping up far too many products for people actually planning to pay for their wares.

When the clerks are away (or unfortunately blobbed), the looters will play.

Perhaps he was just lucky that MC hadn’t tried to perform an even more ridiculous feat this time. Like fist-fighting the Blob... or maybe attacking with nothing but a half-wet towel. *Ha ha...* But even MC wouldn’t be so daft as to attempt *that...*

At the thought, he simply swore and headed for the front counter, fumbling for his wallet and the remnants of his cash on hand, as his current companions began gleefully ransacking the convenience store behind him.

And so it goes, just another normal day with the Bandits of the Round Table.

## Protected: April Fool’s Meet & Greet



His parents were disappointed that there was no time for a proper going-away party that night Percy helped them move into Auntie Pansy’s estate, all of them faintly smelling of ash and ozone after the Grove had that unfortunate incident with the [kythreul](#). Or perhaps it’s best to say that the kythreul had an unfortunate incident with the Grove... as neither had proved too flame-retardant at the time.

But alas and alack, there was definitely no time for parties then.

*They were coming.*

He and the rest of his family, from wandering uncles to tiny cousins thrice-removed, had always known that they were coming. In a sort of abstract sense. But no, there was nothing abstract about the yipping excitement at the back of his mind as something down south zoomed ever closer with every waking moment. He doubted they'd slow for any napping moments, neither.

Best go meet them head-on then and not indulge in a chase across the countryside as some *others* advised (namely his cousin John's ferret).

"Son... there's no such thing as a stupid question," his father told him while thumping his shoulders in encouragement.

Percy wasn't so sure about that, but they were all still probably traumatized over that *one time*.

Meanwhile, his mother packed seven changes of extra underwear in the old rucksack that'd been passed down the family line for generations, while Aunt Pansy began to stuff its outer compartments with beef jerky and a million different bottles of sunblock. He assumed there must be a good reason for the latter as much as for the former, as he wandered around the estate gathering volunteers to accompany him on his not-so-little trip. In the end, he could only take a quarter of them.

After all, his pockets were large, but not *that* large.

And of course, he couldn't leave without Mr. Squeakers. What would even be the point?

Several of his avian friends began winging their way southeast to keep an eye out for the approaching guests as he finally shouldered the overstuffed baggage in preparation for leaving. His mother sniffled as he began to approach the threshold — wait, no, that was her twin sister instead; when had Aunt Lou arrived? — as his mother was instead waiting by the door.

"Happy Birthday!" They all chorused at once, waving excitedly after him as he hoofed his way down the long, winding driveway and all the wards that'd hopefully help prevent any further kythreul *incidents*. Mom and Dad, Aunt Pansy and his many cousins, even Uncle Phil who hadn't been seen for years had decided to show up in the end, lurking in the attic window.

Perhaps he ought to warn them about that. Later.

"Now, don't forget to check in with the rest of the family during your trip!" His mother or maybe his aunt called after him.



He made good time to Philadelphia, reasonably certain that he'd reached the destination city before the out-of-staters, as he hung around the local Dairy Queen, the fanciest one in the entire state, but no, that's not where they were heading.

*Industrial section!*

**CAW** cawed down to him, who'd even migrated a thousand miles east of his normal territory in order to help, despite complaining bitterly about the cold of a Mid-Atlantic new spring. Percy shrugged, finished off his [Blizzard](#) sundae — because, of course, who came to Dairy Queen and didn't have any ice cream? — and set off once again.

He knew he'd found the right place when he came across the abandoned warehouse, its roof fully roosted with several different flocks of pigeons and blackbirds, who squawked in irritation at each other that they'd found it first. Yes, the excited buzz at the back of his mind, fizzing like soda pop that had been shaken too hard, all but confirmed that.

He just had to make certain he didn't accidentally aim the soda in the wrong direction then.

The giant motorhome sitting outside with the **1KNIGHT**♥ license plates and the bright swirls of ocean blue and blood red scrawling down its sides was also something of a giveaway. Yes, the teensiest bit of a hint there.

Percy looked at the front bay door, which'd been invitingly left cracked open. He looked at all the side entrances still boarded up. He looked at the hundreds upon hundreds of windows that dotted the exterior of the rusting warehouse.

He promptly scaled the nearest wall, squeezing inside past the ventilation grate that'd already been half torn away and half collapsed by the double duo of years of neglect and environmental exposure.

*Excellent idea. They'll never suspect we came in this way. We'll chew our way through any walls that block us!*

NIBBLR, the [Allegheny woodrat](#), congratulated him as he began edging his way through the chutes that circled round the factory, the ductwork large enough that even someone far taller than his small frame could easily enough maneuver. Yes, this was definitely meant to be used this way all along, he thought as he followed the feeling that plucked at his soul.

He scooted, his footsteps a faint shuffle amongst the pitter-patter of tiny paws surrounding him, carefully circumventing the rusted sections almost on the verge of crumbling away, ducking beneath a pipe here or a dent there, past the talking rock, until he reached the vent overlooking the warehouse's main docking bay.

There a trio led by Alexandre Cabanel's eponymous [Fallen Angel](#) had gathered around a folding table piled high with snacks and desserts, a small travel fridge at their back, as the three of them faced the waiting bay door. It seemed he'd have a party today after all.

Percy was only surprised that one was wearing clothes this time.

Several squeaks of excitement surrounded him. Prolly at the sight of the snacks more than anything else.

For several long moments, he crouched, carefully balanced on his heels, staring suspiciously down at the empty seat that'd obviously been left open for him. It looked normal enough. The same as the three folding chairs that the others sat upon, but he knew better than to expect *that* this time. Let down your guard too much, and you suddenly got zapped by a bolt of lightning if you sat in the wrong seat. Or the right seat at the wrong time. Or the...

He felt a tiny paw tugging at the edge of his leather jacket. Someone really wanted those Cheez-Its right now.

He slipped out of the vent and lightly landed upon the concrete floor with nary a sound, not even the faintest scuffle to give away his approach. He made certain of it as he eased out of the shadows that loomed at the back of the warehouse. Something chittered to his side. He was pretty sure it wasn't one of his.

Percy slipped politely into his appointed seat — which, to his great relief, didn't promptly burst into flames, electrocute him, or collapse under his weight — and put in a request for his favorite drink, Diet Dr. Pepper, that he somehow suspected had indeed been brought for him today. The one sitting next to him turned around, eyeballing him for all of a second before leaping to their feet with a gleeful cry of "Oh my god, it's my soulmate!"

They flew into each other's arms as the rusty, dusty warehouse faded into a tableau of a field of colorful flowers, some of which he was pretty certain didn't currently exist upon this Earth, under a brightly smiling sun. His soulmate's doing, he assumed.

The bespectacled one to the far right jumped up as well, doing a remarkably fine impression of a wallaroo as his chair went skidding backwards several yards from the sudden movement. Percy really should compliment him on that. Or maybe his was the seat that ended up zapping people if they were unworthy?

Better not mention anything, just in case



And then it was time for introductions, where he learned that his new soulmate was named "Mcgillicuddy". The bespectacled Adrian groaned at that, perhaps still smarting from the zap to his arse.

The fallen angel was, of course, Merlin, as he and his extended family had been expecting all along. Also, somewhat expectedly, came the long lectures, lore dumps, and interactive question-and-answer sessions, some of which he already knew, some of which he didn't, and some of which prolly promptly fell out of his head. After all, his mind could carry even less than his pockets.

Hopefully one of his companions picked it up then.

“No cake until after preparations,” Merlin whispered in his ear as the party games started instead.

Or rather, the party’s landslide defeat at the mage’s suspiciously winning hands (where his own fingers betrayed him and played paper even though he’d intended rock; apparently he wasn’t stubborn enough at times) until McGillicuddy pulled out the Rocket.

Of course, Rocket beats all in Rock, Paper, Scissors. Why hadn’t he thought of that?

He was left to ponder upon the implications as a new game was set up. Chinese checkers. At least this time it wasn’t...

No, it’s just as bad this time!

As the four of them stared down at the colored jewels that represented their tokens, the pieces kept moving by themselves whenever he took too long to blink or otherwise let his gaze wander, which he was pretty certain *they weren’t supposed to be doing*. Not this time, right? Never mind Adrian’s set shifting colors entirely to match his entire ambiance. Purple for royalty, mystery, and mourning.

One of his hamsters crawled unseen into McGillicuddy’s pocket as that one tried to stop the self-moving checker pieces using the power of their phone camera. Hopefully his new soulmate didn’t wash their clothes too often. From the grumbling, it seemed that the camera was a bust, however.

His fingers curled around the edges of the game board as his turn came around once more. Merlin smiled innocently at him. Adrian continued his kamikaze ways, trying to block the inevitable victorious defeat. McGillicuddy gave him a nod of encouragement, of course, both of them understanding what must be done here.

Yah, he always hated this game.

**Protected: Leannán**



She knew not what day it was, only that the promise of dawn prickled at the underside of her skin. The faint taste of a thunderstorm beneath the tongue. Always an ominous thing.

As she lounged in the doorway, Gwen shuffled past, leaving behind a faint cloud of ginger, cinnamon, and vanilla, all the while twittering like an overly excited bird. The blonde girl's arms were full of frippery, lace, and rolls and rolls of pink this-or-that, all of which was soon deposited on the dining table in front of a rather surprised-looking MC.

"Are you decorating the RV for Valentine's Day? Need a helping hand?" The seated Harbinger politely asked, a smile warmly stretched across their lips.

"Oh no, of course not! I mean... that's all for you, silly!" Gwen giggled, fingers twirling coquettishly through the golden waves of her hair as MC's smile turned faintly puzzled at its edges.

Ah yes... *that* holiday. She gathered she knew where this was going. The simpering, the coy looks cast beneath lowered eyelashes, the *flirting*. All seen a thousand times before. Still... it pricked faintly at the edges of her senses. A prodding that she brushed away with slight annoyance.

"Gwen, do you mind moving all that junk out of the way so that MC can eat breakfast?" Adrian lightly, but very *insistently*, demanded as he made his way over from the stove, hands carefully balancing overstuffed plates full of fruit, omelets, and is that... *oysters*?

"Uh, thanks Adrian, but you didn't really need to make me such a large meal," MC amiably began to say, hands peacefully raised. And deep in the depths of their eyes, a faint spark reflected the rays of the morning sun as if a star was caught within.

*Interesting*. Her pen scratched across the surface of her journal as she watched her current companions with rising anticipation. Rising suspicion.

"This isn't junk! Why, I managed to get ahold of the super rare Valentine's Godiva Chocolate Truffle Special and—" Gwen protested as she waved a heart-shaped box draped in crinkles of red, pink, and gold right in the other's bespectacled face.

"Here, this is for you," Broderick announced as he bulled his way past the two quarreling crewmembers to shove an enormous bouquet of flowers into MC's arms. Roses, carnations, and daisies amongst a sea of... what was it called now? [Baby's breath](#)?

"Uh... thanks..." MC said, their smile growing ever more strained with each word, as their eyebrows slowly began to rise towards their hairline.

"Did you even check that those flowers are hay fever-proof and— WAUGH!" Gwen began to fuss right up until a squirrel flew straight into the smooth lines of her perfectly cosmetically applied face.

And from the opposite doorway that led into the cab of the vehicle, a silent Percy raised his thumb in approval as two doves began dropping bits of wild flowers and gathered herbs into the MC's now

gobsmacked lap.

"Percy, your hamsters are eating MC's breakfast!" Adrian fretted as he started fumbling for the nearby cutlery.

"No loss there. Your breakfast sucks," Broderick declared in-between mouthfuls of truffle omelet. A small dark rodent sat unseen and unnoticed upon his shoulder, greedily stuffing its face with said food.

"Oh, what a glorious day it is!" Merlin brightly proclaimed, as they glided past Percy into the room proper, seemingly glowing pale and innocent within the bright sunshine. "But I dare say, nowhere near as beautiful as MC!" And with those words, the supposed mage swept into a low bow and placed a kiss upon the hand of everyone's sudden target of desire.

"*Merlin!*" Adrian snarled, with the hiss of a spitting cat underlying the tone of his voice, as Broderick began cracking his knuckles at the boy's side. The knife that the former had recently been using to chop frozen strawberries remained clutched tightly in hand.

"Okay, did all of you get confused and think this was April Fool's Day instead?" MC said, as they rose to their feet and carefully dumped flowers, herbs, candies, and an assortment of other presents onto the table in front of them.

Apparently she wasn't the only one with burgeoning misgivings here.

Lorelei appeared in the sliding door that led deeper into the conveyance, a suspiciously heart-shaped card clutched tightly in hand, took one look at MC surrounded by a pile of gifts and a gaggle of arguing companions, and then silently turned on her heel and disappeared once more. Perhaps the wisest decision of them all.

She slammed her book down.

"Oh, look at the time! You were scheduled to go patrolling this morning with me, MC. Let us be off!" She announced, grabbing tight hold of the other Harbinger's arm as she dragged them outside, pausing only to slam the main exit's door in the protesting faces of all those trying to follow after them.



"Cassandra, do you have any ideas here?" A worried MC asked as they brushed off random flower petals from their sleeves. "You're the only one who's acting normal... more or less," they said. And then paused, their eyes narrowing ever so slightly in suspicion, as if they feared she was about to proclaim her undying love to them. "Uh... you're not going to start to...?"

She leaned forward, lightly trailing a finger down the other's chest, as a smile curled at the edges of her lips.

"Oh, you wish, darling," she told a faintly flustering MC before taking a step back, tapping her foot upon the mossy-strewn ground around them. "This must be a spell. Of fae origin, I hazard to guess."

"To distract us before an attack?" MC's brows knitted together in concern as several faint thumps drifted from inside the vehicle where their other companions were hopefully not currently engaged in punching each other in the face. "We have to do something... I think Adrian's going yandere in there!"

[Yandere](#)...? Oh, never mind that.

"Hrmm," she merely replied, pausing for a heartbeat of thought, before she briefly cracked the door open once more. "Merlin, get your ass out here!"

Several clawing hands and flailing limbs appeared around the ancient incubus as they briefly re-emerged within the entranceway, lazily drifting past the threshold before the door slammed shut once more with a boom of finality. Meanwhile, someone may very well have been shouting, "*Put the knife down!*" all throughout the entire fracas.

"Worry not, for I have locked all the exterior doors of the motorhome. No simple way for them to leave now," Merlin reassured them, before once more turning to MC with a smile that danced on the edge of being lascivious. "Now where were we...?"

"You aren't even enchanted, are you?" she snapped, foot tapping ever harder upon the ground.

"He definitely isn't," MC agreed as they watched Merlin blowing them a kiss through the air.

"Definitely not," she reasserted.

"Of course not! Who do you take me to be? As if such a low-level bit of magicry would have an effect on me," Merlin chuckled, as they finally shifted back and brushed off the immaculately pristine sweep of their bright white coat.

"What are your wards even doing that its occupants can be so affected?" She demanded in exasperation as her eyes slid around their surroundings. They parked in the shadow of a forest this bright morn, on the edge of the pavement, with no other mortals apparently in sight.

"Working as planned, of course. Protecting against malice. Of which this is assuredly not," Merlin lightly replied.

"And exactly where have you decided to park today?" she snapped, her gaze briefly sweeping upwards to the nearest tree that loomed above them. Already draped in yellow flowers, far too early in the season for that. Winter still ruled this holiday, while what awaited before them called for the newest breath of Summer instead.

"Beneath the boughs of a blooming [linden tree](#)... on Valentine's Day," Merlin replied, the smirk upon their lips giving away that they *knew* exactly what it was that they had done.

"And this means what exactly? Did the tree spirit curse us or...?" MC began questioning, pausing to gawk as the window at the end of the vehicle slammed open amidst a rattling of glass and metal upon

its frame.

“Don’t worry, MC, I’m coming for you and—*ack!*” Adrian announced.

“Oh no, you’re not, Mr. Godiva-is-Junk!” Another voice chorused as a din arose from inside that sounded much like the honking of many geese. Very agitated geese.

She merely sighed as she watched five grown adults trying to jam themselves into one tiny aperture.

“It should all pass, the spell breaking, once we leave the area,” Merlin mildly reassured them all as someone began screaming about the attack of the squirrels in the background.

MC leaned forward and grabbed the incubus by the swooping collar of their coat. “Then drive, Merlin, *drive!* Because I think most harem fantasies have less bloodlust in them!”



It was a rather confused and somewhat sheepish group that reconvened around the dining table once the vehicle had put a few leagues between it and that not-so-mundane forest glen. One that was a single member short, as Adrian surreptitiously and very assiduously washed already clean dishes three times over in the nearby kitchen sink.

She noticed that all the knives had already been tucked away.

“No take backs,” MC told the others with a triumphantly smug grin. “I’m keeping all your presents... especially the fancy chocolates!”

And so all was well; that ended well, as the saying goes. And thus she silently, without any great fanfare, made her way to the compartment at the very back where MC’s paltry possessions were stashed, all that was left over from a grand fire that she had apparently missed by a short scattering of days.

“Very funny,” she said, crushing the toy ball beneath the heel of her leather loafers.

The message flashed in shades of white and blurry blue across the dark screen of MC's beloved Magic-8 Ball. She sighed once more, aggravation prickling at her nerves, before she picked it up again. No scuffling *that one's* possessions. Not yet, anyway.

In the end, she supposed there was no accounting for taste.

## Protected: Lovebirds



He should have suspected something was off that morning when MC surprised him with a breakfast in bed of only half-burnt pancakes shaped like a pair of hearts. Hearts with maybe a nibble or two taken out of them. Percy strolled past the door with handheld extinguisher in tow, pausing to nod solemnly at Adrian, while Gwen shrieked about her hair being on fire in the background.

Yes, that would certainly explain the smoky smell in the air.

"I think the shape turned out really well, right?" MC said as he stared down at the food in suspicion. Where had they found fresh strawberries in February? And how early had they woken up to beat him?

Usually he was the one who had to roll them out of bed come mid-morning. “Gwen helped! It looks very friendly, right? Very platonic-looking pancakes!” his friend assured him.

“Friendly...” He continued staring down at the breakfast, knowing full well that he was going to be eating it, whether it was half cooked and half burnt and about to give him food poisoning for the rest of the week or not.

He finally realized what day it was when Gwen popped her head in, furiously moisturizing the rather crispy ends of her golden wavy hair. She had a bag of those cheap, chalky Sweetheart candies in hand along with a bottle of antacids.

“Happy Valentine’s Day! This is just some ‘friendship’ candy,” Gwen exclaimed with a pointed wink, as if that was the word of the day, as she passed both packages over to him.

This was normally when he plotted out his route through the nearby convenience and grocery stores to hit up their discounted leftover chocolate and candy hoards once the holiday had passed. This, Easter, and Halloween kept him rolling in sweet, sweet, half-priced sweets for the rest of the year... even though the stores had become stingier and stingier with their sales as time grew on during the pandemic.

