Ancient Relics

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Ancient Relics

by SootyOwl

Summary

Merlin Emrys has been waiting thirteen hundred years for this moment to arrive. Can he fulfill the destiny that is required of him? Will Harry learn to trust this mysterious stranger? The fate of the Old Religion and the entire wizarding world depends entirely on them. AU for the last part of Deathly Hallows. Set after Series 4 but written before Series 5.

An edited and updated version of my story on FF.

Part 2 of Eternal Guardian Series.
He had always known this moment would come. It was inevitable really. He'd been on this earth too long to attribute his continued existence to a mere accident. There was a reason he'd survived this long, he'd had plenty of time to ponder that fact, and now the frustrations of the centuries he'd endured, and the patience he'd exhibited was about to come to its end.

It was strange really. He'd spent so long waiting for the moment when he'd once again emerge from the shadows that he'd never really contemplated what he might do when that day came.

That the day had come he had no doubt, he couldn't explain how he knew, he just did. And it couldn't have come sooner.

He'd never interfered, no matter how much he'd wanted to, no matter how desperately he'd wished could. He had no right to interfere in the modern day world; it was not his place. His place had been in Camelot, with Arthur and the others, a place where the Old Religion was rife, where its power had surged through every living thing and brought peace and harmony to the world.

But that world had gone now. After Arthur's death, more than thirteen hundred years ago, the magic of the Old Religion had fallen into decline. Everything he'd worked towards during Arthur's reign was suddenly destroyed by a single act. Mordred, the once innocent child, had slain Arthur on the field at Camlann, and with that, the balance of the world had been destroyed. The Old Religion had cried out at the atrocity, and its power faded. Its legacy had been kept alive for only a few generations, before ultimately, it was forgotten and its knowledge was lost.

But not completely. He was all that was left of the old ways. He had lingered on, the power of the Old Religion still running through his veins, the last relic of all that had been good.
He felt it still, even after all these years, as strong as it ever was. It guided him.

He had always refused to believe that the power of the Old Religion was totally eradicated. He sensed it still; it was all around him. Even the Muggles felt its presence, though less attuned to its inherent power. It was hibernating, resting until the wrongs that had been committed all those years ago could be righted. Only then would it truly return.

Yes, the Old Religion was still out there, he was sure of it.

It had been incredibly frustrating, in the centuries after Arthur's death, to see how truly lost it had become. Lesser magic had replaced it, simple buffoons wielding 'magic sticks', who in the old days, would have been dismissed as simple magicians suddenly rose to prominence, and became the new form of power. He had been scornful at best, and even though throughout the centuries their magic and powers had come far, it had never come anywhere near to his own. His and his alone, was the true magic.

He had watched over the years as their society developed, often amused at their antics and their inability to project magic through any other means than through a piece of wood. None of them had harboured any real power.

Then, about a thousand years ago, four young users of magic had come to his attention. They had used wands, like the rest of their kind, but unlike the rest, the power they had harnessed was something he had not seen since his own youth. What he had seen was an amalgamation of the Old Ways and the New. They had been exceptionally powerful, and he had known that this was one of those rare occasions he could intervene. They had an idea, a crazy idea it had seemed at first, to build a school far from Muggle eyes, to instruct young users of magic.

He had been intrigued; a school such as this would certainly have made his youth in Camelot a whole lot easier. Yet at the same time, he'd been hesitant. To make magic accessible to the masses, while admirable, seemed to him to be lessening its mystique. He remembered himself the wonder and amazement at his own discoveries using magic, of pushing himself as far as he could to become the very best, to discern for himself the essence of pure magic, and this school seemed to disregard it. In his opinion, it had made magic a right, and not a privilege.

Yet, he'd come around in the end. The Old Religion had granted these four Founders extraordinary power, and he knew it must have been for a reason. It wanted this to happen.

So he'd helped them, giving them advice, teaching them of magic they could never have dreamed of, never revealing his true self and watching as Hogwarts flourished.

His earlier apprehensions had proven unfounded. It gave him more joy than he'd had in centuries to witness the young minds being expanded, and their powers cultivated and encouraged. So many children from Muggle families, who would otherwise have lived in fear of their strange abilities were given the chance to live a full and happy life with others of their own kind. It took them away from ignorant Muggles who feared they were 'possessed' and introduced them to magic in a way that taught them how to truly appreciate the wonder that it was. He'd hoped such education and sense of community would have led them on different paths to the one that had led Morgana to her destruction.

But, Dark Magic still prevailed. No matter the education, no matter how much was offered them, there were always those who considered themselves superior, and wanted more. And he had certainly witnessed much of that.

It pained him to watch such evil fester in the world and do nothing, but his instincts told him: now
wasn't the time.

However, Hogwarts certainly brought more advantages than disadvantages. It showed young children that they had no need to fear their abilities; there was always a place for them. And it had torn him apart the day he had finally decided to leave, leave the new friends he had made, the only ones he had known since Arthur’s death. And the Founders Four were soon scattered by abandonment and death, and people began to forget the new ideas they had brought and the amazing things they had done.

The witch hunts had been the most trying era of his life. Europe burned, witches, wizards and Muggles alike were slaughtered in their masses. He couldn't save everyone, even if the Old Religion had allowed him to. He almost lost faith in it; how could it let such atrocities occur? But he'd bided his time, painfully and despairingly, praying for an end.

It had been a sad day when the International Statute of Secrecy had been signed. He had resigned himself to the fact that it had been an inevitable conclusion to a world torn apart by hate, fear and violence, and that it truly had been the only way forward. Yet it still saddened him, and he couldn't help but long for the days back in Camelot, where sorcerers and Muggles lived side-by-side in peace and harmony in a mutually beneficial society. It drove him to despair to think that this was what his kind had been reduced to. Hiding and skulking in the shadows, afraid to show their true colours. It reminded him forcibly of his own terror-ridden childhood. No one should have to live in secret, even if by choice.

Watching had become progressively harder over the centuries after that. Muggles began to forget about the truth of magic and wizards were content with hiding themselves away. The wish of the Founders to bring peace between Muggles and wizardkind through their school had been fulfilled, more or less, but not the way either they or Merlin had ever envisioned. Peace only existed because both sides were separated by years of ignorance. The integrated society that had strived for had never seemed so far away as it did now.

He'd kept an eye on things of course; he knew he had to wait for the day when he would once again come forward. He'd even attended Hogwarts a few times, both as a student, and as a teacher, casting simple spells to disguise his age and lack of a plausible backstory.

How amused he'd been when he'd first been Sorted. The poor hat had nearly fallen off his head in shock! In the end it had refused to Sort him, claiming he was not worthy enough to presume to understand magic of this power (he'd blushed profusely at this; he'd never gotten over his relative fame) and he'd ended up choosing his own House. He chose a different one every time (he needed a little variety in his life after all). His favourite by far had been Hufflepuff. As much as he admired bravery, intelligence and ambition, he felt a true measure of a man was to see who he was deep down. Loyalty, hard work and determination were qualities he felt were far too often overlooked and taken for granted; it didn't matter what other qualities they possessed, if they had these few, then that was all that was needed to prove themselves truly worthy in his eyes.

Besides, he'd never yet met an evil Hufflepuff.

He'd often thought Gwen would have been a Hufflepuff; she was just a truly good and honest woman who'd touched the hearts of so many, just by being true to herself. He often thought how well Gwen and Helga would have gotten along, so similar were their personalities and views. He amused himself sometimes by trying to Sort all of his old friends into Hogwarts Houses; Arthur and Gwaine reckless and courageous as they were into Gryffindor, Lancelot the ever-loyal into Hufflepuff, Gaius the scholar into Ravenclaw … before the sadness overcame him once more. They were all dead and gone, yet he still lingered …
His various times at the school had been amusing, a momentary distraction from the unending centuries. He'd become proficient in 'Modern Magic', even purchasing a wand, despite despising it. He hated channelling his magic through it; he always had to be careful to rein it back. His first time holding a wand and attempting a spell at Mr Ollivander's shop had been disastrous. He'd destroyed half the building trying to do a simple levitation. He never used his wand unless he could avoid it; it was too restrictive.

He'd excelled of course at Hogwarts, making sure he always knew the up-to-date versions of magic in the modern world to avoid awkward questions. Having to act the part of an ignorant child was frustrating however, and he never dared get too close to any one- he knew it would only cause him pain when they eventually succumbed to old age. The only ones he dared become openly friendly with were the ghosts. He had known the Grey Lady exceptionally well when she was just little Helena Ravenclaw and running around the castle chasing house-elves when he was helping her mother and the other Founders with the school. Seeing that happy little girl as a ghost for the first time had been incredibly painful, and he could never cease to be reminded of the happy times he had spent with her and the Founders whenever he saw her pale form drifting through the corridors. He had also met the other ghosts throughout the centuries and he could hardly avoid their company, however much he wished to in the case of the Bloody Baron. They knew he was more than he pretended to be, but they kept his secret. They and he both knew the pains of watching the modern world charge forward whilst remaining unchanged themselves. The portraits too, kept his secret- the Fat Lady in particular seemed to have a soft spot for him. Even Peeves kept silent, miraculously.

But it still pained him. He knew he could not interfere in the present world to any great degree; he sensed somehow that the Old Religion had forbidden it. He'd seen the visions centuries ago, when Morgana had lured him to the Crystal Cave to keep him from protecting Arthur at the fields of Camlann. He knew when he must come forward and that time had increasingly come closer within the last sixty or so years, with the birth of Tom Riddle.

He'd reminded him of Morgana a little, bitter at the world, and determined to punish everyone in it. He'd witnessed his rise to power, hating himself for not intervening. His time had been close, but not quite there.

He'd watched as he committed atrocious acts against magic, splitting his soul in a way too abhorrent to think about. Yet, he'd still waited.

He'd watched as Albus Dumbledore had attempted to fight against him, a futile attempt. Although Dumbledore was the first man he'd seen in centuries with power to even begin to rival his own, against that kind of evil, there could be no victory. At least for him.

Then, when all had seemed lost, he had been born. The one he'd waited for.

Harry Potter took his first breath.

He defeated Riddle whilst still an infant, and suffered cruelly because of him. He'd grown up hated and despised by his own family, gawped at wherever he went and forced to face unimaginable horrors from a young age. He had known deep inside of himself that Harry had been the one from the moment he had been born, and this was only confirmed when he defeated Riddle and was left with the scar the shape of lightning. The vision Helga had had so many years ago about the boy with the lightning scar was finally coming true after one thousand years of searching.

He'd grown impatient. He knew the time was closer than it had ever been. But he watched as Harry's years at Hogwarts had passed.

Then it had happened. Voldemort had returned.
He'd known it from the moment Voldemort had stepped from the cauldron. The Old Religion had cried out in a way it hadn't since the day Arthur was killed. This was just so wrong and abhorrent. Voldemort had used the ancient rituals of the Old Religion in such a grotesque way as to disrupt the entire balance of the world. Only Harry now had the power to stop him.

He'd told himself this was it, now was the time to come forward once more. But he held back, something hadn't felt quite right. He didn't reveal himself to the entire wizarding world. Instead, he'd gone to Dumbledore.

He'd been pleasantly surprised when he found out Dumbledore had already theorised about the existence of the Horcruxes; he too often forgot that although the wizarding world had not the same power as the Old Religion, it had still come far in its advances. He too often underestimated these people.

He hadn't revealed his true identity to Dumbledore; something had told him that was not the right move. But Dumbledore had been a powerful enough wizard to sense the power that came with his new acquaintance, and knew he was of the Old Religion, and so had trusted him implicitly—especially after his phoenix had openly displayed his own trust in a remarkable echo of the way Godric’s own phoenix had done so a millennium before.

He'd dropped in every so often, to learn of Dumbledore's progress, urging him to reveal the prophecy to Harry, pointing him in the right direction, but was always careful not to step too far over the line. It was Harry's destiny to ultimately defeat Voldemort, and his own destiny to protect him while he fulfilled it. It brought certain pangs of sadness to his heart when he remembered another hot-headed youth who'd played a similar part in his life.

He himself knew everything about the Horcruxes, he could sense their evil presence in the world at all times, but he dared not reveal too much to the Headmaster. He was only here to guide, not to do everything himself. Harry was the only one who could do it.

It had riled him considerably to see what Harry had been forced to endure during his fifth and sixth years at Hogwarts, the place which should have been his safe haven. He'd urged Dumbledore again and again to reveal everything to Harry, everything he had a right to know, but Dumbledore hadn't listened. It had driven him almost to the point of insanity. Dumbledore respected him, even admired the strange man who popped in every so often with disturbingly accurate details about his most private affairs, but he still remained firm. He often wondered if Dumbledore would have been so stubborn if he'd known his true identity.

But, he remained largely hidden, even after Dumbledore's demise, when he thought Harry would have needed him most. He watched in silence as Harry and his friends took on the most difficult and dangerous quest anyone should have to endure. He was there every step of the way, through all the dark and harrowing times, invisible, never interfering, always listening to the instincts of the Old Religion: not yet, not yet …

They hunted down and destroyed the Horcruxes, and he felt himself become incredibly proud of the three teenagers who risked everything for each other, as well as extremely amused as he thought of the Founder's reactions if they'd learned what had become of their precious heirlooms. Helga’s anger in particular would have been a joy and a terror to behold. Those objects had meant so much to them.

In what felt like no time at all, they were back at Hogwarts, rallying the other students to fight back against the evil that threatened the school whilst he remained in a corner, invisible and impatient.

He watched as the battle for Hogwarts began. He felt it as the cup was destroyed. Only three more left, yet the hardest one of all still loomed. He'd prayed to the powers of the Old Religion Harry
would have the strength to do what was needed.

Then, all of a sudden, he knew. *This* was the time. It was a perfectly ordinary moment- he was standing in the corridors of Hogwarts wandering aimlessly as the battle raged on around him and he knew, *now* was the time.

He pulled his long under-used wand from his pocket and held it lightly in his hand. Why now of all times- right in the middle of a battle no less- the Old Religion would choose for him to come forward he had no idea, but he knew without a doubt it was time.

He strode off down the corridor of the seventh floor, his wand outstretched. *Be careful Emrys,* the Old Religion seemed to say, *it is your destiny to ensure the Old Religion is restored to the world. Protect the boy at all costs. He is the only one who can right the wrong that was done to the world thirteen hundred years ago. Only he can lift the darkness.*

He smiled: "I will not fail." And he hurried off to join the battle.

Merlin Emrys had re-joined the world at last.
Meeting Harry

The screams of the dying permeated the air. Thick clouds of dust rose like vapour from debris which fell from the heavens in a ceaseless hail. Colourful beams of light rushed around him, leaving the air tingling with magical energy, but Merlin paid them no heed. He had to find Harry amongst all this war and ruin and ensure he was on the correct path.

He ducked and ran like crazy, dodging the spells that soared past him. He didn't really expect to be hit by one; his magical instincts were too powerful to allow himself to be caught by surprise by something as mundane as a Stunning spell, but he had to put on a show.

He ran past Hogwartsians and Death Eaters alike, none of them really paying him much attention. Where was Harry? He thought desperately. He shouldn't have let him out of sight for even an instant! But then again, how was he supposed to know the Old Religion would suddenly thrust him into a middle of a battle?

He ducked behind a statue, while he took his bearings and regained his breath. Thirteen centuries may have passed, but he was still as out of shape as ever. He had been no Knight, but at least in Camelot Arthur had kept him fairly fit. He cursed himself for falling out of practise over the centuries—not that he'd ever been much good at physical activity.

He calmed himself down and cast out his mind, searching for Harry, but the pure amount of magical energy contained in the castle at that present moment made it impossible for him to isolate a single person's magical aura. The castle itself had been imbued with so much magical energy over the years Merlin doubted he would have been able to locate Harry even without the dozens of spells being cast at the moment throughout its many corridors.

Again he cursed his stupidity for allowing Harry a moment out of his sight. What had he been thinking?

"Oh, so you're back again are you?" a bored voice drawled from somewhere next to him.

Merlin turned sharply and saw the Bloody Baron floated a few inches above the ground just a few feet away, looking at him with little interest, seemingly quite unconcerned with the battle raging behind him.

Merlin sighed in annoyance. He'd never gotten on with the Baron. How could he? He had been the one to kill Helena, the little girl he had watched grow up, the daughter of one of his dearest friends. He’d heard she’d gone a bit wild after his departure, and his sense of guilt at ever leaving had increased. This man had destroyed any hope of Helena ever reconciling with the mother Merlin knew she had loved dearly. The reason Rowena had died without seeing her daughter one last time.

"Yes, I'm back," he snapped, not wanting to prolong a conversation with a man covered in an innocent girl's blood.

The Baron didn't react to his abrupt manner. He just drawled on lazily in that horrid hoarse voice of his: "Well, you picked a hell of a time to come visiting again."

"Don't I know it," muttered Merlin, peering out from behind the statue to check if it was safe to emerge.

"Hmm, you know I never did find out your real name. What was it last time? Matthew? And the time before … Mortimer? You have an air of mystery about you."
"Well, you wouldn't be the first to say it." Merlin said, and began cautiously edging out from behind the statue.

The Baron did not seem fazed however, and seemed determined for an answer, despite his greatest attempts to seem unbothered.

"One thousand years have passed and yet you look no older. How did that come to pass? Melville, Marshall, Martin … whatever your name is these days."

"Well I wouldn't want to deprive you of the fun of finding out." Merlin tried to shake him off as he made his careful way down the dark corridor, avoiding great chunks of rock that had fallen from the room above.

"Come now, I must have an answer!" The Baron sniffed in disapproval. "I tire of these games you play."

"And I'm tired of your questions!" Merlin yelled, wheeling around to face him. "Don't you realise there's a battle going on? There are more important things at stake!"

The Baron merely regarded him coolly, and raised a single transparent eyebrow. "What else do I have to indulge my time in if not the mysteries of the man who does not die? This battle does not concern me. Regardless of its outcome I shall remain here unaffected. The lives of mortals do not matter to me."

"Then why won't you leave me alone?" Merlin huffed. "Always the same questions! You think you'd get tired of it after a couple of centuries!"

"Ah," said the Baron, looking pleased. "But you aren't mortal are you? You just as good as admitted it!"

Merlin groaned inwardly. Damn Slytherin cunning!

The Baron continued to look triumphant. "Just tell me … who are you really?"

"Look," Merlin spoke quickly desperate to get away. "That doesn't matter right now. This school and these students are in danger!"

"And why should that-"

"It should concern you because you are the bloody Slytherin House ghost! No pun intended!" Merlin cried exasperatedly. "It's your duty to see to the well-being of the school! You were among the first students to study here, hand-picked by Slytherin himself to be in his House!"

The Baron looked unimpressed. "And in case you hadn't noticed oh-so-ever-youthful-one, my wand has been rather out of commission these past few centuries. As much as I'd like to defend the castle that has become a home to me, what am I supposed to do?"

Merlin opened his mouth heatedly to tell the Bloody Baron exactly what he could do with himself when he was suddenly struck by inspiration.

"You can help me! Do you know where Harry is?"

The Baron frowned. "Harry who?"

"Harry Houdini," Merlin replied sarcastically. He was rapidly running out of patience.
The Baron shuddered. "Pray do not mention that odious blood traitor to me. Calls himself a wizard..." he shivered again and looked as though he'd only just noticed Merlin's annoyance. "I'm assuming you're referring to our elusive Mr Potter? I saw him heading towards the Room of:-"

"Requirement!" Merlin yelled, hitting himself on the head. Why hadn't he thought of that? And without another glance at the Baron he tore off down the hall, dodging debris. He had to get there without delay.

He passed several duels, and struck out with his wand, as feeble as it was in comparison to his own magic, and took down each of the Death Eaters at lightning speed. The tired members of the Order of the Phoenix stared at him in wonder.

"How did you-"one of them began, and Merlin vaguely recognised him as Remus Lupin, the werewolf.

"No time for that!" Merlin yelled as he bowled past them, almost colliding with a young woman, with pink hair who'd just raced around the corner.

"Remus" she yelled, apparently taking no notice of Merlin. "Oh Remus! I couldn't stay away! Not while everyone else was fighting!"

"I expected nothing less Dora," Lupin said affectionately. "Did you see that man there? He took down Dolohov and the others without even breaking a sweat!"

Merlin winced; he shouldn't be so careless with his powers. He wasn't sure he should let these people know exactly who he was yet. But he didn't have time to create a viable excuse; he was already off, racing to the seventh floor corridor with the Room of Requirement.

Merlin kept running, not ceasing in his race to get there. He felt exhilarated; the first real mission he'd had in centuries. He'd been wandering aimlessly around the world as an observer, never doing anything more than amuse himself slightly before moving on, biding his time until the world was ready. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, encouraging him onwards.

He skidded around the corner to the corridor of the Room of Requirement, as graceful as he'd ever been, to see Harry, Ron and Hermione along with a couple others, Slytherin students he thought, lying on the ground, panting, looking rather singed and worse for wear. He was about to head off towards them when he felt it; the Horcrux crying out in pain as it was vanquished forever. He slumped against a wall for a moment or two, regaining his breath as the evil object was destroyed, an object once so dearly treasured by Rowena. He felt the change in the atmosphere. Only two more left.

He headed off down the corridor towards them, as more duellists backed into view. It was two of the Weasleys he thought, never having paid much attention to the family aside from their interactions with Harry.

"Hello, Minister!" the apparent elder of the two yelled, facing the Death Eater coming towards him. "Did I mention I'm resigning?"

"You're joking, Perce!" the younger one yelled back, after successfully defeating the Death Eater he was battling. He turned to his brother. "You actually are joking, Perce ... I don't think I've heard you joke since you were-"

Merlin sensed it before the explosion made itself known. Reacting instinctively, he raised his hand
and yelled "Hilderan þās drhytsele!"

It came not a moment too soon. A large golden hued shield glimmered into the air around the few fighters in the hall, as a giant roar sounded all around them. Debris and dust whirled around them, great stones and thick planks of wood came raining down on them from above, and it became apparent a giant section of the castle had just been blown away. Merlin tried not to wince; it was just typical. Here was a proud and ancient establishment which had stood for a thousand years untouched, and all it took was a few pure-blood psychos to turn it to dust in a matter of hours. If the Founders could see this …

The roar of the explosion died down and Merlin lowered his shield, transferring his wand to his hand quickly; he didn't want any undue questions about the strength and particular type of magic he possessed until this was all over.

It was a good thing too.

The fighters in the hall whirled around to see who had cast the spell, wonder in their eyes, and Merlin inwardly berated himself. You idiot! Why couldn't you have used Protego!

He tried not to look too suspicious, ignoring the voice in his head that told him even Arthur had never been fooled by his 'not-suspicious' look. He'd had centuries to perfect it after all.

"Whoa!" The younger red-haired man said to him. "That was brilliant! What was it?"

Merlin tried to shrug it off. "Just a spell." He noted rather uncomfortably that Hermione was watching him suspiciously.

The older red-head looked deeply impressed: "I've never seen a Shield Charm so powerful. I'm extremely grateful to you. Who knows what would have happened otherwise?"

Merlin gave him a feeble smile. "Oh, I'm sure you'd have been fine."

At that moment, a giant spider tried to force its way through the massive gap now in the side of the wall. Without hesitating Harry, Ron and one of Ron's brothers fired Stunners at it and it retreated. The elder boy looked outside. "There are more of them coming! Fred! Come on! We can't let them in the castle!"

"Right you are, Perce!" Fred said, rather jovially. "Let's have at them, shall we?" And with that they raced off down the corridor, shooting spells at the spiders as they attempted to crawl up the side of the castle.

More spells began soaring over their heads, and Merlin turned to see even more duelling had erupted at the end of the corridor amongst all the dust, falling masonry and general debris.

"Come on!" He urged the three of them, for there were now only three, with the two Slytherins having scarpered.

He led them down the corridor and behind a tapestry, onto a concealed staircase out of the immediate battle area.

He stopped and turned towards them, their faces squinting at him in confusion.

Ron spoke first: "Right, just who in the name of Merlin's saggy left-"

"No time for that," Merlin said hurriedly, trying not to smile in amusement at the fact Ron had
answered his very own question just in the act of asking it, or flinch in annoyance. He would never get used to his name being used like that. He turned to Harry, and fixed him with a cool stare, noting that despite having watched over him all these years, this was the first time they'd actually met. "Did you destroy it?"

Harry's face paled, and he exchanged nervous, panicked glances with his friends, their eyes widening in fear and astonishment.

"How d'you-"

"Never mind how I know!" Merlin said, rather impatiently. As confident as he was that the Horcrux had indeed been destroyed, he could take no chances. "Has it been destroyed?"

But Harry continued to stare at him blankly, with a bit of unease coming over his features. Merlin sighed.

"Look, you can trust me. I'm a friend of Dumbledore's."

"Of Dumbledore's?" Hermione repeated faintly, still looking bewildered.

"Yes!" Merlin shouted. "I know everything! And I mean everything! I need to know: has the Horcrux been destroyed?"

But they still looked at him with uncertainty. Well of course they would, you idiot! What did you expect?

Merlin sighed again. He placed both hands on Harry's shoulders and turned him so they were looking directly into each other's eyes, Merlin's blue ones fixed upon the green.

"I swear to you, Harry, you can trust me. I knew Dumbledore well, and I know you probably have no reason to believe me, but I really am trying to help you. I know you're confused, I would be too, but there's no time for that now. I'll explain everything later, I promise. But at the moment you're just going to have to have some blind faith."

Harry stared at him so intensely Merlin could have sworn he was trying to use Legilimancy. He looked so desperate and alone, haunted by everything going on around him.

Eventually, Harry blinked, and he nodded. Merlin sighed in relief.

Ron, however, was indignant. "Harry! We've only just met the guy! We don't know if we can trust him!"


Ron groaned. "Yeah, and trusting Dumbledore has really helped us out this year hasn't it! The guy isn't perfect, Harry! Remember Snape?"

Harry's jaw clenched and Merlin could see exactly what he thought about Snape. Merlin sighed inwardly. He'd find out the truth about the man sooner or later. Even Merlin wasn't supposed to know the truth; he'd only heard about it from the portrait of Godric Gryffindor in the Headmaster's office after Snape's defection.

Harry spoke: 'I've spent enough time this year doubting him, Ron. It's time I put some more faith back into the man. Dumbledore would never have told anyone about the Horcruxes that he didn't trust completely; he never even told Snape that much! And Voldemort certainly doesn't go around
telling his Death Eaters about them!"

Ron fell silent, still glaring at Merlin with a mistrustful glint in his eyes.

Merlin ignored this however. "It's destroyed then?"

Harry took his eyes off Ron, who was still silently fuming, to look back at Merlin, and nodded.

"Yeah, Crabbe used some Fiendfyre and took it out accidentally. There's nothing left of it."

Merlin nodded. "Good," he murmured to himself, despite feeling a slight pang of pain as he thought of the diadem he had enchanted for Rowena, that she had loved so dearly ... "Only two left."

"Two?" shrieked Hermione, her eyes wide. "I thought it was only the snake left!"

 Damn! Merlin, you idiot! Harry isn't supposed to know yet!

"I mean, including the piece still left inside of Voldemort," he answered swiftly, hoping they hadn't noticed anything. Apparently they hadn't, as Hermione sighed in relief.

"But how are we supposed to find the bloody snake?" Ron objected. "Isn't it with You-Know-Who all the time? He isn't exactly the easiest man to find!"

Merlin directed his gaze straight at Harry. "You'll need to look inside him, Harry. You need to find out where he is."

Harry nodded, and closed his eyes to surrender himself to the obvious pain in his scar, with only the briefest of curious glances at Merlin. Probably wondering how I know so much, he grumbled to himself. He had to think of a good cover story- he couldn't tell them who he really was until after Harry had defeated Voldemort and restored the balance to the world.

Harry's eyes remained tightly closed, his face screwed up against the pain, as they waited for him to re-emerge from Voldemort's thoughts. Merlin couldn't fail to notice Ron was torn between watching Harry worriedly, and eyeing Merlin suspiciously. He pretended not to notice; he hadn't exactly invited confidence when he'd revealed he'd known all about their 'Top-Secret' mission.

They waited for a few moments, Merlin's heart pounding rapidly.

Suddenly, Harry gasped, and opened his eyes. He looked slightly disoriented for a split second, his eyes re-adjusting to the darkness of the staircase and his ears to the sound of the distant battle.

"He's in the Shrieking Shack. The snake's with him, it's got some sort of magical protection around it. He's just sent Lucius Malfoy to find Snape."

Merlin frowned. Did this mean Voldemort was about to try and discover why he could not master the Elder Wand? He would surely kill Snape, who would then have no opportunity to tell Harry what he'd promised Dumbledore he would. This wasn't good.

"Voldemort's sitting in the Shrieking Shack?" Hermione said, sounding thoroughly outraged. "He's not- he's not even fighting?"

"He doesn't think he needs to fight," said Harry. "He thinks I'm going to go to him."

"But why?"

Merlin had to suppress a snigger. Isn't it obvious, Hermione? It's because he's too bloody noble for his
own good. Almost like Arthur had been.

He tuned out the following bickering going on between the three of them about who was all going to go and get the snake. If he was perfectly honest, in the amount of time they’d spent bickering amongst themselves, Merlin himself could have gone and got it with some of his Old Magic, but of course, Harry had to do this his own way, as much as Merlin hated placing this burden on someone so young.

"POTTER!" Merlin jerked back to reality when he realised two masked Death Eaters had just discovered their hiding place. Before he could do anything however, Hermione had already whipped out her wand and muttered a quick spell, which turned the stairs into a chute, which sent them all hurtling downwards, narrowly missing red jets of light from the Death Eater's wands. They tumbled through the tapestry at the bottom of the staircase and Hermione rigged up a brick wall behind them and the two Death Eaters smacked into it.