Somehow he doubted there would be any time for that this year, what with the demonic Midnight Maulers on the loose and the rampaging fae when someone kept accidentally falling through to the Otherworld all the—

His thoughts, as well as his final chew of MC’s pancakes as he reached for Gwen’s provided Tums, were interrupted by the sudden sound of wings fluttering through the air. This was immediately accompanied by a white bird dive-bombing his head as MC yelped and hid behind him, using his now probably poisoned body as an impromptu shield from the pair of doves that now frantically pecked at them both.

“Uh... I think the birds want us to be real close companions too!” MC bravely announced from behind his back.

“I swear to God, I’m going to wring the necks of all your fucking birds, Percy!” Broderick swore in the background.

Why did he suddenly have a very bad feeling about all this?



“Who the hell keeps throwing condoms at me?!” Adrian finally demanded after he slipped on the fourth foil-wrapped package underfoot and nearly tumbled back down the mountain path. Meanwhile, MC surreptitiously kicked what looked like a tube of lube behind a nearby rock outcropping while pretending to see nothing at all.

He squinted suspiciously behind his glasses as Merlin smiled all-too-innocently back at him. Yes, far too innocent, that one. Especially *today*. All the while, he felt the judgmental stares of Cassandra, Lorelei, and Broderick upon his back.

“Condoms, is it? Interesting,” Cassandra said as she furiously scribbled down indecipherable writing in her notebook. Why was she taking notes on *that*?

“Get a room, you two!” Broderick snarled as he kicked at a rock in his path. A rock, which may or may not have yelped in dismay, then scuttled off into the underbrush of the surrounding bushes as the other Harbinger simply stood there, one booted foot half-raised with his mouth half-open on another swear.

*Fucking pixies. Fucking [pukwudgies](#).*

Had he said that or Broderick?

Lorelei briefly pulled taut her bow, her long pale braid practically bristling with her irritation, as she knocked an arrow and stared deeply into the woods. For enemies. For strolling rocks. For fucking pixies. “Do we really need to find that cursed aphrodisiac today? It seems that *some of us* have entirely other things in mind right now!”

“But it’s a magic aphrodisiac! Related to *the* Tristan and Isolde! On Valentine’s Day! How more thematically relevant can you get?” Gwen gushed as she nudged over yet another suspiciously foil-wrapped package towards him with a rather overemphasized wink.

He supposed that he should just be glad that the enchanted barrier was screwing with their tech enough that it was impossible to livestream this.

“Yes. This indeed won the vote, so to say,” Merlin serenely replied, as nonsensically as ever.

The sound of their respective voices was ice water down his spine. But still nowhere near as much as the chill when he noticed MC throwing something elongated, deep purple, and bulbous far back, back, back into the waiting treeline. MC had a powerful aim when they wanted, it seemed.

...was that a dildo or a butt plug that they just tossed? No, no, no, he was absolutely, completely, without a doubt not going to think about it.

No, he definitely wasn’t gonna think about it at all, even as he bit back a curse as another packet of lube bounced off his head.

Never mind that he was pretty sure it was one of Percy’s doves this time.



“Adrian, just know that I love you. In an entirely platonically appropriate manner as befitting a friend. *Real* close friends. Like roommates.” MC launched into their long, overwrought death speech as they

remained entangled within the thorny vines, while Adrian furiously whacked with his now-revealed machete at the oozing plant that was trying to dissolve his companion down to their bones.

Fuck! Where was Audrey III when you needed her? Safely back on the freaking RV, where *they* both should be, is where!

“And I know that your heart will carry on. Just think about me every now and then. For ten years at least. And then come back and nuke this entire fucking forest down to the ground! AVENGE ME, ADRIAN!” MC continued, managing to tear one of their arms free, the fabric of their sleeve slowly dissolving away with the motion as they raised one angry fist to the air.

MC really did like their death speeches.

Thorns and barbs bit deeply into exposed flesh as plant acids and digestive juices splattered through the air while he cleaved and whacked and rended each encroaching tendril, every single leaf a whorl with tiny biting teeth. And then suddenly MC and he were free, both of them wildly discarding their jackets, shirts, and sweaters as corrosive fluid continued to eat its way through the cloth.

He helped to rip away the remnants of MC's jeans even as it tried to fuse into the other's skin and then tore off his own pants as acid continued to melt down into the crotch area. His friend continued to wildly flail at him, apparently greatly aggrieved with the agitated [moonflower](#) spirit's target of choice in the matter.

“Screw the pants and screw this quest! Let's get out of here!” he yelled.

“Yes! Save the balls for me! In an entirely PC-friendly manner, of course!” MC concurred; to exactly what, Adrian didn't know and probably didn't want to know, but at least they seemed in agreement about the leaving this cursed place behind part.

Both of them went whirling away, followed by the faint chittering of laughter, out of the forest and back onto the nearby mountain paths, where half the group had seemingly already given up and regathered. Both he and MC came tumbling out of the woods, half clothed and panting hard, sweaty with hair disheveled and covered in fluids of dubious nature.

Broderick paused from where he was tying and retying his work boots as if he was half afraid that someone was about to run off with them. Granted, there did seem to be a suspicious bite mark along the toe of one sole. Their fellow Harbinger glanced up and then began grumbling under his breath. “Fucking finally, I have never seen anything so ridiculous in my whole—”

“Congratulations!” Gwen chirped, having apparently given up on today's quest despite originally being the one most gung-ho to go on it, as if there was anything worth congratulating today. “Oh wait, where did I put the—?” Oh God, what was she looking for now?

And Percy simply took one look at the two of them and silently raised his thumb in approval.

*Wait, no—!*

“Luckily we were both able to tear off each other’s clothes in the woods. In an entirely chaste manner, of course,” MC simply bragged, perhaps trying to clarify things. Perhaps simply trying to make everything worse. Somehow.

Where were Gwen’s antacids? Despite it being now half digested, at least he still had his handy backpack on, even if his hoodie and jeans hadn’t survived the recent battle. He unscrewed the cap and promptly started chugging the bottle.

“No, Adrian, don’t take the whole bottle. Save half for me! We can do a very platonic, buddy-buddy, double suicide here just like Romeo and Juliet!” MC implored him as he paused, eyes narrowed behind the frames of his askew glasses, with the bottle of Tums raised to his lips.

And you know what...?

He was really beginning to hate Valentine’s Day.

## **Protected: Awakening**



She had her eye on the roof. She always had her eye on the motorhome roof ever since that little incident with the hellion and their acid breath. Too many vents and glass panels with gaps in their frames up there. She still had the quarter-sized burn mark on her biceps that she hadn’t let Merlin heal from that time. And she especially had a wary eye half open when a fellow traveler or two were cavorting around over by there. Multiple of them!

At least this time the RV was parked and not flying down the highway. Although, she wouldn’t put it past...

“...should work your way up,” Percy solemnly advised as he and MC scampered around atop the RV roof like a pair of monkeys. Like a rampaging hellion that needed to be knocked off with fire, bow, and bullet.

“Relax,” the other supposed Harbinger reassured their companion. “You gotta really want it. And depend on your luck. That’s when it tends to happen the best...!”

The cheery sound of their voice immediately made Lorelei tense up all the more as MC traipsed closer to the RV’s edge. All beauty and cheer, a boundless (as well as baseless) optimism coupled with a complete lack of brains and common sense in that one. One of those, along with Percy and *Gwen*, that she had to keep an eye, a double eye, a triple eye on lest they end up as some hellhound’s midnight snack before any of them had figured out anything. All too bogus, the lot of them.

Well, at least the former had some surprising physical capability of his own. A wiry gymnast’s build, she’d hazard to guess, beneath his esoteric clothes.

But *MC*, on the other hand...

Yes, she realized more and more as time passed on exactly why Adrian seemed to suffer from so many headaches. But Adrian wasn’t here right now. Stealthily scurried off to do something or other with that backpack he always had with him yet never let anyone else touch.

But let him have his secrets. For the moment. There were others with far more worrying mysteries to deal with right now. Others that needed to be investigated for reasons of her own. And other things for her to do as well.

Reasons like MC still trying to awaken their supposed powers like an addle-brained, goofy-ass jagoff determined to brain themselves on the ground. As if that was something that someone should even be trying to do. As if it was avoidable in the first place. As much as she disliked it, as much as she wanted to deny... well, she wasn’t Broderick in the end. As if the dreams—

—but, no, never mind any of that.

Lorelei bent down and determinedly pulled the laces of her gym shoes taut, retying them with aplomb. It wouldn’t do to trip over her own feet with what she feared was coming. Five, ten, fifteen yards back to the motorhome. Easy enough for her.

“Needs more need?” Percy confoundingly said. “Maybe during a battle then?”

“I’ll try that next. Now toss me!” MC gleefully commanded as they perched precariously on the smaller youth’s shoulders.

“Geronimo.” Percy deadpanned as he swung in half a circle and flung his friend high into the air. Up, up, and away... dozens of feet. Straight and true, right to her.

It seems she didn’t need to sprint fifteen yards after all.

She dashed lightly forward, leaping up, perhaps a shade far taller than a normal high jump, as she caught the swan diving MC within her arms before the other Harbinger could face-plant straight upon

the unforgiving concrete below. Momentum and the undeniable laws of physics slammed the jumper's face straight between her sports bra-clad breasts with a faint thump.

In other circumstances, she'd be suspicious. In other circumstances, she'd be murderously ticked off. But this was MC, after all.

"My powers summoned Lorelei!" MC smugly bragged, hanging shamelessly from her arms, completely unaffected by the icy gaze that she'd now fully turned on them.

"Hrmm..." Percy said, still perched on the roof and sounding distinctly unconvinced. "I think we need to do the Dance of Joy™ next."

The dance of what? That sounded like her cue to retreat. She planted the other perhaps a sliver harder than needed back upon their feet. MC bobbed happily on their soles, looking completely unrepentant and ever-so-pleased with themselves. As if they hadn't just come within a shade of being dropped on their head.

Broderick poked his head out the motorhome's main exit, took one look at Percy hanging above him and MC still clutched in her arms. "Cuckoos," he muttered and shut the door with a resounding slam.

Lorelei took umbrage to that.



Gwen had no idea what was going on, but never let that stop her!

The motorhome was nestled within a teensy clearing at the end of a darling little dirt path that wended through the woods. Cute to look at, not so cute to bump over every pothole and lump in the road as her posterior still complained. The couch and chairs in the RV certainly needed more sitting cushions. Or shams. Someone ought to get to knitting some of those.

Yes, knitting and sewing certainly had their uses, didn't they?

The sun shone breezily through the trees. Squirrels and rabbits capered underbrush and that was definitely a sweet little field mouse scampering there and definitely not a r-rat. Definitely not that.

The wind sighed. A deer gamboled off far between the trees. MC and Percy cavorted around the perimeter of the parked vehicle, twirling and whirling through a set of fancy moves, some of them more elegant than others.

For a moment she merely stood there, backlit within the frame of the motorhome's main exit with deep blonde hair all aglow like a halo, and squinted after them. And then, with a faint shrug, she jumped down all three steps at once and promptly joined in.

She pirouetted gracefully to the left. She performed a rondé to the right. Phantom ballet instructors criticized her slacking form. MC caught her hands and spun her around, her long skirt trailing on an

errant breeze behind her. Percy ducked as MC nearly clotheslined him in their excitement.

Ah... yes, something very familiar about this. Like a story in a fairy tale. Like a faintly remembered dream. Like her debutante ball where Raven... but, no, never mind that. She pushed it to the back of her mind along with her anxieties, regrets, and old memories that've gathered dust and cobwebs like the abandoned things they were.

"What the ever-loving-fuck are they doing now?" Broderick grouched as he briefly popped his head outside the RV's door, a grumpy-pants until the very end.

"Dance battle," Percy called over his shoulder, not stopping his swaying to the unheard beat for a single second while MC immediately added, "...to the death!"

Oh dear. Perhaps she shouldn't have jumped headfirst straight into this. She always did that! When would she ever learn?

"You realize that one of you needs have the proper knowledge before one can successfully summon magicry that way?" Merlin said, appearing by the side of the RV out of nowhere at all, because she was relatively certain he hadn't been anywhere near there when she'd gone whirling past just a scant few seconds ago. She was only half disappointed that he didn't offer to join in himself.

He was indeed a sight for sore eyes, with his sculpted muscles, finely angled face, and deep turquoise eyes that were also far too familiar even if that tumble of silvery hair was somewhat off. But even she and her love for danger knew better than to dabble with some things. Her mother had at least taught her that.

Broderick scoffed, muttering about "magical malarkey morons" half underneath his breath as he retreated back into the motorhome. And sitting in the shadow of an apple tree with boughs laden heavy with fruit, Cassandra merely laughed.

Now Gwen might not be a botanist, as much as she liked gardening as well as anyone else (except when it came to MC's strange plant, Audrey III, the elected High Queen of Parsimonious Botanical Function, who she was reasonably certain had tried to eat her a time or three), but apple trees should be just starting to bloom at this time of year, right? It was way too early for fruit!

Yet never mind that. The three of them danced and pranced in a circle... or maybe a triangle, considering there were only three of them? Did they want to reenact the Round Table or not? She wasn't ever sure if that'd be a good thing or not. Maybe just a bit to get things going and then send everything hurtling off the tracks?

After all, they didn't want to meet the same end again, right? Tee hee. Definitely not that.



*Skrch. Skrch. Skrch.* The ballpoint pen within her hand lightly danced across her notebook as she observed everything around her, taking “notes” as she always did.

Handy thing that. Pen and paper were far more trustworthy than any modern electronic device in the end. Despite her compatriots’ seeming addiction to their phones.

*Skrch. Skrch. Skrch.* She continued to write, biting back a snort of laughter as MC and Percy ran past, between them juggling a pile of twigs, crystals that they’d requisitioned from somewhere or other, and — what in the worlds was that? A half dozen kazoos? What the barmy goddesses had Merlin been teaching them?

She gathered that the others most probably assumed that MC was merely trying to reawaken the long-lost powers of their previous Camelot incarnation. Not content with the faint bits and bobs that returned to them in dreams and the faint shadow of prowess that came with them, nor in waiting for the completion of this supposed Third Circle.

Well, that would do then.

She dusted off the pristine lines of her dark trousers and rose silently to her feet, padding her way towards where MC and their nigh constant companion were entertaining Broderick with a private kazoo concert. The young mechanic looked distinctly unamused at the prospect.

“Cassandra! Would you like to join in our ensemble?” MC stopped their playing in order to happily greet her.

Meanwhile, Percy played a fanfare to announce her arrival upon his silly little instrument. Broderick took this as an ample opportunity to flee the scene, surreptitiously creeping back a pace, two, three. Perhaps he should have concentrated on alacrity instead of stealth, as MC reached out and grabbed his arm, halting his escape midstride.

She merely shook her head, pausing for a moment to toss Broderick a commiserating glance as he huffed and grumbled at this newest of offenses.

“Why don’t you try concentrating on this instead?” she offered, a lazy smile stretched across her face as she easily snatched up three of the largest nearby crystals, lying amidst the random twigs and sticks like discarded treasures.

Slowly she began to juggle the three geodes, nothing but plain unpolished quartz, as far as she could tell. Rough rock briefly touching her skin before it arced delicately through the air. Slow became slowly faster, her hands a pale whirl as the clear stones began to spark and glimmer in the rays of the afternoon sun, almost as if they’d caught a few stars within their crystalline depths.

“Oooh...” MC exclaimed, the light reflected within their widened eyes. “I need a picture of this!” And saying so, the youngling snatched up Broderick’s phone, half hanging out of his unprotected pocket.

“Wait!” She only had time for a brief exclamation. A single warning as Percy solemnly intoned, “Burner phone at the next supply stop,” at the exact same moment that MC’s fingers flicked across a certain button.

*Adixoui Andagin cuamenai!*

The crystals sparked. The phone sparked as well in a shower of colorful embers as it spat out tiny flames of gold and silver through every single port and plug on its surface while Broderick yowled as if he was the one catching fire instead.

And right on cue, as if he expected exactly this all along, Adrian jumped in and immediately hosed down MC, her, and the hissing phone with a... fire extinguisher? Full of foam. She stared back at him, eyes half-lidded, as she shook off bits of froth and lather. Almost as if she’d taken a dunk within the seas.

“That was awesome,” MC proclaimed as they stared down in awe at the smoking remnants of Broderick’s device. Meanwhile, Percy had gone right back to energetically playing the kazoo. “Let’s do that again!”

“My phone! I’m gonna kill you all!” Broderick snarled at everyone within a seven-pace radius.

She sighed. It was going to be a long road to the Lesser Circle.

## Protected: Knight Terrors



Adrian reawakened with a half-frozen shriek caught within his throat, sitting bolt upright as he tossed away the heavy weight that’d pinned him down. His heart hammered within his chest. His ragged breath filled his ears. His pulse throbbed through his head as he looked wildly around the unfamiliar room.

Not his apartment. Not even his bedroom was as cramped as this.

Tiny night tables to either side. Plain cupboards and cabinets across the short distance. A small bureau at the foot of the bed with an emergency window jammed right above it.

This was the *motorhome*, the very same one from his dreams. Yes, even now the faint rumble of wheels on concrete infiltrated the compartment.

“Bad dream?” MC dryly asked, hair sticking up in random directions as their head peeked over the edge of the mattress from the pile of pillows, covers, blankets, and everything else that’d just been rather violently vacated from the bed. It seemed someone had just paid the dire price for using him as their temporary body pillow.

That’s right. They were in the RV. All of them. And not dragged beneath the bed to a fate worse than death. Yes, he’d made it in time, hadn’t he? As did Merlin when it came to sealing the hell breach in MC’s previous apartment.

This was reality. He wasn’t about to wake up again, right? Back in another universe where he’d been too late...

“MC!” he exclaimed, wildly scrambling across the surface of the king-sized bed. He pulled his friend closer, back up onto the mattress and against his chest, as his hands skimmed over the other’s body, making certain all limbs were present and accounted for and that there wasn’t a giant gaping hole through their—

“I fell off the bed, not the Empire State Building,” MC wryly reassured him, leaning lightly against his chest as their own hands patted him down. In comfort. And perhaps checking that he hadn’t strained himself with that full-body toss maneuver he’d just pulled.

“You didn’t knock your head, did you?” he fussed, unconsciously smoothing down his roommate’s hair as he looked around the room. Pointed edges of tables and protruding handles, all rounded for safety, but still falling over in a tight place like this was dangerous, never mind getting tossed by an incompetent idiot in your sleep—

A quiet knock, both commanding and muted, resounded from the nearby door. He jumped nearly half a foot at the soft sound, muscles tense, as he shoved MC protectively behind him and reached for his nearby sword...

...his nearby sword currently buried beneath a pile of pillows and bed linen on the floor.

“Everything fine in there?” Cassandra’s voice floated in through the wood paneling. The walls were indeed thin here, but exactly how loud had he screamed?

“It’s okay. Just a nightmare,” MC called back, as Adrian finally gave up on his bastard sword for the time being.

“I see...” Cassandra muttered something indecipherably comforting as he cleared his throat and pushed MC lightly away. A foot. Half a foot. A quarter of a foot.

...