Bruised and adamant he was that he could have procured a less painful way of avoiding the Death Eaters, he had to admire Hermione's quick thinking.

He ducked out of the way as one of the Hogwarts professors came storming past with a herd of galloping desks.

They scrambled to their feet.

"Harry!" Hermione said. "You'd better get that Cloak on, never mind us-"

"No," said Harry firmly. "It'll cover all of us."

Hermione and Ron drew closer to Harry who held out a silvery object Merlin recognised as an Invisibility Cloak, and made to throw it over the three of them, but he paused, and looked over at Merlin.

"Well, are you coming?"

Merlin blinked for a moment, unsure of what to say. Harry trusted him this much already?

He shrugged, and drew closer to the others, Ron making room for him grudgingly. Harry threw the Cloak over the four of them, Merlin ducking slightly as he was taller than the other three. Then again, he doubted it made much difference. Who was actually going to notice some disembodied feet at a time like this?

They ran down another staircase, past more duellers and portraits with occupants screaming out advice as Death Eaters and students alike battled mercilessly. Harry paused, obviously wanting to help them, but before he could Peeves soared overhead and dropped a fistful of tubers on Ron’s head, thus alerting the Death Eaters to an invisible presence. Bloody Peeves, Merlin thought. I told Godric he should have him exorcised. But noooo, he thought he was funny!

They ran through the midst of the fighters and reached the marble staircase and headed down it, Ron punching a fellow student in the face as he passed. The Entrance Hall was filled with fighters, and absolute chaos prevailed; bodies fell everywhere, glass was broken, screams rang out through the air.

"NO!" shrieked Hermione, as she attacked a Death Eater couched over the body of a student. Crystal balls rained down from the banisters, as that batty Divination teacher flung them over the side. If the whole thing hadn't been so serious, it would have been quite funny.

But he saw the looks on Harry, Ron and Hermione's faces, and knew this was anything was funny.
They knew these people, they were their friends … Merlin had no particular emotional attachment to any of them. He had no right to find it in the least bit amusing.

They made for the front doors, but before they could, they burst open and more gigantic spiders spilled through causing even more chaos amongst both sides.

The man Merlin thought was called Hagrid stormed towards them, apparently pleading with them, and without a second thought Harry had run after him, as Hagrid was lost amongst the spiders.

"Harry!" screamed Hermione, and she and Ron pelted after him, Merlin following in their wake.

Things were really starting to get crazy; a couple of giants turned up at that point and started wrestling. Merlin blinked. There was a giant on Hogwarts's side?

But he had no time to think, he rushed forwards with Harry, Ron and Hermione towards the Forbidden Forest before something else happened.

The air froze, and a silence fell over the grounds, so intense and impenetrable it could only mean one thing: Dementors.

Merlin froze up. A great terror and sense of dread and hopelessness spread through him. The others tried to cast Patronuses but were unsuccessful, but Merlin didn't even try, so lost was he in the despair that clawed at him, lost in memory …

*Don't you realise your mistake, Merlin, I lured you into a trap. Arthur has gone to war, and to his doom. Without you by his side, he will fall …*

*You failed your King, mighty Emrys … you have failed him …*

Merlin forced himself back into the present. No! He wasn't going to let that affect him! He was here! He had a new destiny to fulfil!

He raised his wand, only just remembering to use a 'Modern Spell': *"Expecto Patronum!"*

A great silvery dragon soared out of his wand, larger than he'd ever conjured before. It charged down the Dementors, opening its jaws, and letting silvery flames engulf the fleeing forms in the darkness, before it faded, leaving only the shadow of what had been there.

Ron turned and gaped at him. "Your Patronus is a dragon? That's actually pretty cool-"

"Ron!" screeched Hermione. "Now's not the time!"

And she hadn't spoken a moment too soon, as a great giant lumbered out of the forest towards them.

They ran off again towards the Whomping Willow, and the passageway beneath. As Hermione and Ron dithered about how to get in, Merlin turned and saw the fighting on the front lawn increase dramatically. They were losing.

The tree suddenly froze, and the others started to crawl through the tunnel.

"Hey! Aren't you coming?" Ron yelled.

Merlin turned back to him. He desperately wanted to go with them, to make sure they were safe, but he couldn't risk it. If he got too close to Voldemort … well, Voldemort was a powerful wizard, especially for a 'Wand-Wielder', as Merlin had dubbed them. He might sense Merlin's presence and blow the whole thing.
Merlin shook his head. "I'll stay here and help the others; there won't be enough room for all of us."

Harry nodded, but Ron looked annoyed.

"Bloody coward," he heard him mumbling, as he disappeared out of sight.

Merlin shook his head; he got the impression Ron didn't like him very much.

He rushed off to help the duellers, stunning a Death Eater midway through casting the Killing Curse at a young boy, who *definitely* didn't look overage.

He just prayed they'd be alright in there.
As Harry crawled towards the Shrieking Shack through the dark, dank tunnel, his mind was racing, not with thoughts of what lay ahead, but who he'd left behind; the mysterious man who'd known Dumbledore.

Who was he? It made no sense! Dumbledore had been adamant that no one save himself, Ron and Hermione could know about the Horcruxes; he'd never even told the Order of the Phoenix, his most trusted allies! Why would he have told this strange man, who himself was barely much older than the Weasley twins? How did he know so much?

Yet despite all Harry's misgivings, he somehow, instinctively trusted the man. He'd known it, as soon as the man had turned to face him, eye-to-eye. He'd sensed something within him, like some deep and powerful magic was urging him to trust him. It didn't make sense to him, but he'd gone along with it; it just felt right. He always had faith in his instincts; even though he couldn't help but remember those times he'd had it wrong. This wasn't like that time at the end of his fifth year, or when he'd met 'Bathilda Bagshot' at Godric's Hollow- this was deeper, more powerful.

He tried to drag himself back to the present- he couldn't afford to be distracted- but that man still lingered at the forefront of his mind. That Shield Charm he'd used … it was more powerful than anything he could have imagined. Why did he feel so strange around him, as though all the magic in his body was reacting violently towards him? That feeling of raw power he'd exuded …

He shook his head, trying to clear himself of these thoughts- he was crawling through a passageway towards Voldemort, he had to focus!

He heard Ron whisper to Hermione behind him: "Who was that bloke?" and knew he wasn't the only one pondering this strange man's sudden appearance.

But there was no time for discussion; Harry had spotted a sliver of light just up ahead.

Merlin darted here and there in the midst of the battle, sending spell after spell at the Death Eaters facing him. He almost wanted to laugh; their spell work was shoddy at best, not in the least powerful, at least as far as he was concerned- they didn't stand a chance against him.

He fought alongside the students of Hogwarts and several members of the Order of the Phoenix, some of them casting curious glances his way at the speed and strength of his spells, as well as his unfamiliar appearance, but no one said anything; there were more important things at hand.

Merlin knew he had to come up with a viable back story for himself, as to why he was here and how he knew so much. Situations such as this usually weren't a problem for him; he'd had plenty of experience of it over the centuries, but he still hated lying. He'd never enjoyed it; it reminded him too much of his early years at Camelot. He detested deceiving people, but he'd become quite adept at it over the years, so much so Arthur would have been amazed at the transformation from the gawky manservant who couldn't even come up with a good excuse as to why he was always late in the mornings to the man he was now.

They were winning, he realised now. The Death Eaters were being pushed back, slowly and surely, in no small part due to Merlin's presence in the battle. Just as he thought they might be able to throw
them off completely, Voldemort's voice sounded over the grounds, calling his forces back, and
calling on Harry to meet him in the Forbidden Forest.

Merlin cursed silently, as the Death Eaters hurriedly obeyed their master's commands. Harry was
going to go to him, wasn't he? Merlin knew it had to be done; Harry had to die for the Horcrux to be
destroyed. He only hoped Dumbledore's theory was correct, and Harry would be able to return.

He had to though! The Old Religion would grant him the choice; it was that magic that had kept him
alive after the first attack, and that magic that had been cruelly subverted to resurrect Voldemort. The
balance had to remain. Harry wouldn't die.

It didn't make him feel any better about it though.

Merlin looked around and saw several heaps of bodies lying on the lawns in front of him, thankfully,
most of them being Death Eaters. However there were still several injured Hogwartians around and
Merlin stooped down to help one who had fallen to the ground.

"Are you all right?"

The boy, clearly underage, was shaking violently, but nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good," said Merlin. "What's your name?"

"C-Colin."

"Right Colin," Merlin smiled. "Can you help me get the other injured back into the Great Hall?"

The boy nodded fiercely, and limped off. Merlin helped as many as he could, most weren't injured
too badly, and made his own way back into the castle.

The Great Hall had turned into a kind of hospital. The injured were being treated on the raised
platform at the front of the hall, while the surviving fighters clustered around in small groups.

Along the middle of the hall were the bodies. The death count wasn't as bad as Merlin had expected,
hating himself for his cold calculation of the situation; no matter how many innocents he's seen die
over the years, it never got any easier. Several of the dead were just students, and it made Merlin sick
to his stomach to see such youth cruelly destroyed, and the suffering around him.

However, it did seem to him that the Death Eater losses had been greater, which was a small
blessing. Voldemort had been losing the battle; but that hadn't mattered to him, as long as Harry
came to him in the end.

Merlin glanced surreptitiously around him. Harry wasn't here. Had he already gone to meet
Voldemort? Merlin had no doubt whatsoever that he would try and sacrifice himself to save his
friends. Perhaps it wouldn't matter if Harry never found out about the Horcrux inside of him.

He heard moans coming from the head of the hall, and Merlin's instinctively rushed forward to help.
His years of training with Gaius had had a profound impact on him, and throughout the years Merlin
had observed the advances in medicine, Muggle and magic alike, as a sort of testament to him. He'd
continued to honour Gaius' memory by learning all he could about healing down the centuries.

He approached the witch administering potions to the injured, recognising her as the school nurse,
and offered to help. She looked at him sceptically, but nodded briefly, before attending once more to
her patients. Merlin didn't take her cold reception to heart; it was only to be expected under the
circumstances. She knew she was overwhelmed by the sheer number of casualties, but didn't want to
admit she couldn't help them all.

So Merlin crouched down, pulled out his wand and began some simple healing spells on the assembled casualties. His own magic would have been much more effective, but as the injuries weren't life threatening, he saw no reason to break his cover just yet.

He moved around the injured, who lay groaning on make-shift camp beds, offering words of comfort and solace where he could, being sharply reminded of his former duties in Camelot whenever there had been an attack. But for some, he just couldn't say anything to help. Loss was one thing magic could not fix.

The hall began filling slowly, as more and more of the fighters made their way there, looking for solidarity. Scores more injured came piling through the doors, and those who weren't were simply staring into space, shaken, at a loss of what do.

He felt something tug at his heart; the sheer hopelessness of the people here was almost too much for him. He got the impression these people were fighting, not because they thought they could win but because they had no intention of lying down and taking whatever atrocities were thrown at them. It was a hopeless struggle in their eyes, for many, it was their last great stand, to ensure freedom and justice did not go down without a fight.

Merlin frowned. He couldn't help these people, just fervently pray that they'd hold on just a little longer. Harry was their only hope now- he wished they'd have the strength to believe in that. Their hollow eyes swam with determination, a dormant passion to keep fighting.

As he looked out, he couldn't help but notice the Weasley family, all huddled together looking grim. The mother was in floods of tears, clutching her children with a desperation that made Merlin want to comfort her. Just a little longer.

They were all there, he noted, all looking shaken, but determined, their bravery practically radiating off them. Godric would have been proud.

Ron was there too, talking with the twins, Hermione at his side, clutching his hand in a vice-like grip. Harry wasn't.

So he'd gone already had he? Merlin's stomach clenched at the thought of what that young boy was going through in his mind right now. So brave, so young …

His friends had noticed his absence, and were glancing around in a barely suppressed panic, their heads turning to and fro and a futile attempt to spot him. Merlin's heart softened in sympathy. If Dumbledore was right, and Harry came back, how would he ever be able to explain his decision to his friends? How could he explain how he had left them here without a goodbye?

One of the twins, turned and spotted Merlin staring at him, and motioned him to come over. It was the boy he'd seen earlier, just before the explosion, Fred he thought his name was, and he looked pale underneath the dirt and grime from the battle. Merlin hesitated only momentarily before moving over to join them. Ron's eyes turned on him in suspicion, and the rest of the Weasley clan stared at him in a barely concealed curiosity.

Fred spoke to him: "Listen, thanks for earlier. If it hadn't been for you, I think we'd all be goners."

"Don't mention it," Merlin replied. Fred stared at him for another moment more, before speaking again:

"You haven't seen Harry have you? We think he's gone loopy and decided to go after You-Know-
Who on his own!

Merlin shook his head. "I haven't seen him since the battle," he replied honestly.

But something in his eyes must have given him away, because Ron spoke next:

"You know don't you! He has gone after him hasn't he?"

Merlin hesitated, and that was all the answer Ron needed.

"You've known all along haven't you? You didn't even try to stop him! How do we know you didn't set this up? That this wasn't your plan all along?"

"Ron-" Merlin began, trying to calm him down, but Ron cut across him, anger in his eyes.

"How do you even know my name? How do you know anything? You're working with him aren't you?"

"No," Merlin said calmly, but his voice was laced with danger. "I would never ally myself with such evil."

Ron looked taken aback at the vehemence in his tone, and the entire Weasley family watched him warily.

"Look, this doesn't matter right now!" Hermione moaned frantically. "Harry's off to face him, we have to find him before he-"

"No," repeated Merlin. "This is the way it has to be."

He was met with incredulous and angry glares from the assembled family.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Fred's twin angrily. "We have to stop him!"

"No," repeated Merlin once again.

Another of the Weasley children, the girl, rounded on him, so angry he wouldn't have been surprised if flames had been coming from her eyes in his direction.

"You mean you want him to die? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"It's the way it has to be," Merlin said again, turning now to Hermione, her expression a mixture of disgust and fear. "He is the seventh."

Hermione froze, her mouth open in horror, her eyes brimming over in tears. She shook her head weakly.

"No ... he can't be ..."

She understood. He saw the pain in her eyes as she began to comprehend the enormity of what Merlin had just said to her. She began to shake and her breathing became laboured as she continued to shake her head, possibly hoping she could erase the whole situation by simply refusing to acknowledge it.

Ron too, had turned pale, his mouth opening and closing in disbelief, his blue eyes beginning to water. The horror on his face ripped down to Merlin's very soul.
"The seventh? What's that supposed to mean?" the Weasley girl demanded, looking from Ron to Hermione, a growing expression of dread appearing on her features.

But she received no answer, as Ron and Hermione continued to gaze at Merlin in shock and despair, pleading him with their eyes to tell them it wasn't true.

Then *his* voice echoed out over the hall: "Harry Potter is dead."

Merlin closed his eyes for the rest of the message, unable to bear the hurt and pained expressions of those around him as they heard of Harry's fate. Voldemort mentioned a body, and Merlin's heart went cold. Had Harry really died there in the forest?

He followed the mass of people as they spilled out onto the front steps, their grief-stricken cries echoing through the air as they saw a small prone figure resting in Hagrid's arms. Merlin's heart thumped like crazy as he took in the scene in front of him, trying desperately to get the measure of the situation through the mass of people currently screaming abuse at the Death Eaters. Merlin barely had the time to sense Harry's continued life force before all hell broke loose once again.

The Longbottom boy had courage greater than anything Merlin had seen in a great many centuries. To openly defy such evil in the face of certain death? Merlin was not surprised when Godric's old sword came sliding out of the Hat; this was truly an historic moment.

Chaos was everywhere, as hundreds of people came storming towards them yelling for Death Eater blood, giants roared, and centaurs fired arrows at the Death Eaters, but all Merlin had eyes for was the snake, as the Longbottom boy sliced off its head with a single stroke. It was over, Merlin realised, Voldemort was mortal at last.

From that point on, everything just got crazier and crazier. The fighters were forced back into the Great Hall, Voldemort raining down curses on anyone he saw, screaming instructions to his followers who were rapidly diminishing as even the Hogwarts house-elves joined the fight.

Merlin whipped out his wand and fired curses after the Death Eaters as he made his way through the crowds to find Voldemort— wherever he was, Harry would be.

By the time he arrived, Voldemort was duelling three at once, his face filled with cold hatred, as his challengers fought to try and gain the upper-hand unsuccessfully. Merlin darted forwards to join them, but before he could a horrific scream sounded behind him, dripping with anger.

"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!"

Merlin barely had time to register his astonishment at the Weasley mother as she ran forwards and began a deadly duel with the most evil sorceress in history since perhaps Morgana herself.

Merlin was torn; who should he help?

But it appeared Mrs Weasley needed no one's help, as their duel turned more and more violent, the very floor beginning to crack beneath them with the power of the magic being issued from their wands. Merlin blinked, he'd never underestimate the power of the 'Wand-Wielders' again.

They duelled ever more fiercely, and Merlin found himself mesmerised by the sheer power before him; one driven by obsessive love for her master, and the other a mother's love for her children. He was reminded forcibly of Gwen, who although gentle and kind, would never cease fighting for the ones she loved, no matter the odds.

"What will happen to your children when I've killed you?" Bellatrix taunted. "When Mummy's gone..."
the same way as little Harry?"

"You-will-never-touch-our-children-again!" Mrs Weasley screamed.

Bellatrix laughed, and it proved to be the last thing she ever did. Mrs Weasley's curse soared beneath Bellatrix's arm and hit her squarely on the chest. She fell, never to rise again.

Then Voldemort screamed, and he blasted his final opponents out of the way in his haste to be rid of the woman who had destroyed his most faithful follower. No! A voice screamed in Merlin's head.

Before he knew what he was doing, despite knowing the dangers of directing an Old spell through a modern wand, he raised his wand and yelled: "Hilderan!", at the same moment another voice yelled: "Protego!"

The two spells combined to create a shield so immense it filled the hall, from its enchanted ceiling, to the cracked and blood-stained flagstones beneath, a golden aura between the Death Eaters and their master and the fighters of Hogwarts. It seemed to shimmer in the air as it undulated, an irrepressible magical presence emanating from it.

Merlin looked around in shock, to see Harry emerging from beneath the Invisibility Cloak, ignoring the cries of the watchers surrounding him, with his wand pointed directly at Voldemort, through the golden shield.

Voldemort's red eyes were wide with shock and, perhaps a little fear. Harry stood facing him, his face stony.

Voldemort looked at Merlin, and he felt his insides freeze up in revulsion. The way he was looking at him … it was eager. He knew what kind of magic Merlin had used.

But then he directed his cruel gaze back at Harry, who still stared at him through the shield that was yet to dissipate.

"You think you have won Potter. You think that by destroying my Horcruxes you could possibly render me weak? You are a fool, boy. A weak fool who hides behind the skirts of greater witches and wizards and survives only by accident while I kill the ones you love! Love did not prevent me from killing your mother Potter, nor did it stop Dumbledore falling from the top of the Astronomy Tower! Nothing shall stop me from killing you Potter! You have no idea of the true magic I possess! The Old ways are mine! You will fall beneath the power of the Old Religion! It is I who has found the true path to immortality! You shall rue the day Potter, when you dared defy me, I who have followed in the footsteps of Nimueh, Morgana, and the great Merlin himself! You shall watch as your friends and loved ones fall before you. I am unbeatable."

He hissed his final statement and stretched his arms out wide, as though in surrender, opening his mouth to say a final harsh enchantment:

"Brūcan ūs þanon heonan!"

His eyes glowed golden. A great wind was summoned which roared through the hall like a raging tempest and engulfed Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Before they were spirited away, Voldemort's eyes found Merlin's. He smiled. I know what you are, he seemed to say. And then he was gone.

The hall stood in silence, holding its breath as one as though it could hardly quite believe what had just happened. Then pandemonium erupted.
"Harry! Harry! I'm so glad- We thought you were- Harry!"

Harry was practically pounced upon by his friends who clung to him, tears unashamedly running down their cheeks. The watchers around the hall burst into applause and cheered for Harry, and jeered at the cowardice of Voldemort for running away. Harry was soon swamped by admirers who congratulated him on seeing off Voldemort once again, and expressed their relief he was alive, pulling him into bone-crushing hugs.

But Harry did not look jubilant, or even remotely joyful. Well, of course he wouldn't. He thought this would be the time to finish off Voldemort for good. But all he did was delay the inevitable final encounter. His opportunity to end it all has been missed.

Harry's eyes suddenly found Merlin's, and he gazed at him in confusion and mild suspicion. Merlin wondered if he was berating him for interfering.

Merlin himself was in conflict. Voldemort, Voldemort of all people had just spoken of the Old Religion, an art that had all but died out centuries ago, and not only that, had actually used it! Merlin felt like he was going to collapse with the shock. The situation was much worse than he'd thought.

Voldemort was using the Old Religion! How was that even possible? How could he have learned it? How could he have the power to use it? Merlin had been incredibly vigilant over the centuries to ensure knowledge of the Old Religion had all but vanished and couldn't be used by lesser sorcerers; he couldn't risk anyone getting access to such power.

The magic of the Old Religion still existed in the world of course, it was ever present, but it was practically impossible to use! Its power had faded, and only Merlin was still able to use it, he was of the Old Religion itself. The Old Religion no longer freely directed itself through humans, waiting for the time when it would be restored to its full power, when humans would once again be able to accept it.

So how had Voldemort managed it?

Merlin's head ached. This couldn't be happening! Harry was supposed to defeat Voldemort! That was the only way to bring balance to the Old Religion! But how would that work now?

And then there was what Voldemort had said: the powers of Nimueh, Morgana and … himself. Voldemort had more knowledge of the Old Religion than Merlin could have dreamed of. The true path to immortality …

Merlin took in a deep breath and tried to calm himself. All wasn't lost yet. Harry was alive.

And at the moment, that was what mattered more than anything.
Harry ached all over. His chest throbbed painfully where, only a few hours earlier, he'd been hit with a Killing Curse. *The Boy-Who-Lived … twice.*

His mind was so jumbled up he could hardly make sense of anything that had just happened. He'd … come back from the dead. Or had he even been dead?

He closed his eyes in sheer fatigue; he wanted nothing more than to curl up in his bed in Gryffindor Tower and sleep for days, that is, if the tower was even still standing.

The castle had grown quieter now. The battle was over, and the combined forces of the Hogwarts students, the DA and the Order of the Phoenix had won, narrowly. The dead numbered around thirty and the injured almost twice that.

The battle, he'd learned, had occurred all over Wizarding Britain. The Ministry had fallen, and Kingsley named interim Minister for Magic. The wizarding world was roughly in the same state of affairs it had been before Dumbledore's death; holding on to power, but only just.

He felt a sense of hopelessness crash over him. He could have ended it- tonight it could have been all over. But now, they were just back in the same position they had been at the beginning. Voldemort was still out there, weakened, but very much alive.

Why couldn't he have just killed him? He had come so close! Now Voldemort was out there again, probably making new Horcruxes and coming up with new horrors for the wizarding world. This was no victory.

Kingsley had headed off to the Ministry to consolidate his power, and weed out the remaining Death Eaters still remaining there, trying to rally up the wizarding world into a fully-fledged resistance against Voldemort and his remaining followers; Tonks had been transferred to St. Mungo's, with Lupin accompanying her, having been struck with a particularly nasty curse from Bellatrix, but fortunately saved by Fred Weasley who'd turned up just in time to prevent Bellatrix from finishing the job; Hagrid was out in the grounds, tending to his half-brother; Neville was sitting in the Great Hall surrounded by admirers and proudly displaying the Sword of Gryffindor, hardly believing his luck and Ron and Hermione were sitting here, by his side, not saying anything, but just being there.

He felt more grateful to them than he could ever possibly express to them. Walking into that forest had been the hardest thing he had ever done, and hearing their cries when they'd seen his lifeless body had hurt him down to his very core. They hadn't said anything to him about it yet, and he was glad, because he wasn't sure how he could ever truly explain. They just sat silently, waiting until he was ready.

But would he ever be ready? He had come *so close!* If he'd only been quicker, perhaps Voldemort would be lying dead now, and not thirty innocent people in the Great Hall who'd died believing in *him.* Everything he'd been through tonight had led up to that moment, the moment he could finally have finished him off, and he had failed.

Voldemort's final words echoed in his ears. *True path to immortality … You have no idea of the true magic I possess! The Old ways are mine, Potter! You will fall beneath the power of the Old Religion!*

He had no idea of what this even meant. But he knew it not bode well for him or those he cared
At that moment Kingsley entered back through the front doors, striding purposefully across the Entrance Hall, looking calm, collected and more determined than ever. He paused, as he saw Harry, Ron and Hermione sitting on the battered steps of the marble staircase. He looked them over, his expression unreadable.

"We're meeting in Dumbledore's Office. I'd appreciate it if the three of you were to attend."

'We' could only mean 'the Order'. Harry nodded silently. He knew he'd have to give an explanation sooner or later.

Kingsley swept past them up the staircase, and Ron and Hermione began to rise to follow him, but Harry reached out and pulled them back.

"Wait," he murmured. He owed it to them. He had to tell them first.

He took a deep breath and began speaking in earnest, looking at his trainers, avoiding their gaze.

"I'm sorry for doing that to you … I'm sorry I had to let you think I was dead. It … it was the only way I could get back to the castle. I didn't want to put you through that, I'm sorry …"

He trailed away, unsure of what to say next. How could he tell them he'd been living with a piece of that monster's soul inside of him the last sixteen years?

"You see … I wasn't giving myself up to him. I wasn't trying to … what I mean is … I had a reason for going out there …"

Hermione placed her warm hand into Harry's and squeezed it gently. "We know, Harry. We know what made you go out there." Her voice was gentle, and thick with emotion.

Harry looked up at her in surprise, then looked at Ron and saw a similar expression of understanding on his face.

"But how could you know? I only just found out myself!"

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances. Hermione bit her lip. "Well, you see … we noticed you were gone. We wanted to come after you, to bring you back-"

"Yeah, to knock you senseless for even trying to give yourself up," Ron smiled weakly.

Hermione continued on as though she hadn't heard:

"-but someone stopped us. It was that man, the one who knew about the –Horcruxes-," Hermione whispered the last word, though there was really no need for secrecy any more. "He told us that this was the way it was to be, that- that you were the 'seventh'."

Harry froze, staring at her fixedly. He had known? He'd known from the start! That slip-up when he'd said 'only two left' after the destruction of the diadem suddenly made sense. Harry felt a cold rage surging through his body. He'd known Harry would have had to give himself up!

How did he know? Dumbledore can't have told him!

Harry looked down at his feet again, still angry. The fact that a stranger knew so much about their private affairs disturbed him. If he'd been such a great friend of Dumbledore's, why had Dumbledore never mentioned him? Even just now at 'King's Cross'? If he knew so much, why wasn't he a
member of the Order?

It made no sense whatsoever. He could tell Ron and Hermione were thinking the same as him.

"How does he know so much? Just who is he?"

Ron shrugged, but Hermione looked deep in thought.

"Did you see the magic he used? That Shield Charm he used at the end there? That was powerful magic, more powerful than anything I've ever read about. He can't just be some ordinary wizard."

Ron nodded vigorously. "Yeah, there's something fishy about him. I don't think we should trust him."

Hermione scowled at Ron. "Why not? What has he done to harm us?"

Ron goggled at her. "He let Harry walk out there to die!"

"Yeah," muttered Harry. "But if he's really so powerful, maybe he knew I wasn't really going to die."

Ron shook his head. "Come off it, Harry! He can't just pop up out of nowhere and spout off all this stuff we've been working our arses off trying to keep secret all year and expect us to trust him!"

"But, did you see his Patronus though," Hermione said, almost whispering, a far-off look in her eyes. "It was a dragon."

Ron huffed. "Yeah, that was cool. But what's that got to do with anything?"

Hermione jerked herself out of her day-dream to look at Ron with an annoyed scowl on her face. "Honestly, Ron. Don't you ever listen in class?"

Harry had to smile at the indignant look on her face; a scholar to the end.

Ron simply looked his confusion, and Hermione sighed exasperatedly.

"Patronuses are physical manifestations of positive energy forces able to protect against Dark creatures, and are unique to the witch or wizard that conjures it, correct?"

"Um, yeah?" Ron said, still looking baffled.

"Well … how many Patronuses have you seen that take on the form of magical animals?"

"Uh …"

“They’re extremely rare!” Hermione insisted. "Most people's Patronuses are animals that are a representation of their character, or which has symbolic meaning to the person that conjured it, so we get things like stags, dogs, otters, horses, swans … normal animals! But to have your Patronus be a creature of magic …"

Harry frowned as he tried to take this in.

"So what does that mean?"

Hermione shook her head, still miffed they hadn't grasped the severity of what she was trying to say.
"Only an incredibly powerful wizard could conjure a Patronus which would take on the form of a creature of magic. There's only been two recorded examples in history: Rowena Ravenclaw, whose Patronus was a Centaur, and more recently, Albus Dumbledore, whose Patronus was a-

"Phoenix," breathed Harry.

"Exactly," said Hermione smugly. "For a Patronus to take a form of a dragon… and what's more it wasn't an ordinary dragon, it was one straight out of legend, the Ancient race that supposedly died out centuries ago. He must be very powerful if he could have conjured a Patronus like that."

Harry stared at her a few moments longer. Just how powerful was this strange man?

Ron frowned. "Hang on a minute. Wasn't Tonk's Patronus a werewolf?"

Hermione turned to glare at him. "There's been debates about that for centuries. But most people believe that technically, werewolves aren't magical creatures. They're made, not born. They're a result of a genetic mutation brought on by a bite which transmits lycanthropy, which is a disease. Even Muggles can become werewolves."

Harry and Ron turned and stared blankly at each other. Hermione sighed.

"Honestly, you two. Did you ever do any work?"

"Maybe, occasionally …" Harry trailed off, an amused smirk on his face.

Hermione shook her head again and stood up brushing dust from her robes. "Come on, we'd better not keep Kingsley waiting."

Harry and Ron stood up and followed her up the marble staircase, towards Dumbledore's Office, still calling it that even though it hadn't been Dumbledore's for almost a year.

They approached the entrance, and side-stepping the lopsided gargoyle, moved on upwards towards the door at the top.

Someone on the other side opened it as they approached, and they made their way into the office.

"Remus!" cried Harry. "I thought you'd gone to St. Mungo's with Tonks?"

Remus' eyes darkened at the reminder, but he forced a small smile on his face. "The Healers there have assured me she will recover in time. She's resting now. She won't be awake for several hours yet, and I would like to be there when she does awaken," he said, directing this last part at Kingsley, who stood in the centre of the room.

He raised a hand in a calming motion. "Do not worry, Remus. I shall not keep you away from your wife a moment longer than I need to. But we all must decide what our next move should be before it is too late."

Remus nodded curtly, and headed back to the chair he had obviously just vacated, allowing Harry, Ron and Hermione better access into the room.

It almost appeared as if it had been magically expanded, with the office being fuller than Harry could ever remember it being. The entire Weasley family were there, along with Lupin, Kingsley, several Ministry people, Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout and Slughorn, Hagrid, Aberforth Dumbledore, Hestia Jones, Dedalus Diggle, several more Order members Harry knew from sight by their brief passing through of Grimmauld Place and also a few members of the DA, including Neville.
and Luna, looking distracted as usual.

"Harry," Hagrid mumbled, his eyes filling up with tears. "I'm glad yeh're all right. Nearly gave me a heart attack yeh did!"

Harry flinched. "Sorry," he said sincerely. "But it was the only way."

"You had to surrender yourself because it was the only way?" asked Mrs Weasley sternly, her flushed face betraying the tears she'd been crying. "Harry, what possible reason could you have had?"

Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. "It's a bit of a long story."

Kingsley nodded, and waved the three of them to some vacant chairs in front of the desk. "Then you had better begin."

Harry nodded, seated himself, and began to talk, only slightly uncomfortable about doing it in front of so many people. He talked for what felt like hours, going over everything that had happened in his sixth year private lessons with Dumbledore. His audience were quiet, and listened eagerly. It wasn't until Harry mentioned the Horcruxes that they stirred.

"Horcruxes?" whispered Professor McGonagall, looking distinctly sick. "As in plural?"

Harry nodded. "He wanted to make sure he was completely immortal, and … well … he thought since seven was the most powerful magical number."

"Seven?" exclaimed the people in the room who knew what a Horcrux was, recoiling in disgust. Slughorn looked distinctly uncomfortable, Dedalus Diggle dropped his hat, Professor Flitwick squeaked and toppled off his seat and Kingsley's eyes darkened as he clutched the desk in front of him in anger.

The atmosphere in the room was almost palpable; everyone looked at each other in shock and disgust. Well, almost everyone.

"Uh, what's a Horcrux?" asked George Weasley, looking confused.

Bill answered for him. "It's among the darkest pieces of magic available. A person can split their soul and encase it in an object to protect it even if the body itself is attacked. It's nothing but pure evil; a pathetic attempt to live beyond death. We thought we'd found one in one of the tombs over in Egypt once. The very thought of it turned some of the nastiest goblins I knew into quivering wrecks."

"Split their soul?" Fred repeated, looking incredulous. "Is that why he didn't die when he attacked Harry when he was a baby?"

"Yes," answered Harry. "It leaves you as a spirit, less than a ghost. But he was able to use them to get his body back."

He continued on, revealing everything Dumbledore had told him about the Horcruxes, wincing as he revealed the true nature of Tom Riddle's diary. Ginny had started, her face paled, and she gripped her mother's arm tightly, but she made no other comment. She locked eyes with Harry, who had to look away quickly to avoid himself being distracted.

He recounted his and Dumbledore's search for the locket, and Dumbledore's death soon after, and the revelation of the fake Horcrux. He ploughed on and on, relating the last year of his life in a wearied voice, how they'd realised where the real locket was and how they'd infiltrated the Ministry,
and then gone on the run.

He'd hesitated when it came to the part where Ron had left, not wanting to bring it up again, but Ron had cut across him and continued the story himself. It was a tribute to the Weasleys' familial bonds that none of his relatives said anything. The twins frowned and Ginny looked indignant, but they did no more than that.

He spoke of the silver doe and the Sword of Gryffindor and of going to Xenophilius Lovegood's house (Luna had looked interested at that point). He talked about the Deathly Hallows, and the ambush. He went over listening to Potterwatch (prompting wide grins from both the twins, Lee Jordan, Kingsley and Lupin) and then how they'd been caught by the Snatchers.

With a dead tone in his voice he told about Hermione's torture (observing how Ron held Hermione's hand very tightly in his at that point), their escape from Malfoy Manor, and Wormtail's death. Lupin's stoic expression had twitched at that point, but otherwise gave no other indication of how he felt about the death of the man he'd once considered a friend.

He talked about going to Shell Cottage, burying Dobby, conspiring with Griphook, and breaking into Gringotts (again prompting wide grins from the twins, whose eyes sparkled with glee).

His voice became faster now, skipping over the escape on the dragon, meeting Aberforth in Hogsmeade and getting back into the castle rather quickly.

He related his side of the Battle, about finding the Horcrux, witnessing Snape's death and then viewing his memories.

McGonagall gasped aloud when she heard about Snape's true allegiances, and her eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing. Harry was grateful; he'd discovered a long time ago, that when relating matters such as these it was easier just to keep going.

He told them about his decision to meet Voldemort face on, how he had allowed himself to be killed. He mentioned the revelation about the Resurrection Stone being inside the Snitch, but deliberately missed out the part where he'd met his parents and Sirius; he felt that was just too private to share.

He quickly related everything Dumbledore had told him after his 'death', noting how Hermione and Mrs Weasley's eyes had filled with tears, and then how he'd come around, and pretended to be dead.

He sighed. "And from that point on you pretty much know everything else."

The room was deadly silent for the briefest of moments before Mrs Weasley shrieked and threw herself on him, hugging him closely.

"Oh Harry, you brave, brave boy!"

Harry didn't try and break the embrace; he just surrendered to it, as he had in the aftermath of the Triwizard tournament, revelling in it.

Mrs Weasley finally broke away, and dabbed at her eyes, before sitting down again, and seizing Ginny's hand in her own.

"Blimey, mate," George said, gazing at Harry in wonder.

Harry looked away from him. He really wished he wouldn't …

Kingsley stood up from behind the desk. "If times were calmer, and I was in full authority of the
Ministry, I would not hesitate to award the three of you Orders of Merlin First Class for all that you have done in the past year. I could not be more proud of you."

"Nor could I," added Professor McGonagall, her voice thick.

"Nor I," piped up tiny Professor Flitwick.

Harry hung his head. "But Voldemort got away. He's still out there! I missed my chance."

"Harry," said Lupin, his voice stern. "Don't ever think that! You've done more than I could ever possibly have imagined. You've struck a mortal blow to the enemy. The war is now tipping in our favour. Voldemort might have gotten away Harry, but thanks to you, he's weaker than he's ever been."

But Harry wasn't convinced. "Is he though? You heard what he said at the end!"

The room tensed.

Kingsley frowned. "As to that, I cannot be sure. He spoke of the Old Religion, an ancient form of magic that I believe died out many years ago. It was said to be very powerful, much more than anything we use now. But I fail to see how he could have learned such magic. All forms of that magic are said to have died out with the Druids."

"We shouldn't underestimate him Kingsley," Mr Weasley warned, his voice more wearied than Harry had ever heard it. "He may have come across it somewhere. Just because we do not believe it could be done we shouldn't dismiss it. After all, how many of us would have ever guessed he could have created seven Horcruxes?"

A grim acknowledgement permeated the room, as Harry's head reeled. The Old Religion? He'd never even heard of it before. But judging by the severe looks on the faces in the room around him, it couldn't be good. He made a mental note to ask Hermione later.

"Well, what is our next move?" Hestia Jones asked bracingly.

Kingsley glanced at her quickly before answering. "We have to once more build up our resources. The Ministry must be reformed, the Muggle-Born Registration Committee disbanded etc. We must convince the wizarding world to come together to fight as one. We must build up the strength we have lost."

"Easier said than done, Kingsley," Lupin noted. "But what about this new threat from Voldemort?"

Kingsley frowned. "We must investigate this thoroughly. I'll have as many people from the Ministry on this as I can spare. Knowledge of the Old Religion has died out, but we must not assume no vestiges are left."

"Yeah," said Fred uneasily. "Didn't You-Know-Who mention something about having the powers of Merlin?"

Kingsley shot him a wry smile. "Voldemort certainly has a flair for the dramatic. We must not assume anything."

"But if he does have the powers of the Old Religion," said Hermione uncertainly. "I mean, I've read about it, what little information there is anyway, and it's really powerful. What could we do against that?"
Kingsley shot a look over her shoulder. "I think I may have an answer to that."

Harry turned, and saw the mysterious man from earlier, standing in the corner, having apparently been there all the time.

He came forward now, as Kingsley beckoned and Harry finally got a proper look at him for the first time.

He looked like he was several years older than Harry himself with hair the same jet-black colour. He was pale, tall and slender with clear blue eyes. He was dressed simply in Muggle clothes, dark jeans and a dark blue jumper. At first glance there was nothing remarkable about him, but the more Harry looked, the more he saw. He held himself proudly and straight-backed, seeming to exude a sense of authority effortlessly, though something in his face betrayed a more whimsical nature. His eyes were deep, as though concealing some hidden wisdom, and made him look far beyond his years. But most of all, it was his very presence. It seemed like he was radiating magical energy, some deep and ancient power that had no limits. The only time Harry had sensed something akin to this had been at the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. He would have no troubling believing it if he had been told this man was made from the same mystical energy that had surrounded that place.

Kingsley smiled at him, but Harry could see his eyes were wary; he sensed it too. "Our young friend here was most useful in the battle, he took out several Death Eaters, apparently by quite some ease, and betrayed a great power."

"I'll say," said Fred. "That Shield Charm he did earlier saved me, Percy, Harry, Ron and Hermione from being blown up!"

"And he also displayed great power later when he used another Shield Charm against Voldemort," agreed Kingsley, watching him with curiosity. "Such power I have never witnessed in all my years as an Auror. It was almost as though it came from the Old Religion itself."

The man shrugged, and replied: "My ancestors were Druids, and some of the Old spells were passed down through the family. But we've forgotten how to use them mostly. There's very little left of the Old teachings."

"Indeed," replied Kingsley, still eying him curiously. "Be that as it may, you still know more than the majority of us here about the ways of the Old Magic. You may prove extremely valuable to us."

The man bowed his head and smiled. "I hope so."

McGonagall turned to Kingsley and frowned. "But who is this man? How do we know we can trust him?"

"Yeah!" added Ron. "He knew about the Horcruxes. He knew everything, even though we'd kept it secret and Dumbledore had insisted that no one else could find out! How does he explain that?"

Kingsley turned to look at him once again. "Is that true?"

The man nodded.

Mrs Weasley had turned pale. "You knew!" she screeched. "You knew Harry had a piece of that— that beast's soul inside him but did nothing?"

The man looked troubled. "Yes, I knew. But it was not my place to interfere."

"Not your place?" roared Mrs Weasley. "You could have helped them! But instead you left a bunch
of seventeen year olds to risk life and limb on a half-brained scheme they knew practically nothing about and—"

"Mum! Shut up!" shouted Fred. "At least give him a chance to explain."

"I think we'd all appreciate that," said Lupin, intrigued.

Mrs Weasley looked around, and seeing she was defeated, sat down again huffily, shooting the man glares.

"Why don't you sit down?" asked Kingsley pleasantly, waving his wand and conjuring a chair out of mid-air.

"Thank you," replied the man, and he seated himself.

Kingsley opened his mouth to ask another question but before he could, a long quavering note echoed throughout the castle, igniting a fire in Harry's chest.

The room was silent for a moment. "What was that?" asked Neville breathily.

"It's Phoenix Song," said Harry, having recognised its warming effects.

"Phoenix song?" McGonagall asked in surprise. "But Fawkes hasn't been seen since the day of Dumbledore's fune-"

Her words were drowned out as more of the enchanting melody rung out over the school, and in a burst of flame, Fawkes had soared into the office. He was as stunningly beautiful as ever, his red and gold plumage striking and bold. His beautiful song continued as he glided through the room, mesmerising its occupants. Harry felt his soul lift, and the weight in his chest evaporate.

They followed the bird's flight in a kind of day dream, until Fawkes flew lower and lower, and eventually alighted upon his new perch; the strange man's shoulder, who murmured a soft 'Hello' and extended two fingers to stroke his beautiful plumage.

Harry sat there in shock for a few whole seconds, along with everyone else. Fawkes? He was Dumbledore's most faithful … well whatever he was, not merely a pet or a servant anyway. Fawkes would never act this way unless …

Unless Dumbledore had trusted him implicitly. Harry looked at him in a new light. If Fawkes would behave this way around him …

Hagrid cleared his throat gruffly. "Well, tha's me satisfied. Fawkes was Dumbledore's bird, an' if he trusts him, so do I. Can' go wrong with an animal's instincts."

The man smiled at up Hagrid, Fawkes still resting on his shoulder.

Kingsley took a moment to recover from his shock. "Well, then. I suppose we'd better start from the beginning hadn't we? What is your name?"

The man smiled again, and it looked so genuine Harry began to release some of his earlier misgivings.

"My name is Martin Emrys."

Hermione gave a little start next to him. "Emrys? As in the ancient Druidic name for Merlin?"
Harry looked at her sharply, before turning back to the man who was now laughing, though Harry could see nothing funny.

"Yes. The family myth goes that we're descended from him, though it's probably nothing more than wishful thinking on our part."

Harry looked at him closely; his laugh seemed genuine, as did his smile, but he detected something more. Something deeper.

Martin Emrys laughed again. "I suspect you're right, Mr Shacklebolt, I'll have to start from the very beginning."
Merlin sat in the Headmaster's office with the stares of everyone in the room upon him. His heart was thumping wildly, but he willed himself to calm down. He couldn't waste this opportunity; he had to get them to trust him.

The lie about his name had come surprisingly easy to his lips; he'd once went by the name Martin Emrys before, and it now seemed the name was back in style, plus, it was only two letters away from his real name. He'd amused himself as he moved around by changing his name. Once it had become more and more accepted for everybody to have a surname, and not just the nobility, he'd chosen 'Emrys' and stuck with it ever since. His first name varied a lot, but always began with the letter 'M'. He'd had a lot of fun experimenting with as many silly names as he could.

He should not have underestimated the brains of Hermione Granger however. Of course she would have heard of the legendary Emrys! He backpedalled a bit, made up some silly family myth, and hoped it would suffice.

He didn't want to arouse their suspicions; now was not the time to reveal his identity, he could sense it.

The phoenix had been a help, unexpected as it was. Fawkes was his name? Dumbledore's own phoenix. He sat there quite contentedly on Merlin's shoulder, along with Merlin, one of the last remnants of the Old Religion, sensing their bond. Their powers had been revered by the Priestesses of the Old Religion, as their habit of 'rising from the ashes' exemplified the fundamental nature of the world; that for a life, there must be a death.

He had to admit, he admired Dumbledore's sense of humour. Naming a powerful magical creature after a Muggle criminal? Genius.

He'd encountered only one other phoenix in his lifetime, when he'd first come to Hogwarts to offer his assistance to the Founders in creating their school. That bird, Moltres had been its name, had performed the very same gesture when Merlin had entered the school. That had been enough proof for Godric Gryffindor, the bird's companion, of Merlin's trustworthiness. Fawkes had also done it when Merlin had first met Dumbledore.

He wondered if it was the same phoenix …

"Well, Mr Emrys, why don't you tell us how you came to be here?" Shacklebolt asked him.

Merlin smiled. That would take a while to answer. Shacklebolt seemed to realise, and prompted him further. "Did you attend Hogwarts for example?"

"Yes, only about a dozen different times, he wanted to say, eyeing the Sorting Hat in the corner. That bloody thing'd better not give me away,

"No," he replied instead. "I was home-educated. It's common in the Druidic families. We've lost most of the knowledge of the Old Religion, but it's still traditional to reject modern magical teachings in favour of 'the Old Ways', even though none of us really know what those are any more."

He paused for breath and gauged his audience, seeing their faces fixed on him with no hint of suspicion. So far anyway.

"We only have a few of the Old spells left- they're extremely difficult and dangerous to learn. That is
what I used in the recent battle," he paused. He knew he had to reveal a semblance of the truth here; he'd given away more of his true power in the battle than he'd intended. "It was a Shielding Charm that's been passed down through the years."

"I see," nodded Shacklebolt. "It was incredibly powerful. Is it possible to learn?"

Nope.

"I don't think so, there are only few people able to cast it, and all those are of Druidic heritage, like me," Merlin lied. "I only used it out of sheer desperation. Under normal circumstances it would have been too dangerous to attempt. Its power is too great for modern-day wizards to wield successfully."

There, maybe that should dispel their suspicions for a while.

Shacklebolt nodded, only the tiniest glimmer of disappointment crossing his face. "And what other abilities does your, ah, Druidic heritage allow you to have?"

If I was to answer that you'd never believe me.

"Not much I'm afraid," he sighed, pretending to be genuinely disappointed. "I have quicker reflexes than most, a greater ability to sense magic and the ability to cast a few minor Old Religion spells. Nothing big."

"And do you often use these spells?"

Well I've managed about a dozen a day for the last thirteen hundred years.

"Not often. There's not much point, they require far too much energy to be useful." He grinned. "I prefer using my wand. My connection to the Old Religion means that any spell I direct through it becomes more powerful than if cast by another."

Well, that was a blatant lie Merlin. You detest that bloody stick!

Shacklebolt looked intrigued, but before he could ask any more, the stern-faced woman (McGonagall?) spoke to him.

"Fascinating indeed, young Mr Emrys." Young? I'm thirteen hundred years old! "But it still does not explain your connection with Dumbledore, or how you were aware of Potter, Weasley and Granger's escapades this last year."

"I was getting to that!" Merlin replied in a false cheery voice. Damn, this woman's shrewd; I'll have to be careful around her. "My father was an expert in Ancient Magic, in particular Dark Magic, the kind that sprung up after the decline of the Old Religion. Dumbledore often came to him to discuss matters late into the night; they were friends for many years. When Dumbledore began to suspect Voldemort had Horcruxes after Harry's fourth year it was my father he came to, to try and find out as much as he could."

Shacklebolt tilted his head to one side. "Your father was in a very dangerous line of work."

Merlin almost snorted. Yeah, he was at constant risk of being fried by a massive dragon.

"Yes, he was. And I'm afraid that's what led to his death." He noticed the sympathetic looks in the room, and tried to make himself look sad. "Voldemort got wind of what my father was researching, and sent his Death Eaters to our door. Both my parents were murdered."
Mrs Weasley covered her mouth with her hand and looked stricken, her earlier hostility to Merlin evidently forgotten, as she heard of his 'tragic past'. He felt guilty lying to them about this.

"I'd been working with my father, and had gathered up as much of his research as I could. I went to Dumbledore," Merlin said. "Together we managed to find out as much as we could about the Horcruxes. I was happy to help in any way I could, I wanted to do more to avenge my parents, but Dumbledore wouldn't let me. He said it was too dangerous for someone like me to be in the Order; if Voldemort found out about my 'heritage' …"

Merlin pretended to look regretful before he continued.

"I just wish he could have let me though. He refused to let me help search for the Horcruxes; I think he felt guilty about the death of my father, and wanted to keep me safe out of a sense of duty to him. He made me swear I wouldn't reveal my knowledge of the Horcruxes to anybody. Not until they were all destroyed."

Merlin hated himself for lying like this. This deceit was abhorrent to him, but it was necessary. He couldn't let them know it had been he who had told Dumbledore about the Horcruxes in the first place.

"But you didn't though," a voice spoke up. Merlin looked up to see Harry staring at him. "You told us that you knew about the Horcruxes before they were destroyed."

Merlin winced inwardly. Damn! Think of something, quick!

"At that point Harry, I was beyond caring," he waffled. "I couldn't stay out of the fight any more. I had to do something." He looked at him evenly, glad to see he seemed to have accepted his explanation; he knew what it was like to want to do something. "I did keep my other promise though; that I wouldn't tell you of the Horcrux within you. That was vital. I wanted to tell you so badly. But I couldn't." Merlin fixed his eyes solely on Harry's aware that for the first time he was telling the complete and utter truth. "Dumbledore had a theory; he thought you would survive the Horcruxes destruction, and I hoped and prayed that he was right. I couldn't do anything. I'm sorry."

He willed Harry to believe him. It was the truth, if there could have been any other way, Merlin would have taken it in an instant. It wasn't fair to place so much pressure on one so young.

Harry stared at him for a moment, his face unreadable. Then he nodded, and relief washed over Merlin like a wave.

They remained staring at each other for a few moments before Shacklebolt cleared his throat. Merlin turned to look at him again.

"You certainly have a story to tell, Mr Emrys. I am grateful for your co-operation."

Merlin nodded, wondering where this was going. Shacklebolt continued.

"I hope you realise then, the importance you could have in our organisation. You may say that you know little of the magics of the Old Religion, yet you certainly have greater knowledge than all of us combined. I hope you will consent to continue to assist us in our mission against Voldemort."

Shacklebolt smiled at him.

"Wait, you're offering him membership?" A Weasley brother asked. He glanced at Merlin. "No offence, I'm sure you're a great guy, but can we really just go around recruiting random people? We don't even know if what he just told us is true!"
You're right; everything I just told you was a pack of lies. But that doesn't mean you can't trust me.

Shacklebolt however, smiled again. "How can I refuse him membership to the Order of the Phoenix when its eponymous member has so obviously given him his blessing?"

As if on cue, Fawkes let out another quavering, heartfelt note which seemed to reverberate in Merlin's very soul. Fawkes rubbed his face up against Merlin's, leaving the skin he'd touched tingling with magic energy, and Merlin felt his heart leap. *Fawkes knew who he was.* He'd known that very first day they'd met one thousand years ago, and helped to prove to Godric Gryffindor, Dumbledore, and now the entire Order of the Phoenix that he was trustworthy.

Merlin grinned.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and the Weasley twins walked side-by-side down the corridor, strewn with dust and debris, aiming for the general direction of the Gryffindor Common Room. Harry just felt like collapsing into his bed and never rising from it again. He was weary beyond belief, and he needed some time on his own to think about the strange turn his life had taken.

Only a few hours ago he'd found out he was a Horcrux, died, then been brought back to fight again. It was enough to mess anyone up.

The castle was silent, and apart from the debris ridden halls there was almost no indication a battle had been fought at all, until Harry remembered the bodies of those who had died fighting for him lying in the Great Hall.

He needed to rest; he hadn't slept in almost two days. He couldn't deal with all of this yet.

Fred and George however were in no mood for melancholy.

"Cheer up, mate!" George grinned at Harry, nudging him in the ribs. "We showed old Mouldyshorts didn't we? We defended the school! We're on our way back up again!"

"Yeah, Harry," agreed Fred. "Look on the bright side. We're alive to fight another day aren't we?"

Harry managed a weak smile.

Fred looked behind him and shouted out: "Hey!"

Harry and the others turned to see the strange man, now known to be Martin Emrys, come walking along the corridor towards them. Harry didn't take his eyes off him. He didn't know why, but he'd come to trust this man. He was concealing something, Harry could tell, yet he couldn't help but trust him nonetheless. It's as though some external force was urging him to place his faith in him. He couldn't explain it.

He came closer down the corridor and smiled at them, stopping several feet away as though nervous.

"Martin m'boy! Don't be a stranger," Fred yelled, extending an arm and pulling him closer. "You saved my life, don't forget!"

Martin shrugged, "It really was nothing."

"Not the way you were talking in there it wasn't," said George, turning to face him. "It sounded like you risked a great deal to use that kind of magic."
Martin tried to shake his head and look modest, but Harry wasn't buying it. He was beginning to believe Hermione's suspicions. The man in front of him really was incredibly powerful.

Hermione didn't take her eyes off of him. "Do you really know about the Old Religion?"

Martin smiled at her enthusiasm. "Not much I'm afraid, like I said, much of it's been lost."

"Oh I know," gushed Hermione. "I've always been fascinated by it; all the tales of Merlin and the Druids. Not the silly Muggle ones, the real ones, but there's so little known about it!"

Harry rolled his eyes at Ron who returned the gesture.

Martin grinned, a genuine grin which made him look rather goofy in Harry's opinion. "Well, I'd be happy to tell you all I know about it, Hermione."

Hermione's eyes lit up at the prospect; Harry could tell she was dying to ask him more. Ron scowled at the way Hermione was fawning over him, grabbed her arm and gently guided her down the corridor before glancing back at Martin. "We're going to try and get a decent kip, you coming?"

Martin looked slightly surprised, but came along anyway. In Harry's opinion he didn't look tired at all.

Hermione continued probing him. "Do you really think you're descended from Merlin himself?"

Martin laughed. "I doubt it. I guess it's just one of those things families like to say about themselves to big up their reputations a little. I don't know of a single Drudic family that doesn't do something similar."

Hermione looked slightly disappointed, but didn't cease in her questions. "Druidic families? How many of those are there?"

Martin grimaced. "Not many. They have very little power; it's more tradition than anything else. They like to reject modern magic, they hate wands and think themselves superior because they're descended from the original users of magic, and consider everyone else inferior because they have to rely on sticks- sorry, wands."

Harry looked at him in interest. "You mean they don't use wands at all? How's that possible?"

Martin answered without faulting. "The Druids and original users of the magic of the Old Religion didn't use wands. They directed the magic through their bodies instead of channelling it through a magical core. But when knowledge of how to do this was lost, when the Old Religion declined it was no longer safe to use magic this way. Wand magic is much weaker, but safer. Some of us still learn the Old spells, but it's too dangerous to try and do it to the full power the Druids originally used. That's why you won't find any of us at Hogwarts. If we refuse to use wands, we can't learn magic, because we have no control of the power we possess. The knowledge was lost."

Harry tried to digest this. Magic without wands? It seemed impossible. He'd seen Dumbledore use wandless magic, but it was only little things, like parlour tricks. Had an entire race of magic users commanded such power without a wand?

George looked intrigued. "Can you do any of this wandless magic?"

Martin grinned, and for a moment it was if he was lost in thought. "I can do some things. But I was never happy with the limitations Druidic magic had, unlike my mother. I wanted to learn properly, with a wand. My father taught me. He was one of the more progressive Druids. If it hadn't been for
Hermione wheeled around, her curiosity once again piqued. "You can do wandless magic? Can you show us?"

Martin stopped in the corridor, and bit his lip, thinking. He glanced around for a moment, and then held out his open palm. "Forbearnan."

Harry wasn't expecting what had come next. Martin's eyes had glowed golden, like tiny fires had been lit within—burning for the briefest instant, and then Martin's palm was filled with cracking orange flames, sitting harmlessly against his pale skin.

Martin grinned. "Fugol."

His eyes once again flamed golden. He clenched his fist quickly, and then opened it again, revealing a tiny bird sitting in his hand. It sat there for a moment, looking distinctly ruffled, before it shook out its wings and flew off down the corridor. Harry watched it fly out of sight before turning back to Martin with a broad grin.

"That was brilliant!"

Martin laughed. "It's just a simple little spell. No real power involved; no use to anyone really."

Hermione's eyes were wide in amazement. "It doesn't matter! It's still the magic of the Old Religion! That's something handed down from the likes of Merlin himself! If that power could be examined and used—"

"It may not be for the best." Martin said firmly, setting off down the corridor again, past Ron, Fred and George who were still staring dumbly at his hand as though expecting more birds to fly from it.

Hermione frowned and followed him. "But that magic is still around in the world. If that knowledge can be regained maybe we can use it!"

Martin shook his head. "If there's one thing I know about the Old Religion, it's that it concerns itself primarily with the balance of the world. It faded for a reason, and I have to have faith that it will one day be restored when the time is right."

Martin turned and looked at Harry when he said this, and Harry felt himself shiver involuntarily, as though someone had just walked over his grave.

"But—" Hermione persisted. "We're fighting Voldemort here, if we had the powers of Merlin—"

"But there was someone else who had power like that Hermione," said Martin stopping in his tracks to face her. "She was Merlin's contemporary, and also followed the Old Religion. It was her and her obsessive need for power that set things in motion. She committed an act so dreadful the balance of power was altered and the Old Religion began to fade. Merlin may have had good intentions, but she certainly did not. There always needs to be a balance, Hermione. Perhaps you can guess what her name was?"

Hermione stopped, a small frown on her forehead, looking distressed.

"Morgana."

Martin smiled ruefully. Harry desperately tried to remember his History of Magic, without much luck. All that could come to mind about Morgana was something he'd read off the back of a
Chocolate Frog card; that Morgana was King Arthur's half-sister and Merlin's enemy.

He was saved the trouble of asking more when Peeves came soaring into view.

"Ooohh, looky looky what we have here! It's Potty wee Potter! Back from the dead! Is he really alive?" he soared towards Harry and hit him over the head with a walking cane. "Ooohh look it's solid! Not a ghostie then? Should Peevsie try again?"

"Get out of it, Peeves!" Harry roared, swiping at the Poltergeist in mid-air, and missing by a mile, as Peeves dodged him easily.

Peeves spun around cackling gleefully and soared past Hermione and Martin. "And who else have we? Potty's friends are we?" Then his eyes fell on Martin, and they widened in shock. Peeves actually fell several feet as he looked at Martin.