Well, he at least stopped clinging on to his bedmate as he reached over for his eyeglasses that'd thankfully somehow not been knocked from the nightstand in the fray. His hands shook slightly as he picked them up, running his fingers through his own rumpled hair, and then set the frames upon his nose. Slightly askew. He fumbled to fix that.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" MC asked softly as they gently straightened his glasses upon his face.

He cleared his throat again. And a third time for the charm. No, no, he definitely didn't want to talk about it. Or bring it back to mind. Or ever give the thought a split second's consideration of what would've happened if he'd been just a little slower when the hydra had been dragging MC under the bed. At that exact moment, things could've spiraled in entirely different directions with just a few simple...

"Adrian?" MC once more called for his attention, breaking him out of his self-flagellating loop of despair.

"Uh..." he said and coughed, his throat feeling sore. Perhaps he'd cleared it a few times too many. "J-just your standard nightmare. Monsters under the bed. Demons eating everyone. S-same old, same old, right?" he said with a smile that trembled ever so slightly at the edges.

Shit. This had freaked him out way too much. It'd felt so *real*, as if it was a long-lost memory from a timeline he hadn't quite trod upon.

"Ah..." MC said in comprehension. In commiseration. With the Midnight Mauler on the loose. With it explicitly after *them*, this sort of worry was entirely... "Understandable. Who wouldn't have demons on the brain? But that was only a dream, Adrian."

"Yeah. M-maybe I'll just get some tea and..." he began to mutter, needing to get out of here, the walls too close, the air too stuffy. Too full of the potential of the nightmare and *what if he'd been a step too late*.

He paused.

No, wait, Merlin was out there with the cockpit only a few scant feet beyond the kitchenette counter in the living quarters. For a brief flash, he pondered over the benefits and drawbacks. Merlin or tea. Merlin or tea. Merlin or tea and definitely not MC being dragged under the bed with their fingernails splintering...

"I'll make it for you," MC brightly offered, with another companionable pat to his arm. Their eyes were half-lidded as they regarded him. It seemed he was definitely not pulling off this entire 'everything is fine and hunky-dory' attitude very well.

"N-no, I can..." he spluttered as MC lightly regained their feet, slipping on their favorite pair of shoes as they made their way towards the sliding door that led to the compartment beyond. "I'll go with you!"

Fuck his own shoes; he had no idea where they might be buried at the moment with most of the floor of the master bedroom covered in literal covers. He padded barefoot after MC, who was stepping out into

the dim (possibly dangerous) shadows beyond.

Hopefully Broderick hadn't left tacks and nails scattered across the floor.



It seemed that Cassandra had already returned to bed, as the curtains were pulled over the bunk bed alcove she shared with Gwen in the second compartment. The unlit doorway to the single bathroom loomed to the left. Yet still, he felt eyes upon his back as he and MC slowly crept their way towards the front compartment.

Typical cop. He'd always felt faintly jittery around the detective. Perhaps for more than one reason alone.

In the darkness, MC clasped his hand, theirs warm while his remained ice cold, as they threaded their way through another even narrower sliding door. He just hoped his friend didn't realize how much his fingers still trembled. The instant they stepped inside, Lorelei's eyes immediately snapped open as she sat up in bed, body taut and head cocked to the side in consideration.

Judging their shadowed forms as dangerous or not.

Oh shit. He'd completely forgotten that Broderick and Lorelei slept in the living quarters.

MC waved silently at Lorelei, who continued to squint back at them in suspicion for several heartbeats longer before rolling over on the sofa bed. A dismissal as she turned her back on them, face tilted towards the wall. Meanwhile, Broderick muttered in his sleep, his tall form hunched over and half hanging off the edge of the adjacent dinette bed.

Adrian picked up a pot — no, it was a skillet...why was he holding a skillet? — as MC fussed around with the nearby counter and cupboards. By the time he'd returned the skillet back to where it belonged, with a somewhat muffled bang or two due to his still skittish hands, his friend already had a ceramic mug half-filled with tea bag and water in the microwave.

The appliance door was snatched open a few seconds before the end of its countdown, all the better to avoid the beeping that might further annoy those currently trying to sleep in here. For a moment, MC held the mug, steam faintly wisping from its contents, and raised an eyebrow in query at him.

"Perhaps no greater sense of agony exists than a mind consumed by *'what if'*. It lurks at the edges of one's thoughts, a different future, a changed past, the potential of what might have been. But in the end, *'what if'* does not exist," Merlin suddenly spoke, their voice a velvety whisper. And from the cabover bed above the driver's seat, two dark gray eyes peeped over at them in interest.

"Damn you and your moldy cheese," Broderick muttered in reply. Still seemingly asleep.

Yeah, no. Let's get out of here. He motioned with his head back to their shared quarters.



Back they went, MC still clinging to the cup of tea in one hand and holding his own hand in the other. Deep breaths, deep calming breaths the entire way. First compartment, second compartment, returning to the master bedroom, where MC paused long enough to toss the blankets back onto the bed before handing the mug over to him as they both resettled on the waiting mattress.

He inhaled the vapors, the faint aroma of English tea tickling his nose. And something else... chamomile? Had MC used two tea bags this time? A soothing scent as he quickly gulped down a swallow or two. Yes, it most certainly had calmed his nerves as his still shaking fingers sloshed warm tea over his wrist.

Warm, not scalding hot.

Apparently, MC had timed this perfectly, even as the mug still faintly rattled within his hands.

"You know," MC casually said, as they nudged closer, reaching over to place their own hands over his and stabilizing the faint trembling of the mug. "I always found that making everyone naked helps during a nightmare."

He laughed at that. "Not everyone is a lucid dreamer," he replied as his friend stole a sip from his cup.

"Maybe I could try busting into your dream next time instead?" MC muttered in consideration, as if that was a thing that they could definitely do. Of course, all considering...

No, too dangerous. There were other things best left forgotten and unspoken haunting his dreams.

For a heartbeat, he fantasized about burying his head against MC's chest and simply... letting go. But that wasn't him. Even if offered. Even if wanted. But that's all right; this was enough. They're resting comfortably against each other, hands entwined, body heat shared. Breathing. Still living. Still at his side, for the moment. That was enough.

It had to be.

## **Protected: The Monster Under the Bed**

# INTERLUDE

## ADRIAN

In the end, it came down to a matter of seconds. Milliseconds. The brushing of his fingertips against a hand that clawed upwards in desperate search of salvation. Of assistance. Of a rescue that didn't come.

That came far too late to be of any true help.

He'd been there. *Right there.* Standing in the doorway. The threshold to the room bathed in its eerie pallid light, the bed frame jittering violently against the floor, as a mixture of phantom flames and shadowy tendrils curled out from beneath the mattress' expanse. MC's face and arms, fingernails splintering in panic against the wooden floor, the only parts of their body not already consumed by the breathing darkness beneath the bed.

If only he hadn't frozen, his muscles seizing up in a mix of incredulity, startlement, and an existential horror that took a moment to banish from his brain.

A moment too long.

"*Adrian!*" MC screamed, finally breaking him free of the spell.

He lunged forward then, desperately towards them, just as desperately as they reached towards him. Called forth every single iota of strength and speed from his leaden legs, his arm outreached and hand grasping. Grasping nothing but empty air with the faintest trace of warmth across his fingertips as his friend was hauled out of sight right before his eyes.

Their final words had been his name.

For a moment he simply stood there in shocked disbelief amongst the sea of shadowy tendrils that began to coil inwards towards him. Swamped in the infernal light of reddish hues and other obscene colors, unnamed and impossible, that caused tears to drip from his eyes as it continued to spew forth from beneath the bed.

There shouldn't have been enough room under there for his friend to disappear. A crazily inappropriate and unhelpful thought. He knew where it led. But ultimately, it didn't matter. It only took a few heartbeats to make up his mind as he prepared to go diving beneath the bed in the wake of MC's dragged path.

He took too long once again.



nothing and no one stop him from following under the bed, but here he was instead, sitting with backpack and bastard sword at his side as the newest fellow Harbinger — Percy, was it? — fluttered around him in worry.

The slender youth pushed sweetbread and a cup of hot tea into his hands. He quietly laid them aside on the nearby table without even glancing down to note them.

And he wondered... if he threw himself off the motorhome now, as the vehicle sped down the highway at 70 mph, surrounded by cars, tractor trailers, and other behemoths... would that be enough to kill him instantly?

Somehow he doubted it.

He was nothing if not durable. Utterly undependable, but durable.

And ultimately, there was still too much riding on him. A thousand plots over a thousand years. Although it was hard for him to even care at this point. A weight dragged down his shoulders, hung from the edges of his lips, and dangled in the dark bags beneath his eyes. No, he couldn't die. Not just yet.

He was milliseconds too late, and thus his punishment was to wait an entire year. A year before this calamity finally wound to its close, for better or for worse. And in the end...

He did owe someone *else* the honor of being the cause of his death, after all.

And as his new temporary companion pushed a hamster into his hands — how, from where?, if he could be arsed to think upon it, there was something familiar here — he could only dryly laugh. A dark, somewhat unhinged sound that sent the little creature struggling away from his grip and fleeing back to its ever-more-concerned owner.

After all, Merlin had said that he might meet MC again. Or the newly born monster who wore their face.



The sound of hoofbeats resounded through the now-silent air. **Clip-clop. Clip-clop.** Somehow a menacing sound as it reverberated within the night. Cars remained frozen around them, caught in the very moment of their speeding. Another time bubble. Just like that night, so long ago and yet so seemingly easily within reach.

Just out of reach. Fingertips barely swiping against a clawing hand.

"Tis ██████!" Merlin's usually mellifluous voice was raised in alarm, the closest they'd come to yelling yet. He felt their eyes boring deeply into the back of his head. "No, not simply them this time."

At his side, Percy pulled free his own sword, a glittering thing that suddenly manifested as if out of nothing at all. Yes, that was the spell, wasn't it? An illusion. Everything was an illusion. He didn't bother

to draw his own weapon, merely squinting behind his eyeglasses towards the shadowy forms that began to coalesce down the far side of the road.

Perhaps it was time to dispose of them, if they didn't help him view what he wanted to see. Because, of course, he'd already given up any hint of a happy ending at this point. He merely meant to follow this **Dead End** to its very finish.

And so he stood there, arms limp at his side, gaze straining as a wooden staff erupted into twining leaves and flowering branches within the mage's hands. Merlin took up guard at his left. Percy's slender form with a gleaming blade in hand that reflected the scarce moonlight remained to his right.

All in readiness. All in stillness. All as expected as the sound of rattling snake scales faintly filled his ears.

Through the dim foggy night, vaporous trails rising from the surface of the highway, they came on two horses that were more bone and rotted flesh than any living creature. Clad in tarnished armor that had been dyed in pools of black. Something familiar in its own twisted way. From way back then. From a few scant days ago.

And finally, after all this time, he smiled. A grim thing, as hopeless as the hollowness that nestled in his heart.

Merlin never lied, after all. Not directly.

He did see MC again.

## Protected: Ambrosia



Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

Of course, that goes without saying. Somehow the group had become scattered, shattered into its component parts, as they blundered through the surrounding enchanted forest. Perhaps [Brocéliande](#)

risen from the depths of history. Or the wilderness of the Wirral, considering the [talking animals](#) they'd stumbled across. He never trusted that blackbird and how it so gleefully cackled about buried 'jewels'.

Or perhaps it was simply the fucking [Perilous Forest](#) that had the habit of popping up here, there, and everywhere.

Then there was this strange castle, unknown despite how he dredged through the remnants of his memories. The voices of his lost companions would briefly come echoing down the stony hallway or up the stairs or from behind the thick wooden doors that they periodically passed by. Yes, he definitely recognized that screech of "Motherfucker!" as coming from Broderick.

Yet no matter how he looked, there was no one there.

No one except MC (and that's the problem!), who'd crossed his path just as they both snuck in through the dark portcullis, left unguarded and half open, as if in welcome. A trap. Definitely a trap. And now he suspected, belatedly and haplessly, exactly *how*.

He scurried warily through the stone-flanked corridor, dimly lit by flickering oil lamps, with a hand clamped over his nose and mouth. Backpack and extra face masks had disappeared along with that little yapping dog that'd scurried through the forest underbrush. A rather familiar dog. If only he could remember...

As if that would help anyway. This was magic, not some sort of modern gas attack.

It pulsed through his mind, a dry hunger at the back of his throat and a niggling throbbing between his legs that matched the tempo of the footsteps that followed in his wake. Steps that grew closer and closer until...

"Hey Adrian," MC said as they tugged at the cuff of his sleeve with growing insistence. "Why don't we stop and rest for a bit? I don't feel too good."

He refused to look their way and instead opened the nearest door. It swung silently wide upon well-oiled hinges, revealing a bedroom where a richly embroidered canopy bed beckoned, all fine linen sheets and coverlets lined in fur. How many of these had they passed already? Enough to quarter an entire battalion of knights.

Where was this place? [The Vale of False Lovers](#)? [Grande Disio](#)? [Castle Nigramous](#)? The palace at the [Lake of Idleness](#)? [The Bower of Bliss](#)?

"Why were there so many sex dungeons in Arthurian lore?!" Adrian bemoaned as he batted away MC's hands from unzipping his hoodie.

"The twelfth and thirteenth-century authors were very horny," MC helpfully informed him as they began to unbutton their shirt and shrug free of its confines. He hurriedly reached forward, fumbling to stop his companion's ever-stripping hands.

"I'm hot," MC complained, their eyes sparking a fire of their own in the lantern light.

Apparently they enjoyed the feel of his hands against their chest far too much as their grip clamped around his wrist, holding his fingers against the thin fabric of their undershirt. The only thing now separating their bare flesh from each other, as he felt the soft thrum of their heartbeat beneath his fingertips.

His eyes traced the peek of stomach that they'd bared from the rising hem of their still-far-too-unbuttoned shirt. He swallowed.

Yes, yes, *you certainly are*— but that was not the point!

"It's a spell, MC," he muttered for about the three-dozen<sup>th</sup> time, as he turned on his heel and wrenched his arm away from his companion, who sighed in disappointment. "Aphrodisiac. *Because someone was always dosing someone else with one of those things back then, and*— but, no, no, never mind that. We'll try to outrun it."

So he said, as he opened another door into the exact same bedroom.



He kicked in the door to the twelve-dozen<sup>th</sup> room that led to yet another richly appointed bed piled high with pillows, feathered bolsters, and blankets pulled back ever so slightly in invitation. A golden ring glinted against the white of the linen. He could just imagine how a certain someone would look splayed out across—

The toecap of his worn sneakers squeaked in protest as he punted the door again for good measure. It splintered and fell off its frame with a dull thunder of heavy wood upon stone. The pain in his toe was a good thing. It distracted him from an aching in another place entirely. Still, it wasn't enough to distract him from the warm presence he felt at his back, a presence that had begun to lightly run their fingers along the curve of his spine and...

"Oh god, I really need a cold shower right about now. Even a waterfall would do!" he said as he oh-so-carefully began to shimmy away from the other's touch.

"I could join you," MC offered as they stepped around to face him, eyes intense with a smile that was verging a shade too sinister to be truly innocent.

Or maybe just an open window to jump out of. He didn't even care that they were several floors up at this point. Yes. That was definitely going to help. The sweet allure of the waiting ground called to him.

The sweet allure of MC's now-fully unbuttoned shirt called to him. The other's scent as they edged over closer, right into his personal space bubble which was going **POP!** in glee at the other's presence and shut up lizard brain connected to the rest of his body.

"Just... just stand *right there*," he ordered his friend, sounding half strangled, as said friend continued to keep pace with him, step by step, while he backed away. "And lemme just... just bash my head against this wall for a little bit here?!"

Yes, yes, that would definitely be one way to stave off the effects of this spell.

"I can do what I want with your unconscious body afterwards, right?" said MC, who was very much not fighting off the effects of the aphrodisiac.

He bit back a groan as MC's lips quirked in a teasing smirk. But from the hunger that peered behind the other's gaze, he wouldn't bet his life, his chastity, or his very-much-doomed virginity on his friend merely joking here.

"Maybe..." he took a deep breath. Wrong move. Was his companion wearing fragrance? Something spicy and pungent. It made his head spin. "Maybe-we-should-part-ways-for-a-little-bit?"

"Really?" MC arched an eyebrow, looking highly unimpressed at that suggestion. "We're going to split up? In an unknown castle in enemy territory full of god-knows-what? Fae? Enchanted knights? Demons? More tentacle monsters?"

That's right. MC alone out there under the effects of an aphrodisiac running into... *Merlin* was still out there somewhere for cripe's sake! And also the owner of this wretched castle that he swore he would stab and not in the lustful way, no matter what his hips demanded right now...

"Okay, no, we're sticking together," he said as he grabbed hold of his companion's hand. His doom was set as he willingly embraced it.

He always did in the end.



He supposed in the end, he should've suspected that it would come to this.

The world narrowed down to the itching on the underside of his skin. A thirst that parched his throat into nearly knotting. And yes... a definite swelling down somewhere else as well, that begged for attention with every single step as he ignored it and most certainly ignored MC until something hurtled straight into his back and slammed him against the wall.

Perhaps he shouldn't have neglected MC after all, as he found himself pinned against the naked stone, boggling back at his strangely aggressive companion. Two men in a nearby tapestry, chests bared and swords crossed, seemed to leer down at them.

"Hey Adrian," MC whispered, their breaths briefly intermingling. "What happens if you ignore the spell for too long?"

What's a little insanity amongst friends, after all?

“Fuck!” he helpfully said, perhaps quite literally, as he tried to push the other back. A futile attempt as his friend pressed ever closer, pinning his arms to the wall with the motion. How was MC suddenly so strong? Is this the pure power of horny? Or is MC finally beginning to awaken— and if so, why *now* of all times?! “I know this seems like a good idea right about now—”

“Mmmhmm,” a suddenly shirtless MC eloquently responded as they buried their face against the crook of his neck, leaving light nibbling kisses in their wake.

This is not helping. *Not helping* even as the shudder of pleasure running down his spine tried to convince him that these actions were very helpful indeed. He put all the strength of a young athletic man behind the motion of tearing his arms free and tossing his overly amorous friend away.

But his limbs remained restrained as he half slid down the wall, downwards to the floor, while MC slung a leg across him, beginning to straddle his waist. Okay, this indeed was very hot, but *that is not the point here*, and where did his hoodie go as a fiery arc of kisses began to trail across his chest.

His head was woozily heavy. His wrists might be beginning to bruise with the grip that clamped them. His attention shattered into a thousand jagged shards as teeth and tongue began to nibble at his right nipple.

He shoved away with a growing strength, one that slightly, handily, *greatly* exceeded the power of a young athletic man who trained without fail every single day.

Nothing.

His arms still stayed pinned. The stone still welcomed his back. His jeans still begged to be discarded as MC’s leg shifted to the junction between them. No ifs, ands, or buts about this... someone was definitely awakening here. In more ways than one.

“A failure in willpower,” Cassandra said, a faint echo from he knew not where. And for a moment it sounded like someone else he’d once known. Once upon a time. But in the end, MC’s gaze was locked on him and him alone, no phantom voices strong enough to part them.