Harry froze and stared at Peeves in disbelief, who, for the first time Harry had ever known him was being deadly serious.

Peeves cackled again, his eyes fixed on Martin. "Well, well, well … this IS a surprise. The mysterious Emrys pops up again does he? Peevsie wonders how he does it, yes he does."

Martin stared back at Peeves, a slight frown on his face. "Do I know you?"

Peeves chuckled. "Oooohhh, plays a dangerous game so he does. Peevsie knows. Very dangerous game."

And with that Peeves blew a giant raspberry and zoomed off, once more cackling to himself.

"What the bloody hell was that about?" Ron demanded, but Martin just shrugged.

"I've no idea."

Harry wasn't fooled. He was hiding something. How did Peeves know who he was? What could he have meant?

Martin didn't say another word on the way to the Common Room, and Harry watched him closely. He couldn't help but notice when they approached the portrait hole and the Fat Lady broke off her intense recap of the battle with her friend Violet that she gave him a strange look as she swung forwards on her hinges to let them in.

They'd all tramped up the stairs to the first available dormitories and thrown themselves upon the beds, the Weasley boys falling into a deep sleep almost immediately. But Harry lay awake, despite his overwhelming weariness, pondering everything that had happened.

What was Voldemort doing now? Was he using the Old Religion? What even was the Old Religion? How much more powerful was it than normal magic? How could he defeat it?

He rolled over on his side and saw Martin sitting at the window, looking out over the grounds, not even looking remotely tired. There was a sad, melancholy look on his face.

Who was he? What was he hiding? Could he truly trust this Martin Emrys?

These thoughts rolled around in Harry's head as he finally succumbed to sleep.

But Merlin could not sleep, even if he had felt tired. All he could think about was Harry and what lay ahead. Could Harry really be the one to restore the Old Religion?
He hated not being truthful with Harry; after all the lies everyone else had told him, he deserved the truth. Not everything Merlin had said was a complete lie however; there really were Druidic families out there that rejected modern magic, that part had been truthful. It was just that he wasn't one of them. Many of these Druidic families also claimed descent from Merlin, which never ceased to make him laugh; he'd never had any children.

Merlin sighed. What had he been thinking? Spouting off all those lies and then showing them his magic for crying out loud!

Then Peeves had to go an open his over-sized gob.

All he could think about was the webs of lies he was once again weaving around himself. He'd thought he was done with that; the lying, the deceiving. It alarmed him slightly how well adjusted he'd become to issuing silky smooth lies over the years.

He closed his eyes. All his life had been one great lie, excepting those few precious decades with Arthur and the Knights. Would he ever be able to be himself once again? Would there ever again be anyone who truly understood him?

Merlin couldn't even remember the last time someone had called him by his true name.
Daylight seeped into the Gryffindor Common Room, casting light upon the sleeping figures within. Harry awoke with a start.

Groggily, he sat up and looked around. It appeared to be early morning, meaning he'd slept all night and most of the previous day. He didn't feel refreshed however.

He sat upright, his back leaning against the headboard, knees drawn up tightly to his chest. He shouldn't have slept this long; he had a lot to do.

But where to start?

At least last time he'd had something to go on however unsubstantial; he'd known he'd been after Horcruxes. But now … he had no idea what he was dealing with.

Even now, people were lying dead somewhere in the castle, killed because of Harry, and he'd let Voldemort get away from him. And here he lay in bed, after hours of rest, with no idea of what to do next.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling even more tired than he had been before going to sleep. Many Death Eaters had been killed or captured, control of the Ministry had been regained, and yet he still felt he had failed. He had failed when it had been most important.

Could he have killed Voldemort?

Harry opened his eyes. He heard sounds from around him, indicating the room's occupants were still sound asleep. He listened to their steady breathing for a few moments. They had all come so close to being killed yesterday. He'd risked everything, they'd risked everything to bring Voldemort down and yet, he still lived. And from what Voldemort had said before he'd vanished in that mysterious way, it seemed he was even more powerful than they'd feared.

He twitched open the hangings of his four-poster bed and looked around the dormitory. Ron lay on the bed next to his, and Hermione on Ron's other side. They looked so peaceful in their sleep.

Harry turned his head again, and saw Fred and George occupying another bed, lying there top and tail, snoring loudly. Harry wondered vaguely where the rest of the Weasley family were …

He then looked directly ahead of him at the bed opposite, and saw it lying empty. He frowned. Where had this new mysterious stranger headed off to?

He heard a muffled groan coming from his left, and turned to see Ron untangling himself from the bed sheets, blinking blearily.

"Hi," said Harry softly.

"Urgh," came the response, as Ron continued blinking rapidly to regain focus.

Harry smiled. Even at such a time, some things never change.

He watched as Ron continued trying to awaken. He yawned violently.

"Blimey, how long were we out?"
Harry looked over at the early-morning sunlight streaming in through the window.

"Dunno, but I reckon for a while."

"Hmph," grumbled Ron. "Not long enough."

Harry chuckled.

Ron yawned again, and looked around, noticing the empty bed.

"Hey, where d'you reckon he's off to?"

Harry stared at the empty bed. "Dunno."

Ron glanced around furtively, to see if he was being overheard. "Here, do you really think we can trust this bloke?"

"Why? Don't you?" Harry asked.

Ron looked around again. "Look, I know he helped us out and all, but there's just- I dunno, something odd about him."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Then again, Dumbledore was a bit odd in his own way."

"You know what I mean," Ron said, waving this away. "Hermione reckons he's more powerful than he's letting on."

"So? Maybe he's modest."

"It's more than that!" Ron said urgently. "All this stuff about the Old Religion and Druids and stuff. All of that was supposed to be have lost centuries ago, and suddenly he pops up and claims he knows about this stuff? It's weird. Not to mention the fact that I still don't get why Dumbledore told him all that stuff about us."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, it is weird. Seems a bit too convenient that he pops up right at this moment."

"Exactly", said Ron, apparently happy Harry seemed to be grasping the situation. "How do we know everything he said in that meeting was true?"

"One reason, said Harry. "Fawkes."

Ron frowned. "The phoenix? Harry, you're not trusting the bird are you?"

"Fawkes isn't an ordinary bird Ron," said Harry. "He came to me in the Chamber of Secrets when I was loyal to Dumbledore remember? Fawkes willingly flew over to that bloke. He'd never do that with someone he didn't trust himself."

"Still, Harry," said Ron unconvinced. "It's just a bird."

Harry shook his head. "It's more than that. I don't know why, but I trust him. It-it just feels like something I'm meant to do. There's things about him that don't add up, things that he's obviously hiding, but still, I think he's genuinely trying to help us. And I'm going to trust in that."

Ron still looked sceptical. Harry didn't know why he so fiercely believed in this man, it made no sense even to him.
Ron spoke again, his tone more serious. "Did you see that magic though, that wandless stuff he did, the spell that made his eyes glow like that? Why is he holding back on us? And what was that thing with Peeves all about? Have you ever seen Peeves act like that before?"

"No," said Harry softly. "But, I'm still going to trust him. I doubted Dumbledore before, and look where that got me. If Fawkes, who Dumbledore was fonder of than anybody, can trust him, so can I."

Ron looked doubtful, but said no more on the subject. They fell into a silence, as the room continued to lighten as the morning wore on, neither making a move to get dressed. Harry felt weary beyond all measure.

Eventually, Ron broke the silence. "What d'you think'll happen now?"

Harry looked down at his feet. "I don't know. Voldemort's still out there and we have to stop him. But I don't have a clue where to start."

Something his voice must have spoken of his bitterness and despair, because Ron leaned in closer to him. "Listen mate, it's not your fault he got away. What could you have done?"

"I could have done something," said Harry, frustrated. "You heard what I told Kingsley and the others. I was the master of the Elder wand, I could have beaten him!"

Ron's face was set. "Don't blame yourself Harry. He suffered a defeat yesterday. He lost half his Death Eaters, and we've got the Ministry back! He's back in hiding again. We've got the upper-hand!"

"Have we?" asked Harry. "We don't have a clue what he's up to; we're right back where we started. Voldemort's messing in Old Magic, something we can't begin to understand! I could have finished him yesterday, I know I could have!" Harry's face clenched up. "You were all in such danger yesterday; I put your lives on the line."

"No Harry," said Ron firmly. "We put our lives on the line. We're all fighting him Harry; we all want him dead as much as you do. We'll figure this out Harry, just like we always do, together. All of us."

Ron's eyes were fixed on Harry's, a determined glint there as he stared Harry down. Harry looked away, unsure of how to react. He knew he was doing his stupid noble thing again. But no matter he tried to tell himself he had to let others help him, it didn't repress his overwhelming fear that one day he'd lose one of them. They'd come so close yesterday …

Harry was saved from responding to Ron, by Hermione, who rolled over in her sleep, a tired moan issuing from her throat.

Ron looked over at her, and fixed her with a stare so loving it almost made Harry jealous. Not of his love for Hermione, he was thrilled they'd finally got it into their thick heads that they cared for each other, but because he knew he couldn't share that with anyone. He couldn't risk it, couldn't risk Ginny, until Voldemort was destroyed.

He murmured something unintelligible, and started to get dressed, noticing a freshly-laundered pile of robes on the chair next to his bed. He felt a slight twinge of guilt; the house-elves surely had enough on their plates what with clearing up the castle without thinking to provide him with clean clothes.

He pulled them on over his head anyway, and crossed over to the dormitory door, intending to go for a long walk somewhere he could clear his head.
Merlin sat in one of the squishy armchairs in front of the rapidly dying fire in the Gryffindor Common Room. The room had been more or less untouched by the recent battle, only a few shards of broken glass and shattered timber to account for the horrors that had occurred only floors beneath, something Merlin had easily fixed with a flash of his eyes.

He hadn't slept at all. After a few hours staring out of the window in the dormitory and observing the first clean-up efforts beginning he'd left, wanting to do something to help.

But upon reaching the common room he'd sunk down in one of the chairs in front of the fire and hadn't moved since, lost in thought.

The Common Room hadn't changed much since the last time Merlin was here, when he'd last chosen to be a Gryffindor, what was it, a hundred, a hundred and twenty years ago? The furniture had been updated, a couple of new portraits had been added, the place had been re-carpeted. Yet it still felt the same; still the same cozy and safe atmosphere. Abandoned homework lay scattered on the tables around the room, used quills lay forgotten on the floor, there were ink-stains on the desk, and the notice-board still listed the same old contraband, Hogsmeade notifications and Quidditch timetables.

Merlin felt old. He'd grown almost accustomed to watching the world change around him, yet sometimes particular places just hit him harder than others. The room still felt as safe and comfortable as ever, yet Merlin was cruelly reminded of just how deceptive that was. He was never truly safe anywhere, he could never be comfortable. He was always moving on, always saying goodbye. He'd distanced himself for so long now from other people just to protect himself from the pains of having to lie continually to them, and watch as they grew old without him. Sometimes he wished more than anything he could just grow old with them. He was tired; tired of this existence. That's what it was, it wasn't a life. He wasn't living just … existing, like the pawn of the Old Religion that he was, ever waiting.

Not for the first time in all his centuries, he wondered how had had come to this point. He'd been happy in Camelot, happier than he'd ever been at any other point in his life. When Arthur had found out about Merlin's magic, well, it hadn't been pretty to say the least. But in time he'd realised that Merlin's loyalties were to him and Camelot and that had been that. The turning point had been when he'd allowed Merlin to heal Arthur and Gwen's nephew, Elyan's son, when he became deadly ill with consumption, something Merlin had been only too happy to do. Arthur had welcomed magic back into the kingdom, under Merlin's careful guidance, even appointing him 'Court Sorcerer'. He'd been wary of magic at first, as was to be expected, but had come to embrace it and encouraged people to harness their magical abilities to help others. Camelot had prospered.

Merlin smiled as he remembered the good times he had had then with his friends, and the joy and peace that had come with him finally fulfilling his destiny. At least he thought he'd had. It seemed nowadays he had a new destiny.

He missed them, more than he could say. But they were dead now. He couldn't dwell on that fact any longer than he needed to. They'd all died after leading long and happy fulfilling lives. Their names lived on in legends. But their true selves lived on solely in Merlin's memory.

History and myth had remembered them, but distorted, like an endless chain of Chinese Whispers. The true stories were dead to the world. No one knew of Arthur's bravery when not in battle, when he took his place on the throne to protect his kingdom, how he'd transformed his kingdom into a haven of tolerance and good-will, seeing even lowly servants as people to be respected; no one knew of Lancelot's good and true nature, or his selfless sacrifice, only remembering him as the Knight who'd betrayed his King; no one knew of Gwen's kindness and humble background, or that she had
never truly wavered in her loyalty to the man she loved; no one knew the real reasons Morgana had been so evil, twisted as she was by fear and hate; no one truly knew who he was.

No one knew about the laughs they'd shared, Arthur's arrogant and prattish superficial surface, Gwen's tendency to be tongue-tied, Gwaine's love of life, Merlin's constant returns to the stocks, Percival's dry wit …

Merlin was sometimes terrified that he'd forget them; that their faces would eventually fade from his memory. He'd often considered writing it all down, or getting himself a Pensieve, but always backed out in the end. If he couldn't remember them in his own terms, he didn't want to have to read some old diaries or sift through some memories to do so. He couldn't forget them. He wouldn't.

What was he really doing here? He'd spent so long preparing for the moment he'd be back in the world, he'd forgotten to actually prepare. Was he doing the right thing? How long could he keep this ridiculous charade up?

He wanted Gaius here. He wanted just to sit across a table from him, splitting a loaf of stale peasant's bread, spilling his heart out and getting the advice he'd always received from his old mentor, who'd always seemed to know everything. He needed to talk to him now more than ever.

Or even Kilgharrah. Merlin hadn't spoken to the dragon in many years. Kilgharrah had flown off somewhere a long time ago, frustrated that with the growth of urban Britain and eradication of the wilderness he had to share territories with the lesser dragons, pretending to be as dumb and animal-like as they were. Merlin had never attempted to call him back. He was only another reminder of the life Merlin had once had, but now no longer.

Merlin felt tears pricking at his eyelids and cursed himself for being so silly. Stop reminiscing about something you can't change you sentimental old fool!

He sniffed, and blinked the tears away. He noticed a movement in the corner of the room, and turned sharply to see Harry staring at him curiously.

"Harry," Merlin said calmly, hoping the boy hadn't seen. "How are you this morning?"

"What were you thinking about?" Harry asked softly, ignoring Merlin's question.

Merlin sighed; of course he'd seen. He looked straight at Harry; he might as well be honest. "My family," he said, simply.

Harry's face softened, and he looked apprehensive. He edged closer and perched himself on the edge of a desk looking at Merlin rather more shyly than Merlin would have imagined.

"Do you miss them?" he asked.

Merlin smiled sadly. "Every day of my life."

Harry nodded, and looked down at his feet. "What were they like?"

Merlin leaned back and his smile widened. "The most dysfunctional family you could ever picture. Half the time we wanted to kill each other, and the other half of the time we protected each other with our lives."

Harry looked nervous, as though something was troubling him. "Did you ever feel guilty? Guilty that people you cared about were putting themselves in danger to protect you?"
Merlin sat looking at Harry for a long moment. Harry looked apprehensive as though almost dreading Merlin's answer. Merlin fixed him with an intense stare.

"No. I didn't. And that was because I knew that if the positions had been reversed, I would have done the exact same thing for them. We cared about each other deeply, and we never forgot that. We all tried to be noble, putting others' lives in front of our own, being angry when others put themselves in danger. But we were so close, that we knew we could never accept it any other way. We lived to protect each other. None of us would have hesitated to die for the other."

Harry looked even guiltier. "But that's just it. I can't let any of them do that for me!"

Merlin smiled, happy Harry had finally admitted he was actually talking about himself.

"You were prepared to die for them, Harry," he said softly. "You were going to leave all of them alive and knowing you had sacrificed your life to protect them. How is that any different from what they are doing?"

"But that was different," insisted Harry, getting increasingly agitated. "This is my fight; I'm the one Voldemort wants!"

"Harry, do you honestly think that this is all about you?" Merlin asked. "Do you think that if you were dead Voldemort would leave everyone else alone? Voldemort is evil. He killed many, many people before he even thought about going after you. This is a fight belonging to everybody."

Harry stopped the pacing he had just begun and looked at him, a small frown crossing his features. Merlin returned his gaze. It was imperative that Harry know this, know that he wasn't alone, that they were all in this together.

"I could have done it though," whispered Harry, pain crossing his features. "I could have ended it all."

Merlin shook his head. "Harry, if you always think about the 'I could haves' you'll never get anywhere. Just focus now on what you will do. Don't continually look backwards."

Harry nodded, and sat back on the edge of the table, contemplating Merlin's words. Merlin himself felt like a huge hypocrite. Hadn't he just spent the entire last few hours looking backwards? Hadn't he just been lost in memories of his own past, wondering what could have been- like 'if only' he could have done something to help Morgana and perhaps steered her back towards the light. Her betrayal still hurt after all these years. Not just the first one, but the final one, the last betrayal that had led to Arthur's death …

Merlin shook himself out of his memories and again focused on the boy in front of him. Harry looked tired and gaunt; he'd certainly had a rough time of it. But Merlin would help him now-he'd ensure Harry would succeed. Merlin had failed all those centuries ago, failed to protect Arthur, but he wouldn't fail now.

Harry remained sitting there awkwardly, fiddling with bits and pieces of paraphernalia on the table. Someone had left their Chocolate Frog Card collection there. Merlin was amused to see his own name. He'd never gotten over the injustice of his eternal depiction as being an old man- he'd never even aged naturally! He supposed it was something to do with the fact that every time an official woodcarver, or illustrator had come to the castle, Arthur had always insisted Merlin be drawn as Dragoon the Great, possibly as revenge for making him carry him piggy-back all those years ago. Still, Merlin didn't mind too much, it just made his disguise much more fool-proof; no one would
ever expect the great Merlin to be young.

What sounded like herd of stampeding elephants came hurtling down the stairs, and the Weasley twins, Ron, and a slightly annoyed Hermione, appeared in the doorway. They paused at the sight of Harry and Merlin sitting there, perhaps feeling they were intruding.

"Hey!" Merlin said cheerily, trying to reassure them.

The twins responded enthusiastically and came over and sat themselves around Harry and Merlin, joking and complaining at the lack of room service after 'all they'd done.'

Merlin shot a quick smile at Harry, letting him know everything he had just confided was safe with him. Harry responded with a smile of his own gratefully.

Ron however looked slightly more suspicious, and Hermione looked as intrigued as ever. Merlin restrained from rolling his eyes. Typical that Ron would see him as a threat and Hermione would want to know everything. Merlin had been sincere earlier when he'd said he'd tell her all about the Old Religion; he knew she'd find it fascinating. But that had to wait until the right moment for it to be revealed, all he could give her just now was subtle hints and ghosts of the truth.

"I'm starving," Ron announced, and grabbing Hermione's hand he headed off towards the portrait hole.

"Charming as ever, our brother," Fred said to George, who nodded fervently.

"We might as well join him, you know. Make sure he doesn't get so hungry he starts eating the house-elves by mistake."

They stood up and followed their brother, Merlin and Harry doing the same. Their trip through the castle wasn't pleasant. The house-elves had done an admirable job in such a short space of time; the blood stains were gone, as was the broken glass and the largest of the debris. But the gigantic holes in the walls, and smell of burning still lingered. They were still surrounded by the battle.

They emerged in the Entrance Hall, where several people were gathered, all of them turning to gape at Harry, who blushed and flattened his fringe over his scar. Merlin almost snorted. Yeah, like that would make a difference.

They moved into the Great Hall, where the House tables had been re-established, with an impromptu breakfast resting on them. There weren't many people in there; a few students and their families who'd come to fight, the teachers and some members of the Order, who milled about trying to organise the chaos.

Everyone looked up as Harry entered, but Hermione grabbed on to Harry's hand and led him determinedly between the tables, past the stares and settled mid-way down the Gryffindor table.

They all followed her lead. Merlin felt acutely aware of the amount of stares he was receiving. He was momentarily thrown by this; he hadn't received so much attention or notice since Camelot- he'd always tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Well, that's a thing of the past.

They sat down at the table, across from the Longbottom boy, who greeted them enthusiastically. Beside him were another two boys, Merlin knew by sight as being in Harry's year, and the Lovegood girl, who was staring up at the enchanted ceiling, frowning slightly, seemingly not even noticing their arrival.

Neville Longbottom's face was alight with eagerness. "I thought you lot would never get up! We've
Kingsley and a lot of the others are off at the Ministry trying to sort everything out, get rid of all the Death Eaters still in office. We've got a castle to clean up!"

Harry frowned. "We're going to be cleaning up? Voldemort's out there doing Merlin knows what and we're just going to-"

"We'd love to help Neville," interjected Hermione, silencing Harry's objections with a glare. "It's important we don't let the place fall into ruin. We can all help."

Ron looked slightly annoyed, but didn't say anything. Neville beamed at them, and his eyes settled on Merlin.

"Hey, you're that guy! The one who helped us in the battle! The one who knows about the Old Magic. Sorry, I can't remember your name."

"Martin Emrys," Merlin replied, shaking Neville's proffered hand.

Neville grinned. "Neville Longbottom. This is Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan," he said, gesturing to the two boys on either side of him. "And, uh, that's Luna Lovegood. She's not usually this rude, but she's concentrating you see, says she's trying to count the uh, Wrackspurts."

Merlin looked over at her, noticing her glazed expression, and the fact she seemed to be counting under her breath carefully. He smiled; he liked her.

Neville beamed at Merlin's smile, obviously pleased Merlin didn't dismiss Luna as a lunatic. "You were really cool in the battle, Martin. That was some brilliant magic."

Merlin grinned. "Thanks Neville. You were pretty good yourself. The way you handled that snake, that was cool."

Merlin had never really understood why modern generations liked to use the word 'cool' to describe something, but he'd come to learn it made them more at ease.

Neville flushed, but he looked really pleased with himself nonetheless. "It was nothing really," he mumbled.

"Come off it, Neville," Dean said, nudging him. "It was awesome!"

Neville flushed deeper, and looked down at his plate of scrambled eggs.

Seamus turned his attention on Merlin. "Do you really know about Old Magic?" he asked.

Merlin nodded, remembering neither of these boys, unlike Neville, had been in the meeting with the Order. "I do a little."

Seamus looked interested. "Wow. I've heard stories and stuff about all of that. Always thought it'd be pretty cool to learn."

Merlin just smiled, but made no reply, helping himself to some toast. He couldn't give anything away.

Breakfast passed without much incident, apart from Luna randomly clapping her hands together and yelling 'I knew it! Two-thousand and twenty-five!' The hall was pretty empty. Everything was informal, parents and teachers sitting amongst the students, who were rarely sitting at their own House tables. Harry, Ron and Hermione made little conversation, and Dean and Seamus were
eagerly talking amongst themselves about what the other had been up to during the previous few months. Merlin took the opportunity to look around, noticing the wearied and grief-stricken faces that seemed to be everywhere. He wondered where the bodies that had lain here only yesterday had gone to.

Eventually, Harry, Ron and Hermione stood from the table. "I suppose we'd better get started on helping restore the castle. Anything we can do, Neville?" Hermione asked.

Neville thought for a moment. "You might start outside; there's still a lot of debris out there. I'll be out soon, I said I'd help Professor Sprout with the greenhouses, a lot of rare and valuable plants are going to die unless we get them sorted out."

Harry nodded distractedly. Merlin watched him- it was obvious he'd rather be anywhere else but here, he wanted to be fighting, not cleaning.

They headed outside, through the ruined front doors and on to the lawns, now trampled and dug up, shallow trenches criss-crossing the ground where the giants had fought.

But before they'd so much as begun to clear up, a shout rang out from behind them.

"Ron!"

They turned to see one of Ron's brothers running towards them; Merlin wasn't sure which one, Bill? Charlie?

"What's up?" Ron asked, taking in his brother's breathlessness and evident distress.

"Where is it Ron?" he panted. "We've been searching like mad but we still can't find it!"

"Find what?" Ron asked, confused.

The Weasley brother looked at him exasperatedly. "The dragon, Ron! You know, you one you flew? It's loose somewhere isn't it? It's blind, probably very hungry and very pissed off. We have to find it before it gets too close to a Muggle settlement!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at him uncertainly. Hermione bit her lip.

"Um …," she said, not exactly inspiring confidence. "Well, we're not sure exactly …"

The Weasley brother rolled his eyes. "You just let it go without caring where it ended up?"

"Well, we did have other things on our minds at the time!" said Ron defensively.

The Weasley shook his head. "This is going to be an absolute nightmare."

Merlin remained silent. Despite being a Dragonlord, he doubted he could help. Dragons nowadays had changed so much. They were dumb animals now, no ancient wisdom like what Kilgharrah had possessed. They wouldn't recognise his authority.

He'd tried, over the years to contact them, but to no avail. Kilgharrah said that they were 'ruthless and stupid beasts, with no concept of conscious thought'. But still, he sensed that there was still some form of ancient wisdom lurking under the surface.

The Weasley sighed, leaning back on his heels. "We've been telling the goblins for years to get rid of their dragons. It's blatant cruelty is what it is. Those poor things trapped underground all their lives, blind, starving, tortured, it was only a matter of time before one of them managed to get out."
"Yeah, well, I think we helped a little there," smiled Harry weakly.

The Weasley looked at him. "I still can't believe you lot actually rode on a dragon. You must be the only people in history to ever have done it."

Merlin scowled. No, they're not. I did it too, on a much better dragon!

The Weasley was still talking:" –can't believe you survived. You still might not, mind you. The goblins are pretty mad."

Hermione looked worried. "Really?"

"Of course, Hermione!" Ron said. "Can you imagine what the little gits are saying about us right now? We broke into a high-security vault, stole something precious, and stole their dragon. I'd be pretty pissed."

"Wonder what they'll do to us," Harry wondered aloud.

"I may be able to answer that," a deep voice said. Kingsley was walking towards them from the front gates.

"Kingsley!" exclaimed Harry. "I thought you were at the Ministry?"

Kingsley smiled wanly. "I was. Overturning the awful things the Ministry has incorporated since Thicknesses' reign will take a long time. I'm trying to get everyone out of there that I don't trust. I thought you might like to know I've got Umbridge in a cell in Azkaban awaiting trial for crimes against Muggle-Borns."

A flash of triumph gleamed in Harry's eyes. Even Merlin was glad to hear this; although never directly interacting with Umbridge, he'd still come to loathe her as much as Harry did.

"Serves her right the old hag-" began Ron, but Hermione interrupted.

"What were you saying about the goblins, Kingsley? Are they really mad?" Hermione asked, looking afraid.

Kingsley laughed without humour. "Are the goblins mad you broke into Gringotts … you might as well ask 'Are the Chudley Cannons going to finish last in the league again this year?'"

Ron tensed slightly.

Kingsley went on, not noticing: 'They've been swarming the Goblin Liaison office the last couple of days demanding you all be brought to trial for your crimes.'

Hermione's eyes widened and she gripped on to Ron's arm tightly. But Kingsley held out a hand to reassure her.

"Don't worry about that, Hermione. I won't let that happen, though it may sour diplomatic relations with them for a while."

Ron looked sheepish. "Sorry about that."

Kingsley waved his apology away. "No need Ron. There is absolutely no blame placed on any of you. The goblins don't see it that way however. They don't care for what purpose you broke in, their pride has been wounded and they want you punished. We had managed to come to an agreement; they'd lessen their punishment if you returned the artefact you stole. Obviously since you destroyed
it, that is impossible, and we're still trying to come up with a better solution."

Harry, Ron and Hermione fell silent, looking rather worried, and Merlin almost had to laugh at their expressions. They'd just fought in a terrible battle, facing deadly foes, but they were afraid of the goblins?

"By the way, Kingsley," asked Hermione in a timid voice. "Are we going to tell them, and the whole world for that matter, about what really happened here. With the Horcruxes and all?"

Kingsley frowned. "As to that, I'm not yet sure. People will want to know where you have been the last year but I don't want it widely known in the world. However Voldemort himself mentioned Horcruxes before he vanished, and about the Old Magic; I don't know how long we can keep it secret."

He broke off leaving an ominous silence.

Harry broke it. "And what are you doing about the Old Religion stuff?"

Merlin tensed slightly.

Kingsley sighed. "I have people working on it Harry- in the Department of Mysteries. But so far, no luck. All knowledge really seems to have been erased from history."

Harry pressed forward. "We could help-"

"No, Harry," said Kingsley firmly. "Leave this to me. The Ministry's records are the most extensive in Britain, if anything is to be found it will be found by my people."

_Ha, thought Merlin. I'm the one that erased it all._

"What you can do now Harry is help here at the castle, and rest a while. You need your strength back. Now you must excuse me, I need to speak to Professor McGonagall."

And he left.

Merlin saw Harry's anger and frustration on his face. He hated waiting. He wanted to _do_ something.

Merlin knew the feeling.
Resurfacing

Harry wandered aimlessly around the castle, having no real purpose. He'd helped the others with clearing away the worst of the destruction of the castle, but he felt he couldn't any longer. Every broken wall, every smashed window just made him feel guiltier.

He'd excused himself, and wandered off, wanting something better, something more useful to occupy his time, but nothing had come up. So now he was just wandering around being even more useless than he was before.

It was now late-afternoon and the castle rang with voices. Re-enforcements had been called in from the Ministry, professional magical masons, restorers and enthusiastic volunteers poured into the castle, eager to help. Kingsley had gone back to the Ministry, the Hogwarts professors were leading the clear-up, Dumbledore's Army were helping co-ordinate everything, the Order of the Phoenix was out there helping round up more Death Eaters, Remus was back at St Mungo's with Tonks who'd now regained consciousness … and still Harry was here, feeling like the proverbial fifth wheel.