“—but this actually isn’t going to help and— mrhphm!” He protested as lips claimed his, a persistent tongue pressing through for entry, a light touch against his teeth, his gums, teasing ever deeper against his own tongue.

He wrenched away and pulled free, roughly elbowing MC off of him. In his mind, at least he did. And by that he meant that his finally free arms entangled around MC’s torso, pulling them closer, as his own tongue entwined around theirs, a mirror of a dance that his lower half most assuredly would like to join in.

“Arthur...” he muttered as the two of them finally came up for air.

Those words finally gained the other's attention, half drunk on the ambrosia of the aphrodisiac as they might be. MC slightly drew back, simply staring *down* at him in judgment, eyes darkened and perhaps wondering why the lover they currently straddled was now mumbling the name of another man.

"He can join us later," MC reassured him, not very reassuring at all, as they returned to nibbling at his collarbones.

"What? N-no! *That's not*— we— we need to form the Lesser Circle and summon him!" he spluttered as the back of his brain fractured into dozens of shrieking brain cells that gleefully died one by one. Goodbye, brain. It was nice knowing you. Please take his sense of responsibility and propriety along with you.

He gave one last desperate buck, trying to disengage from MC's embrace. The smile that flitted across the other's lips as their lower bodies rubbed roughly against each other at the motion gave away just how much they truly enjoyed that sensation. Far too much. The same as him, as his thoughts faded in and out in a blur of ecstatic white.

"Like I said, he can join us later," MC repeated, their voice a husky whisper as they grinded ever closer.

They're doomed.

"This is not how—" he feebly protested, faintly missing MC's newfound strength binding him down. Because now that his limbs were free, he had no excuse for why they were entangling in the remnants of the other's clothes. Who'd torn those buttons free? MC or him?

"This doesn't count," his friend reassured him, leaning nearer. Chest to chest, hip to hip, and aching groin to groin. "It never does when you keep your socks on."

He laughed, a hint of hysteria tingeing the sound.

"You don't want to?" MC asked, head cocked to the side. They looked as if they might throw themselves out the nearest window if he denied them. They probably would in order to grant his request.

And he'd follow right behind them.

"I—" he said. Swallowed hard. But in the end, he was never the best of liars. "Keep the jeans on."



"That didn't help at all!" MC accused, as they stared down and eyed their respective pants, slightly damp in certain areas, as if gauging if it was the material that still separated them behind this sudden lack in gratification.

"I warned you it wouldn't!" he snapped back as he hurriedly shrugged into his hoodie. That he finally found, after much searching, a few dozen feet down the hallway. Alas, his accountability seemed forever

lost. If only the guilt that dragged at his shoulders would keep *other parts* down as well. “It’s a spell, after all! Doing this just makes it even harder to ignore!”

“Hrmm...” MC mumbled unhappily beneath their breath, the considering glint within their gaze giving away their thoughts. The desire for a Round 2 posthaste, this time without any pants in the way.

Adrian simply sighed and refused to think of any implications of what just happened here. Friends indulged in frottage every now and then, right?!

...

He needed that shower more than ever (even as he cast aside the image of MC joining him in there that his traitorous brain conjured forth). And a change of clothes as well. And perhaps a sword to fall upon. But first...

Whoever was the lord or lady of this castle... he was going to *kill* them.

## Protected: Helping Hand



“Stop helping!” Broderick snarled at the two people lurking in his shadow as he sweated like a pig beneath the hot afternoon sun. He tucked a few damp tendrils of his hair beneath his baseball cap and pulled on his short ponytail as a tractor trailer blasted past in a loud hoot of horns and diesel exhaust.

The RV was parked in a wild zigzag along the shoulder of the highway, its hood rolled back and still faintly steaming from its recent efforts. Most of the group brainlessly ambled around the outside of the now stationary motorhome, along the parched grass at the side of the road, periodically stopping to stare like yokels with their mouths gaping open, asking questions like “Can you fix it?” or “Should we call an RV repair shop for help?” (The answer there is YES!) or “Oh god, I feared for my life!”.

The last not being a question, but a sensible reaction to what just happened.

Off in the near distance, Gwen was being motion sick in a nearby scraggly bush while Adrian patted her back in commiseration. Even further away, Lorelei stood at stiff attention, doing a damnably good

impression of a guard or a soldier keeping track of a pack of criminals.

Meanwhile, he stood on his tiptoes and peered haplessly inside because this shitty group didn't even have a proper step stool — who goes on a long road trip without an RV step stool?! — while MC crouched at his side and dug around in his opened toolbox.

“Stop doing that!” he snapped as MC tried to hand him a monkey wrench.

Apparently this wasn't even the first time that the RV's brakes had failed.

What the fuck was he even doing here? A Class C motorhome was way past his pay grade. But even to his undertrained eyes, some of the gashes that he found among the metal valves, rods, pistons, and bearings looked *highly* suspicious. Especially if this thing was as new as it appeared to be. With proffered monkey wrench spurned, MC went scurrying off as Cassandra approached.

“Nuts!” Percy proclaimed as he hung off the side of the RV like a baboon, far too short to see inside its hood without a helping boost. “The treadle valve calls for the Swiss cheese.”

Broderick wondered if the blue-haired nitwit was describing his fantasized state of the motorhome's brakes or the condition of his own brain instead.

“Interesting,” Cassandra commented, scribbling down further notes in her ever-present notebook. Broderick merely narrowed his eyes at her, wondering what was so interesting about a busted RV and two chucklefucks. But just as long as she wasn't investigating what was in the cupboard beneath the dinette table seating, then things were fine.

As fine as things could be during this clusterfuck.

“What does this button do~?” MC sang out from the cockpit, haplessly mashing on some dashboard control or other that *they really shouldn't be touching*.

A blast of water erupted from the windshield wipers. He felt the spray hit his face as Cassandra continued writing, not a single droplet marring the porcelain beauty of her visage or the blank stretch of paper in her book.

Off in the background somewhere, Merlin laughed musically, a siren calling for her prey. The formation leader among the flock of cuckoos.

He heaved a great sigh, knowing full well what was required and what he'd been putting off. He needed to check on the air brake system on the underside of the RV. As high up as the vehicle was riding compared to normal cars, would he even fit underneath there without any jacks to help? He'd hardly the smallest of builds and—

Broderick glanced down in mild alarm to see Percy wiggling out from beneath the vehicle's undercarriage.

What the fuck was he doing down there?

'Oh god, do I even want to know?' his overheated brain wondered as MC once again tried to hand him the monkey wrench.



"Stop. Helping." Broderick snarled as MC very unhelpfully pointed out every crow, finch, sparrow, pigeon, and damned dove within a five-mile radius. The birds twittered energetically around them, apparently drunk on the air of a too-warm spring warning.

To be sure, they were looking for a bird — a supposedly magical one that'd lead them frolicking through the forest like Snow White and her seven dwarves who all mutated into Dopey. And yes, he damn well knew what dwarf he'd be.

And it wasn't Dopey.

They were looking for birds, but not of that sort. A thrush, or an eagle, or an owl (in the daytime!), or maybe even a fucking talking salmon like in that [Fishbone Cinderella](#) cartoon that his parents had inflicted on him and his siblings because they were too cheap to shell out for the Disney version. Because, *of course*, talking salmon were actually real.

Percy scampered up a nearby fallen log covered in lichen and moss and whatever other gross stuff grew on such things in the forest, with MC shadowing his steps in his wake. Broderick plodded after them both, grumbling the entire way, nearly tripping over a thick twisted tree root that he could've *sworn* hadn't been there before. Both of his companions blinked back at him, extending two hands in perfect tandem as if they shared a single brain.

Which, from what he'd seen so far, might very well be true. Fuck, forget a single brain; it was a single brain cell with those two!

Fucking god, why did he end up with them? Why couldn't it be Lorelei, who at least appeared to know her way around the damn wilderness? Or Adrian seemed rather sensible whenever the MC wasn't being a bad influence on him. Which was most of the time. But noooooo, he had to end up with [Tweedledee and Tweedledum](#) instead.

Tweedledum cast him an encouraging smile as he groaned internally. All surface beauty that one, with nothing but the sound of the ocean rushing around in their head. In other normal circumstances, the susurrus of the sea could be a soothing thing — hell, he even had a white noise machine left behind (with his normal life and all other sense of normalcy!) that spat out that exact sound — but it was less than reassuring coming from a companion during an emergency.

He grumpily batted away their hands, stepped up to the fallen log which he could traverse himself thank-you-very-much, and proceeded to fall straight through the rotted wood.

"Don't eat the fish. It'll give you indigestion," Percy and MC chorused in perfect harmony as Broderick merely groaned externally.



"*STOP HELPING!*" Broderick snarled as MC hung off him like a backpack.

The other lunatic would periodically loosen their hold and flail their hands through the air, trying to fan themselves or Broderick, or perhaps trying to catch invisible flies or their fleeing brain cells before their slack hold nearly sent them faceplanting upon the ashy ground once more.

If he had to make a bet on who'd end up collapsing beneath the searing unblinking eye of the sun over fucking [Death Valley](#) because, of course, where else would the group be going for a stroll except one of the deadliest deserts in the world? Fuck the [Mojave](#)! Wait— what was he even thinking about again?

Oh yes, that's right. As they wandered up and down a succession of seemingly unending sand dunes, he would've bet on Gwen being the weakest link. Fainting like a fucking Victorian lady did seem to be her thing after all. But no, she was energetically traipsing along, arms bobbing around her as she delicately kept her balance at the front of the straggling line of travelers being led by Merlin.

Merlin. Looking as perfect as ever, not a single silvery strand of hair out of place as she led everyone off to their doom. In the middle of the fucking Mojave Desert. A grinding sound filled the air. It took a moment or two before he realized it was his own teeth gnashing together.

"You need any help back there, Broderick? I can take over carrying MC?" Adrian offered, pausing at the crest of the next sandbank that Broderick had yet to trudge up. Unlike the way he currently felt, Adrian hardly looked winded nor bedraggled at all, his slightly sweat-dampened hair looking artfully tousled by the desert wind.

"Nooooo! Damn you for leaving me behind, Simba, I loved you!" MC cried out, holding on to Broderick even tighter until he started choking, nearly turning purple to match the pastel pinks, blues, and greens of the sculpted hills in the distance.

"Uh... right..." Adrian said as Percy scampered past him, sliding back down the dune among several great puffs of dirt and dust like a sand surfer with an invisible windboard. All the while, the blinding light of the sun reflected off the lens of his eyeglasses and glinted off the dark edge of Percy's visor-style shades that he'd pulled out of his ass or somewhere or other.

"I-I'm not really sure if you're being normal or if that's heat stroke kicking in, but I think we need to stop for some shade and water replenishment here and—" Adrian attempted to continue.

"Ay caramba, the watery isle is about to reveal itself," Percy solemnly intoned, whipping out a pump-style water gun — no, a fucking automated water *rifle* — from behind his back and repeatedly shooting Broderick and MC in the face.

"Mmm... braaaains," MC muttered as they leaned in closer to his sun-beaten head.

## Protected: Oubliette



He was falling.

The knowledge of *how* or *why* this was happening fled from his mind, as slippery as the shadows that surrounded him. Smooth stone met his grasping fingertips. Darkness met his eyes. An inelegant yelp was wrenched from his lips as he finally splashed down in an even wilder flailing of limbs.

The bottom of the... was this a well?... was covered an inch or so of water that quickly soaked into his sneakers. The dimness lay unbroken except for a small sliver of rectangular light seemingly dozens of feet above his head. He reached out to discover the press of blank walls all around, so close that he could barely stretch out his arms.

*How* did he get here? What was even the last thing he remembered? Surely he'd been on the motorhome not so long ago... was this some sort of trick of magic?

And what's breathing over his shoulder in a press of warmth against his back?

He turned around, half caught between whirling in alarm and slowly rotating, inch by inch, so as not to give away his position as he snuck a peek — as if whoever was crammed down here with him wasn't already well aware of his presence! No, he simply turned around, tossing a single look over his shoulder, right before he shrieked.

"Adrian, is it?" The High King of all Britannia nonchalantly commented, as if his screaming had been a proper introduction all along. Even now, the sound of his squawk of alarm echoed all around them as the faint light at the bottom of this hole gathered within sea-green eyes and glinted faintly along the edges of an armor that's both silver and gold. "Although we've never crossed paths, I recognize you from the dreams of MC."

Oh. God. *Wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up!*

“Wh-why would I be in MC’s dreams and— no, no, that’s not the point here! Where is— what in the world is this?!” Adrian eloquently said to the face of his king as he prayed for the sweet embrace of death.

King Arthur, his visage half hidden, merely tilted his head back up towards the shaft of light high above both of their heads. “An oubliette, I would gather,” he informed.

“An [oubliette](#)?!” Adrian exclaimed, his voice rising perhaps a shade higher than normal. No more than a mere octave or two. He flailed even harder at the stone walls that surrounded him and his long-lost king. “Why is there an oubliette here?”

“I fear I cannot say,” the king replied in a soft shuffle of damask and fur. The metal of his armor faintly clinked and *chimed* beneath the cloak clasped at his shoulder. “For I reckon, this dream is *yours*, Adrian. Why do you have an oubliette in your mind?”

“Ah ha *ha*... well, about that—” Adrian said as his voice did a damnably fine impression of a goose. And then he was scrambling desperately up the walls. The close confines had their advantages at that, as he jammed his shoulders against the unyielding stone, arms outreached to the sides, and braced his feet against the opposite wall. Foot by painful foot, he clambered upwards.

Like one of those ninjas in those shows that MC liked to watch. Like a teenager scaling a corner in those TikTok videos.

The High King continued to watch silently from below, which made Adrian scamper upwards all the harder. All the faster. A mistake as something slick and heated began sliding down the oubliette’s surface.

*It’s oil! Hot oil!* Adrian’s brain screamed in warning as both fingers and feet lost their purchase.

And down he went in a whirl of windmilling limbs with thoughts of how ancient medieval fortresses would pour boiling oil on invaders from high above. With thoughts of what else could be done with slippery oil that was more pleasantly tepid than not. He welcomed the crash of stone and cold water that would splash all around him as he smashed back onto the waiting floor—

A sensation that never happened, as arms wrapped around him instead. A soft brush of linen and bear fur. Yes, it was definitely bear — the old Welsh word ‘arth’ to play against the name ‘Arturus’. The High King held him against his chest, having arrested Adrian’s inevitable fall. A bridal carry, the latter’s brain unhelpfully supplied, just like MC had once requested.

It’s fine. It’s fine. *It’s fine!* This was obviously just a dream. Some fragment of his overworked imagination due to a tangle of nerves, stress, guilt, regret, and a slew of other emotions he’d rather not give name to.

“Why are you in my dream?” he asked the phantom of the king.

Adrian carefully reached over and brushed off some of the displaced stone dust that'd landed in his king's hair. Even in this dim gloom, divested of all proper light, it faintly gleams a red-gold. His dream could be less messy here.

"A good question. Why *am I* in your dream? I walk the dreams of men, often circling around those you call 'Harbingers'. The ones I once knew, long ago now and yet so shortly for me. Still, I've never been able to reach your dreams, Adrian," the king replied, assuring him that he was no mere phantom. Eyes the color of a forgotten ocean narrow nearly imperceptibly at him in calculation. "I suspect there was some outside intervention here."

He goes still within the king's arms as his brain whites out in a short circuiting of sparks and static.

"Adrian, art thou well?" The king slipped back into formal language, as if his tongue worried about the current state of his companion's mind. And other parts perhaps, as Adrian began to thrash about in his grip.

"I-I'm fine!" Adrian exclaimed, limbs covered in slippery oil, as he slid out of the embrace of his king. "But if this is a dream — *my* dream — then by dream logic I should be able to do *this*!" He drew back his arm, careful not to elbow the man standing at his back, rotated his shoulder and punched the nearest stone wall with all of his might, his sleeping brain commanding the dream to *submit*.

He swore he heard the crunch of bone as his hand tried to collapse in upon itself instead.

Darkness filled his gaze as a haze of pain shrieked its way through his consciousness. Subconsciousness. Unconsciousness. He reeled backwards, a field of shimmering stars filling his head, as he collapsed back into a certain someone's arms. A certain someone who might be worrying about a certain someone else's sanity at the moment.

Yes, that's definitely what one would expect when they punched a solid stone wall. It seemed not feeling pain in a dream was a lie, after all.

Two of the stars approached closer, twin pinpricks of turquoise, as he felt a warm wave engulf him. Silvery chestplate at his back, as the king's crimson cloak drapes over him. The High King reaches over and takes Adrian's mauled fist within his hand, magicry flooding his senses as flesh and bruised bone began to knit itself back together.

Adrian swallowed thickly.

"Just\*\*—\*\*just take Excalibur and run me through," he told the king. At least then Arthur would be free. And he'd be dead, which would also be free and away from this torturous situation that he most certainly deserved at some level as a form of punishment, whether self-inflicted or because there were watching gods out there who seemingly enjoyed his torment.

It didn't even matter that he was pretty sure there's no way the great sword he'd glimpsed in shadow upon the king's back could be pulled forth in the tiny space of this oubliette. It was the thought that

counted.

"I see," the king smoothly replied, with Adrian pressed close enough to feel the rumble underlying the other's voice. "You think to be free of the dream by killing the dreamer and thus ending the reverie. But tis a lie, you know. That one cannot truly die in dreams."

"A l-lie?" Adrian stuttered as a thousand lies clogged the back of his throat.

The High King reached ahead, past Adrian's shoulder and the quieting throb of his once-mangled fist. The king pressed a gauntleted hand against the unyielding stone as soft golden sparks began to fizz between his fingers. A heartbeat, two, a dozen more, as Adrian became aware of his pulse thundering within his ears, of the fevered rasp of his breath, of the quiet whisper of the king's own breathing, assuring him that yes, the other man truly was *alive*.

Alive and walking the world once more, if only in dreams.

And so the shadowy stone melted away like snow before the breeze of spring. Of summers lost but not forgotten.

"There is a trick to such things," the king gently informed him. "If one is a dream walker, that is. I believe they're called 'lucid dreamers' in your time, are they not?"

Adrian hastily scrabbled forward, away from the tender embrace that he most assuredly didn't deserve. Had only snuck into since the king still didn't realize who he truly was. He briefly stood framed within the gaping hole in the wall as a sea of stars flared out in the waiting darkness beyond him. A galaxy unfurled at his feet.

"Could you have done that this entire time?" He can't help but ask.

"Aye... but my hands were a bit full here this whole while," King Arthur said with a soft smile cast his way, unmerited and unwarranted, but never ever unwanted.

He'd had ample opportunity here... but no matter how he longed for it, no matter how many chances were lost, he didn't dare hug him back. Not this time. Not ever again. He'd learned his lesson there. He said nothing in parting this time.

And with that, Adrian flung himself away, falling backwards into the cold abiding darkness. As he always did while the golden star brighter than the sun faded away from his sight. Waking up to a fit of MC's sleepwalking, whether nude or not, was far more preferable to this.