He scuffed some debris with the heel of his shoe. He needed something to do!

He emerged into another corridor which was seemingly untouched by the battle, when he noticed another figure already occupying it.

Martin Emrys was standing halfway down the corridor, closely looking at a painting hanging there.

Harry started towards him. He noticed as he drew closer, that Martin was staring at the painting with a strange emotion on his face. It was intense, and made Harry feel rather invasive.

Harry looked at the painting. It seemed fairly nondescript to him, being a simple landscape of some ancient castle, but Martin was staring at it so fiercely it was almost as if he wanted to climb into it himself.

"Hey," Harry said, speaking quietly, somehow he felt this was a private moment.

Martin started and looked around as though alert for danger, but relaxed when he saw Harry.

"Oh, it's you. Hi."

Harry moved closer, himself looking at the painting. As he drew nearer he saw a tiny bronze plaque underneath it, spotted with age, with the word Camelot clearly engraved on it.

He looked back up at the painting with increased interest. This was Camelot? It was different than he would have imagined, certainly nothing like the films he'd seen at the Dursley's when he was younger.

"Wow," he said. "It looks grander than I thought."

Martin smiled, almost sadly. "It was said to be the greatest city that ever existed. The epitome of tolerance, peace and chivalry."

Harry looked back at it. "What happened?"

Merlin sighed, looking grim. "King Arthur died, and with him, all that he believed in. The kingdom crumbled away, the people forgot all that had been good. They began to fear magic once again, and
the magic of the Old Religion fell into decline. Within fifty years of Arthur's death, it was nothing more than some forgotten backwater settlement, known for its degradation. Its glory was lost, never to be regained."

Harry heard the sadness in his voice. "But what about Merlin? Couldn't he have done something?"

Martin looked at him strangely, and when he spoke his tone was bitter.

"Merlin wasn't there when Arthur died, He'd been tricked by Morgana, his enemy. She led him into a trap. No one knows what happened to him after that. Some say he was killed by Morgana, others that she had him confined inside a crystal cave, and that he is still alive, ready to return when he is needed."

Harry looked at him closely. "And what do you believe?"

Martin looked back at the painting. "I don't know. Perhaps he will return one day."

Harry frowned. "I hope so, and I hope it'll be soon. I really need him."

Martin laughed. "Perhaps you don't need him as much as you think. You underestimate yourself, Harry."

Harry made no answer to this. Then another question popped into his mind, something he'd meant to ask Hermione.

"What is the Old Religion anyway? I get that it's really powerful and all, but what else?"

Martin looked suddenly wary. "No one really knows much about it. It was like a sort of external force, ever present in the world. It existed in all living things, in every person, in some more strongly than others. These people were able to harness this power to use magic, really powerful magic, wandless, and commanded by words from Old English, rather than the Latinised spells you use nowadays. Then, Arthur died, and for some reason the Old Religion fell into decline, and although it's still out there, people have lost the knowledge and ability to be able to harness it again."

Harry listened avidly, trying to make sense of it all. "But, how was Voldemort able to use it?"

Martin sighed. "I wish I knew."

They stood in silence a few moments longer.

Harry sighed. "I just wish there was some way to find out more about what I'm facing. Kingsley won't let me help at the Ministry, but I need to know as much as possible about all this if I'm to one day defeat him. I feel like there's nothing I can do."

Merlin turned to him, a slight mischievous glint in his eye.

"From what Dumbledore tells me, you've never really been one for following the rules. Perhaps there is a way you can help."

"How?" Harry demanded.

Merlin smiled at him. "I hear Hogwarts has quite a good library …"
"Remind me again why we're doing this?" grumbled Ron, as they entered the library.

"Be quiet, Ron!" chided Hermione. "If Kingsley won't let us look at the Ministry then we might as well try here!"

"Yeah," said Ron sceptically. "I'm sure the answer to all our problems will be found in a school."

"You never know what might be lurking in a forgotten corner," Martin said, winking as he passed by them and headed into the cavernous Hogwarts library, miraculously undamaged.

Ron huffed. "There isn't going to be anything here! The Old Religion stuff's been lost for years!"

Hermione didn't look fazed however, and began peering at dusty titles on the shelves.

"You never know what you'll find at Hogwarts, Ron," she said distractedly. "The castle's over a thousand years old; there's bound to be references to the Old Magic."

Ron wasn't convinced. "The Ministry will find it, Hermione, you heard what Kingsley said; they've got more official records than anywhere! Why would all this knowledge be here?"

Harry moved past him to Hermione's side, and began examining books of his own. "I'm not just going to sit back and let the Ministry handle everything, even if it is Kingsley who's in charge."

Ron scowled. "This is some sort of pride thing isn't it? You still feel like you have to make up for not finishing Voldemort off aren't you?"

Harry whirled around to face him, anger simmering beneath the surface. "This is nothing to do with my pride, Ron! Voldemort is still out there! And we need all the information we can get!"

Ron said nothing, and Harry returned to examining the bookshelves, his heart pounding. He observed Martin observing him out of the corner of his eye. He looked more amused than anything, watching their interchanges. Harry felt a slight unease; he trusted the man, but he was still too mysterious for Harry's liking.

"Will you help us?" Harry asked him.

Martin looked down the aisles of the library, lined with the ancient volumes.

"I'll try," he said. "But this library looks huge."

"Too right," grumbled Ron, looking around miserably.

Hermione took charge. "Well, I suggest we start from the beginning. The oldest books are at the very back. There's bound to be some references in there."

They moved down the aisles, their footsteps ringing out in the empty library. Harry was disconcerted. He'd seen the library empty before, but now it seemed almost ominous as he considered the fact that the answer to his problems may be hiding here.

They approached a small alcove at the very back of the library. The air seemed to be tingling with a magical energy, books so ancient Harry was surprised they were even still intact lay heavily on dusty shelves.

Hermione approached them reverently. "There's a whole host of protective charms on them naturally, to keep them from crumbling into dust. They're centuries old; some of them even belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw herself."
That explained the tingly magic about the place, Harry thought, looking at the books in interest. Their titles looked faded and worn away, some written in languages he couldn't begin to understand.

"Are you sure we'll be able to read these, Hermione?" Harry asked. "Hasn't writing changed a bit over the years?"

Hermione gasped. "Oh yes! I completely forgot!" She thought for a moment. "There ... is a charm that might help. It translates the written word; no help in translating actual speech of course, but it might just ... " She broke off biting her lip. "It's incredibly complex ..."

"Leave off, Hermione," Ron said. "If anyone could do that spell, you could."

Hermione flushed slightly as Ron's praise. "Well, I might ... but it would be a whole lot easier to just read them. The spell isn't fool-proof and it's very slow."

"I can help there," interjected Martin. "I used to help my father with his research, and a lot of that involved reading ancient manuscripts. I might be able to translate a little."

Hermione's face lit up. "Really?" she breathed. "That'd be really useful!"

"Yeah," said Ron, looking bored. "Listen, why don't you two read these ones, and Harry and me will go and look somewhere else?"

"Where?" asked Hermione.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno, the Restricted Section maybe? I bet there's loads in there. I mean, it's where Voldemort learned how to make Horcruxes."

Hermione looked doubtful. "I don't think we should ..."

"Come on Hermione!" said Ron. "You don't need to worry about rules for Merlin's sake! Madam Pince isn't even here! Besides, I reckon we've done enough to be allowed in there anyway!"

Hermione nodded, reluctantly. "I suppose. Just be careful will you? Some of the books in there are quite nasty."

Harry nodded, remembering only too well the books he'd encountered in the Restricted Section in his first year.

They walked off, stepping over the low rope that covered the entrance to the Restricted Section, leaving Hermione and Martin heaving down copious ancient volumes.

Ron ran his fingers along the spines of the books, looking wary.

"D'you really reckon we'll find anything here?" he asked Harry doubtfully.

"Only one way to find out," said Harry, reaching for a book.

Merlin's eyes were beginning to glaze over as he skimmed over the passages in the ancient book they were perusing. It was deadly boring, as he'd expected.

He didn't really expect to find anything; he was pretty much sure all the knowledge of the Old Religion had been more or less lost, both due to time and his own interference. But he'd guessed that
Harry needed something to occupy his time to make him feel useful, and this had been his suggestion.

He was regretting it already. Ancient writers really like to drone on, and on, and on …

He felt his eyes begin to droop

He jerked himself awake, as he began to fall slightly forwards. He needed to look focused!

But Hermione had noticed.

"Is there nothing in there?" she asked.

Merlin shook his head. "Nah, it's just some old chronicle about cauldron exports. Nothing useful."

He closed the book, and levitated back up to its shelf with his wand, and summoned another even heavier book.

Hermione watched him curiously. "How did you learn these languages? Even the writings in English from a thousand years ago make no sense to me without this charm, and even then it's dodgy at best, I don't think I did it right."

Merlin smiled. *Because this is the language I grew up with.*

"My father taught me all of it." He answered.

Hermione looked at him sympathetically. "You must have been really close," she said softly.

Merlin's lips twitched. "Not really. I- I didn't really see much of him growing up. I was still devastated when he died of course, being murdered and all when I really needed him. But, he left me with his legacy, you might say."

There; one of the first things he'd said in the last couple of days that was completely truthful, if a little vague.

Hermione continued looking at him kindly. "What was his name?"

Merlin hesitated. As far as he knew his father's name had never been recorded in history; Muggles had concocted some silly story about him being sired by a demon, and Merlin had never mentioned his father's identity to anybody, save Arthur and the Knights.

"His name was Balinor," he said finally. "He was wise, and brave. But he suffered a lot in his life, began to resent the world for its cruelty. He was grumpy to the point of being insanely annoying. But he was a good man."

Merlin finished, lost in his own memories. He looked over at Hermione.

"You miss your parents don't you?"

Hermione looked down at her feet uncomfortably. "Yes, all the time. They're safe, they're in hiding. But I can't help but miss them, and want them back here. But at the same time I'm afraid they'll be angry at me for sending them away."

Merlin frowned; he knew of what Hermione had had to do to ensure her parent's safety, and he admired her courage for it, and her pure selflessness.
"They won't be," he tried to reassure her without letting her know he knew about what she'd done. "When all this is over, you'll be able to find them, and they'll be so thrilled to see you they won't even think about being angry. They'll be incredibly proud of you, Hermione Granger."

Hermione ducked her head, her bushy hair covering her face. Merlin suspected she didn't want him to see her emotional. He pretended to become absorbed in the book in front of him again, and waited until she finally gave a great sniff and brought her head back up to his level.

"Thank you, Martin," she said, gratefully. She looked down at the book in front of her and sighed at the difficult looking runes there. "I'll never get this done."

Merlin shot her a grin. "And I bet you said that about your O.W.L’s."

Hermione laughed, the sadness lost from her face. "At least then I knew what I was dealing with. I doubt memorising the ingredients for a Shrinking Solution would help me now."

"You never know," said Merlin, flicking through the pages of the book in front of him. "Did you ever expect you'd have to break into Gringotts the first time you walked inside?"

Hermione smiled at him. "I've done a lot of things I'd never expected."

"Well then," said Merlin bracingly. "'Expect the unexpected', that's what I always say. Life's just a little crazy like that, believe me, I know. You never know what might be around the corner."

Merlin started staring at his book again, leaving Hermione to ponder his words. Sometimes she just didn't have enough confidence in herself, something that was uncharacteristically stupid of her. All of the things she had already accomplished at such a young age she should never have to feel she was out of her depth. He knew if anyone could solve a mystery, this bright young witch could.

They remained in silence for a good while longer, the light from outside dulling to become evening. Merlin read through the endless amounts of books. He'd read most of these before, during his many times at Hogwarts when he'd felt like doing some research into this type of magic's past, but he couldn't ever remember them being this boring. There was some pretty fascinating things written here, but he was in no mood for them. Even for the ones written by the Founders.

His mind wandered back to Voldemort's final appearance, and the words he'd spoken before he'd vanished. The true path to immortality … the powers of the Old Religion …

"Oh!" squeaked Hermione, grabbing a book closer to her.

Merlin turned sharply. "What? What have you found?"

She pointed at a line of text. Merlin stood up and moved over to her, reading over her shoulder with relative ease the words she'd so painstakingly translated.

'The magics of the Old Religion have been forgotten by most peoples since the downfall of the great Myrddin. But some still say that the power lives on, and even once walked the hallowed halls of Britain's most prestigious magical establishment. The Founders themselves were once said to have had this power in abundance."

Merlin frowned. This wasn't exactly true; the Founders certainly had had very powerful magic, some of it contrived from the Old Religion which had seemingly bestowed it upon them for some greater purpose, but they had never actually used Old Magic. At least, not the same kind he had.

The name Myrddin also slightly annoyed him. He'd never gone by that name! Silly Muggle rumours
Hermione turned to stare at him, her mouth open. "The Founders had Old Magic?"

Merlin pretended to look intrigued. "I'm not sure. They were very powerful, but I doubt they ever actually used it. It might just be someone trying to make them seem bigger than they were."

Hermione shook her head, looking ever more excited. "But the Founders were around a thousand years ago! It wasn't too long after the time of Merlin was it? Maybe some of it still survived?"

Merlin didn't feel much like curbing her enthusiasm. He might as well just let her think so. He doubted it would get them anywhere, but he could see no other option. He wasn't even sure what path he should be directing them towards. He had no idea himself of what he should do, what he should be doing to stop Voldemort and find out more about his plans.

But, maybe this would help the three of them get on track. Perhaps the Founders did have some part to play in this. He never had discovered the reason for the Old Religion bestowing that magic on them. Was this what it had had in store for them all along? Was this why he had been so compelled to teach them Old Magic, even though they had been unable to pass it on to others? Was this part of one greater purpose that Merlin simply hadn’t been able to understand back then?

He’d known he’d been taken to the school by the Old Religion for the purpose of helping them build their school, and he had been able to see for himself all the good that the school had done in the subsequent ten centuries. But why had he taught them that new form of Old Magic? At first, he had believed it was because they were the people he had been waiting for, the ones to bring the Old Religion back to the world. But when he’d realised that wasn’t the case, he had still continued teaching them, because he knew deep inside of himself that it was vitally important. Was he now about to see the conclusion of the actions he had taken so long ago?

He’d never even seen the Founders at all towards their latter years, save that one fateful final day. It was possible they might have discovered something, however unlikely, something that might be relevant to Harry and his friends in the present day. He remembered vividly Helga’s final words to him: the prophecy she had had of a great battle, and a boy with a lightning scar. Undoubtedly, this was Harry. Was whatever they had done in the past now about to impact directly on his life? Was he linked to them?

He noticed that Hermione was staring at him, eagerly awaiting him to agree with her.

Merlin just smiled, keeping his musings secret for the present. "Maybe."

"You two found something then?" Ron moaned, coming around the corner with Harry, whose sleeve was smoking.

Hermione gasped. "What happened to you?"

Harry grimaced. "A pissed off Encyclopaedia of Poisonous Fungi. These books are dangerous."

"I told you!" Hermione reprimanded sharply. "Never mind that now, did you find anything?"

"Nope," said Ron, throwing himself into a chair at the desk. "It's like looking for Horcruxes all over again. There's some references to it, but it's all stuff like 'has been forgotten for many centuries' or 'was considered the most powerful of all magic'. Why mention it all if you don't know anything about it?"

Hermione looked slightly disappointed, but gestured for them to come closer. "Well, I think I might
have found something. Look at this!"

Harry and Ron looked at what she was pointing to, and then looked at each other, clearly baffled.

"Hermione, we can't read runes."

Hermione sighed exasperatedly, and translated. By the time she was done the two boys were looking as awed as she was.

"The Founders used Old Magic?" Harry asked, looking slightly dumbstruck.

"They can't have!" Ron said. "I remember stories from when I was a kid. They all used wands; it's said Godric Gryffindor stuck his up Salazar Slytherin's nose when they had an argument once! They can't have been using that kind of magic!"

"Maybe they used a sort of hybrid form!" said Hermione excitedly, not noticing Merlin’s subtle smirk as he recalled this particular incident. "Perhaps they combined the two forms of magic! The Old Magic might have still been around in a diminished form at the time they were alive!"

Harry and Ron exchanged glances, looking slightly awed.

Ron turned to Merlin. "You're the big expert in Old Magic. What do you think?"

Merlin was slightly surprised at Ron asking his opinion; he'd gotten the impression Ron didn't trust him as readily as Harry and Hermione.

"I think it's possible. It was said they had incredible power, of a kind that hasn't been matched since. Perhaps it was some form of Old Magic."

Hermione looked breathless with excitement. Merlin was suddenly glad he'd never had to witness Hermione in class or doing homework; she was positively frightening with her enthusiasm.

"Oi! You lot!"

They turned to see another one of the Weasley brothers coming towards him. Which one was he? Not the one who was chasing the dragon, but not the one who'd been fighting with Fred during the battle either … how many of them were there?

"What's up?" Ron asked, still distractedly staring at the book in Hermione's hands.

The brother came closer, and a frown crossed his features as he took them in.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked, his eyes crossing over the various books lying open in front of them.

"Just looking," said Hermione, her obvious lie betraying her.

The Weasley brother stared at her before shaking his head in resignation. "I won't even pretend to understand what's going on with you all. I'm just here to let you know mum's looking for you. They're about to start dinner in the Great Hall, and we've got some stuff to go over."

The four of them exchanged glances. "We'll be down soon," promised Harry.

The Weasley nodded, and backed away still looking curious. They waited until he had vanished out of sight, before rounding on each other.
"What will we tell them?" asked Hermione apprehensively.

"Nothing yet," said Harry firmly. "We don't know anything for sure anyway. We'll wait and try and see what Kingsley finds out before we say anything."

Ron nodded, and then looked at Merlin. "Think you'll be able to keep a secret?"

Merlin almost burst out laughing. Keeping a secret was his specialty. He didn't miss Ron's subtle accusation though, reminding Merlin that he still hadn't forgiven him from keeping his knowledge of the Horcruxes secret.

"I'll do my best," said Merlin, smiling again.

They emerged into the Great Hall a few moments later. It was busier than it had been that morning, with the extra workers called in to help restore the castle. The Weasley family wasn't easily missed; a gaggle of red-haired people were crowded around each other at the Gryffindor table.

They made their way over to them, Harry and Merlin both purposefully ignoring the stares that seemed to accompany them. As they approached, Mrs Weasley broke off the group and hurried over to them, pulling the three younger ones into a huge enveloping hug.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you're all alright!" she said, pulling back to look into their faces. "I haven't seen you all day! What have you been up to?"

"Just helping out, you know, Mum," shrugged Ron. "Cleaning up the mess the Death Eaters left."

Mrs Weasley stared. "You cleaning? If only you were so inclined to do the same thing in that pig sty of a bedroom of yours!"

The tips of Ron's ears turned red, and he hurriedly sat down at the table and tucked into some roast pork, Harry and Hermione sitting on either side of him.

Mrs Weasley turned to Merlin, a hesitant expression on her face. "You're welcome to join us too, dear."

Merlin smiled at her. He liked this woman. He was guessing she had forgiven him for his decision not to help Harry Ron and Hermione on their 'Horcrux Hunt'. Or was at least trying to.

"Thank you, Mrs Weasley," he said graciously, and sat himself at the table across from Fred Weasley who smiled at him.

"So, what's going on?" asked Ron with a mouth full of food, ignoring Hermione's look of disgust.

"We're all leaving," said Mr Weasley, who was sitting between his two oldest sons; Merlin still didn't know which one was which. He really should know; he'd been at Bill's wedding in disguise for goodness sake! But he'd had other things on his mind at the time.

"Leaving?" echoed Harry, looking at him. "Why?"

"The Ministry is moving in several Aurors and other officials," answered Mr Weasley. "They're going to finish up the job of restoring the place. They have to redo all the wards around the castle, the Death Eaters left them in ruins and we can't leave the school unprotected. It's easier for them if we get out of the way."
Merlin saw Harry, Ron and Hermione look at each other with a barely concealed disappointment. He knew they were desperate to resume their search for more about the Old Religion.

"Where will we be going?" asked the Weasley girl, who Merlin had only just noticed sitting on the opposite side from her mother from him.

"Grimmauld Place," her father answered promptly. "It's been cleared of all the Death Eaters that were living there and the Fidelius Charm's been recast. Kingsley's the Secret Keeper now. Which reminds me."

He pulled out several scraps of paper, and distributed them around the table. He hesitated only briefly before handing one to Merlin.

"Kingsley told me to give you this, and to tell you he hopes you can become a useful and integral part of the Order of the Phoenix."

Merlin took it gratefully. "I'm honoured he's including me in this. We've only just met."

Arthur smiled at him. "You've made quite an impression."

Merlin bowed his head, and made no answer. He read the scrap of paper quickly. It was what he had expected; the location of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix written in Kingsley's elegant script. He'd never actually been inside of Grimmauld Place. He'd known it had existed, but Dumbledore had never seen fit to give him the location. It wasn't out of mistrust, he simply believed it just wasn't necessary.

He was touched, and glad that Kingsley had made this gesture of good-will. He hoped this meant they were truly beginning to accept him.

The conversation drifted back towards Grimmauld Place.

"When will be going, Father," asked one of the older boys- Percy?

"Tomorrow morning," replied Mr Weasley. He smiled at his son in an expression of fondness, and Merlin remembered with a start that until recently one of the Weasleys had been estranged from the family; it looked like all was forgotten. "It'll be quite crowded with all of us there, but it'll be easier than at the Burrow- we'll be more accessible to the Order this way. We're trying to coordinate all our efforts in a single place. Of course, with Kingsley as Minister now, London's the obvious choice."

"Will we still not be allowed into the Order meetings?" asked Ron dully.

Mr and Mrs Weasley looked at each other for a few moments before answering.

"Actually, Ron, Kingsley believes that after all you've done, you've earned the right to become fully-fledged members and take part in all our activities. And, well, your mother and I quite agree."

Mrs Weasley nodded, her expression determined, with only a tinge of worry.

Harry looked up brightly. "Good. Then we can help instead of sitting around."

Mr Weasley nodded. "There's a lot to do to try and get the country back under our control. We'll need all of you to help."

The three of them grinned, and Merlin was happy they now had a feeling of purpose.

Mr Weasley was soon conversing with his elder sons about the whole Gringotts affair, one telling of
his continued fruitless attempts to find the dragon, and the other about the diplomatic relations with the Gringotts.

Merlin listened with interest; he hadn't thought modern day dragons were intelligent enough to elude capture this long. After all, how could something so large hide itself so efficiently? Perhaps there was something of the Ancient wisdom left in them after all.

Hermione waited until Mr Weasley was deep in conversation, before dropping her voice and whispering to Ron, Harry and Merlin.

"What'll we do about the … research?"

Harry looked at each of them. "We'll wait. Kingsley might find something useful at the Ministry, and if not, we can always come back here to search. At least in the meantime we'll be doing something that'll actually strike out at the Death Eaters."

Ron nodded in agreement, and the three of them continued their meal, looking slightly happier than they had been.

Merlin however, was lost in thought. While he was glad at the thought of being able to be a part of this organisation and help fight against Voldemort and the Death Eaters, he didn't feel that this was the right path. He still felt they should be focusing their efforts … well, elsewhere. Where, he had no idea.

But still, he thought, *I might as well go with them. I'll help in any way I can, and hope the Old Religion will guide me when the time is right.*

But he couldn't shake the feeling that the answer was *here,* here in the castle. It was as though he was being told to stay by the Old Religion itself.

Perhaps they'd be back sooner than they thought.
POTTER JOINS SECRET RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

The Daily Prophet can now exclusively reveal that 17-year old Harry Potter, of Little Whinging, Surrey, has formally joined the Order of the Phoenix. This top-secret organisation, believed to have been formed by Albus Dumbledore during the last war and reformed after the tragic events of the Triwizard tournament three years ago, is dedicated to eliminating Death Eater threats in society and working towards the eventual defeat of the forces that threaten us. From their secret headquarters, believed to be located somewhere in London, they have continually fought against oppression and the terror tactics used by Death Eaters.

Why such an organisation was ever founded is unknown, but its uses were undeniably vital to overthrowing the recent Death Eater regime at the Ministry, when Aurors were no longer able to defend their country.

It is believed Potter has been involved with the organisation previously, however his depth and authority within the Order are unknown.

After the recent battle at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry the organisation has once again risen to prominence, never ceasing in their efforts to free the peoples of wizarding Britain from oppression.

However, many mysteries still remain. From our sources within Hogwarts School, your Daily Prophet correspondent is led to believe that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named escaped from the battle unscathed, and made mention of a dark plan. However Interim-Minister Shacklebolt has refused to reveal this information to the public, despite being believed to be a member of the Order himself. Why hasn't this information come to be public's attention? What is the Order hiding?

Also, many questions still remain about young Mr Potter, so recently dubbed 'Undesirable Number 1'. What was he doing this last year when he was at large? Was he drumming up support for the resistance? Working on a way to defeat the Dark Lord? Or was he simply on the run?

No answers have been given although the wizarding world is clamouring for an explanation. Mr Potter's recent and controversial Gringotts break-in is causing ripples of unease amongst his former supporters as the goblins continue to bay for his blood. Mr Potter still refuses to answer any questions from the media, or from anxious families seeking for reassurance that he is well on his way to defeating the man who murdered their loved ones.

What will Potter be up to now he has joined this controversial organisation steeped in mystery?

Interim-Minister Shacklebolt has requested that the media refrain from questioning Mr Potter, however considering Mr Shacklebolt's own links to this shadowy organisation, questions may be asked as to his true loyalty.

Should the Minister for Magic be allied first and foremost to a secret society rather than his own government? Is his plan to merge Aurors and volunteers from the Order a good one? See pages 2 and 3 for our take on it.

What was Potter really up to? Is he the Chosen One? Should we trust our fates to one so young? See pages 4, 5, 6 and 7 for our opinions.
Merlin sat back in his chair at the table of Grimmauld Place, casting the newspaper aside. It seemed the press was always going to be corrupt and biased, no matter what.

Harry didn't need this at the moment; he had enough on his plate without the Daily Prophet's scaremongering. How did they even find out this much?

Merlin glanced around the kitchen in interest, still not quite believing he was in the Order of the Phoenix Headquarters itself. It looked pretty nondescript and more than a little shabby, although Mrs Weasley had assured him it had been far worse before Kreacher -the elf- had begun to regain any of the self-respect and pride he had lost.

It was still early morning and the kitchen was empty. Not for long however; Headquarters was always packed these days. Merlin was closeted into a room with Harry, Ron, Neville (who'd now followed his friends into full membership) and Bill Weasley.

They'd arrived a few weeks previously, and so far they'd had little to do other than occasionally helping with patrols around the Ministry and other important buildings alongside the Aurors, who were still a little unsure about working alongside the Order.

So far it was more boring than Merlin would have imagined for the top-secret headquarters of a top-secret organisation.

Kingsley had only rarely dropped in, trying to act as a liaison between the Ministry and the Order. He was rushed off his feet, that much was obvious. Several Death Eater retreats were still occupied and many Death Eaters were still active in society and it was proving difficult to try and track them all down. And adding to that were all the ordinary witches and wizards who weren't Death Eaters but had still supported the Death Eater regime. But who were the ones who had done it out of malice and pure-blood supremacy, and which were the ones who had silently opposed it? Kingsley was still trying to solve this and the many other problems the Death Eaters had left behind, as well as solidify his own position against those who opposed him.

Merlin was glad he was no politician. Even in Camelot he'd never been much involved in it. Arthur often asked his opinion of course, but he'd always been the one who'd made the decision. Arthur had considered him wise (on occasion at least) but politics had always been his area; Merlin had just been there to support and protect him as always, offering his true and honest opinion.

Merlin tried not to think of those times; what use was there in looking back to a world that was now gone and never would be again? But still, there wasn't a day that went by when he didn't miss them.

An old man's silly nostalgia.

A noise sounded on the stairs and Mrs Weasley bustled into view. She stopped in surprise at seeing him there.

"Oh! I didn't think anyone else would be up!"

"I'm an early riser," Merlin said to her. It was a habit he'd gained in Camelot after having to rise early to be on hand to wake Arthur and organise breakfast in the kitchens. Unlike what Arthur had liked to tell people, he was more often on time than he was late.
Mrs Weasley nodded, and moved over to the cupboards and began pulling pots and pans from the cupboards at random.

"A pity more of them aren't like that. I practically have to drag Ron out of bed in the mornings."

Merlin laughed, he could easily imagine it.

Mrs Weasley then went down into the pantry and emerged a few moments later, levitating several ingredients in front of her with her wand. She waved it with a flourish and sent them off to the worktops in the kitchen. She paused as she walked past the table Merlin was sitting, her eyes lingering on the newspaper Merlin had cast aside.

"Full of the usual lies is it?" she asked him wearily.

Merlin grimaced. "Pretty much."

She sighed and moved over to the stove and began directing the cooking of breakfast with her wand. "I told Kingsley he should try and rein them back. What Harry and the others need right now aren't more lies and conspiracies."

"I suppose he doesn't want it to seem like he's censoring them," Merlin noted. "It'd just make the public panic more if they thought they were being denied the information they desperately seek."

Mrs Weasley shook her head. "They're panicking enough. All this will do is make them come up with their own horror stories. Besides, he hasn't told them about the Horcruxes. He doesn't think they're ready for that information, so why not make sure they're not making up even worse stories?"

Merlin sighed. "That's what Scrimgeour tried to do. He wanted to white-wash everything. Fudge tried to deny everything; I suppose he wants them to feel like they're finally getting the truth."