**Protected: Reverie**



# INTERLUDE

## ADRIAN



From the beginning, some part of him knows that this is only a dream. Through the muzzy sleeping logic, the strange ephemeral nature of his surroundings, both illogical and hauntingly familiar, and through the static that fills his brain, he must've sensed it, even though he was never a lucid dreamer like his friend.

His friend standing before him, shirt half unbuttoned as it bares the curve of their throat, the slanting temptation that dipped down to their chest, with a smile that is enigmatic — innocent — alluring — haunted.

His legs are rooted beneath him like old oak in an ancient forest. His legs are the dainty limbs belonging to a white stag that should send him bounding away. No, that's what they should be, but this is only a foolish dream.

Yes, that's most certainly his excuse as he half closes the distance between them — only half is needed as the world lurches and shortens, MC gliding forward the final few steps.

Their limbs desperately entangle each other, sliding along bodies that press heatedly close, along the arch of a still-clothed back, along the swell of buttocks that he possessively pulls close, as MC's fingers tangle painfully in his hair.

There shouldn't be any pain in dreams, right? But that's always been a lie. One amongst so many.

Their lips hungrily meet. Or is that hunger simply his(?) as his *friend's* tongue shyly — boldly — longingly — flirtatiously meets his own. They make a soft sound of mixed pleasure and surprise as he pushes deeper, a noise muffled greedily between the two of them as his own tongue lays fierce claim to each tender millimeter of the other's mouth.

Beneath his fingers, MC shudders. Or is that him?

MC tastes like salty tears and sugared tea intermingled. A sweet promise of a freed future. Like honey forbidden and poisoned. Like old blood and regret.

Just as expected.

As his friend tugs at his clothes, Adrian doesn't even bother with the buttons. His fingers are knives that slice cleanly through MC's shirt — blouse — dress. Their pants are mere tatters that blow in the wind.

He buries his head against the nape of his *friend* — never speak, never think the word 'lover' — his lips pressing against the warmth of the other's skin, both tongue and teeth already laving, already biting.

Not gently. Not this time. Not here, where there'll be no bruises to give them away.

His own shirt is gone. Perhaps MC simply wished it away.

"You risk the fate of the world with these frivolities," a woman tells him, taller than any normal human with ears frilled to either side, watching with cold clinical eyes even as her lips curl playfully at their ends. Her hair is a tumble of streaming ebony to below her hips as stars briefly flicker through her irises. "Remember what you must do. Remember your duty."

Damn the celestial heavens that gave birth to clairvoyance.

"Shut up!" he tells her. "Haven't you already taken enough of my life even before I met you?"

MC hushed him with probing fingers against his lips as he's drawn down to the floor, roughly mundane carpet, mystically smooth marble — no, it's the light brush of grass far softer than any rug as they're down on the ground, sweaty limbs entwined. Something twitters happily in the trees that surround them. Something chortles darkly in the back of his mind.

His friend's hand lays against his bare chest, directly above his still-beating heart, as if to reassure himself that it does indeed still exist. Sometimes he's not so certain himself even as he straddles the other, his naked thighs brushing against the other's nude hips. Skin to skin to briefly drive all other thoughts away.

"You know it's fine if it's you," MC says, hesitation and desire warring within their voice.

"You know you're only hurting yourself, right?" MC says as worry tangles through their tone.

"You know I've known all along?" MC says, a simple statement and nothing more.

"You know that I'm a dreamwalker too?" MC says, with a challenge to their gaze that declares they'll move if Adrian refuses to do so.

Hands fisted in his hair pull his head down, down, down to lap greedily at the exposed flesh of an exposed thigh as he trails grasping fingers along his pinned friend's sides, along a stomach that contracts at his touch, sending a flood of liquid fire through his own abdomen. No lower than that... lower still, as he at first tentatively and then with ever-growing eagerness suckles at *that* spot between the other's legs.

Someone moans. Perhaps that's the both of them.

Salty here too, yet quite different from the taste of MC's lips, as the other's thighs close around him, pulling him deeper, and yes, with a heated hand grasping at the throbbing ache between his own legs, he's very much tempted to *simply let go and*—

"If you continue to walk the same path, you shall meet the same end again," a white-clad figure tells him. Watching ever watching. Even now. An enigmatic smile, a spray of wild silvery hair, and deep violet eyes above layers upon layers of concealing white, as if the fabric could mask their true intention as much as their figure.

Merlin in their true form. No, that form was a lie as well. Merely a convenience to be used or shed as Camelot required.

"Get out of my dream!" he yells at the phantom. "It's bad enough that I have to deal with you in real life all this time!"

"*Adrian...*" MC says, their voice once more compelling his attention.

The world around them hitches.

They're walking along a soft, sandy beach, hand in hand with a sky painted above in watercolor shades of orange, blue, and pink. He still tastes them on his lips. The house waiting in the glen behind them is their own, happily yapping dog, white picket fence, and all.

No, the house is a white castle with soaring crystal parapets in a fortress city lost long ago. What seethes before them is a river called River, its true name forgotten before this language even existed. MC wraps an arm around his waist, as if they were afraid he might dissipate in the wind.

The winds are calling, after all. Always calling.

The High King who watches them says nothing. Perhaps that's the greatest indictment of them all. Because there's no proper excuse he could ever say back. He'd been greedy. Wanted it all... duty, love, and acceptance, no matter the pain that it left in its wake. Had he succeeded at anything? Has he simply failed everything?

Still, some small buried part of him screams for him to try.

"I—" he says as he pulls away from MC, the loss of their body warmth as devastating as if he'd just let his own heart's blood drain from his veins. That's suitable, of course. One last gift to give the betrayed king.

"You know, **Adrian**," MC tells him, their eyes the only thing in sharp focus within this clouded reverie. "You're not ██████ anymore."

And a thousand shrieks rise up in the back of his mind to drown out that name. Beloved. Hated. Forgotten name. It buries everything beneath its silent syllables, blotting out the sky, the castle, and the

sight of MC before him.

The sound of silent screaming that awakens him.



Adrian woke up with a start beneath a too heavy blanket. He stared blearily down, vision somewhat blurry, tension headache faintly pounding within his right temple, only to discover that said blanket was actually MC sprawled across him while rolled up in a tangled burrito of their actual blankets.

Further suspicious squinting at his roommate revealed that they were actually completely naked beneath the linens *because, of course, they are!*

He bit back a groan and slowly, methodically, began to try and extricate himself from beneath the other's weight as he inched away towards the edge of the treacherous bed. A bed far more perilous than the one in the old legends of the [Castle of Marvels](#).

Punishment for his sins. Punishment for *that* recent dream, and God alone knew what was going on with his subconsciousness, which he'd like to dropkick at this very moment.

MC muttered something incomprehensible beneath their breath as they clung on to his shirt while he slinked away, bit by tiny bit, gently disentangling clutching fingers, until with a final flail he rolled free of the bed and onto the floor and perhaps smacked his head into the wall that was only a freaking foot away.

Yes, that's enough sleeping for the night. It didn't matter that it was only 3AM... he'd had enough dreams for the rest of his life. It didn't help that Merlin's amused cackling greeted him as he slunk through the darkness back to the bathroom for a shower as cold as the apprehension that bubbled at the back of his mind.

Behind the wheel, the incubus didn't sleep. And in the end, neither did he. Time grinded on to its inevitable end.

He simply had to be glad that the mind reader here wasn't MC.

**Protected: All Hallow's Eve**

# INTERLUDE

## BRODERICK

“Why are we watching scary movies now? Isn’t our life already enough of a shitshow B-grade horror movie as it is?” Broderick groused from his place sprawled out on the right side of the couch.

To his left sat Gwen, front and center with a giant tub of freshly popped and highly buttered popcorn, and beyond her Lorelei perched on the sofa’s plush armrest, eyes wary and every muscle tensed, as if she half expected the group to be attacked at any passing moment. Maybe by the movie that they were now settled down to watch.

Granted, considering what’d been happening to them lately, that wasn’t a particularly unlikely outcome. So why were they even tempting luck by...

“Tis a modern-day Samhain tradition!” Merlin merrily exclaimed from where she’s ensconced in an overstuffed armchair to Broderick’s other side. For a moment, he merely squinted suspiciously back at her artfully tousled locks and the smug curve of her perfectly plump lips. “All Hallow’s Eve... or rather, your quaint Halloween and all its candy-pillaging customs.”

The mage’s chair was tilted *just* so to keep a convenient eye upon both those sitting at the couch and also the small group gathering around the table at the back where a [Ouija board](#) was currently being set up after Percy had declared that dicking around with a haunted Ouija session would be safer than watching the movie.

Although obviously phrased differently and using far less words. Despite that announcement, the slim boy was currently wearing a pair of aviator-style 3-D glasses.

Of course, the movie that they’re watching wasn’t in 3-D. Had there ever been a good 3-D horror released? Because it certainly hadn’t been [Jaws 3-D](#) or [My Bloody Valentine](#), that he can personally attest to!

MC had joined the latter after announcing that Merlin wasn’t allowed to play. A strangely sensible sentiment from the other so-called Harbinger for once. What daft idiot would trust a self-proclaimed succubus during a Ouija session? And of course Adrian had gone to join them, even as he pushed up his eyeglasses and stared dubiously down at the board game.

Did that damn pair of glasses even properly fit him with how often it kept sliding down his face and...

Wait, what was that?



## All Hallow's Eve



Broderick turned back to the television screen as the staticky roar of a black and white dragon filled the air. Wait a minute... what movie studio used that logo in the opening sequence of their films? Wasn't it supposed to be a lion instead?

Behind him, Cassandra took her place at the table, completing the party. While she appeared to study the Ouija board, he didn't trust that playful smile upon her lips one single bit.

The sound of a drop of water falling from the leaky kitchen faucet plipped in the background.

He reached towards the tub of temptingly butter-adjacent popcorn as Gwen stuffed an entire fistful of the stuff into her mouth. The screen before them flickered, showing the shambling figure of a multi-limbed creature lurching its way down a deserted nighttime street. Its obviously cheap CGI flesh faintly spasmed with every step as its many limbs bent in ever more gruesomely contorted directions.

Was this supposed to that eldritch Lovelace crap? Lovecreep? Lovercraft? [Lovecra](#)—

No wait, that looked like one of those damned hellhound things!

"Hey, who's pushing the planchette?" Adrian whispered, somewhere out of sight.

"Tinkerbell," Percy solemnly informed him. Or perhaps revealed the name of the entity that'd stolen and currently had possession of his brain. Or the one brain cell shared between him and...

"Merlin!" MC called out in accusation at those words.

"Tis not me," Merlin mildly replied as she sank comfortably deeper into the chair, the voluptuous curves of her figure leaving a deep imprint within the padded cushions.



## All Hallow's Eve



The television flickered once more, the scene shifting to a rocky tunnel underground with natural gray walls speckled a dusty orange-brown. The ceiling and sides pressed in closer and closer as the camera view lurched through the gloom, the whisper of fevered gasping the only noise gracing the soundtrack.

Some sort of cave or cavern system? But they weren't supposed to be watching [The Descent](#) or [The Cave](#), were they? Strange hieroglyphics began to appear etched into the walls, their designs twisting painfully at the eye.

A shitty special effect, obviously.

Gwen silently shoved another handful of popcorn into her mouth, her soft green eyes gleaming as she kept her enraptured gaze riveted to the screen. Meanwhile, Lorelei remained frozen upon the sofa's armrest, the remote she held within her grasp half upraised, almost as if she's preparing to bludgeon someone — or something — with it.

Another annoying plop reverberated from the nearby faucet. Hadn't he just fixed that thing?

The group of boardgame players muttered in the background.

"Who should we be wary of?" Cassandra intoned. Broderick twisted his head to glance at her as he reached for more popcorn, the residue still greasy on his fingers. No, he didn't trust that smug smile at all. If anything, it reminded him of the succubus sitting to his right, whom he was definitely not paying any attention to. None at all.

"L-U-C-I-F-" Percy began to spell out while Adrian once more demanded, "Who's pushing the planchette?!"

"Oh god, it's Satan! Is that you, Merlin?" MC called out while they reached for another set of 3-D glasses. Because obviously matching Percy's fashion statement was of utmost importance right now.

Broderick simply ignored how much better said glasses flattered MC's face as compared to their counterpart.

"Tis not me," Merlin idly repeated as the light of the television screen continued to bathe her suspiciously curvaceous form. "And I already warned you that Lucifer and Satan are two entirely separate entities."

Yes, that was *definitely* the most important thing to confirm right now!



## All Hallow's Eve



A drop of water fell from the nearby spigot with an ever-louder 'plop'. Broderick looked around the room for where he last left his toolkit.

The television flickered once more, the scene changing to the placid view of a lake whose waters lapped up to the very edge of the screen. Waves gently inundated to and fro as a figure began slowly emerging from its murky depths far in the background. Too far to see when his eyes refused to fucking focus. Slowly, ever so slowly, the darkened shadow began to drift towards the screen.

"What the hell kind of movie are we supposed to be watching here?" he demanded as he fumbled for his wrench.

"[Scary Movie](#)," Lorelei's tone remained clipped, her eyes never straying from the television even as she rapidly flicked through the remote's many buttons until the title of the currently playing movie brightly lit up the screen. The words then promptly turned red and began dripping down the face of the monitor.

"There's no fucking scene like this in *Scary Movie*!" Broderick snarled as Gwen mumbled her agreement between two fistfuls of popcorn. Hopefully there weren't any unpopped kernels there; otherwise, someone's liable to chip a tooth.

But there were far more urgent matters at hand besides the effect of certain shitty diets on poor dental hygiene!

In the background, someone faintly squealed in alarm.

“...u-uh,” Adrian eloquently said as Broderick turned around completely to stare at the table where the others were still congregated around the Ouija board.

Untouched by any unseen hand, the game’s pointer-thing spun upon its edge in ever faster circles. Smoke plumed upwards from beneath its ever-grinding tip as it tried to burrow its way through the board, the table, and perhaps the floor beneath.

“Merlin!” Several voices chorused.

“Tis not me,” Merlin blandly replied as she continued placidly filing her fingernails, apparently completely bored with this entire scenario.



## All Hallow’s Eve



The sound of a single drop of water splashing down once more briefly echoed through the room. Not coming from the nearby faucet. No, that’d make far too much fucking sense.

The rain of falling droplets, coming closer and closer, faster and faster, rose from the TV as beads of moisture began to drip down its screen. First a trickle, then a spout, then a deluge as the lake seemingly tried to empty its contents across the rapidly soddening wooden floor of the living room.

“Great SFX.” Both Percy and MC said in perfect concert as they stand there, side by side, staring at the television with their 3-D clad heads. Meanwhile, Adrian’s gaze flitted nervously between the malfunctioning appliance and the haunted Ouija board until Cassandra buried the game beneath a nearby handy cushion.

Broderick turned back to the living room, which was quickly becoming the indoor pool room. Gwen choked on a piece of popcorn in alarm, swinging her feet away from the rapidly expanding puddle, while Lorelei leaped over the side of the sofa as if this was the moment she'd been waiting for all along. She approached the television, water sloshing beneath her boots, with remote in hand and murder in her eyes.

Her homicidal charge was brought up short by the mage's sudden exclamation.

"Vivian, stop that at once!" Merlin demanded as a high-pitched giggling filled the air, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. Crystalline chimes that had the faintest hint of menace behind the sound like glass shattering in his ears.

Something trickled down the sides of his head. Sweat? Haunted lake water? If it was blood, then he was about to pop someone in the —

The television stopped leaking as the laughter faded away. Once more, the monitor flickered. Broderick stared suspiciously at the [OLED display](#) and decided that he could afford the price of replacing it. At least it'd be cheaper than the water damage from the new pond that still graced the floor.

And god help everyone if it started showing [Firestarter](#) next.

But before Broderick had the chance to pick up the wrench he'd found suddenly at hand, a polite knocking resounded from the nearby front door.

"Trick or treat!" A childish voice called from outside.

"Flee! Flee for your lives!" Percy helpfully called out as MC did a jig at his side, trying to avoid the ever-expanding puddle of water that crept across the floor as something in the back of his mind continued to giggle in fiendish glee.

"Isn't this a bit early for that?" Adrian warily said as MC began to use him as a stepping stool to avoid getting wet.

"No, the little ones would be going out while it's still daylight," Gwen reassured the group, releasing her death grip on the tub of mostly eaten popcorn as she splashed her way towards the door. Lorelei made a sound, halfway between a "tsk" and a grunt, as she moved to intercept the bubbly optimistic bubblehead.

Behind them, the television screen continued to flicker faster and faster until the faint, grainy sight of a fair-haired man in armor lying upon a gloomy stone sepulcher filled the still moist screen.

"Arthur?" Merlin exclaimed, leaping to her feet as she suddenly, belatedly, *finally* decided to become interested in the current proceedings.

The succubus dropped to a knee in front of the monitor, her trench coat somehow still improbably not drenched, and rapidly patted at its still beaded surface as if searching for some way to toss herself inside. Like she desperately wanted to reenact fucking [Poltergeist](#) of all things.

Even he knew you don't reenact Poltergeist on purpose.

And all the while, the knocking at the door grew ever more insistent.



## All Hallow's Eve



"Trick or treat!" The intonation of the voice is exactly the same as before except chorused by a dozen different throats while the knocking on the door grew ever louder. Broderick craned his head, wrench tightly clenched within his fist, and peered out the nearby window. He saw nothing standing on the front porch.

"Uh, yeah, I really don't think we ought to open that door!" Adrian oh-so-helpfully advised.

"*Thank you, Captain Obvious!*" Broderick profusely lauded him with a snarl.

"No, go right ahead and do it," Cassandra said, faintly chuckling as she released her hold on the Ouija board and pulled free the pistol always holstered at her side. She closed one eye and pointed it towards the door that shivered and shook on its frame while Broderick underwent severe doubts about the competency of the local police force.

"Flee for your lives," Percy blandly repeated as he dug into the nearly empty tub of popcorn and shoved its remnants into his mouth.

"~~TRICK OR TREAT~~"

Something shrieked behind the door as it thundered on the verge of being torn from its very hinges. Broderick clutched his wrench in a death grip as suddenly a crowd of swords and other pointy objects

filled the surrounding area.

MC moved in a blur of motion, nearly managing to decapitate Adrian and run-through Gwen at the same time as they teetered around with a ten-foot-long lance whose wicked tip Lorelei barely managed to smack away at the very last moment and how did that fit in here and where were they even previously hiding it?!

“Oh, fuck off [REDACTED]!” Merlin snapped over her shoulder as she continued to bat plaintively at the TV.

This is why Broderick always fucking hated Halloween.

## Protected: Locked In



Inside the tiny bathroom, he sat upon the closed toilet seat cover and ruminated on exactly where he went wrong in life. The floor of the RV continued to lightly rumble beneath his booted feet, every now and then swaying or jittering as the wheels hit a pothole in the road that 20% in income tax and a boatload of tolls still couldn't find the budget to fix.

Unlike the others who'd joined earlier, with their own cubbyholes or even an actual *master bedroom* at the back of the vehicle, this was the only place he could find any privacy, with him consigned to the shitty convertible dinette bed.