"Then why doesn't he tell them about the Horcruxes? Why not tell them everything?" Mrs Weasley muttered.

Merlin exhaled heavily. "No matter what he does he'll be criticised when it all finally comes out. It's all far too political to me."

Mrs Weasley nodded darkly. She continued bustling around the kitchen, waving her wand seemingly at random as breakfast came together. Noises from above came louder and louder, with a sudden screech of pain.

Mrs Weasley glanced up at the ceiling. "Well, the cavalry's awake."

"Here, Mrs Weasley, let me help," Merlin said standing up, as he saw her struggling with the cutlery.

"You don't need to dear," Mrs Weasley said, but Merlin took it firmly from her hands.

"I want to," he smiled.

She smiled back gratefully, and went back to preparing breakfast as Merlin laid the table. He still couldn't believe this was the woman who'd killed Bellatrix, so caring and loving. He admired her immensely; there were times when she reminded him of his own mother.

The door burst open, and several of the Weasley's Harry and Hermione came filing into the room, laughing raucously and arguing.

"It wasn't funny, George!" Percy admonished. Merlin suddenly noticed his nose looked rather red.
George meanwhile was almost bent over double in laughter. "Come on, Perce, what's a Nose-Biting Teacup between brothers, eh?"

Percy sat himself at the table, still looking annoyed, touching his nose gingerly.

The room was soon filled with the entire family with the addition of Neville and Luna who all seemed to be in a good mood and laughing freely.

Mrs Weasley waved her wand and sent the plates of toast, bacon, eggs, sausages and cereal zooming over to the kitchen table, where it was rapidly set upon.

Mr Weasley took barely a few bites of toast before he stood up again. "I have to go into the Ministry early. Kingsley wants to speak to me."

The mood at the table dampened slightly.

"What about?" asked George.

"I have no idea," Mr Weasley said absently, pulling on a cloak over his robes.

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Ginny.

Mr Weasley looked around at them all; they were hanging on his every word.

"Not today," he said eventually.

The faces which had been laughing only moments ago suddenly turned into scowls.

"What's the point of being in the Order if we don't get to do anything?" asked Ron huffily.

"Well, there's a meeting today," said Mrs Weasley briskly, seating herself at the table. "You'll be able to find out more then."

The faces at the table brightened a little at this, but Harry's face in particular still looked annoyed. Merlin could tell why; he'd thought by coming to the Order he'd be able to fight against Voldemort, but instead he was doing even less than he had before.

Kingsley had so far not mentioned anything further about his research at the Ministry into the magic of the Old Religion, claiming that he wanted to wait until he had some solid information to give them before revealing anything, something Harry, Ron and Hermione weren't too happy with. Merlin was getting the impression they'd wished they had stayed at Hogwarts to continue their own research.

They continued with their meal, somewhat subdued. The jovial atmosphere had vanished. Now that the Ministry was under Kingsley's leadership and the Aurors were on their side, there was far less things for the Order to do. And now that the house had been scrubbed top to bottom by the elf, there wasn't even any cleaning to do. Merlin sometimes heard Ron grumbling to Harry that he should summon Kreacher from Hogwarts where he was helping their Aurors there restore the castle, just so they could annoy him and kill some time.

Merlin poured himself a cup of tea, and sipped it leisurely, thinking. What was he to do? Harry had to do this; he was the one who had to eventually defeat Voldemort, just like it had been Arthur and Arthur alone who could unite the kingdoms of Albion. He knew this with every fibre of his being-Merlin was only there to guide, like he had for Arthur and the Founders. But how was he to point Harry in the right direction when he didn't even know it himself?
He was still unable to shake those lingering suspicions that something lay at Hogwarts. Something important. Had the Founders discovered anything after he’d left?

Mrs Weasley looked over at him, a frown on her face as she saw him drinking the tea.

"Aren't you having anything to eat, dear?"

Merlin was pulled back from his thinking.

"No, I'm not really hungry." And he wasn't, he was far too preoccupied.

Her frown deepened. "You really should eat something. You're far too skinny; we need to fatten you up."

Merlin was slightly alarmed by this, especially when he saw Harry smirk at him across the table, almost as if he was saying 'Now it's your turn'.

"Uh, no thanks, Mrs Weasley," he said. "Don't worry, I've always been thin. My mother used to say the same thing all the time."

She didn't look convinced, and pushed a stack of toast at him regardless.

"Really, Mrs Weasley," he said, aware now that everyone was staring at him, their faces amused at his predicament. "I'm okay. I'm used to not eating much; we never had a lot of money when I was young'. More like no money, he thought to himself. In Ealdor, chickens and bags of flour had been the currency. He'd never even held a coin before he went to Camelot.

"What, you were poor?" Ron asked incredulously, looking at his clothes, which Merlin realised were of an expensive Muggle design. Well, he had thought he might as well treat himself occasionally, especially after spending all his youth in rags. And after saving up for thirteen hundred years he wasn't exactly poor any more.

"Ron!" hissed Hermione disapprovingly.

"Nah, it's alright," Merlin said amused. "We weren't that poor. We just- well, we struggled sometimes." Yeah, he thought. Shabby one-roomed shack in a run-down village, sharing it with the animals in the winter, not having my own pair of shoes until I was fourteen, barely surviving on what we could grow ourselves… Ron had it lucky. At least he had his own room, was clothed and shod, plenty to eat …

Merlin didn't feel he had been wronged in his childhood, he might not have had a lot- the only toys he'd ever had were the things he and Will could pick up off the ground to play with- but he'd been happy. He'd had a loving family. Ron was equally as lucky; he had a warm and loving family too. There were times during Ron's early years at Hogwarts when Merlin had watched over them all that he'd feared Ron lost sight of what he did have instead of what he wished he had.

"Well, I'm sure your mother wouldn't want you to be starving yourself now," said Mrs Weasley sternly, with a slightly softer expression, as she prodded the toast rack in his direction once again.

Merlin sighed, and surrendered, picking up a couple slices of toast. This woman was worse than his mother and Gaius combined.

Fred smirked at him as he ate. Merlin ignored him.

The laughter around the table promptly resumed. Merlin watched them all, thrilled they were still
Several more weeks passed in largely the same fashion. It was now almost two months after the battle, and Merlin was bored out of his mind, and he knew Harry, Hermione and Ron were just as frustrated. Death Eaters had been strangely quiet. Kingsley and the Ministry had been searching, but those who had eluded capture at the Ministry still evaded their attempts to capture them.

Voldemort was still out there, and he was building his strength. Death Eater attacks, which had been sporadic after the Battle of Hogwarts, began to become more and more coordinated, targeting the homes of top-ranking Ministry officials, trying to spread fear and panic. They seemed to be performing guerrilla warfare, striking out quickly, always long-gone by the time the Order, Harry included, had turned up, ready to fight back.

The attacks had grown in viciousness, and Merlin suspected that if it wasn't for Kingsley the entire wizarding world would be in a state of panic. His cool and calm presence soothed many of the panicked citizens, and even his critics had begun to warm to him. He had been officially appointed Minister by the Wizengamot a few weeks ago, and the people were looking to him for guidance. Though there were still those who did not trust him. Being a member of a secret organisation whilst trying to run an entire country made many people anxious. They were questioning his motives.

He hardly ever came there though, so preoccupied was he with trying to reform the Ministry. Every time he did call at Grimmauld Place, Harry rushed over to him expectantly. But each and every time, Kingsley shook his head sadly and said: "Nothing yet."

Still nothing, after two months of searching. Apparently there wasn't a single reference to the Old Religion anywhere in the Ministry records. Merlin wasn't surprised; he'd wiped many of them himself over the years, knowing that the Old Religion had become dormant for a reason, and its knowledge should not fall into enemy hands. Its knowledge would return when the time was right.

But was that time now? Merlin thought about it again and again as he lay awake every night in his room at Grimmauld Place. They were seeking the knowledge, should he give it to them?

But every time he came to the same conclusion- no. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but it was the same way he knew over the centuries that he couldn't interfere. The Old Religion was working through him, letting him know what to do and what not to do. He forced himself to keep faith, but it was difficult.

He'd been a pawn of the Old Religion from the very beginning; it had kept him alive, always young, throughout the years. It had forced him to witness great evil being committed in the world, with the knowledge that he could do nothing to help. He resented it at times, no longer willing to live his life this way; angry at the Old Religion for doing this to him. It drove him mad to think that he was constantly living his life to abide by its laws, its ways, and had no free will of his own.

The hardest period had been when he had been with the Founders. He had seriously thought they were the ones who would restore the Old Religion; after all, why else would they have had the Old Magic if not to bring it back? He had so longed it to be true, hoping against hope that he could grow old and die with these new friends he had made. But he had been wrong. And the realisation that he would have to watch these friends grow old and die without him had cut him to the core, especially after so much hope. Now it was one thousand years in the future, and again he was faced with the same situation. But this time, it was not the Old Religion teasing him. Harry really was the one to return the Old Religion.
He seriously considered telling Harry Ron and Hermione who he was, and everything he knew about the Old Religion, but he'd always recoiled from it when it came down to it. He felt a powerful strong resistance to it, and he'd decided that he had to follow his instincts, as difficult as that was.

But why had the Old Religion thrust him into this fight if only to keep his true identity secret? It frustrated him no end. But, he reminded himself, this was Harry's fight and Harry's alone.

But still, he wanted to be there doing something, instead of sitting around Grimmauld Place. He'd asked Kingsley if he could help, but he'd been politely brushed aside and asked to remain here.

So remain, he had, but his very instincts were telling him that this wasn't the place he should be. Voldemort was planning something, something very big, and Merlin knew that the answers wouldn't be found by remaining here.

And to add to all of this, that dragon was still loose somewhere, driving Charlie Weasley insane. No one had any idea how it had managed to elude capture for so long. Merlin wished it luck; it had been trapped so long it deserved some freedom. It hadn't attacked anyone, it hadn't even been seen since its escape. Merlin thought about trying to control it, but he'd had little success with modern-day dragons, so dissimilar were they from the Old dragons. But he told himself, if things got bad, he'd have to at least try.

At the moment they were all sitting in the drawing room of Grimmauld Place. Mrs Weasley sat in an armchair by the fire place supervising the jumper that was knitting itself, the elder Weasley boys and Ginny were engaged in a game of Exploding Snap, Ron and Mr Weasley were playing a game of chess watched by an evidently bored Harry, Fred and George were sitting with their heads together sorting through mail-order forms for their joke shop, Neville and Luna- who Merlin had come to really like over the past several weeks- had gone home to visit their families, Hermione was predictably reading a book (*Ancient Forms of Magic* by Aloysius Tempus) and Merlin was examining the Black family tapestry.

It certainly went back a long way. Some of the names at the very beginning were barely legible, but he found it fascinating all the same. Every so often a name would leap out at him, a name he would recognise. Some were rather infamous, known blood-purists who'd campaigned against Muggle rights, but some were far more pleasant to recall. Some of the names were the names of people Merlin had attended Hogwarts with, and he remembered some of them fondly.

Eduardus Limette Black for example; Merlin had shared a dormitory with him for seven years, and they'd gotten along rather well. He had been a good laugh. Now unfortunately his name was just a black mark between Cygnus Black I and Arcturus Black I, neither of whom Merlin had liked much.

Slytherin House had always had a rather dark reputation, yet Merlin had always found this rather unjust. He had known Salazar Slytherin, not as well as the others, yet still well. He'd been a very shrewd and cunning man, yet not entirely unpleasant- just one of those socially awkward people who people often dismissed as aloof. He had been a brilliant man however, a master of potions. Merlin had shared many a laugh with him, and had many fond memories of their time at the castle. His Pure-Blood policies hadn't been as extreme as people made out. He had detested Muggles true, and mistrusted Muggle-Borns, but wouldn't you if your entire family, including your five year old cousin, had been burnt at the stake by Muggle religious extremists?

His main objections about Muggle-Borns being allowed in the school hadn't been about the 'purity' of their blood, rather he felt they might be influenced by their Muggle families to betray the school and rise up against wizardkind. In his own twisted way, he had been *protecting* the school.

And that whole Chamber of Secrets thing. It had been built not to eradicate the Muggle-Borns, but
rather serve as a warning to Muggle-Borns of what would happen if they were to betray the school. He wasn't a saint exactly, but definitely not as bad as he was made out to be. Of course, all the other Pure-Blood extremists who were around took him as a figurehead for their own warped beliefs, which really annoyed Merlin; if the Chamber of Secrets was supposed to be a way to eradicate Muggle-Borns, why would he have told anyone about it? The Chamber was *supposed* to be public knowledge; what was the point of building it as a warning when no one would know about it?

Of course the other Founders had been appalled when they discovered this and banished Salazar from the school. They themselves never found the Chamber, and tried to hush it up so no Muggle-Born would ever be afraid to come to Hogwarts. And history had recorded a distorted version of the truth.

Of course, Merlin had known none of this at the time. He had left long before Salazar built the chamber; Helena had filled him in on the details when he next returned to the school. But he had often wondered, if he had stayed, would things have turned out differently? Salazar’s paranoia had been growing ever stronger when Merlin left the castle, pulled away unwillingly by the Old Religion. Would it have happened if he had stayed? Would Helena and her mother have grown so far apart if he hadn’t gone away? Though not quite as bad as his guilt over Arthur, these thoughts had returned to haunt him more than once over the years.

Merlin had made many friends in Slytherin House; they weren't the evil gits everyone thought they were. He'd truly enjoyed being in that House, even though the members of the other three houses had immediately spurned him and mistrusted him, even though barely a century earlier they had welcomed him graciously into their own House.

He'd enjoyed rotating the Houses every time he went to Hogwarts; he found both good and bad in each of them. He continued following the line of the Black family, recognising more and more names. He remembered with a smile he'd even played Quidditch against several of them. Not that he'd ever been much good at the sport; he was still as ungainly in the twentieth century as he had been in the seventh, but he'd enjoyed the distractions it had offered from his mundane life.

He got closer and closer to the modern-day era, noting the burn marks there. His fingers trailed over the one side-by-side with Narcissa and Bellatrix.

"Andromeda Tonks," a voice came next to him. Harry had appeared there, having apparently abandoned watching the chess game to come and stand beside him. He looked sad. "She was blasted off when she married a Muggle-Born."

Merlin nodded understanding. "I'm guessing she's Tonks' mother?"

Harry nodded. Tonks had emerged from St. Mungo's a few days previously, restored to full health and eager to get back into the fight, apparently dismissive of how close she'd come to death. She'd holed herself up with Remus in their house with their son, taking a few days to re-connect after her lengthy stay in hospital. Merlin had yet to meet her. He hadn't gone with the others to St Mungo's to see her, feeling like he was intruding.

Harry's eyes strayed to Narcissa's name, and the rest of the Malfoy family. "What are happening to them?"

"Kingsley said they've been placed in a Witness Protection Programme," answered Merlin. "Apparently Voldemort was pretty pissed off that Narcissa lied to him. So she and Lucius grabbed their son and fled to the Ministry. They're cooperating too, giving lots of valuable information. They're desperate to stay out of Azkaban."
"I bet they are," Harry murmured, his eyes now on the black burn mark next to the name 'Regulus Black.'

Merlin looked too, guessing it must be Sirius' name that was missing from there. He'd never really known Sirius. He'd never been particularly interested in the Potter family and their acquaintances before Harry had been born. And after that Sirius had been in Azkaban, then on the run, and then locked inside Grimmauld Place. He'd never come into much contact with him. But he could tell by the look on Harry's place that he missed him terribly.

He didn't say anything however, he didn't want to let on that he knew too much, and besides he didn't want to seem invasive to Harry's privacy.

"Who looked after you after your parents died?" Harry asked suddenly.

Merlin had to think for a moment, trying to remember the story he'd come up with.

"I looked after myself. It wasn't that long ago and I was old enough," he said. "Liar, your parents have been dead for over a millennium!"

He sensed however that this was not the answer Harry was looking for. "I had a sort of mentor though. His name was Gaius. He looked out for me, taught me things … he was like a father to me."

Harry looked around at him in interest. "Where is he now?"

Merlin sighed. No matter how many years had passed, the pain had never faded. "He's dead."

Harry's face became sympathetic. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Merlin. "He was old, so old I was beginning to think he'd just fade away into nothing if he wasn't so stubborn," he laughed as he remembered. "He had a good life helping others and doing good in the world. I'm honoured to have known him. And I'm not going to mope and continually in a depression about it. He wouldn't have wanted that. I owe it to him to keep going."

Harry smiled at him, and looked away from Sirius' burn mark, a look of contemplation on his face.

Merlin turned and faced the rest of the room, realising he'd been moping about all day. He should take his own advice- do something instead of staying here and moaning about the unfairness of the world.

The atmosphere in the room was contented, almost relaxed. There had been no attacks for a few days now, and Merlin was growing suspicious. What was Voldemort planning?

Almost as if on cue, a great silver animal leapt into the room, prompting a shriek from Mrs Weasley. It was a lynx Patronus; Kingsley. It spoke in his voice:

"Attack at the Ministry. Department of Mysteries. Urgent reinforcements required."

It vanished.

The room was still for a moment, before everyone leapt to their feet and drew their wands.

Merlin drew his as well. It looked like he had something to do after all
A Proposition

Harry ducked as curse after curse soared over his head. His heart was pounding in his chest, adrenaline spreading like fire through his veins. He saw Ron beside him hurl a Stunner at an approaching Death Eater who promptly fell to the ground.

He was exhilarated. *Finally,* after weeks of sitting around he was actually fighting back!

They’d arrived at the Department of Mysteries to find the place crawling with Death Eaters. They hadn’t hesitated, but thrown themselves into the fight. Jets of green light bounced off the walls as the Death Eaters futilely tried to hit their opponents.

Harry and Ron ducked out from behind the column they’d been sheltering behind and ran forwards, Harry casting spells with increasing rapidity. The Death Eaters held their own however, and Harry noticed more than one Order member go down.

Echoes of the previous battle in the Department of Mysteries threatened to overcome him, but Harry pushed them back. He had to focus!

The Death Eaters attacks grew more and more ruthless, as they lashed out with spell after spell in every direction. They were losing, and they knew it.

"Harry!" yelled a voice from behind him. Harry turned to see a purple beam of light heading towards him. He leapt out of the way, but only just. He felt a searing pain on his arm where the spell had grazed him. Blood was seeping through his robes and on to the floor. Harry felt dizzy as blood continued to pour from his arm.

A Death Eater noticed him lying there on the ground, and advanced on him, his eyes glinting with malice from behind his mask as he took in his weakened state. He extended his wand and opened his mouth to utter a curse-

But then suddenly, he fell to the ground, unmoving. A great hole had been seared into his back, charred flesh around the wound sizzled slightly.

Harry looked up in surprise. Martin was standing there, his wand pointed at where the Death Eater had stood, his face perfectly calm.

Harry had barely enough time to register his astonishment before a blinding flash overwhelmed them all, and blocked out the entire room. Disoriented, Harry only barely registered slight 'popping' sounds as he struggled to stand up.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, it vanished, leaving lights flashing in Harry's eyes. Blinking rapidly, he looked around the room to see that the Death Eaters had vanished.

"Where'd they go?" Harry asked wildly.

Martin answered him. "They disabled the Anti-Apparition Jinx. They've gone."

Harry swore loudly.

"I heard that, Harry Potter," a voice came from behind him.

Tonks was making her way towards him, her hair bubble-gum pink again.
She smiled down at him, though her smile seemed forced, and so very 'un-Tonks'.

"We'd better get you back to Headquarters," she said, taking in his injured arm.

Harry nodded distractedly, still annoyed the Death Eaters had gotten away. "Is anyone-"

"No deaths," said Tonks brightly, as she reached down and pulled Harry to his feet. "On our side at least. Charlie was hit by a nasty Stunner and Hermione seems to have dislocated her shoulder, but otherwise we're all alright."

Harry nodded, slightly happier than he had been. Tonks looked behind him to Martin.

"Wotcher," she said grinning. "You must be Martin?"

"Yeah," he answered.

She smiled. "Remus told me about you. Said you were awesome with spell work. I didn't realise just how good you were 'till just now." She gestured to the Death Eater he'd taken down; Harry only just realised he was dead.

Martin smiled modestly. "I've heard you're pretty good yourself."

Tonks winked. She steadied Harry, who was beginning to sway on the spot. "Hold on, kiddo. Apparition when injured isn't a great experience."

Harry grimaced, but made no move to stop her, as she Apparated him to Grimmauld Place.

An hour or so later, after a worried Mrs Weasley had been calmed down and had treated Harry, Charlie and Hermione, and everyone else who'd been at the battle and after several Order members who'd arrived too late to fight were present, Kingsley strode into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, his face set in a grim expression.

He looked around at them all.

"I think it's time for an impromptu meeting," he announced. Everyone murmured in agreement.

Kingsley seated himself at the table, the eyes of everyone in the room on him.

"I'm glad there have been no serious casualties on our side," he began. "That was quite a fight, and I'm grateful to you all. However the Death Eaters got away, and we must now ask ourselves why they infiltrated the Ministry at this time when in full knowledge the chance of their discovery was high."

"Do you think they were after a Prophecy?" Bill asked.

Kingsley shook his head. "They didn't even go near the Hall of Prophecies. The only room they attempted to access before they were discovered was the Room of Records."

Harry sat up straighter. "You mean the place we've been looking for information on the Old Religion?"

Everyone looked uneasy at this, even as Kingsley nodded.

"Either they were aware we had been searching there, and wanted to stop us, or there was something there they needed themselves; their motives are unclear. But we can safely assume they were after knowledge of the Old Magic."
"Then there's something there?" asked Hermione.

"I don't know for certain," Kingsley answered. "Perhaps that is what they were trying to determine. Perhaps they need information from there to complete their plans, but then again, it may have been a futile attempt to either prevent us from finding out knowledge to try and stop them, or to find out what we've been looking for."

The room fell silent, as everyone took this in. Harry's mind was racing; if the knowledge was there, perhaps Voldemort didn't have everything he needed to complete his plans, whatever they were. Maybe they themselves had the knowledge and they finally had the upper hand.

"I thought you'd been looking in there?" asked Fred. "I thought you said you couldn't find anything?"

Kingsley looked at him stoically. "The Room of Records is the result of more than ten centuries of magical research. It's like looking for a wand in a bonfire."

"Did they take anything?" Mr Weasley asked him.

Kingsley shook his head. "It is impossible to say at present. I have my people working on it, but since the place was so poorly catalogued to begin with it may be difficult to determine whether they achieved what they went there to do."

The silence turned even gloomier than before. Then Kingsley's eyes turned to Martin's.

"We didn't manage to capture any of the Death Eaters... alive. A pity."

Martin looked back at him almost challenging. "If you're referring to the Death Eater that I killed, I have no regrets about that whatever."

Kingsley frowned. "You could just have easily stunned him."

"True," said Martin. "But I doubt he would have told you anything."

"That is immaterial," retorted Kingsley. "There are other methods of extracting information, Veritaserum, Legilimancy... there was no need to kill him."

"I had to make a decision," said Martin, his voice rising slightly. "He was seconds away from cursing Harry. I struck out. I didn't have time to wonder about whether or not I could take him alive. I reacted purely on instinct. I'm sure as an Auror you should be able to understand Kingsley."

Kingsley listened, his frown growing ever deeper. "I understand completely. However I still feel it would have been more prudent to allow him to be questioned-"

"You're acting as though I enjoyed it!" Martin almost yelled. "I hate it. I hate killing people! But sometimes you just don't have a choice! Harry was in danger, I reacted."

Kingsley stared at him a moment. "You've killed before?" he asked mildly

Martin blinked, and his expression faltered. Harry watched him in unease. He wasn't sure how he felt about this; even Dumbledore had always tried to capture prisoners alive. But he couldn't hate him for it- he'd just saved his life! Still, it unnerved him slightly to think that this nice young man who Harry had grown closer to in the last few weeks had killed several people before.

Martin breathed in deeply. "Yes, I've killed before," his voice flat. "But only whenever it was
absolutely necessary. I don't enjoy it. But I never regret my actions either. I do what I judge to be correct, and only ever go as far as that when I feel there is absolutely no other route possible. But neither do I dither about wondering what to do and being hesitant to act to save people I care about."

Kingsley stared at him for a long moment, his eyes never straying from his. "I can respect that," he said finally. "I apologise for my insinuations. I believe I was just frustrated that we had no prisoner to interrogate."

Martin nodded, and his expression relaxed. Harry still stared at him. He'd come to realise Martin was a good and honest man, wise and often slightly goofy. He wondered morbidly how many men he had killed.

Everyone in the kitchen was still looking at Martin in a rather curious way. Harry wondered if they were also thinking the same thing.

Kingsley broke the rather awkward silence. "I must be getting back to the Ministry," he announced standing up. "I must re-examine the security measures in the Department of Mysteries."

"Not yet, Mr Shacklebolt," Martin said, his voice soft. He looked up at him. "I believe I may be able to help in your efforts to find records of the Old Religion."

Everyone stared, and Kingsley raised one eyebrow. "I've already told you, I would prefer if you were to remain here."

"I'm not referring to going there in person," Martin said. "I just believe I may be able to help you know where to look."

Kingsley retook his seat, looking intrigued. "Please, tell us."

Martin paused for only a second. "I've heard stories about the Department of Mysteries, about what they study there."

"They study many things," Kingsley answered. "The mysterious forces that govern the world around us for example."

Martin shook his head. "They study the Old Religion."

The room sat in shocked silence for a moment.

"Explain," said Kingsley, his face intrigued. "I thought you said that all this knowledge was lost and the power of the Old Religion had faded?"

Martin sighed resignedly. "That's true to an extent. The power of the Old Religion is very complex. In the Old days it was said to inhabit humans, give them unprecedented powers, and strange abilities. This aspect of it faded- people forgot how to and were soon unable to harness this power. But the Old Religion still exists in the world. It lives in every living thing, every part of the universe all at once. Its power is ever present, just not in the way it used to be. It is still around."

"And how do you know this?" asked Kingsley.

"I sensed it, as soon as I walked into the Department of Mysteries. It was all around me; in the Veil Chamber, outside the room that was locked … it was there. Its powerful magic still lingers on, it's just people have forgotten what it is. It's that power that saved Harry as a baby."

Harry sat stock-still, as everyone turned to stare at him. He could hardly believe it.
"But I thought what saved me was the fact my mum sacrificed herself for me?" Harry asked, confused.

Martin smiled. "Yes. The two are connected. Love, that ever powerful force is straight from the Old Religion; it runs through us all. It's the oldest form of magic available. Your mother, whether she was aware of it or not, accessed that power by sacrificing herself. Thus, when your mother died, the Old Religion saved your own life. That's its way; it's concerned with balance. For one life to be saved, another life must be taken. There is a precedent for this; King Arthur was born from this magic. His parents used the Old Religion for him to be born, and he was, but at the cost of his own mother's life."

Merlin watched as they all absorbed this new information. To stay they were shocked would be an understatement.

He'd debated whether or not to reveal this to them, but eventually decided that he must. He had to let them see that the Old Religion's power was not just something that could be subverted by the enemy, but that Harry himself owed his life to it.

He'd always known this; he'd felt the pull of the power of life and death being enacted upon the earth on Hallowe'en, that night almost seventeen years ago. That was how he'd known Harry was the one he'd been waiting for. He was alive because of the Old Religion, just like Merlin himself.

Unfortunately, so was Voldemort, having disgustingly corrupted that power by using it to resurrect himself.

He wondered if that was how Voldemort was able to use the power of the Old Religion; because he himself owed his life to it. The normal rules didn't apply to him because he'd subverted its power. When he'd performed that act, he'd tipped the balance of the Old Religion, like how Morgana had done it centuries ago. Merlin had dismissed the idea that this was how Voldemort had this power; he didn't possess the magic in its purest form, but as a shadow of itself. But he was beginning to question his earlier assertions.

Merlin really had sensed that power as soon as he stepped into the Ministry. It was almost intoxicating. He now felt that he should reveal just a little more about it.

"Now that you know the power of the Old Religion itself resides within the Ministry and is in fact being studied by your own people, perhaps you may be able to direct your resources a little better?"

Kingsley nodded, in shock. "Research into these powers has been going on for centuries. Perhaps there is something we can discover."

Merlin nodded. "I wish you luck."

He turned and headed out of the room, leaving some seriously bewildered people behind him.

"So, how many blokes do you think he's killed?" Ron asked, almost casually, many hours later as they lay in bed, after checking Martin was asleep.

"I dunno," said Harry. "Sounded like quite a lot."
"Hmm," said Ron. "Seems weird doesn't it? I mean, Kingsley, Mad-Eye and Tonks were all Aurors; they must have killed people before. Blimey, even mum's killed someone! But, I dunno, it's just hard to imagine him like that."

"Yeah," said Harry, thinking.

"He's hiding a lot," said Ron. "Wonder how much he's not telling us?"

Harry made no answer. He was too busy thinking about what Martin had revealed earlier.

_He was alive because of the Old Religion?_

It seemed unbelievable. Yet, somehow it fitted. Dumbledore himself had told him that what had saved him from Voldemort was an ancient form of magic, that his mother's sacrifice had led to his protection.

Every time Harry was near Martin, it seemed like his magic had been stirred somehow, and was stronger than before. Was this because they both had elements of the Old Religion within them, stronger than it was in anybody else?

It made his head hurt to even think about it all.

Martin's knowledge of the Old Religion unnerved him as well. He'd told them all he knew very little about it, yet he seemed to know a great deal. Ron was right; he was hiding a lot.

Harry awoke the next day to find Mrs Weasley shouting up the stairs.

"Ron! Harry! Hermione! Ginny!"

He groaned as he sat up in bed, reaching for his glasses. A similar sound from nearby told him Ron was doing the same.