Or rather, it was, until MC came bursting in through the narrow bathroom door.

“The window above acts in tandem to the window of the soul,” the interloper announced without a further how-do-you-do. *What the ever-living-shitty-fuck, he thought he'd locked that door?!*

“What the ever-living-shitty-fuck? I thought I locked that door?!” he snarled as he lunged to his feet and immediately half-tripped straight into MC. There was barely any room in here for a pipsqueak, never mind someone as tall as him, and never mind *two people cramming themselves where one person needed to turn sideways to fit*.

Oh yes, he knew *exactly* where his life took a screeching turn into the wrong lane. It was the exact moment he suffered a fit of insanity and agreed to join this pile of chucklefucks on their balmy lunatic quest.

“Oh. Sorry about that,” MC politely said as they reached behind them and locked the bathroom door.

“Don’t lock yourself in here with me!” Broderick snapped the blindingly obvious to someone who was definitely completely metaphorically blind. He reached around the other’s back, trying not to elbow the dimwit in the side, as he felt one of Adrian’s migraines pounding in his temple. Those things were definitely catching. And he could just guess exactly *why*.

He fumbled with the doorknob to the thin door, only half the width of a normal one, that led into the cramped RV aisle beyond. The knob turned. The lock did not.

With growing aggravation, he shoved MC out of the way (who took this opportunity to hop up and balance precariously on the skinny bathroom vanity, which hopefully wouldn’t immediately collapse under the other’s weight), and began jiggling the doorknob with an ever-growing sense of frantic doom.

Yet no matter how he twisted, thumped, or twirled the lock, it refused to give way.

Oh no. Oh no no no no.

He should never have stepped foot on this RV.



He banged and pounded on the doorway, yelling out in frustration. The annoyingly off-white door merely stared blankly back at him, refusing to budge on inch. He took half a step back, preparing to ram straight into the unyielding exit, and promptly slammed straight into MC’s idly kicking legs. “Not enough propulsion,” his fellow bathroom occupant helpfully informed him, peering over his shoulder as he disentangled himself from the other’s limbs.

There simply wasn’t enough room for a running start like that. And by “running start”, he meant taking two steps away.

“RARGH!” he eloquently replied and began an energetic one-two combo of punching and kicking the door frame while trying not to accidentally backhand MC. “Accidentally”. The thought was tantalizingly alluring.

“Everything okay in there?” Came a quiet query from without. Adrian. Whose voice very much indicated he fully realized and expected that nothing was okay inside the close confines of the motorhome’s single bathroom.

“The fucking light forsaken door won’t open!” he yelled back at the exact same moment that MC replied with “Everything’s as expected. It’s like my apartment door. Only slightly less demonic.”

“ . . . . .” commented Adrian on the other side of said door. “...why are you both in there?”

“Because MC is an idiot!” he snarled. “Can you get the door open? The lock won’t turn from this side.”

“Let me see if I can try and pick the lock from here,” Adrian’s unseen voice came floating from outside.

“Yes, Adrian, use your nefarious hobbies for good!” MC encouraged and jumped off the vanity, once more clogging up every single inch of floor space remaining within the bathroom.

“Uh.... right.” Came the reply, as the doorknob began to softly click.

It was only a few moments of waiting. Yes, only a few moments indeed. Not for Adrian to open the door, no, not for anything so silly and unnecessary as that. It was only a few moments later when something dark fell straight down from the ceiling above the shower alcove crammed to the side.

He let loose with a manly shout of warning — yes, that was definitely the sound he made and not a high-pitched girly yelp — as a shadow began to unfold itself from within the acrylic, laminate, and plastic confines of the shower stall that’d all the space of a vertical coffin.

“Opportunity’s window opens as complacency’s door closes,” the unfurling silhouetted figure solemnly intoned in a voice as dead and flattened as the roadkill on the highway that they’d just passed by.

“Fucking hell! And now Percy’s in here too!” He pounded on the exit all the harder as the newcomer slid back the glass sliding door of the shower and attempted to step inside. Outside. Into the main compartment. The youth’s slight figure immediately bounced straight off of someone’s flailing limb or other because there’s *definitely not enough room for three people in this fucking bathroom*.

“*How* did he—” Adrian’s muffled voice began to reply in disbelief. “Oh wait... the skylight. Is there any way all of you could get back out that way?”

“Out’s harder than in,” Percy nonchalantly stated as the *three* bathroom occupants craned their heads to regard the faint sunlight filtering in from above. The triangular skylight was even tinier than the death trap that was the glass-enclosed shower. Was it even supposed to open up like that?

“C-can three people even fit in there at once?” A new voice sweetly piped up in confusion. Gwen. Come to join the insanity, it seemed.

“NO, NO, THEY FUCKING CAN’T!” Broderick roared as Percy leaped from shower to sink counter to standing atop the toilet tank like shitty knock-off [Spider-Man](#). MC clapped in approval. The bathroom lock quietly clicked as the metal knob jiggled in place.

“Well, I picked the lock, but the door still won’t open,” Adrian ruefully announced. Yet his tone wasn’t nearly dark enough for the tragedy currently taking place inside this bathroom. No, not nearly fucking mournful enough. “It looks like the door’s being jammed in the frame by something else?”

“Ah... it seems you need a bit of help here, hmm?” A third voice interjected. Silky with a slightly sultry undertone that’s tinted by only the slightest of accents.

*Merlin.* He breathed deeply and viciously shoved from his thoughts the mental images *that* voice brought to mind, bubbling up from his subconsciousness, of the way that (obviously bleached and dyed!) hair would look splayed out across a bed and—

Grr... Merlin, so suspicious! The most dubious, untrustworthy, and probably bat-shit crazy of them all, with her dark eyes like limpid pools, her legs that kept going and going, and those curves that should be illegal in most countries—

But in the end, that gal was the most likely one to be able to force the door open, and so he’d accept her help here. Just this once.

“Shall I then? Stand back and then—” Merlin coyly said.

And then a round of screams rose up from behind the door.

“Ah. I suppose we were past due for some magical backlash, weren’t we?” The so-called mage’s voice remained nonchalant even as a burning smell began to infiltrate the bathroom while someone wailed about their hair in the near distance. From all the way across the room, and by that he meant a scant two fucking feet away, someone blasted him in the face with the portable shower head.

The warm droplets dripped down his chin into the open collar of his shirt.

Urge to kill... *rising*.

“Umm... calm down, Broderick! Don’t do anything you might regret! Like setting your hair on fire!” Gwen pleaded from the other side of the door.

Wait, had he said that aloud?

“Mentos soda,” Percy said, followed in half a heartbeat by “Definitely Diet Coke Mentos,” MC agreed, as the motorhome bounced rather violently over a deep pothole. Or hit the curb of the road. Or ran over an ill-fated wandering kid. Or something such.

Something such. *Waitamminute*...

“Merlin, if you’re back here now...” Adrian briefly paused to rather violently cough. Was that dark smoke he saw floating through the air? “Then who’s currently driving the RV?”

“It’s fine,” MC called back. “I left Audrey III riding shotgun up there.”

They were going to die. They were all going to die in a horribly bloody and fiery accident that’ll probably take out over a dozen vehicles down with them and cause a pile-up all the way back to the next state’s border, and he’ll be passing through the [Pearly Gates](#) with toilet paper wrapped around his shoe

because *he's still stuck in the bathroom* as a fucking mutant Venus flytrap drove the motorhome while several voices began shouting for Merlin to go back to the driver's seat.

He should never have stepped foot on this RV.



"Broderick. Broderick. Broderick? *Broderick!*" they chorused as Percy clung to his back like a demented knapsack while MC carefully teetered atop the nearby closed toilet seat, sitting cross-legged while holding on to his knee for balance. At least this way he'd room to stand and spread his legs, bracing himself as the RV continued to rumble along in the absence of any screeching accidents.

"Broderick~!"

Oh wait. That was him.

"Just stay still, you two fuckheads!" Broderick told his fellow bathroom prisoners.

To the relief of all, Merlin had retreated a few moments prior. And a new voice came to join the crew outside the door instead.

"I could kick in the door?" Lorelei offered, voice clipped and neutral as ever, after a quiet consultation amongst those still gathered outside. Percy had slipped silently down and was now hanging off his waist like a too-long sweater. But more importantly, he half turned his head to see that MC had slowly started to climb to their feet on top of the toilet seat.

What the fuck was that dipshit planning now?

"The bathroom door opens outwards," Adrian said in an attempt to dissuade her.

"I could kick in the door." Lorelei sounded not dissuaded a single bit. If anything, a hint of eagerness might've begun to thread through her tone.

"I-I don't think there's enough room in there with three of them. If the door falls inward, it'll hit someone, right?" Gwen hesitantly piped up. "Also... I kinda have to use the bathroom right now..."

"There's definitely not enough room in here!" Broderick said as he slammed a fist against said door. A door that'll definitely be smashing straight into his face if it's kicked in. "And go use the fucking bushes or something if you need the toilet!"

"Not my bushes. My garden isn't meant for that," MC added as Percy began scrambling up Broderick's back like a monkey once more.

"*Stop dancing!*" Broderick barked at a sashaying MC while Lorelei once more offered, "I can kick in the door!"

"Has someone tried picking the lock yet?" Yet another voice interjected. Pragmatic. Less eager to send doors flying in their wake.

The cop. If she had any sense at all, she'd be arresting the lot of them. Although, with how many notes she'd been jotting down this whole while, he can't help but suspect that she'd just been gathering evidence this entire time. Maybe of group insanity to get all of them committed.

"Let me try something quick here," Cassandra said, over the protesting explanations of Adrian, as something rustled on the other side of the door. Could it be? Some sort of detective trick? Perhaps this time...

And then another round of screams rose up from the other side of the door.

"What was that?" Gwen moaned.

"Another backblast— I mean, backlash from Merlin's prior spell?" Adrian suggested, sounding distinctly groggy.

"Oh... was it then?" A voice trilled from the other end of the motorhome. Merlin. Hopefully, still driving.

Percy twirled around Broderick's shoulders like an out-of-control carnival swing, briefly bracing his feet against the wall, before he hopped from sink to shower top and then scooted back up the skylight, flipping himself around like a gymnast on the uneven bars. MC flung themselves afterwards in the other's wake, arm extended and hand upheld, as they leaped from toilet top to shower head.

Like a consummate trapeze artist, without a single hitch, Percy smoothly caught the other's hand and drew them upwards and back out of the skylight.

And once more, Broderick could *breathe*.

"You shitheads! You could've done that the entire time, couldn't you?" he accused while looking up at the itchy bitsy skylight, which definitely should've been soldered shut from the very beginning. Monkey gymnasts or not, there's no way he was fitting through that.

"Take shelter in the shower," MC suggested while hanging upside down like a baboon. "Then let Nessie loose." And with that, the other 'Harbinger' disappeared back up to the RV's roof. While they zipped along at 60 miles per hour on the highway.

Oh well. Finally, he was once more alone within the bathroom.

With brows lowered and face furrowed, Broderick took one single stride to the left and shut himself inside the shower stall. "Lorelei, kick the door in!" he called out.

He should never have stepped foot on this RV.

## Protected: Parsimonious Botanical Function



He'd planned the trip to Greenfields Nursery for ages. Fussed around, put it off, procrastinated... and then, in a flurry of worry and misgivings, he finally bolted over there one fine day in early spring, praying that he wasn't too late. That everything would go as smoothly as planned, like things never did.

A turn of phrase, of course. He didn't really pray any more.

He looked through his wardrobe, both all-too-briefly and far-too-long, fruitlessly debating over his wide selection of dull-colored hoodies and faded jeans. A momentous decision to be made here. The same as what discreet cologne to wear and if he'd brushed his teeth suitably well this morning.

With a sigh, he snatched the closest shirt and pants at hand, ran his hands through hair that always seemed to look unkempt, made sure his car keys were in his pocket, and then mentally paced through scenario after scenario as he locked the door.

Slowly, inevitably, he made his way towards the nearby gardening center. Nearby, yes, although not quite the nearest to him, with his apartment on Lanvale Street — a name so close to the [knight](#) whose bad luck he's certainly about to share. But from what he'd previously scoped out, Greenfields had the better selection. Wider. More exotic.

That's probably why...

The bright morning sunrays filtered through the glass ceiling of the nursery, leaving the plants glowing healthily in a warm halo of light. A blue-vested employee with a garden hose in a far-off section sent small rainbows through the air as the water lightly sprinkled down. Everything exactly positioned for the perfect shopping experience.

The heat of the store smacked him in the face as he stepped within, leaving the chill of new spring in the city behind.

As he surreptitiously scurried inside — no, strolled, he very nonchalantly and casually *strolled* — his gaze flicked back and forth in search of his target. And there — *ah ha!* — something suitable came to sight. He pushed his eyeglasses back up the bridge of his nose as he made a beeline towards the

exhibit of brightly colored [monkey cups](#), picking up the largest specimen on display and burying his head amongst its strangely shaped foliage.

[Nepenthe](#), indeed. A moment to forget his regrets as he gathered up a handful of potted plants *here* and an eye-catching hanging sample *there*. And thus, with his arms suitably filled with potential purchases, he began ambling around the store with an ever-greater focus, half of his body hidden behind spiky leaves, waving fronds, and somewhat unsettling gaping mouths of vegetation.

Yes, simply a completely normal shopper here.

Too bad he'd been in the carnivorous plant section at the time.



He was making his third lopsided circuit around the store when his attention was arrested by the sight, glimpsed between waving spikes and curling leaves, of a figure bathed in the slanting sunlight coming in from the nearby floor-to-ceiling glass storefront windows.

Glass, glass everywhere, in the store, in the windows, in the reinforced ceiling, in his heart that feebly jumped within his chest and the foggy edges of his mind. A figure both achingly familiar and entirely strange.

A figure turning to stare at him. And not the only one either. He felt the heavy weight of several gazes resting upon him, from the scattering of other customers to the employee who was accidentally watering the nearby wall as she side-eyed him. Of course they are; he fucking looked like [Poison Ivy](#)'s dorky cousin at the moment.

MC put down the large tub of budding hyacinths that they'd been inspecting and slowly began to make their way over towards him. In his general direction. Sweat prickled beneath his clothes as he shambled over towards them on an intersecting course. He thought. Perhaps. Those were MC's shoes over there, right?

He nearly walked into the nearby shelf as leaves of [butterworts](#), [cape sundews](#), and [spider lilies](#) bobbed seductively all around him. A hand reached out and parted the veil of foliage — the sea of concealing greenery — that surrounds his head, and finally they came face to face. First time. At least in this...

He knows this face. It's entirely wrong.

"Hey," the utter and complete stranger says to him, smiling at this completely normal meeting. Their eyes met. He discreetly swallowed. "So, you seem to like carnivorous plants. Having a bad bug infestation there?"

"Hey there," he casually replied in a tone that neither spiked upwards in his nervousness nor dropped too low into a creepy stalkerish tone. The leaves of meat-eating plants whispered all around him. His

heart stuttered and attempted to lodge itself into the yawning maw of one of the Venus flytraps that he held. “Funny story there...”

He spouted some nonsense about his mother and watching [Little Shop of Horrors](#) as a kid, the kernel of truth dredged forth from his discarded past, even if the memory had faded over time like a photograph yellowing at its edges. It made as much sense as anything else. *Of all things, why had he decided to pillage the carnivorous plant section like some budding serial killer?!*

No roses of new reminiscence here. No bouquet to celebrate a new friendship.

No, only a predator luring in its oblivious prey.

MC softly laughed and seemed intrigued enough. They wandered side by side, chatting amiably about this and that, as they made their way back to the insectivores. Their conversation remained light and superficial. He could barely pay any attention even as he burned every single word into his mind while MC asked for his recommendation.

He juggled all the pots in his arms as he stooped over the ones that remained on the tiers of shelving on display. The nearby lobes of a flytrap, turning pink at its very edges, seemed to wiggle almost in anticipation. One of the cape sundews he held attempted to slap him in the eye. It left a residue of digestive juices lightly splattered across his eyeglass lenses.

Glass everywhere. So very fragile, this quiet moment, snatched away in a fitful bit of time. A peaceful moment in the midst of a burgeoning pandemic. Things were bad, already spiraling, but they would get so much worse.

He was just going to ignore MC staring at his ass.

“So is this the one you recommend?” MC asked, nudging straight up to him. The warmth of the store, needed to protect its products within, needed to bloom something out of season, should make it impossible for him to sense the other’s body heat at his side.

His new acquaintance was pointing towards the rather large Venus flytrap now clamped to his head, the prickly lobes fastened firmly around one of his shaggy spikes of hair. He could swear he almost heard the sound of chewing.

“Yes,” he amiably replied with an assurance he didn’t feel. That he never felt, not one single moment in this lifetime. “This one is very healthy... and... uh, feisty? Exactly what you want in a bug-catcher.”

MC eventually pried the gleeful plant away from him, taking a non-negligible amount of hair strands on its way, and then with one last wave, his new acquaintance checked out as they parted ways. MC’s new purchase also waved its leaves at him as several of the plants he continued to hold within his grasp undulated their stalks in seeming reply.

...why in the world did he decide to go with a bunch of carnivorous vegetation?



“So you going to check out?” The wall-watering store clerk finally prompted him with a popping of her gum. At least he thought it was gum. It seemed this was one of those businesses that’d already mandated their employees to wear face masks all the time.

*Prescient.*

“Uh yeah, about that...” he began to demur.

He knew he didn’t have the proper time and attention to take care of all these plants. These living beings (as sentient as they may or may not be, as he cautiously eyed some of them), which are fated to die, soon as likely as not. Still... after all of that, it’d be highly suspicious if he didn’t buy anything here.

Especially if his new acquaintance ever came over to his apartment.

And in the end, he had what he really wanted. MC’s phone number now lodged within the memory of his rather aging phone.

He carefully arranged his armful of carnivores on the nearby checkout counter. “So out of all these plants, which would you recommend as the most alluring to its target?” he innocently asked, as if he hadn’t studied, in torturous detail, every single product this store offered on their website ahead of time. As if he hadn’t studied a whole lot more than that.

Yes, this time will be different. He’ll make sure of it.

## **Protected: Soulmates**



It began inside an abandoned warehouse so covered in rust that the sight of it was enough to seep the fear of mutant [tetanus](#) into his bones. Never mind sitting inside of it as he felt a multitude of eyes coming to rest upon him.

Rats. Just rats. Rats were a common pest inside abandoned buildings, weren’t they? A faint metallic thump reverberated through the vents. Neither of his companions reacted to the sound.

Yes, just giant rats. He casually reached for the hidden machete lying in wait at his feet.

The small group huddled around the circle of magically glowing orbs that wanly tried to illuminate the vast expanse of the industrial warehouse. Bravely, the lights tried. Bravely, they failed. He shifted in his seat, clutching his bottle of tea like a weapon, with eyes riveted to the shadows as he wondered if he shouldn't have sat closer to MC after all.

The group chattered. The group snacked and drank. The group waited. And then there was one more in the group than there had been before.

He'd read about this. This is exactly how the [Goatman](#) appeared in all those urban legends—!

While a shout of warning strangled in his throat, MC leaped to their feet, as did the shadowy figure that'd so easily infiltrated the group. The two of them frolicked towards each other. Yes, somehow they managed to do so, even though only two short feet separated them, right up to the moment that they flung themselves into each other's arms.

Oh. It seemed that MC already knew who this was. A touch of good luck to find another Harbinger who already had a connection to them. Just like him and MC.

Yes. 'Good luck'.

—although [skinwalkers](#) and [fleshgaits](#) could also take on the familiar forms of people to trick their newest victims. Behind his eyeglasses, his gaze narrowed ever so slightly.

"Do you two know each other?" he asked cautiously while pushing said glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"Never seen him before in my life!" MC reassured him as the newcomer nodded in silent agreement. All the while, the two of them continued clinging onto each other.

He squinted in the darkness. The figure of the quiet intruder somehow seemed somewhat familiar to him. This slight frame. That blue-streaked hair. Those eyes, seemingly blankly shuttered and staring. Just like...

*Oh God.*

And as MC and Percy kept holding each other's hands while their marbles hit the floor and skidded out of sight, some part of him couldn't help but wonder if they wouldn't have been better off with the Goatman.



The ghostly sounds of "[The Song That Doesn't End](#)" still reverberated within his mind as their small group traipsed through the very much haunted forest that surrounded them. Or rather, *skipped* while still

holding hands in the case of MC and Percy, as they gamboled on the heels of a Merlin who currently hunted through the woods like a bloodhound with the scent of fox within its nostrils.

*Three-fucking-hours of—*

Cassandra, bringing up the rear, already had her pistol drawn in hand. The detective kept a wary eye on the trees and other vegetation that surrounded them, as well as the shadows that skulked through the dimness, easily keeping pace with the pack. A wary eye that often came to rest upon him — *him*, instead of the two frolickers twittering at nonexistent birds in the trees — as if she were half afraid that he planned to go on a murderous bender with the newly gained bastard sword now strapped to his back.

Of course, she doesn't know. She wasn't there for the hours of *The Song That Doesn't End...*

A wind far too cold for new spring moaned through the trees around them. The empty branches that should've been sprouting leaves by now clattered amongst themselves. Something giggled, high-pitched and crazed, in the distance. [Lamb Chop](#) chirped about singing forever in his head.

The hands of MC and Percy were still conjoined, a plump picnic basket held between them, even as they scrambled away from a dead tree trunk that, oh-so-coincidentally, nearly fell on their heads.

For a moment, he simply stared after them with a wary — weary — warning on his lips. If it was anyone else besides MC, one would make certain assumptions here. But in the many years of his friendship with MC, he'd come to understand some of their particular foibles and eccentricities.

Randomly dancing and bursting into song. *That song. For. Three. Hours.* Talking about celery coming at midnight and trailer gremlins. Climbing into his bed and stripping buck naked.

Yes, definitely *friends*.


“!” Merlin melodiously shrieked as the laughter surrounding them deepened into a roaring echo.

Behind him, Cassandra began opening fire on a darkened figure that coalesced between the clawing tree limbs. Fog swirled amongst the gloom as the buzz of a thousand midge and mayfly wings beat through the air.

“Food fight!” Percy announced as he and MC began pelting the encroaching fae with maple ham and glazed salmon.

Sometimes he just didn't know.

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“McBuckway Bell's wants its customers to stay... forever... and ever... and ever...” Percy and MC chorused in perfect harmony, hands still linked, as they stood at the midway point of the hallway that greeted Adrian's eyes upon his leaving the restroom for the three dozenth time.

"Would you two stop doing that?!" Broderick barked as he, also trapped in the same hallway labyrinth, exited from the restroom on the opposite side of the corridor (which also somehow managed to be the same one behind Adrian's back).

In the unseen distance, McBlippy, the commercial deep-fryer machine, *screamed* amid a shriek of grinding metal. Lorelei was probably still doing battle with it.

They were going to be here awhile.

"They don't know?" MC asked in the same sing-song voice.

"They don't know," Percy replied, completely deadpan.

"You two little shits are purposefully being as creepy as possible, aren't you?" Broderick snarled at the pair, whirling on the heel of his work boots as he slammed the distant restroom door shut. He then promptly walked straight into Adrian's back on the opposite end of the corridor.

"Godfucking dammit!" Broderick's voice joined in the muffled chorus as Adrian politely sidestepped to the left, his own eyes narrowing as he squinted down the cramped hall.

Scuffed wooden floors. Drab off-white walls. A single sign at eye height proclaiming 'Universal Restroom' with arrows that pointed in both directions. A migraine pounded behind his eyes. To the left. He could just bash his head right into the wall over there...

"No doors work here," MC said. Or perhaps it was Percy. "Only the windows," the other one added.

"There are no windows in the fucking restroom!" Broderick growled right as a window in the hallway slammed open.

Adrian was reasonably sure that wall had been completely blank before, a stretch of bland laminate between the blown-up posters of various overpriced value meals, exactly where he'd just been contemplating ramming his head.

"Look, what I just found!" Gwen gleefully waved a colorful bag full of sealed plastic toys outside of the new drive-thru window in the narrow corridor.

Percy and MC finally released each other's hands as they eagerly swarmed towards the proffered McKid's Valu-bucks Funway Meal. In the background behind Gwen, Merlin stared down at the plastic floor display of available kid's toys, available for the low, low price of \$9.99 + tax, as if it held all the secrets of the world.

Or the secret on how to leave this cursed place.

"No, Percy, don't eat the flower!" MC intoned just as the blue-haired Harbinger was about to snack down on a particularly brightly petalled abomination that looked like a combination between a [Transformer](#) and

[Audrey II](#) from [Little Shop of Horrors](#).

It was Audrey III's little robotic cousin.

"Jinkies," Percy said. Or perhaps it was MC as they helped each other crawl through the displaced drive-thru window. With one last wary eyeballing of each other (and perhaps a "Fucking hell!" coming from the other Harbinger), both he and Broderick followed in their wake.

He always hated the [Backrooms](#).



"MC is dead!" Percy suddenly proclaimed from the back of the pack.

Several groans arose around Adrian as the sun continued to glare down upon the small plodding group like the [Eye of Sauron](#). Burning. Unblinking. And completely merciless. He carefully made his way back down the trail, through the orange-tinted sand and the shimmer of heat in the air, to find MC lying face down in the desert dust.

They never did have the best stamina.

"Percy, stop poking them!" Lorelei warned halfway back down the path, with a tone as icy as the day was not, while Percy blithely ignored her and continued repeatedly prodding the unmoving Harbinger with a stick he'd found somewhere or other.

"We can always eat them," someone added. Someone who sounded suspiciously like Broderick.

As Adrian stooped with a sigh, he tried to ignore the fact that just last year, a troop of hikers had gone missing on this very trail. Their desiccated corpses, bled dry of all fluids, had been found a few days later, not very far from here.

Yes, let's not think about that.

"Shall I float them?" Merlin offered, tone ever blandly solicitous, from the very front of the impromptu band of backpackers. Just another Harbinger keeled over in their potential death throes. Nothing worth worrying over. "Better that than hampering our pace even further."

He supposes he ought to be grateful that Merlin hadn't simply turned MC into a duck. *Again*.

All eyes had turned to Adrian and the new lump upon the path, in various stages of concern, impatience, and boredom. A few had even started to slowly make their way back over, as their feet kicked up even more dust and grit in their wake.

"That's not necessary." Adrian gritted his teeth as he carefully nudged MC onto his back with a helpful boost from Percy to the side. Stronger than he looked, that one. Something that Adrian could quite easily understand. "Just do your healing thing once I'm up there, right?"

"Forget the [Ides of March](#)," Percy advised him, voice low and conspiratorial, as if it wasn't already the middle of April.

The other Harbinger's slight figure leaned in closer as he tied a wet towel around the nodding MC's forehead. A very slight figure indeed, as Adrian well knew from *intimate* experience upon waking up to find a nude Percy and a just as naked MC in his bed this very morning.

Yes, let's not think about that.

"Screw March!" MC mumbled their agreement, apparently still completely unconscious, as Adrian slowly trudged his way back up to the group.

Yes, he simply knew... it was going to be a very, very long day.

## Protected: 'Platonic' Partners



They came across the sea on the tumbling edge of an encroaching storm, a moment of silence in between the rumbling of thunder and the curtains of rain, as the memory of their recent failure nipped at the edges of their not-yet-existent heels. Too late, too far, still too weakened to reach out for *that one* who'd fallen through their fumbling grasp, leaving only the faint impression of what they had once been.

*Lamorak.*

And even now, the glimmer that they chased, brightest amongst all the stars that marked the presence of the Harbingers, grew dimmer and dimmer still as they approached on ephemeral wings. How long had it been now? A night? A day? A week since one-third of its shine had been lost? In the end, Merlin was not surprised at what they found upon reconstituting on that darkened street.

Two instead of a singularly powerful one. Ah yes... even if they'd hoped to find the reincarnation of *her*, this made far more sense to explain the strength of the resonance they felt... and how quickly it died away. Too late once more for that third.

One of them held a thickly bound book on high—a grimoire, perhaps? Humans would sometimes create such things to act as a focus for their spellcastings. But no, the other seemed intent on physically assaulting the lumbering mass of the hellhound that stalked its way down the street. With nothing more than a book at hand. *Interesting.*

And that one remained undissuaded a single bit by Merlin's sudden appearance.

Their companion apparently held a rather different opinion, as he picked up his 'friend'—yes, , that was the word that echoed between both of their minds—and carried them off, protesting madly, into the night.

"Carry me like a princess, not a sack of potatoes!" The complaint came drifting back through the too-quiet evening shadows. Apparently, that one didn't mind being carried off, only the details and how it should be done. A proper bridal carry then.

And so Merlin laughed as they turned their attention back upon the demon spawn who dared to defy them.



They caught up with the pair once more, the stench of infernal ichor lingering upon their essence as the very edges of the diablerie trembled and frayed away in the aftermath of its caster's death. Nearly too late again, as one of the Harbingers lay half dragged into the tear in reality as the other clung fervidly on, a death grip where one was determined to be dragged down with the other.

No. With the spell that'd been cast here, the first would be torn apart before that happened.

"Never let go!" one of them exclaimed.

"I'm not planning to!" the other swore.

Suitable enough words, considering the situation, yet while the bespectacled one's thoughts were filled with burgeoning horror, the other's mind danced with images of embraces from behind, nude modeling for paintings, and sex inside a—

*And my heart will go on and on...*

Delusional due to pain and fear, Merlin decided, as with a flick of thought, both the bed and bridge to the abyss were set alight.



Deadly injuries healed, infernal breaches scabbed over, and the dying diablerie convulsing all around them, the three of them faced each other and proffered introductions as befitting the occasion. In the end, 'Merlin' was the safest name to extend. Known with a suitably benevolent reputation... more or less. One connected to the apocalypse without the connotations that *other* names might bring.

In response, their newfound companion lied straight to their face and stole the name of the other who stood at their side. Slowly, ever so slowly, 'Adrian Benoni' turned to stare at their 'friend'. Yes. Most certainly, 'friend'.

Oh. So *that* sort of relationship was it? Camelot had more than enough of such ambiguous bonds back then.

Merlin was reasonably certain that whatever smile the other two were seeing upon whatever face it was that they conjured forth, yes, most certainly that expression remained serenely unruffled. They simply hoped this wasn't Lancelot and Galehaut this time. While those two were certainly powerful enough allies as one could wish for, they were both less than reliable in their loyalty... especially when it came to perilous times like these.

Yes, there was certainly far more afoot during the apocalypse than any mere plots for sudden-sprung platonic marriages.



The day dawned early as Merlin held the reins to the vehicle that was both chariot and chastel. Certainly this and the smooth path it traveled upon would be the envy of any cart driver back in the times of Britannia, all without having to sink to the use of fae magicry. And as the mage controlled and wondered over the modern marvel, behind them MC lured Adrian into sharing a bed.

A very platonic bed, the first assured, even as they warned about their habit of stripping naked and wandering the world in their sleep.

"I know!" Adrian groaned, apparently well-used to their 'friend's antics by this point.

For a brief moment, the static that filled the dark-haired man's mind briefly lifted, bringing images of a screaming elder lady in the middle of a hallway pointing at a nudely frolicking MC. And then another flicker... as the image of MC slowly divesting themselves of their clothing, piece by seductive piece, leaning in closer as...

Oh dear. That teakettle sound in the memory was probably Adrian's yelp, wasn't it?

Merlin felt the other's glower burrowing in their direction as they lightly laughed at the thought. Yes, well, that one would indeed blend in splendidly with certain sorts back in Camelot. But as amusing as the circumstances might be, there was danger lurking in the latter. Too easy for the fae or the demonic to take advantage of one's propensity for *sleepwalking*.

Yes, they'd certainly have to keep an eye out for that, amongst the thousands of other eyes watching a thousand other things.

And when Merlin chuckled all the harder as MC turned their attention towards trying to convince Adrian to join them in a completely platonic morning shower, the mage felt a further burning at their back. At the

back of their attention, a slow rising growl, like a wolf snarling warnings at someone who dared approach too close to the den where their mate rested.

Ah yes, they were truly reincarnations of Camelot, weren't they? Complexities upon complications... nothing could ever go quite so easily *there*. Too much power. Too much ego. Too much balancing on the edge of fate.

"Who doesn't indulge in platonic nude bathing in close quarters every now and then? The ancient Romans would've certainly agreed!" MC continued to try and cajole, even as Adrian sighed all the harder.

Popcorn, wasn't it? That was the sort of thing that mortals would seek during a time like this. Even as tiny teeth of hidden jealousy continued to nigger at Merlin's all-seeing back.



"I'm just saying," MC said as they clung to Adrian's arm while the remnants of the restaurant burned down all around them. Or perhaps the one who held on for dear life was Adrian instead. In the tangle of limbs, it was hard enough to tell. "That it's totally possible to sleep with someone platonically."

As Merlin carefully sought out each Harbinger one by one, Cassandra already free as she warily circled the area with her gun drawn for any other lingering threats, Gwen half buried under a pile of menu boards as Lorelei stoutly dug her out, Percy sitting on a nearby tree branch—where did that even come from?—the mage glided nonchalantly through the carnage, a projection of serene composure even as they frantically licked at their ever-widening wounds.

They've extended themselves too far. Pushed too hard. Fed too lightly to compensate. Yet none around them paused to blink at the trickles of melted galaxies they left in their wake.

Broderick burst out of the rubble that was once the checkout counter in an explosion of ash and burnt plastic splinters. "Fuck this! Fuck the backrooms, fuck the apocalypse, fuck McBuckway Bell's, and fuck all of you too!"

"...not 'friends with benefits'. Simply fucking... platonically," MC casually explains as a gout of flame consumes the McFluff BB soft serve machine behind them.

"Oh god, we're both so fucked up!" Adrian bemoans as he buries his head within his hands.

Yes, most certainly, this is Camelot reborn.

**Protected: Lore Dump Extraordinaire**

# INTERLUDE

## MERLIN

Twas a very close thing this time. This time and the previous one, where Lamorak had fallen through their grasping fingers, and all those who came before. But for once the coin balancing upon its edge fell to Merlin's side.

Even if the two Harbingers before them seem to disagree with that sentiment, one of them glowering in silence while the other waves around one of those new fangled style of brooms in a manner that is probably meant to be threatening.

It reminded the mage more of the mummeries that [Dagonet](#) would sometimes put on for the pleasure of the royal court.

Knowing now the true source for the strength of the resonance that Merlin had sensed here — not due to the power of a singular reincarnation but the close proximity of *two* — left unfortunate implications on *how* and *why* the connection had diminished over a singular day.

There had probably been three of them at one point. So close, but still so far away. And so Ninianne continues to remain beyond their reach.

“What’s a merlin with camels a lot?” The owner of these particular quarters pronounces, surrounded by tapestries, immaculately carved figurines, and a host of other paraphernalia that Merlin’s previous brief stint within the modern world leads them to believe are entirely Camelot-related. Even that one’s dark-haired companion has turned to stare at them.

Yes, Merlin is quite certain that the particular painting right beside the other’s head depicts himself and Arthur with the [Sword in the Stone](#), no less. Even if all three of them looked entirely inaccurate.

“Cute. Or are you telling me that you simply like this aesthetic alone?” Merlin says, while silently they idly ponder if this one is simply a fool or someone steeped deeply in wariness and suspicion. And what truth — which variation of this potential Harbinger — would be more useful to Merlin and their cause in the end?



*Wariness*, the mage decides when the time comes for proper introductions.

The dark-haired one with green eyes like jeweled emeralds has given his true name. No, his *current* name. And behind that gaze simmers something far closer to resentment than any plain suspicion.

Interesting. They've been recognized, and not simply the name from folklore and legend. Merlin themselves. That certainly has some *implications*.

And the other... oh, that one is about to *lie*. The intention coats this body's tongue like a bitter poison with the sweetest aftertaste. Yes, Merlin supposes that is one proper way to describe it, if one had a proper body in the first place.

That one pronounces their false name. Which is their true name. 'Adrian Benoni' makes no move, as if all is as expected, while Merlin simply stares, digging deeper for an explanation. A current name only, like this 'Adrian'? A false name that has taken deeper root than the original truth?

No, none of that. All implications point to this 'lie' indeed being the other's true name.

While tis quite possible to fool the mage's senses with a delusion so deep that its perpetrator believes it to be the truth or through a compartmentalization where the truth is briefly hidden even from the mind of its originator, somehow this simply does not seem to be the case here.

No, this one believes the true name that they've given is actually a *nom de guerre*. As if Arthur traveled incognito under the alias 'Arthur'.

And as the newest Harbinger, having seemingly abandoned their attempt to hide their knowledge of legendary Camelot, begins gushing about a "hobo hermit Merlin" and showing off their false *Excalibur* while bragging about their specialization in "improper weapons", the court mage quietly adds a mental stone to the scale that measures foolishness.



*Foolishness*, the mage decides at some point between MC indulging in a chant that's supposed to summon some sham of an eldritch abomination called "[Dagon](#)", babbling excitedly about something called "[Amogus](#)", and then arguing for several moments that the quaintly named "time bubbles" should be renamed to "blathering blatherskites" instead.

"No matter how many times you try, we're not calling them *blathering blatherskite*," 'Adrian' continues to argue back, quietly entreating their friend's understanding.

The previous name had come from the Second Circle, those adolescents who toed the line between children and adults at a mere fifteen years of age, as they always have since time immemorial. The age where Arthur ascended his throne. The age where [Percival](#) and [Galahad](#) wandered into Camelot to be knighted.

A few joyfully childish peculiarities are only to be expected then. Of course, ten short years later, and there's little enough excuse for *this* right now. The mage is reasonably certain that twenty-five is meant

to be the age of a fully adult mortal.

If MC was a shade more quiet, Merlin should be inclined to think they were purposefully indulging in a ‘*smashing*’ — as they are wont to colloquially say — impersonation of Percival. Although perhaps the latter has come to regret the things he’d never said, those tragedies left unremarked, those warnings never spoken.