Together they groggily made their way downstairs in their pyjamas, meeting Hermione and Ginny on the stairs.

They emerged into the kitchen, to find Mr and Mrs Weasley, Martin, Remus, Kingsley, and bizarrely, Professor McGonagall sitting at the table.

Hermione squeaked slightly at the sight of their professor and tried to rearrange her nightdress to make herself more presentable.

"Whas' goin' on?" asked Ron, still half-asleep.

"We've come to make a proposal, Mr Weasley," said Professor McGonagall, a frown on her face at his lack of decorum.

"What kind of proposal, professor?" Ginny asked.

Professor McGonagall and Kingsley exchanged looks.

"About the four of you returning to Hogwarts this year."

"WHAT?!" all four of them yelped, now fully awake.
Martin pushed his breakfast plate away from himself casually and looked directly at Kingsley. "I told you they wouldn't like it."

"Of course we won't!" Harry shouted, indignant. "Voldemort is out there right now building his army and threatening the entire wizarding world and you want us to go back to school?"

Professor McGonagall looked at him sternly. "Just listen to us Potter."

Harry fell back, still scowling. How they even thought he could go back to writing essays and doing exams whilst Death Eaters were at large … it was ridiculous! As much as he loved the castle, there were more important things than his N.E.W.Ts!

"There would of course be several changes," Kingsley said in a placating tone. "Hogwarts is being restarted this year under Professor McGonagall's leadership. The wards around the school have been strengthened to an extent none of us believed possible. The student's safety is paramount. Everyone is being offered the chance to redo the last year due to the disruption to the teaching schedule and the fact many Muggle-Borns were unable to attend. While this means the castle will be slightly fuller than usual, we believe it is vital. Everyone should be given their education. This is important for their future in a world like this where to be unprepared, is preparing to be killed. Although exam results in the present climate may not matter, the extent of your magical education does."

He paused to look at the three of them closely.

"You four, and Mr Longbottom, Miss Lovegood and other senior members of the D.A who have now joined the Order will be in a slightly different position. You will of course be granted complete access to Order meetings every week throughout the year through a specially connected fireplace in Professor McGonagall's office. We will not hesitate to call on you if any trouble arises of any sort. You are not being excluded from the Order- we simply want to make sure you are all as magically equipped and as educated as possible. Yes, you will still be subject to the same rules as everyone else, but you will have a certain ... leniency. None of you can deny that you are still woefully unaware of certain branches of magic. In that regard special classes will be laid on for you all. An Auror will come to Hogwarts once a week to instruct you in duelling and other practices."

He looked at them severely.

"In return you must do certain things for us." He looked over at McGonagall. "Professor McGonagall here has agreed to allow you to reform the D.A. as an official student organisation, open to anybody. You will run meetings twice a week and instruct the younger students in defence techniques. This is an important task; students must be prepared. They must learn, not just about how to look after unicorns or the correct way to chop up a Mandrake, but how to survive. And I believe the four of you can teach them that."

Kingsley fell silent, and looked at them all evenly.

Harry didn't know what to think. The idea of returning to school was revolting to him, yet he saw Kingsley's point. Teaching the students as part of the D.A. on how to defend themselves was important, and certainly more important than anything he'd been doing here the past two months.

He looked at Ron and Hermione, who looked just as stunned and as uncertain as he felt.

"Just how much leniency would we have?" Ginny asked.

Professor McGonagall's lips thinned. "Not too much, Miss Weasley," she said. "You'd still be expected to follow the rules, complete homework and do your exams. But I appreciate you may have
more glamorous activities on your minds; heaven knows you've proven yourselves worthy. To that end, you will still be fully-fledged members of the Order, and be entitled to leave at any time to assist in Order's activities where you are needed. You will not be constrained to the school, however I would hope you would remain there unless it was absolutely necessary."

Hermione bit her lip, looking conflicted. "But, if we were in school … wouldn't it be harder to keep up with what's going on?"

"As Kingsley said, Miss Granger, you'd have the same access to Order meetings as you do now. Every week. You would be kept completely up to date on everything, I promise you," McGonagall said. "You would be perfectly entitled to leave the school at any time to return to Order if you felt your talents were being wasted. However I would encourage you to remain. Many of your victories over the years have been down to sheer nerve, and that may not be enough to help you with this new threat Voldemort poses. You'd do well to be as well versed in as many forms of magic as you can."

The four of them remained silent for a few moments, thinking, still trying to comprehend the concept of going back.

"I would add," interjected McGonagall, "Mr Longbottom and Miss Lovegood have consented to return. They were most enthusiastic about teaching the students to defend themselves, and felt their places were there in order to do their bit to protect the students."

They stood again for a moment or two. "Can we think about this for a while?" Hermione asked tentatively.

McGonagall nodded curtly. "Make sure your answer reaches me within the week." She stood to leave, smoothing down her crisp Muggle dress. She glanced over at Martin, who was still sitting at the table having remained silent the whole time.

"You would also be welcome, Mr Emrys."

Martin looked up at her in shock, his eyes wide.

"M-me?" he stammered.

"Yes, you," McGonagall answered stiffly. "I understand you had no formal magical education?"

Martin opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, looking like a fish out of water. Harry had the mad desire to laugh.

"Uh- n-no, I didn't," he said, still looking flabbergasted. "But- aren't I- aren't I a bit old for Hogwarts?"

McGonagall almost smiled. "That's what they've been saying about me for years, Mr Emrys."

Martin looked around at Kingsley, who looked amused.

"I was the one who suggested it, Mr Emrys," he said. "I am in no doubt you possess powerful magic."

"Then why send me to Hogwarts?" Martin asked frowning.

Kingsley and McGonagall exchanged a glance.

"I confess, it is not solely for your benefit that we've offered this too you," Kingsley answered. "You
are extremely capable in a fight, you are knowledgeable of Old Magic … we feel you would be a perfect addition to the school to assist in protecting it. We can't have Aurors patrolling the corridors; it would only panic the children and distract them. You could help us immensely."

Martin's eyes grew even wider, making him look extremely gawky. "You want me to be the students' bodyguard?"

"For want of a better word," Kingsley chuckled. "You would of course be entitled to the same liberties as the others, perhaps even more so as we may require your expertise more frequently. What do you say?"

Martin looked around again at everyone, still looking slightly stupefied.

"Go on, dear," said Mrs Weasley, speaking for the first time. "You may even enjoy it. I'm sure you'd be an excellent Hogwarts student."

For a moment, Martin's expression changed to one that looked like he was about to laugh at some hidden joke. He looked around the room once more, as though searching for a way out.

He sighed, and then looked directly at Harry. "If they go, then I will too." He said finally sounding as though he was desperate to laugh at something.

"Excellent," said McGonagall brusquely. "Remember, owl me within the week. Good day to you all."

She swept out of the kitchen, leaving several stunned youngsters in her wake.

Remus, who'd watched everything in amusement, laughed at the look on Harry's face. "Professor McGonagall certainly has a way to shock people. You look just like your father did when she told him he'd been appointed Head Boy."

Harry laughed, feeling slightly more at ease. Still thinking furiously, he motioned for Ron, Hermione and Martin to follow him out of the kitchen, which they did. Ginny looked hurt for a moment, and Harry felt his heart sink. He hated excluding her, especially after everything that had happened this past year. But he couldn't let her become involved; he couldn't risk that.

What was he going to do?

Merlin followed Harry out of the kitchen in a slight daze. Going back to Hogwarts? How many times would this be? His eleventh, his twelfth?

The thought of becoming a student again was laughable; he'd only ever done it in previous years because he'd been incredibly bored that century and needed something to distract him. But retuning now, in the midst of all this?

Harry and the others secreted themselves in a small alcove down the hall from the kitchen, checking that there was no one nearby.

"What do you all think?"

"I think it's mental!" Ron said. "How can we go back with all this crap going on?"

"Yes, but we do need our education," Hermione said biting her lip. "We need to know as much
magic as possible if we're to defeat him. This isn't like last year; last year we had a goal. This time we
don't know what we're up against, and until we do, there isn't much anyone can do. We might as
well fill our time doing something useful, learning what we can and teaching the others."

"I can't believe you, Hermione!" said Ron looking incredulous. "Do you really love school that
much? How can we go back after everything that's happened? We're in the middle of a bloody war!"

"And we haven't exactly done much fighting," said Harry quietly. "Maybe this way we'll have
something to do, something that'll make a difference. We can always leave if things get too messy on
the outside and they need us. But at the moment …"

Ron turned his incredulous expression on Harry. But before he could say anything Hermione cut
across him.

"We might find out more about the Old Religion as well. We could search the library again, look for
anything useful."

"Hermione, we didn't really find anything useful last time did we?" said Ron.

Hermione shook her head. "We found out that the Founders may have used some form of Old
Magic. Hogwarts was the castle they built, completely by themselves. We might find something
useful there, something about what they did that can help us, some powerful magic. Who knows?
Maybe there are more Chambers of Secrets lying waiting for us to find them. Perhaps the knowledge
the Founders possessed was left as their legacy in their school. There's no telling what we could
find!"

Ron still looked dubiously, but Harry looked thoughtful.

"What do you think?" Ron demanded Merlin.

Merlin thought for a moment. "I feel like we should go. There's something telling me that it's where
we should be, something I can't explain. It's been there for a few weeks now."

This was true, he'd felt it even before they'd left after the battle. He felt there was something in that
castle that would help them. He didn't know what, but it was a powerful instinct, and Merlin always
followed his instincts.

Harry looked at him. "I feel it too. Like somehow, we're meant to be there."

Ron rolled his eyes. "You don't seriously think that do you? Come on, Harry! It's ridiculous!"

Harry still looked deep in thought. "Maybe. But perhaps that's why we should go back. We thought
that by coming here we'd be able to do something to help, but we've done practically nothing. Maybe
at Hogwarts we can finally do something useful."

They all looked at each other for a moment. Hermione broke the silence.

"Let's just think about it alright? We don't want to rush into this."

They all agreed.

Merlin retreated into his memories. Hogwarts … the Founders … had they hidden anything in the
castle?

It looked like they may soon be finding out.
The next few days in Grimmauld Place passed by the same way the past few months had: quietly. Harry found himself increasingly isolating himself from the others as he pondered McGonagall's suggestion again and again.

No matter what way he tried to sort it out, it felt as though he was just giving up the fight. To go back to school after a year on the run … It seemed to him like nothing in his life could ever be that normal again.

He could be fighting, right here with the Order of the Phoenix, he could strike out at the Death Eaters from here …

But how much fighting had they actually done? The Death Eater's random attacks had ceased; it seemed they were beginning to build up solidarity again. Most of them had scarpered before the battle had finished, and it was Kingsley's theory that they had isolated themselves, in fear of what Voldemort would do to them. But now, he'd regained their loyalty, their random attacks ceased. This was ominous at best, as it became apparent Voldemort had a plan he was setting in motion.

They'd been frustratingly denied any more useful information about what was Voldemort was up to. The report from the Department of Mysteries had concluded that the Death Eaters **may** have stolen something, which was really no use at all. It didn't help them in the least.

The more Harry thought about it, the more he began to suspect the answer may be hidden at Hogwarts. It was the same nagging feeling he'd had about the Horcrux that had been hidden there. Could his instincts be right again?

But there had also been plenty times his instincts had not been right.

Then again, what could he trust if not himself?

And besides, it wouldn't be like he was completely surrendering. He'd still be a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and that was something he'd make doubly sure of. They couldn't exclude him now, not after everything he'd done. He'd still be able to help them.

There wasn't much for them to do anyway. Kingsley was a wise man; if anyone could figure out Voldemort's plan, it was him, especially with the full resources of the Ministry behind him. Until they knew Voldemort's next move, there was little they could do in the meantime. He had to have faith in Kingsley.

He'd still be fighting, in his own way. There was that extra training Kingsley had mentioned, plus he'd be able to run Dumbledore's Army again, not this time as an illicit student's group, but as a fully sanctioned fighting force.

Was this worth it? Could they find anything useful at Hogwarts that would help them?

Hermione thought so; she was so adamant now it was frightening. She rattled on and on about the Founders and what they **may** have left lying around the school. Besides, she was eager to get back to school and learn as much as possible about the magic she felt would help them in their mission to defeat Voldemort. Hermione wasn't even an issue.

Ron on the other hand, was just as adamant that he **didn't** want to go back ("How's learning how to turn a desk into a pig going to help us?"). He wasn't as sure as Hermione that something could be
gained from it. But Harry knew he would follow if Harry decided to go back, however grudgingly.

And Martin … Harry didn't even know what to make of him. He was being just as infuriatingly mysterious as ever. Sometimes something deeper shone through, in those rare moments that he spoke about his past, and his wisdom became apparent, yet at other times … Harry just couldn't understand him. When Harry had said this to him, he had laughed.

"You're not the only one to have said that," he'd said, his eyes glinting mischievously. "There were many people who said that about me. My mentor used to say I was 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery.'"

Harry certainly agreed with him. But he'd gotten the impression that Martin thought they should return.

Ginny had already decided to go back. She wasn't entirely happy with it, but she and Luna had decided they should be there to help the students in the D.A, like they'd been doing all year.

Harry tried not to think about her. She was still somewhat awkward around him, and it pained Harry to be so close, yet so far, to continually keep his distance to protect her. He knew he shouldn't worry so much, she was going to be at the forefront of the fight regardless, but he still wanted to protect her. Would going back to Hogwarts with her be the wisest move?

The adults were being frustratingly cryptic, telling him that it was his decision alone. Harry thought really carefully. They all managed to coordinate Order activities around their jobs, could he coordinate his around his school work?

And besides … it wasn't as though the Order was the last line of defence as it had once been. They were now backed by the full force of the Ministry.

Harry thought and thought; barely comprehending he'd been sitting in the same spot in the drawing room for several hours

He stood up, his limbs aching from the sustained awkward posture.

His decision was made.

He made his way downstairs to the kitchen, where he saw Ron, Hermione, Martin, Remus and Mrs Weasley.

"Hello, dear," said Mrs Weasley, bustling around. "Would you like something to eat?"

"No thanks, Mrs Weasley," said Harry, seating himself at the table. "Remus, how's Teddy doing?"

Remus grinned widely, and pulled out a photograph to give to him.

"He's doing amazingly well. Hair never stays the same colour for longer than a few hours. He's driving Dora's mum up the wall, she looks after him a lot while we're out doing things for the Order," he informed Harry proudly.

Harry glanced at the photograph, showing a baby boy with bright turquoise hair gurgling contentedly, while his mother looked on, with a tender expression on her face that Harry had never seen before.

He passed the photo back to Remus, and turned to his friends.

"I think we should go back."
Ron grimaced, Martin said nothing, but Hermione nodded.

"Good," she said. "Because I've already sent an owl to Professor McGonagall."

"You did what?" yelped Ron, looking at her in incredulity.

Hermione frowned. "Today was the last day. Besides, I knew Harry would say yes."

Harry stared at her for a moment, torn between annoyance at her presumption, and amusement that she'd known him so well.

Ron shook his head dejectedly. "Can't believe we're going back to essays and homework and detentions."

"It's your own fault if your get detentions, Ron," Mrs Weasley said sternly, as she came over. "I'm glad you're all going back, you need your education after all. It might be more important than ever. I'll go into Diagon Alley soon and get some supplies."

Harry nodded, feeling hollow, knowing that he'd now made his decision. He was beginning to question it already.

The next few weeks flew past as the date for their return to Hogwarts drew ever closer. Nothing had happened. Nothing at all. All their work seemed to consist of patrolling the public entrance to the Ministry of Magic, where nothing more exciting than a cat attacking Ron's trainers and clawing its way half way up his leg had happened.

Merlin was bored once again. Kingsley still hadn't found anything in the Department of Mysteries, despite Merlin telling him more about the Old Religion. It seemed it had been studied in the Ministry for centuries, but still no significant advances had been made.

He was still trying to figure out Voldemort's plan, but no matter how many times he racked his brain, he couldn't. The attacks had ceased completely. While this was good news no one was being hurt, it made them far more wary.

What could he be up to?

Perhaps he had stolen something from the Department of Mysteries; maybe he was even now trying to learn more about the magic of the Old Religion. Merlin would once have thought this impossible, but after seeing Voldemort using the magic during the battle …

He walked into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place towards the end of July to find it surprisingly filled with people. He opened his mouth to try and discover what was going on, when he noticed who was sitting at the table: it was the Malfoy boy.

He barely had a moment to react before an angry shout came from behind him.

"What's he doing here?" yelled Ron, pointing at Malfoy. Harry, who stood beside him, looked equally as angry.

Malfoy raised one eyebrow. "We're on the same side aren't we, Weasley?"

Ron swore so loudly his mother whipped out her wand to threaten him with it.
The Malfoy boy just smirked; Merlin had to admire his audacity. To be so blasé in a room full of people who didn't like you was certainly pushing it. But Merlin could tell it was an act, behind his eyes there was a fear there, something he was apparently trying to hide by being a smarmy git.

"Language, Weasley, they won't tolerate that at school you know," he said coolly. "Is it true you're going back? And there was me thinking school was too tame for the likes of the Golden Boy Potter."

"That is enough, Mr Malfoy," said Kingsley sternly. "You are under our protection, and you should show some respect."

Malfoy looked back at him with an almost defiant stare.

"I am your prisoner!" he said. "Why have you separated me from my parents? It's because you don't trust us not to betray you! What kind of protection is that?"

"The very best," growled Kingsley. "It is far safer that the three of you are confined to separate safe-houses for the time being."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I can't tell you anything you know. Me and my father weren't exactly in the Dark Lord's good books. I don't know his plans, and I don't know anything about this Old Magic stuff."

"Would you tell us?" asked Kingsley mildly.

Malfoy made no answer, but sat there silently fuming.

"Wait, you mean he's going to be living here?" Ron asked indignantly.

"For the moment," Mr Weasley said, obviously not pleased.

"Can't wait," said Malfoy sullenly.

Merlin felt now he had to step in, he really didn't like this boy's attitude.

"You should be grateful," he said fiercely. "If it wasn't for this organisation being willing to help you even though we had every reason not to, you'd have been dead a long time ago. You are in no position to complain, you came to us. You're relying purely on our good-will. I'd be a bit more courteous in future if you don't want to find yourself hung out to dry."

Malfoy's face ignited in fury. "And who are you to lecture me? Besides, you'd never let me go, I know too much about your precious Order."

Merlin smiled mysteriously, fingering his wand. "Who said anything about letting you go?"

Malfoy looked down at the wand in Merlin's hand and paled considerably.

Merlin revelled in the sight of his discomfort. He wouldn't attack him of course, he wasn't Voldemort, who killed for pleasure and power. He didn't believe the boy was truly evil, just twisted by bad decisions and a weak will, but he was still a slimy git. And until that changed, Merlin had no intention of letting him walk all over everyone here.

"Y-you wouldn't," Malfoy said finally, though he looked unsure.

"I wouldn't be so sure Malfoy," Harry said quietly. "You don't know Martin here."

Malfoy's eyes widened and he looked afraid, though he tried to hide it. He whirled around to
Kingsley, who looked amused.

"I can't stay here! They all hate me!"

"I think you'll find that is the case wherever you go, Mr Malfoy," Kingsley said finally. He looked him up and down. "You'll be confined to this house. You are not allowed to leave under any circumstances. You are not permitted to write any letters, you may not make any communication with the outside world. You will be useful in the house and not cause any trouble. These rules must be obeyed without compromise. If you want our protection and our trust you must earn it. We will not hesitate to make your living circumstance more unpleasant if we find you have disobeyed these rules. Do I make myself clear?"

Malfoy looked at him petulantly, and then around at the assembled Weasley family, who were all glaring at him.

"Do I make myself clear?" Kingsley said, his voice betraying a hint of anger.

"Yes," sulked Malfoy.

Kingsley nodded, and turned to leave. The Weasleys began to file out of the kitchen, shooting distrustful looks at Malfoy who remained sitting at the table, determinedly avoiding eye-contact.

Harry, Ron and Hermione left the kitchen, looked disgustedly at him. Merlin watched the boy carefully.

He sat there, trying to be aloof, trying to be superior and smug, but he was failing miserably. Merlin noticed his paleness, and the shadows under his eyes. He was suffering more than he let on.

Merlin had always been one for offering second chances, but would Malfoy want a second chance?

The next few days passed without Harry and the others even catching a glimpse of Malfoy. It appeared he'd decided to seclude himself in the room that he shared with Percy Weasley, something neither of them were happy with. He appeared every so often to grab some food from the kitchen, never joining mealtimes, and otherwise not emerging from his room.

Harry couldn't say he was disappointed. Although his hatred of Malfoy had diminished slightly from what it had once been, he was still glad to see as little of him as possible.

Four days after Malfoy's arrival, Harry's eighteenth birthday came around.

He walked into the kitchen that morning, to find that Kreacher, who'd returned to Grimmauld Place a few days previously, had decorated the place with streamers and banners.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" Mrs Weasley came over to him, enveloping him in a hug and kissing him on the cheek.

"Thanks, Mrs Weasley," Harry grinned. If he was honest, he'd completely forgotten about his birthday; it hadn't really been at the front of his mind.

"Come on, then!" grumbled Ron. "Open your presents!"

Harry sat down at the table where most of the Weasleys were sitting, alongside Hermione and Martin, noticing several small packages wrapped there.
"You didn't have to do this," Harry said looking around at them all. "It's not important."

"Of course it is, Harry!" Fred urged. "You survived another year! That's something to be proud of!"

Harry couldn't help but smile. He pulled the first of his presents towards him. Harry hadn't expected much considering the situation that they were in, but he was touched all the same. Fred and George had predictably sent him a box full of their own produce, Hermione, also predictably had sent him a book *(Defensive Magic for the Advanced Student* by Wallace Schiltron), Ron a box of Chocolate Frogs, Mrs Weasley one of her knitted jumpers and some home-made fudge, Charlie, Bill and Percy had clubbed together and given him a wand holster made from dragon skin, and Martin had given him a small wooden chest for storing potion ingredients, with an ornate lion carved on the lid.

"It belonged to Godric Gryffindor," said Martin. "And don't worry, I've checked; it's not a Horcrux."

Harry ran his fingers over the lion almost reverently. "How did you get it?"

Martin smiled, as though recalling a lost memory. "My father liked to deal in magical antiques," he said.

"Thank you," said Harry still quite in awe. Why would he give him such a gift?

"You can have one of my Chocolate Frogs for that," he said tossing him one over. Martin grinned and caught it, his reflexes lightning fast.

Harry opened his own, and pulled out the Card. "Merlin again. I've already got one of him."

Martin started laughing next to him. Harry stared at him.

"Sorry," said Martin, his eyes still full of laughter. "It's just – I was thinking of something else."

"Right," said Harry still looking at him strangely. "Who did you get then?"

Martin ripped open his own, and examined the card, his face immediately draining of hilarity.

"Morgana." He said softly, looking at it, almost sadly.

Harry decided not to ask; it must be a sort of Druid thing, he always looked sad when someone mentioned Morgana. Harry still didn't really understand what had happened all those years ago, but he gathered Morgana had been the reason the Old Religion had declined.

Fortunately they were spared any further awkwardness when the post arrived.

He received a birthday card from Hagrid, who described in detail his delight that Harry and the others would be returning to Hogwarts. He also got one from Remus and Tonks, who included a photo of little Teddy, as well as his sticky handprint underneath their signatures in the card. Harry smiled fondly; he still hadn't met his godson. Mrs Tonks had wanted to keep him with her at all times where he could be safe, and despite Harry having plenty of time on his hands, Kingsley hadn't wanted Harry to leave Grimmauld Place.

His attention strayed to the last owl, which was unfamiliar to him. It held out its leg and Harry took the letter, noting it was paper, rather than parchment.

"Isn't that Dedalus Diggle's owl?" Charlie asked frowning.

"Yeah," said Fred, watching as the owl began hopping on the table in a little dance, apparently pleased with itself. "Just as loopy as he is."
Harry opened his letter, and his eyebrows went up in astonishment.

"Who's it from?" Hermione asked.

"My- my cousin," Harry said, bewildered.

He ignored the shocked looks around the table, and began to read.

Dear Harry,

_I hope this gets to you. This Dedalus bloke says the owl will know how to find you, but I'm still having a hard time believing it._

_I know that Dumbledore bloke said that people like you come of age at seventeen, but I thought I'd send this anyway, since in the normal world it's an important day._

_I just thought I'd let you know how we're all doing, if you were wondering. Dedalus and Hestia have been looking after us okay. We're in a big house in the country where no one can find us. It's alright here, the house is pretty normal and there's TV and things so I'm not really bored. Dad's fed up though and he keeps trying to get out. Never works, some little thing keeps dragging him back- Dedalus called it a house-elf? Mum's not really doing much, she's cleaned the whole house top to bottom a dozen times, but that seems to insult the elf thingy so she's had to stop._

_They're going mad, but I'm not too bothered. Dedalus has been telling me stuff about your world, and all the stuff you've done. I can't really believe half of it, he seems to be seriously obsessed with you! But I understood enough._

_I just wanted to let you know that I hope you're okay, and you'll beat this Voldemort guy. I realised when that Dementy thing attacked me that I've been a spoiled brat to you over the years. I hope that when all this is over we might be able to start again._

_Happy Birthday._

_From Dudley_

Harry sat in shock for several whole minutes. This was the _last_ thing he'd expected to receive on his birthday!

"Well," asked Ron impatiently. "What did the git want?"

"He … uh," hesitated Harry, still unable to believe it. "He apologised, at least as close to an apology that Dudley can come to. Says he wants to start again, and that he hopes I don't die."

"Apologised?" asked Ron looking bewildered. "After everything he's done?"

Harry nodded, still in shock. "I guess living with Dedalus and Hestia must have rubbed off on him."

"Never thought he had it in him," muttered Fred.

"Well, I think he's being very brave to write to you, Harry," said Mrs Weasley. "Nothing's more important than family at a time like this."

Harry nodded numbly, the letter still clutched in his hand. Ron opened his mouth to say something, but was stopped as he saw something behind Harry's shoulder.

"OI! What are you up to?"
They all turned to see Malfoy sneaking out the pantry, a flask of Pumpkin juice and some sandwiches clutched under his arm.

Malfoy turned to glare at them.

"I am getting something to eat, Weasley. I may be stuck in this awful place but that doesn't mean I have to starve."

Mrs Weasley jumped up from the table looking flustered.

"Would you like me to make you something, dear?"

"No," he said coldly, facing away from her and staring at Harry. "So, Potter, you've reached eighteen then? There's many who thought you wouldn't make it this long."

"Well I did, so lucky me," Harry said angry at Malfoy's dismissal of Mrs Weasley.

Malfoy smirked. "Well, since we're all in the spirit of giving today, why don't you give me something? Namely, the thing you stole from me."

Harry glanced down at the wand in his pocket.

"I won it fair and square, Malfoy."

Malfoy scowled. "Say what you will. That wand is mine. And I will have it back."

He made a motion towards Harry, but before he could step forwards, he was suddenly jerked up into the air, where he hung suspended by his ankle.

"Let me down! Let me down!" he yelled, struggling in mid-air, as the kitchen roared with laughter.

All of a sudden, he was deposited in a heap on the floor, red-faced, and undignified as his sleek hair was plastered over his face.

He glared at them all, scooped up the food he'd dropped on the floor, and ran from the room.

"That was good, mate!" Ron said, gasping for breath through his laughter, looking at Martin.

Harry turned and saw Martin sliding his wand back into his pocket.

"You did that?"

Martin smirked in answer.

"You really shouldn't have," Mrs Weasley said disapprovingly. "We're supposed to be treating him well."

"I'll treat him well if he treats us well," Martin said.

Mrs Weasley still looked annoyed. "He's been through a lot. I feel sorry for him, he was forced into all of this, and now he's lost everything. The least we could do is show him some kindness."

Martin continued looking at Mrs Weasley evenly. "I feel sorry for him as well. And that's why I did what I did."

Harry frowned as he tried to understand this.
Martin rose from the table. "I'd better go; I've got a patrol in a few minutes."

He bade them goodbye and crossed to the door, pausing only to drop something in the bin in the corner.

Curious, Harry moved over to the bin to see what he'd dropped. It was the Morgana Chocolate Frog card.

What on earth was going on with him?
Going Back

The night before they were due to return to Hogwarts came quicker than anyone could have imagined. Mrs Weasley had gone into Diagon Alley and bought all of their school supplies; much of it from scratch, as Harry and Hermione had both lost much of their possessions, having no home of their own to keep their things in.

There had been quite a tussle with the goblins; they had point-blank refused to allow any money to be drawn from any of their accounts. It had seemed to be quite a hopeless situation, but some intervention by Bill Weasley and Kingsley himself had negotiated a peace settlement.

"Still, I don't put it past those slimy gits to be a bit too careless with our money," Ron had grumbled.

Harry wouldn't either. They were still furious with them for breaking in and stealing something. The fact that their dragon was still on the loose didn't help either. It had eluded every attempt made to capture it, and Charlie Weasley was beginning to get seriously worried.

“They aren't supposed to be this intelligent,” he had said one evening, exhausted after another fruitless attempt to find it. 'No matter where we look, there's no sign of it. A normal dragon would leave trails, would attack humans, but no one's seen as much as a scale of this one. It's weird.”

Harry had noticed Martin listening intently at this point, a small frown on his face, and Harry wondered for the millionth time what he could possibly be thinking. All news of the dragon seemed to interest him far more than any of the others.

Harry wondered if he had any special reason for being so interested. He'd noticed one evening, when they were all getting ready for bed, that Martin had a small wooden figurine of a dragon in the small bag he'd brought to Grimmauld Place, which seemingly held all of his possessions. It looked ancient, and Martin had held it almost reverently when he lifted it aside to search for some pyjamas. Harry had asked him about it once.