They suppose that Percival’s incarnation could simply have evolved that way. Even though that one had been a member of the Three Great Mortal Seers, yet still escaped the fire of fate that had damned the others.

Yes, MC certainly doesn’t have the Knight of the Circle Gold’s penchant for muteness, as they proclaim that they would’ve already conquered the world if not for [Madagascar](#) and once more starts chanting again.

“Stop trying to summon [Cthulhu](#)!” that one’s companion implores as another round of fiendish incantation begins anew.



*Not Percival*, the mage decides after their supposed new ally begins demonstrating an undue interest in demonic appendages — particularly *tentacles* — and then tries to initiate a ménage a trois between the three of them.

Although perhaps that one had come to regret their role as one of the famed [Three Virgin Knights of Britannia](#).

“Hey, Adrian... one word. ‘Threesome’,” MC gleefully suggests, as ‘Adrian’ coughs and sputters as if caught in the midst of an apoplectic fit.

Merlin is far from unfamiliar with either topic. There had always been *those* sorts from the very beginning who liked to indulge in the exotic and what the mortal world might otherwise deem profane. Although, from the all-too-paltry knowledge they’ve absorbed, it seems that a tentacle fetish in particular has taken quite ahold within certain modern cultures.

Never mind that the commonness of threesomes — and outright orgies — had always secretly flourished despite the Church’s attempts to stamp them out. Camelot had certainly not been excluded there. At least in the former, and how that helped to destroy more than one royal court.

A lazy smile slowly widens across the mage’s face. Yes, most certainly, that must be the expression that they now project as ‘Adrian’ grows ever more alarmed. It’s been awhile since they’ve fed deeply. No time, no access, no opportunity, even as their life force bled away.

Perhaps then, if enough space, both physical and metaphysical, could be gained between them and the current threat, then mayhaps they could finally indulge...

...no, not a mere indulgence here. Little chance remains of properly protecting this Circle without regaining a modicum of what they've once lost.

Although perhaps Merlin should be more wary of how MC keeps trying to claim 'dibs' on Arthur. Perhaps MC is merely stubbornly clinging to the idea that they are the Once and Future King who stands at the heart of the legends.

Or perhaps it means something else entirely. There had been far too much claiming of the king in *other* aspects back then. What was the modern word for it? Stalker? [Yandere](#). They must certainly remain more vigilant this time.



*Not a true enemy*, the mage decides as MC speaks in inhuman guttural tongues and flings their friend halfway across the room. Said friend had just revealed the presence of a certain mark upon the other's arm. Something that worried 'Adrian' even more than the motives of the mage himself.

In the end, Merlin is hardly surprised by this development, even as they extend their own essence out towards the possessed Harbinger. This household had become an incontrovertible bridge to Hell. Of course, the Diablerie Court had unfurled their tainted touch and tried to contaminate the one who lived here, to their own misfortune. Had tried to drag them across the barrier between realms, compressed down to nothing but their fading life essence, and violated their soul into an empty puppet for their own benefit.

That this had happened merely indicates the true proof of MC's innocence. If they had to be taken by force, then they must not be part of the Rival Circle already allied with the other demons.

And so Merlin refuses to give up on this one. Not now. Not yet. Not this time.

It only takes a moment of shared agony to purge enough of the taint to bring the other back to their senses. But Merlin is no true healer, and they have discarded far too much of their essence in far too many ways to now overwrite the blight with their own.

They had hoped to leave Vivian as a final resort. An 'ace up the sleeve' as the modern tongue would so herald. But they no longer have such a luxury. The next acceptable body of water must be found before too long. The Veil has thinned so much in the scant few years since Merlin had licked their wounds and painfully stitched their spirit back together.

A brief moment of contact should now be possible. Should hopefully be enough.

"What do you mean? I'm always sane," MC declares as 'Adrian' warily approaches once more, shaking off the effects of a throw that should've shattered a normal mortal's bones.

"I have gathered the greatest warriors and the finest minds within Camelot," Arthur had proclaimed near the start of his legendary reign.

"Nay, you have gathered a collection of crackpots, lunatics, and outright fools," Kay had grumpily retorted, as was always his way.

"That most certainly is up for debate," Merlin dryly replies in both the past and the present.

Simply another normal day with the Fellowship of the Round Table.

## Protected: Mercy



The sun burned bright as the eye of God within a cloudless sky. Even through the many leagues that still separated them from the sea, through the intricately snarled boughs of the nearby Forest Savage, across the very coastline, Merlin could still sense the faint tang of salt upon the air. Too indistinct and nebulous for a human to detect, but its scent coated the underside of their tongue like the memory of spilled blood.

Yes, they did have a tongue. The golden child often glanced back to make certain that they hadn't evaporated away into the air. Still too easy to do after all this time, when one was distracted.

Arthur careened through the long grass, juicy at its roots and drying at its tips, with the sort of boundless joy that only young mortals seemed to possess. That his soul was able to cling to such a shard of rosy brightness even as he aged, even throughout all the darkness that haunted his many steps, was one of the reasons they always loved him so.

Of course, the purest ones were not those who were never touched by the decay of this mortal realm, but those who remained unbroken after everything had already charred to ash. In the end, yes, at the very end of this world, this is why the two of them were so *compatible*.

They were alone now, Kay having been previously dragged off to his lessons on the stewardship of a smaller household with attendant lands. Those suitable for the heir of what the kingdom erroneously deemed a lesser lord.

The older boy had become a shadow at his younger foster brother's side during Merlin's latest tutelage, ever since that unfortunate incident where Kay had nearly crushed the recently metamorphosed ant-

Arthur underfoot. There had been good reason why the pair of them had snuck off to that anthill. A very adroit reminder of that whimsical warning, *'Watch where you step'*. Or was it *'mind your step'* here?

Had that saying come into existence yet? Ah... they suppose it mattered not.

It certainly would've been a rather ignominious end to this particular incarnation.

They had briefly drifted off again, and then suddenly Arthur was before them, eagerly asking, *what shall they learn today?* What new discoveries to be found? What new paths to be explored?

But something had been plucking at the mage's attention for awhile now. A moment. A second — no, that quantity of measured time certainly did not exist yet. A heartbeat. A few days. A chafing beneath a skin that was more illusion than not.

Merlin smiled and took the child's hand within their own, gently, as such fragile things were so easy to crush like the dust underfoot. All the remnants that remained of a prehistoric mountain. Yes, they quite remembered *that*.

"Shall we catch a handful of mercy today, dear child?" A lilting tone, light as air, heavy as the leveled summit.

It was time.

The trees whispered at their backs as they wandered away from the forest with its lichen, ash, and old oak. Warnings of the journey ahead, recriminations of the path already walked, and oaths that at least a kernel of them shall remain standing until Judgment Day.

A heavy promise indeed for something that was mortal.

The birds sang around them, [chiffchaffs](#), [redstarts](#), and [wood warblers](#) crying out their simple glee, while a buzzard slowly circled high above, waiting, ever patiently waiting as it slowly descended towards the silhouette of a rocky outcropping ahead. A squirrel in love chased after them until they'd left all the overhanging trees behind. As was fitting. Hearts broken and love unrequited will walk by the side of the boy they now clasped so close.

Carefully they led the child by hand, up the nearby craggy ridge Preswylva — Mynyddoedd y Preselau — [Presili Hills](#), past the cairn with its standing stones that would later be misattributed as Arthur's Tomb or Arthur's Table or Arthur's This or That for centuries to come, further still until they stood within the shadow of a copse of rocks that teetered on the edge of collapse.

Or so it seemed at first glance. But that delicate balance would outlive them all.

And in the shadow of the rocks, thrashing and squirming in agony, lay a grey wolf pup, short fur matted in blood with only three legs remaining. A small thing still, only a few sennights removed from its own

birth into this cruelly beautiful world. Its adult form remained the bane of many a farmer and shepherd, and will continue to do so for many centuries to come.

Neither the incubus nor Arthur shall live to see the day that they are hunted into extinction within these very isles.

The boy made a soft sound of sympathy and rushed to the whelp's side. Merlin did not warn him. And Arthur did not cry out when the pup bared its teeth and sunk its tiny fangs into the child's outstretched arm. It hung there, worrying at the boy's sleeve, as if its pain and frustration could be soothed away with the motion.

"Merlin, can you heal him?" Arthur turned back with eyes the color of the summer seas, eyes filled with hope and an underlying pleading. For a miracle to stave off what nature decreed must come to pass.

"Your father would not appreciate yet another wolf stalking his people's herds," they cautioned. The proper thing to say even if the mage cared naught for propriety. They knelt down upon the flattened moss and soil, amongst a slickness that belied the wolf whelp's true injury. A peek of entrails amongst the craggy grass.

The pup whimpered low in its throat as they pointed a single pale finger at it, towards the absence where its limb should have been, where a tangle of wild thyme and [foxglove](#) grew instead, out of season and in wild profusion.

"That wound is fae-wrought. This little one has barely escaped the fate that befell its missing parents and littermates. But such a wound as this cannot be healed by normal spells." And thus the mage pronounced the pup's fate.

Of course, that did not mean twas truly *impossible* to heal such a thing as this. Yes, they could see it now. A missing hand instead of a missing forepaw and the silver that would replace it. A mere momentary prolonging of the ephemeral life of a mortal. They indulged themselves in doing such things every now and then. That was, of course, what made them *different* from the others.

But Arthur had learned more than enough of healing from them. This lesson now taught was more important still. The balance of the world hung upon it, just as heavily as the rock above them precariously perched. One day the boy would learn to hear the truth left unspoken in the silence between the words, but today was not that day.

"Arthur, it's been waiting. For days now. For you. Sometimes the end of suffering is the only mercy that can be wrought." Merlin's tone was gentle. Their words implacable.

Arthur remained crouched next to the whining pup, who had finally released the boy's arm, growing too weak and weary to hang on any longer. The fae magicry was ruthless as it often could be. The plants would slowly bleed the sustenance from the still-conscious wolf til nothing but a husk was left. One of the crueler ways to die.

In the end, the boy didn't ask why it had to be him; why not have Merlin take on this burden instead? Nor continued to plead for a miracle that was not coming from an unhearing God. Because in the end, this is the soul of a king. Even if his bottom lip quivered ever so slightly.

They hand the blade over to the child. A rough-hewn, nameless thing that can kill in a single strike. They do not like suffering, after all. That was the entire reason why they were here.

The buzzard went unfed that day as they buried the pup's body at the foot of the stone of the Nodding Dog.



They walked in silence back down the vale where cottages, well-beaten paths, and an older brother bursting free from his lessons in the nearby manse now awaited them. Twas several moments longer before the boy finally spoke once more.

"I shall find a way to counteract that sort of spell," he solemnly told his mentor. "Even if it takes years, even if I've to walk through all the kingdoms on this isle and speak with a thousand and a thousand people."

"I know you will, and so the next one shall live," the mage replied. A soothing sound that bridled with sharpness beneath the silvery tones. After all, this one had always liked to see their true face, even when it frightened all others so. They imagined it would be so for this incarnation as well.

For a moment, he sees someone else. Emrys. The one who shall be remembered as Aurelianus — Ambrose the Golden. And the hundreds more who came before. Babylon at its height. And earlier still, [Alulim](#) the king consigned to myths and legends.

So had nearly all of this one's incarnations been deemed. But in the end, only one is needed. And finally, twas time. [Ambrosius Aurelianus](#) the prototype. Arthur Pendragon the masterpiece, forged through time immemorial.

They smiled with an expression that crinkled to dust at the edges and stooped to sweep the boy into their arms. The child was a warm thing within their arms, his heart beating with an affection that was still reflected by the heartless one who held him.

Mercy to end the suffering.

Yes, this was also a form of love as well.

## Roommates

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Adrian had assumed that MC was just joking when warned about the other's nocturnal habits. After all, how could he suspect any differently? Even though they'd known each other, befriended each other, grew closer to each other for years, they'd never slept over at each other's apartments.

Too much temptation that way.

After all, he well knew the way that MC's thoughts ran -- at least when it came to Adrian himself -- even if he didn't quite understand *why*. Of all the people to be attracted to, why him? Why *now*? Why why why **why why why WHY**

But if he understood MC's mind, he'd just have to make certain that MC didn't understand his. And so he'd assumed, had hoped, had reasoned that his friend had to be joking about having such a ridiculous sleeping habit.

He assumed wrong.

On the first night that they shared the master bedroom, he'd been lightly dozing on the far side of the king mattress, his muscles and mind still clenched at the edge of wariness even during his sleep.

A shuffling sound awakened him. Of that, he was pretty certain as his eyes flew open and he bolted upright in the bed.

A few dim lights (too dangerous to turn them off) remained above the counter and the reading light in the alcove directly above his head. His eyes adjusted fast.

The sliding door to the rest of the RV remained locked with their luggage piled in front of it. As did the emergency window at the foot of the bed. The doors on the cabinets were still closed and the rest of the room stayed as stiflingly empty as always.

And at his side, MC was half naked, having already divested themselves of their pajama top and the undershirt beneath. For a moment, he squinted suspiciously over at his friend (no, he's not looking at their--) who still seemingly remained snoozing blissfully away.

He stared.

MC slept.

The early morning minutes continued to tick ever onward.

Some part of him wondered if this wasn't another flirting attempt. MC had certainly indulged in stranger ones before. And so he rolled over and inched his way along the mattress, millimeter by millimeter, towards the (seemingly!) sleeping figure.

He's reasonably certain (~~that some greater part of him was just masochistic~~) that if the other was faking it, their composure would break and give themselves away at the end.

And so he stealthily approached, his body braced over MC, their faces close enough that their breath intermingled. Only a few short inches separated their lips as he dipped his head, watching for the other's reaction the entire while.

MC's eyelashes fluttered. (**REM** Sleep?) Adrian's face lowered ever more enticingly. And beneath him, MC began squirming out of their pants.

GODDAMMIT THEY REALLY WERE SLEEPING!

And with that thought, Adrian hastily retreated, snatching up extra blankets and covers along the way. He only reapproached long enough to swaddle MC in as many layers of bed linens as possible while his erstwhile roommate continued blithely stripping out of every single piece of clothing they were currently wearing.

Of course, he could've simply woken up his bedmate instead of engaging in a game of reverse strip poker.

But he knew how difficult sleeping had been for his friend ever since the other's apartment burned down. And he knew from intimate experience how hard it could be to go back to sleep after being prematurely awakened.

In the end, it was a long, restless night.

A few nights later, he awakened to the sight of a buck naked (butt naked... no, he's not looking there, even if the smooth curve of that sight has burned itself into his mind) MC shuffling over their luggage as they wandered out of the master bedroom's sliding door.

His lack of proper rest had finally done him in and this night he finally slept deeply. Too deeply. Far too deeply on the night that MC's sleeping self decided to do a midnight birthday suit stroll around the motorhome.

He lunged out of the bed, nearly colliding with the opposite wall in his haste. Too much energy put into that jump, but in the end he didn't care as he grabbed MC around their naked waist, making certain that his fingers didn't stray too far up a naked chest or down a naked groin, and then led them back to bed by their naked hand (wait, hands are always naked, aren't they?)

His own hands and arms (and cheeks and maybe his entire body in general) might've been currently burning, but he eventually maneuvered his sleeping friend back into bed, carefully covered and tucked in beneath layers and layers of blankets.

It's still chilly in early April, after all. Even if he felt like his own skin was on fire. Never mind a certain *mage* chortling all the way in the driver's seat at the front of the RV.

And so it went on, day by day, and restless night by night, as slowly their comrades came to join them.

Eventually, he's awakened by a high-pitched scream. Unconsciously, without thought, he leaped out of the bed, his arm automatically reaching for the bastard sword tucked within easy reach against the nearby wall.

A very empty bed in a very empty room.

MC was gone.

*OH NO!*

In his hurry, the sliding door slammed open with a resounding **BOOM!** And there, standing in the narrow aisle between the double bunk beds and the bathroom was a screeching Gwen, her brassy blonde hair cascading in disheveled waves all around her face.

She hurriedly raised her hands to cover her eyes (never mind the cracks between her fingers that continued to allow her to peek right through) from the sight standing before all of them.

And bathed in the moonlight coming from the open skylight was a luminous figure, their pure unblemished skin almost gleaming beneath the celestial glow from above. The other youth stood there with a casual grace, completely bare for the world to see and--

Wait. That's not MC... that's Percy.

The curtain to the nearby upper bunk bed silently drew back. Cassandra poked her head out, her short dark hair as perfectly arranged as ever, as she carefully glanced over at the three people currently jammed within the aisle. And then, with a quiet chuckle, she rolled back into her bed and closed the curtains once more.

As Gwen continued to fluster, and bluster, and ask *what in the world are you doing, Percy?!*, Adrian slowly edged around the pair, flattened against the far wall (which wasn't very far at all considering the cramped corridor of the RV) until he reached the sliding door to the front compartment.

Gwen kept squawking her protests behind him (although was it just him or did they sound somewhat halfhearted?), as he cautiously rolled the door open.

*"I'm going to fucking kill you all!"* Broderick greeted him, the man's tall frame crammed into the tiny space of the converted dinette bed. The other Harbinger loomed menacingly upward upon his elbow... and then promptly collapsed face-first back onto the lumpy bed, having apparently completely exhausted his energy.

"Hey, have you seen MC?" Adrian quietly whispered to him.

"Rrrgh!" Broderick helpfully snarled back.

Beyond him, the bundled figure of Lorelei could be seen stretched out upon the unrolled sofa bed, her form mostly hidden from view save for the faint glint of gold reflected from the strands of her still-braided hair.

Past her was the completely empty cabover bed where a certain dark-haired nudist *should've* been sleeping, and beneath that Merlin still hummed while driving, periodically stopping to cackle to themselves every now and then.

Not particularly reassuring there, but neither was there a naked MC to be seen here.

Silently, Adrian retreated back into the second compartment, just in time to see the bathroom door swing open.

In the narrow confines of the motorhome aisle, said door promptly smacked into Gwen's back, who gave forth another high-pitched squeal of dismay as she was sent hurtling straight into the naked arms of Percy (who'd stepped forward to catch the falling lady like a gentleman).

A confused and rumpled looking MC peeked around the edge of the door to see exactly what just happened. The flood of relief at seeing his friend -- still clothed at that! -- was short lived as something sent a trill of warning down the back of Adrian's spine.

**DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER**

He looked over his shoulder to see the approach of a looming Lorelei, shadows beneath her eyes and murder within her gaze. MC's favorite iron floor lamp was tightly clutched in her hand.

"*Cheese it!*" Percy proclaimed and, holding a still-squalling Gwen within his still naked embrace, he promptly dove into the empty bottom bunk and pulled the privacy curtain back around the bed.

Adrian and MC shared a single hurried glance before they beat a hasty retreat back to the master bedroom, locking the door and piling their luggage in front of the entrance once more. And so came the end of that particularly adventurous night.

Or so Adrian thought. And wished. And had his hopes crushed as, a few short hours later, MC began wiggling out of their pants once more.

Yes, he's definitely being punished for his sins.