"My father made it for me when I was a lot younger," he had shrugged, before hastily changing the subject.

Harry had the impression, not for the first time, that he was again holding something back. He remembered that Martin's Patronus was a dragon, having seen it during the battle, and thought perhaps there were yet more secrets locked within this mysterious young man.

All their supplies had been bought, their socks laundered by Mrs Weasley, everything was ready, but Harry still felt hollow inside. He sorted through his textbooks, parchment and quills, feeling as though he was looking at it all from a great distance.

It still felt completely insane to be going back to school, but something deep inside of him told him this was the right move, however strange it felt.

He pondered this in the room he shared with Ron and Martin as he moved aside his clothes in his brand-new school trunk, looking for a lost shoe. Everything was brand-new: his trunk, his cauldron, the majority of his books … he'd even be heading off this year without Hedwig. Her loss still pained him, especially now as he was going off for his final year without the one constant companion he'd had since his eleventh birthday.

Martin sat on the end of his bed, his own small trunk already completely packed, looking quite relaxed.
Ron noticed this. "You're packed already?" he asked in disbelief.

Martin nodded. "I don't have much stuff. I moved around a lot."

Ron looked annoyed. "I'll never get this done," he moaned, looking at the jumbled mess of possessions on his bed.

"Well, your mother did tell you to start hours ago," said Hermione matter-of-factly, as she sat on Martin's bed, still absorbed in *Ancient Forms of Magic*, re-reading it for the fourth time, despite the fact it hadn't turned up anything useful about the Old Religion.

Ron scowled, and attacked his trunk in a renewed vehemence. He shoved his Quidditch robes in his trunk, cramming them in in a crumpled heap.

"You don't have yours any more do you Harry?" asked Ron, looking at them.

"Nah, I left them at the Dursley's, God knows what happened to them after that," said Harry, finally closing the lid of his trunk, and flopping down on his bed.

"You going to keep playing, you know, being the captain and all that?" Ron asked him.

Harry sighed heavily. "I don't know. It'll be weird going back to Quidditch after this. Besides, McGonagall might have appointed someone else."

"She won't have," Ron assured him. "You're the best player Hogwarts ever had. Besides, McGonagall's got a bit of a soft spot for you. She's the reason you got on the team in the first place."

Harry said nothing. True, he'd *like* to play Quidditch again, he just didn't know if he could go back to it all, being in a situation where there was nothing more pressing than catching a tiny golden ball. It was a big change from constantly being on the run and fighting for his life.

"You play?" Ron asked Martin.

For some reason this seemed to make him extremely amused. "No, never had the opportunity to learn. I've watched a lot of games over the years though."

Ron turned back to his trunk. "Suppose Druids don't go in much for sport."

"I wouldn't say that," Martin said. "I used to be fairly good at Muggle sports, you know, like horse riding and … uh, *fencing.*" His eyes seemed to glint in some amused way as he said this.

"Fencing?" asked Ron dumbfounded. "You mean building fences and stuff? That's a sport?"

"It's a kind of sword fighting, Ron," Harry explained wearily.

"Oh," Ron said, looking slightly more interested. "That sounds pretty cool. Were you any good?"

Martin laughed. "I used to be awful. The guy who taught me, one of my oldest friends, he used to tease me so much about how bad I was. He used to beat me every time we practiced. But I got better eventually. I could hold my own in a fight, even won a few."

Ron nodded, and then turned to Harry. "It's like what you said to Scrimgeour last year, Harry. Maybe we *could* stick a sword into You-Know-Who."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," Hermione said. "Voldemort's not going to be killed by a Muggle sword."
"Of course I didn't mean it literally, Hermione," Ron defended himself. "It was a joke!"

"You know, I think I left something downstairs," Harry excused himself before the bickering got any worse. They may officially be a couple now, but that didn't make them any less inclined to argue, if anything it only increased it.

He wandered down the stairs, and emerged into the Drawing Room. He saw a faint figure jump as Harry entered.

It was Malfoy.

"What are you doing in here?" Harry asked, suspiciously. Malfoy had kept to his room almost exclusively since arriving. Harry didn't think he'd seen any more of the house other than his room and the kitchen.

"That's none of your business, Potter," Malfoy spat. "Why are you here? Shouldn't you be getting ready for going back to school?"

Harry moved closer to him, and realised what he was standing next to.

"Admiring your in-bred history are you?" said Harry, motioning to the Black family tapestry.

Malfoy's face flushed. "At least I have a family, Potter. A family to be proud of!"

Harry raised his eyebrows, and read some of the names.

"A family of Death Eaters, insane people and murderers … yeah, a lot to be proud of."

Malfoy flushed even deeper. "I notice you're not on here, Potter. Not good enough I reckon."

Harry smiled, and pointed to a singed mark underneath the names 'Dorea Black' and 'Charlus Potter'.

"That's my dad right there. Blasted off for marrying a Muggle-Born. Look around, there's lots of these marks; it looks like your family isn't as 'pure' as you like to think."

Malfoy scowled, and turned away.

"You wouldn't know a thing about it, Potter. What do you know of family?"

"I know enough," said Harry. "My Muggle family treated me like scum, but I've found my own family now. I'm happy with them, proud that they've accepted me."

Malfoy wheeled around to face him once again, his face mad. "You mean those blood-traitors? Why are you proud of them?"

"Because," said Harry angrily. "They have treated me better than anyone else in this world. Mrs Weasley loves me as one of her own, and I'll be ever grateful for that. What about your family, Draco; the superior one? You got yourself into this mess because you wanted to uphold your family's honour, because you believed you were better than the others. But you were wrong. All your family's pride has gotten you is being on the run from your former master who'd quite happily kill you without a second thought!"

Malfoy made no answer, breathing heavily as he shook in anger.

"Are you really proud of them, Draco?" asked Harry quietly, looking at Malfoy's name on the tapestry. "Look at your aunts; one of them married a Muggle-Born, but she's had a happy life with a
loving daughter and a grandson. The other let herself be twisted by hate and evil, killing innocent people wherever she went. Can you honestly say you're prouder of her than of the ones who were blasted off?"

Malfoy's glare softened as he looked at Bellatrix' name.

"I didn't want anything to do with her," he said softly.

"Why not?" prompted Harry. "She was a Pure-Blood wasn't she? Isn't that all people like you need to be certain of a person's worth?"

Malfoy looked at him, frowning.

"Don't you dare tell me what to think, Potter."

"I'm not trying to," said Harry. "I'm asking you to look for yourself, see if you're truly proud of them."

Malfoy didn't answer, just stood there fuming.

"Why didn't you tell her?" Harry asked again for the first time since the battle. "Why didn't you tell your aunt that it was me? You knew perfectly well that it was us. And for that matter, why didn't you kill Dumbledore when she told you to?"

Malfoy again, made no answer.

"I know why," said Harry. "It's because you don't truly believe in all this stuff. You have a chance, Malfoy, you can be proud of the family that you detest, or be proud of the decisions you make on your own. You have a chance to change things. Take it."

And with that, Harry turned and left the room, leaving Malfoy standing in the dark.

The next morning dawned as chaotically as always. People ran around making last minute preparations, trying to fit in breakfast around getting the last vestiges of the laundry packed away.

Merlin sat at the kitchen table, watching the chaos, barely suppressing his laughter. He always worked well in high-pressure situations; something he thought he'd picked up in Camelot, always frantically trying to help in the preparations for a banquet or a hunt with the Knights.

He was fully packed; he didn't really have much anyway. He'd found it easier over the centuries not to acquire too many things, it just made it more awkward moving around. He had literally everything he owned packed into this small trunk. Even though it was magically expanded, there wasn't much there. There were a few artefacts that he'd picked up over the years, some precious relics from Camelot, such as one of the Knight's cloaks, his old magic book, the dragon figure his father had carved for him, all magically preserved, some clothes, his school supplies and his books, the only large things he had in his possession, a collection he'd made over the centuries.

The one thing he lacked, making his trunk somewhat lighter, was the potion chest he had given by Godric Gryffindor, that he had now passed on to Harry. Godric had given it to him the night before Merlin had left the castle as a parting gift to remember him by, and Merlin had promised to pass it onto someone else in the future, a true Gryffindor, to preserve Godric's legacy. Although it made Merlin rather sad to part with the last remaining object he possessed of his old friend, he knew it was
the right thing. Harry had proven himself as a true Gryffindor when he had pulled the sword from the Hat, and when he had given himself up to Voldemort. He knew Godric would approve.

He'd gone into Diagon Alley himself, extracted gold from the Emrys 'Family Vault' at Gringotts, now rather large after accumulating so much over the years, and bought his school things. It made him rather nostalgic buying everything again after so many years. He hadn't been at Hogwarts for quite a while now, and it brought back floods of memories.

He still couldn't get over the fact that he was going to school. He was an old man; he didn't know if he could cope with all the teenage angst that came with it.

Still, Harry was going, and Merlin needed to go with him.

Mrs Weasley ran into the kitchen, looking flustered.

"Oh dear! Thank goodness you're ready at least, I told Ron!"

Merlin tried not to laugh as she continued rushing around the kitchen. "I thought we'd done with all this! I thought that this year we'd only be sending one of them off! Of course I'm thrilled they all want to improve their education, but … well, I'm getting a bit old for all of this."

_Not as old as me_, Merlin thought.

He jumped up and helped her in any way he could. He spent a good half an hour trying to lure an irate cat into its hamper. It was Hermione's cat, he'd gathered, and had been staying with the Weasleys while Hermione had been off searching for Horcruxes. Like Ron, it wasn't happy to be returning to Hogwarts.

Eventually they were all ready, and they rushed out the front door of Grimmauld Place dragging their trunks with them, heading for King's Cross station. At first glance it appeared they were alone, but Merlin soon observed the Aurors that watched them from behind parked cars all the way to the station. It seemed Kingsley was taking no chances.

They arrived at the station in plenty of time and they made their way to the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

Merlin hesitated only slightly; although having attended Hogwarts several times before he'd never arrived by train. The Hogwarts Express had only come into being in the 1930s, and Merlin hadn't attended Hogwarts since. He tried to space out his times at Hogwarts so as to not run the risk of being recognised by some of the older teachers.

He certainly thought it a novel way of getting there. He remembered quite clearly the outrage and controversy that had accompanied the Ministry's ground-breaking proposal; the more out-spoken Pure-Bloods didn't want their children arriving at school by Muggle transport.

Still, it was more practical than the old method, in which everyone just turned up however they liked. That had been fun. He remembered in particular one exciting time in the 1830s when he'd shared a flying carpet with Eduardus Black when he'd last been in Slytherin House. Eduardus had been a good man, later blasted off the family tree for supporting Muggle rights.

Ron smirked at him. "It's okay. You just walk through, no big deal."

Merlin was slightly annoyed by his smug tone. Ron moved forwards to lean against the barrier causally, still smirking at Merlin.
Merlin smiled, and his eyes flashed gold. Before Ron had reached the barrier, suddenly his feet gave way underneath him, as the floor became like polished glass. He fell, and landed sprawled on the floor, his limbs outstretched in a very unseemly manner.

"Really? No big deal? But it looks so difficult from where you’re sitting," Merlin smirked back at Ron, whose face had flushed red.

Merlin started to laugh, and ran forwards and emerged on the other side of the barrier, emerging onto the platform, where a great scarlet steam engine stood waiting for him. Despite himself, he felt a little thrill of excitement as he beheld it, and the dozens of students milling around, saying their goodbyes. He'd always enjoyed his times at Hogwarts.

Ron came through the barrier behind him, still red-faced, and Harry and Hermione and Ginny followed soon after, laughing loudly.

Merlin grinned at Ron who was scowling at him. "Did you do that?" he demanded.

"Don't know what you're talking about," he said casually, winking at the others.

Ron wasn't happy. "That was that Old Magic wasn't it? I thought you said that stuff was difficult and dangerous!"

"Relax, Ron," Merlin said, still laughing. "It was only a little thing."

Ron was still scowling as he stormed past him, searching for a compartment.

"Don't mind him," Ginny said to him. "He needed that."

Merlin smiled at her. At that moment, Mrs Weasley came through the barrier behind them, along with Tonks, clutching a baby to her chest.

"Aww!" gushed Hermione and Ginny, and they moved forwards to Tonks, who was beaming happily.

"I thought you'd all want to see little Teddy before you left," Tonks said, looking down at her son with a look of pure adoration.

"He's so tiny!" cooed Ginny, as she held out a finger and Teddy gripped on to it. Merlin was rather amused at the transformation in Ginny; true she could be fiery and fierce, but she definitely had a softer side to her.

"What's keeping you all?" Ron had reappeared, and his eyes widened at the sight before him. "Blimey."

"I'm sure he likes you too, Ron." Ginny snapped at him, evidently annoyed at his less-than-enthusiastic reception.

"But I'm sure I know who he'll like the best," said Tonks, moving over to Harry, who was still staring at him, a smile on his face. "His godfather of course."

Harry looked alarmed, and tried to back off. "Oh, I don't think I should," he said as Tonks tried to place Teddy in his arms. "I'll drop him."

"Don't worry, Harry, just pretend he's a Golden Snitch," said Tonks brightly.

Harry held him, rather awkwardly at first, but soon relaxed as Teddy began to gurgle at him.
"See, he likes you!" Tonks said happily.

Harry grinned, as he shifted Teddy in his arms. The blankets surrounding Teddy's face suddenly dropped down a little, and his face was fully exposed.

He squealed happily as he saw the train, and then suddenly his hair changed from the orange colour it had been to a bright scarlet red, the same shade as the Hogwarts Express.

"I don't think he wants to wait eleven years until he's old enough to go," laughed Tonks, taking him back from Harry. "Well, shall we find you lot somewhere to sit?"

They all nodded, and moved off down the platform, weaving in between the families crowding the platform. As they walked, Merlin couldn't help but notice the amount of stares they were all receiving. He sighed; he supposed he'd better get used to this.

They found a fairly empty carriage at the end of the train, and they hopped on, dragging their trunks behind them, and depositing them in an empty compartment. They went back outside to say goodbye.

Mrs Weasley hugged them tearily. "Be careful won't you? Remember you can all come back at any time you want to be more involved in things. Teach that D.A. of yours everything you know!"

Harry nodded. "We will," he assured her.

Mrs Weasley hugged him again, and Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny headed back onto the train. Merlin tried to follow them, but found Mrs Weasley had grabbed on to his arm.

"Look after them, won't you?" she asked him, searching his face.

"I will protect them with my life," Merlin said solemnly.

Mrs Weasley nodded, hesitated, and then pulled Merlin into a fierce hug. Merlin, surprised, barely had time to react before she pulled back.

"Now, off you go," she said, smiling.

Merlin smiled back, and went back to the compartment the others were occupying, now accompanied by Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood.

"All right?" Neville asked, grinning.

"Yeah, you?" Merlin asked, smiling at him.

"Not bad!" said Neville. "I was just saying to Luna here we're going to have a hell of a year. Got real responsibility now that the D.A's been made official."

"Yeah," agreed Merlin.

Before long, the whistles had been blown and the train started to pull away. They waved as Mrs Weasley and Tonks, who was waving Teddy's tiny little hand at them, began to fall back and were eventually gone as the train rounded a corner.

Merlin sat back in his seat. It was going to be a long journey.
Harry watched out of the window as the countryside began to flash past. He was going back; it was finally starting to sink in.

He didn't pay much attention to the conversations going on around him, too lost was he in his own thoughts. Here he was zooming off to school to sit in a classroom while Voldemort was still out there causing chaos and devastation. It made him so frustrated.

He didn't doubt he had made the right decision, at least he tried to tell himself that, but it didn't make it any easier.

Every so often excited and curious faces would peer into their compartment, whispering excitedly at the sight of him. Harry ignored them; he didn't deserve their praise, and he couldn't care less about their rumourmongering.

"I expect you're not too happy about going back, are you?" Luna said dreamily, looking at Harry, who was sitting across from her.

Harry looked at her sharply, and sighed. "Not particularly."

"I understand," nodded Luna. "At first I didn't want to come back. I'd been held prisoner and tortured, and then fought in an awful battle- I thought that coming back would be strange. But we're doing good by retuning, we're going to learn lots, we'll have the D.A. to teach … we'll be just as useful as we ever were."

She smiled at him. "Don't feel bad, Harry; just think about all the good things that'll come of this."

Harry smiled back at her; Luna just had that way of making you feel better, no matter the circumstances.

All of a sudden, there was a flash of fire in the compartment. Neville yelped, spilling a ton of Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans on the floor as he whipped out his wand.

Harry made to reach for his too, but stopped before his hand had gone half-way to the wand holster he'd received for his birthday when he realised what had happened.

Sitting there in the middle of the compartment was Fawkes.

"Bloody hell!" yelled Ron. "Where did that thing come from?"

Fawkes squawked at him reproachfully, and turned around to face Martin, hopping up until he sat on his knee.

"I've always loved phoenixes," sighed Luna.

"What does he want?" breathed Hermione, her eyes wide.

"He's got a letter, look!" Neville pointed.

Martin reached down, and pulled a small scroll of parchment from his leg. As soon as it was removed, Fawkes gave another squawk, and vanished in another spurt of flame.

"Well, that was weird," stated Ginny, rather unnecessarily. "Phoenixes wouldn't carry letters for just anybody. They're far too proud."

"Who's the letter from?" urged Ron.
Martin unrolled the scroll and read through it quickly. "Professor McGonagall."

Harry frowned. "What does she want?"

By way of an answer, Martin handed him the note. Harry read it aloud.

_Dear Mr Emrys,_

_I thought you'd like to know the preparations for your rather unorthodox attendance at Hogwarts are now complete; you will begin in seventh year with Mr Potter and the others. While I understand you've had no formal education, I believe your spell work to be sufficiently advanced enough to aspire to N.E.W.T standard, therefore I've enrolled you in the following subjects: Transfiguration, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Herbology and of course, the extra-curricular classes the Auror from the Ministry will be running once a week._

_You remember of course the Minister's suggestion of your acting as a defender of the school from the inside. As such, I should like you to come to my office before the Opening Feast as soon as you arrive to discuss this further. I shall also Sort you at this time._

_I'd also be grateful if you would relay this information to Potter and his friends, and ask that they too come to me before the Feast, so that we can discuss the arrangements being made for them to enable them to continue their activities with the Order of the Phoenix._

_I wish you a pleasant journey on the Hogwarts Express, and will see you all when you arrive._

_Yours sincerely,_

_Professor McGonagall,_

_Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry_  

_P.S. Forgive the strange nature of the arrival of this letter. I was going to use a school owl, but Fawkes insisted. I think he's taken a shine to you._

Harry looked up at him.

"Not even got there yet and we've already got an appointment to see the Headmistress? I'm guessing that's some kind of record."

"You've been enrolled in all the classes that a prospective Auror would take," said Hermione, examining the letter.

Martin shrugged. "Makes sense doesn't it? We're all here to learn as much as we can to defeat Voldemort. An Auror's training makes sense."

Ron was still gaping at where Fawkes had been. "That bird really must like you to be willing to act like an owl."

Merlin smiled. "I just have that natural charm."

But Harry was slightly more suspicious; why was Fawkes so trusting of him? He hadn't thought Fawkes would ever show such loyalty to anyone other than Dumbledore.

"So," said Ginny, trying to bring some normality back to the proceedings. "Now McGonagall's Headmistress, who do you reckon will be teaching Transfiguration? Or Defence for that matter?"
Hermione looked thoughtful. "I hadn't thought of that. I suppose we'll just have to wait until we get there."

"Bet you're pleased you don't need to get Sorted in front of the entire school." Neville grinned at Martin.

"Yeah," laughed Martin. "It would've been quite embarrassing to be up there with a bunch of people half my age."

"Wonder what House you'll be in?" Ginny pondered.

"I think Ravenclaw," said Ron. "You're way smarter than us."

Martin shook his head. "No, I'm not."

"Yeah you are!" said Ron. "You know all this stuff about Old Magic and that!"

"Doesn't mean I'm smart," said Martin.

"Well," said Hermione. "You're definitely smart enough for Ravenclaw, but that doesn't mean you'll be in that House."

"Yeah Hermione," said Harry grinning. "You're not in Ravenclaw, and I doubt there's a smarter witch in the school."

Hermione blushed.

"I think your true House is Hufflepuff," said Luna, randomly.

Everyone turned to look at her.

"I mean, it's your loyalty that defines you," Luna went on, looking at Martin intensely. "You'd do anything for the people you care about, and you'll always work hard to do so. I think you'd be happy there."

Martin looked at her, his eyes slightly widened. "Yeah, maybe," he mumbled, and looked away.

Harry was intrigued by this, but said nothing.

The rest of the journey passed rather quietly, and before long they were changing into their robes as the sky darkened and the train started slowing down.

The train pulled into the platform, steam swirling around like tendrils of mist.

They made their way out onto the platform, and started negotiating their way through the crowds of people.

"Firs' years! Firs' years!" A familiar cry echoed out over the platform. Harry smiled; even after all the bad stuff that had happened, it was nice to hear that familiar start-of-year greeting.

"Hagrid!" cried Hermione, waving to him.

Hagrid lumbered over. "Great teh see you lot! I thought fir a while yeh weren' goin' teh come!"

"Well, we're here," said Harry, trying to sound happy about it. But Hagrid wasn't fooled.
"Don't yeh worry yersel's, yeh'll have a great year. You'll see!"

And he walked away, grinning at them, gathering the first years to him.

"Come on, we need to find a carriage." Hermione chided them all.

Ron looked at her in annoyance. "You're the one who stopped to chat to Hagrid!"

But she pushed them all over to where the Thestral-pulled carriages were waiting. They all scrambled into one, and soon they were off, on their way to the castle.

Harry sat staring out of the window until the castle itself appeared, looking as familiar and comforting as it always did.

"Looks like they fixed it up, eh?" Ron said, peering out of window. "Not a bad job considering how messed up it was."

They pulled up outside the front doors, and they stepped out of the carriage, and moved into the Entrance Hall.

If Harry hadn't known a battle had taken place here just a few months ago, he would never have believed it. There wasn't a sign of it anywhere.

"Come on!" directed Hermione. "We need to go and see Professor McGonagall!"

They moved up the marble staircase, Ron groaning slightly as they moved away from the brightly lit Great Hall, from which tempting smells were being issued.

Before long they found themselves in front of the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance.

"Er … "said Ron, looking unsure. "What's the password?"

Hermione bit her lip. "Oh no! I don't know it!"

Harry opened his mouth to begin to guess, but Martin beat him to it.

"Fawkes," he said, and the gargoyle sprang aside.

"Just a hunch," he said, shrugging at the curious looks he was receiving.

They progressed up the revolving staircase and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice sounded on the other side. Harry pushed open the door.

McGonagall was sitting at Dumbledore's desk- no, her desk now, writing. She glanced up as they entered. "Ah," she said. "Please, take a seat." She waved her wand and seven seats appeared around her desk.

They took a seat each, and waited until McGonagall had finished.

When she had, she looked up, and observed them over her spectacles.

"I'm glad you all decided to return to Hogwarts," she said. "There is much you all still need to learn, and much you will be able to teach the younger students. I'm thrilled you have realised that."

Harry and the others said nothing. McGonagall stormed ahead regardless.
"Of course, you are all still fully-fledged members of the Order, you must never forget that. Once a week, on a Saturday evening, there will be an Order meeting at seven o’clock. You will all make your way here, to this office, and we shall Floo to Grimmauld Place. Any new advancement in the fight will of course be made available to you immediately. Your services may be called upon at any time to assist the Order. You are of course welcome to leave, but I would advise against it. You are of are more benefit here."

Harry nodded dully. McGonagall looked stern again.

"Of course, I shall still expect you all to perform to your very best in class. There will no leniency. You are here to learn, and shall be expected to perform as every other student. Do I make that clear?"

Harry nodded again.

"You will be invited to these special Auror-run special training sessions," McGonagall continued. "The seven of you, and any other people you deem to be worthy will attend once a week on a Sunday; it will be written on your timetables, where and when you are to attend these. They are also optional but I strongly recommend you attend."

"As to the D.A.," she said, looking stern. "Meetings twice a week Potter, in your usual place. I shall make a school-wide announcement, inviting the students to attend, and you will teach them, regardless of age, or of House. These meetings will begin next week. I would like this upcoming week to be spent by yourself drawing up plans of what you intend to teach, and to send them to me to be approved."

Harry nodded once again, rather feeling like he was being dictated to. McGonagall's style of running the school seemed to be far stricter than Dumbledore's, but Harry didn't doubt she was as equally efficient in her own way.

"I appreciate that all of this extra-curricular work may mean your school work suffers. I understand, but I will still expect each of you to perform to your best," she said looking around at them all seriously. "I would like to impress on you all that this will be a tough year, and that you must be fully committed to doing this. There will be a lot of hard work involved, and I hope you will all try your hardest."

Neville looked slightly worried at this, though determined all the same. Harry sighed as he thought of the incredibly tough year he had just resigned himself to.

"Professor, what about Quidditch?" Ron asked tentatively.

McGonagall looked at him in astonishment. "Surely with everything going on you will have neither the time nor the inclination for Quidditch of all things?"

Ron frowned. "Gryffindor's won three consecutive trophies, we have to keep that up don't we?"

McGonagall blinked for a few moments, looking bewildered.

"Well, of course, heaven knows, we can't let that falter," she stammered. She looked at Harry and Ron and Ginny seriously. "Do you really think you'll be able to cope with this on top of everything else?"

Ron and Ginny nodded eagerly, but Harry didn't respond for a moment. Playing Quidditch, something so normal …

"Potter?" McGonagall asked.
"Yeah," Harry finally decided. "I'd like to play again."

McGonagall nodded, and Harry could swear he saw a tiny glimmer of a smile on her thin lips.

"Very well, I shall see what we can do. I'll have to liaise with the new Head of Gryffindor however."

"Who is that, professor?" asked Hermione interestedly.

McGonagall looked at her, her stern expression faltering a little. "It is Professor Hagrid," she said finally.

"Hagrid?!" yelled Ron. "That's brilliant! He'll be great!"

"Yes," said McGonagall distractedly, as though she wasn't too happy about it. Harry could see why; whilst having great intentions, Hagrid wasn't exactly the most responsible person ever. He was thrilled of course, he knew what this meant for Hagrid, but he couldn't help but wonder if Hagrid was the only ex-Gryffindor teacher at Hogwarts.

McGonagall quickly pulled herself together. "Well, I think that's everything concerning you six. Now," she said turning to Martin. "You know your role?"

"I think so," said Martin, trying to smile.

McGonagall looked unamused. "You are the unofficial protector of the school. I would like for you to make patrols three times a week around the grounds, checking that the wards around the school are functioning correctly. I want you to patrol within the school itself also, work alongside the Prefects of your House. You are to be vigilant, always on the lookout for anything suspicious. I would like for you to meet with me here every Friday evening after dinner to make a report. Is this understood?"

Merlin nodded, slightly intimidated by her austere presence. Here was a woman who didn't tolerate shoddiness. Overall it didn't seem like too much extra work. He might even be able to improve the school's defences. He would've been on the lookout anyway; he would be able to sense any magical threats to the school before they even made themselves known to anyone else.

One of the silver instruments whirring on the spindly tables dotted throughout the room suddenly made a high-pitched noise and issued a puff of purple smoke.

McGonagall glanced at it momentarily. "The first years have arrived at the castle. The Sorting will begin shortly. Which reminds me …"

She stood up and moved over to a shelf at the side of the room, where she brought back the old Sorting Hat.

"They'll be needing this, but not just yet."

She approached Merlin wielding the hat, and Merlin suddenly felt nervous. He remembered when the hat had belonged to Godric, and how Helga had detested the very sight of its threadbare fabric. It still surprised him that she had eventually consented to use it as a means of Sorting students. In any case, the hat had known from the very first time Merlin had worn it just who he was. It wouldn't tell the room, would it?
She placed it on top of his head, where it settled quite comfortably, not even dropping to cover his eyes as it had done many times before when he'd made himself take on the appearance of an eleven year old boy.

All too soon, that familiar little voice echoed in his ear.

'Well, well, well … look who we have here. Back again are we?'

'Um, yes?'

'Hmm, will you ever get bored? Ah, but I sense you're here for a greater purpose this time. It's not simply for your own amusement.'

'Not exactly.'

Merlin tried to look anywhere but the office, where everyone was sitting watching expectantly.

'Hmmm … a very dangerous and ambitious task you've set yourself. Will you be able to accomplish it?'

'The only way to find out is to try.'

'Ha ha, you were always a determined one.'

'Come on, can't you just Sort me already?'

'I've told you before, and I shall tell you again. It is not my place to presume to Sort someone of your power, to judge the power and mystique of the Old Religion.'

Merlin smiled in amusement.

'You're going to make me pick again aren't you? Come on, just tell me, what House would I really be in?'

'It is impossible to say. You are magic itself. You are everything all at once.'

'Still as infuriatingly cryptic as ever then?'

'… you must choose.'

Merlin glanced over at Harry, who was watching in interest.

'You are here to protect him are you not?'

'I am.'

'In that case, I wish you well. But be warned, the path before you is wrought danger. The hopes of the wizarding world rest on him and on you … Merlin.'

Merlin jumped, as the Hat called him by his name. He'd forgotten how it had felt to be called thus instead of hearing it used as an expression in everyday life.

'You must protect him, for all our sakes. And if you are to do that, better be … GRYFFINDOR!'

The hat roared this last word to the room, and Merlin grinned to see Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville clapping him enthusiastically.
Luna on the other hand, looked disappointed. "Hmm, I was so sure you'd be a Hufflepuff."

Merlin laughed, hoping one day he'd be able to tell her Hufflepuff had been his favourite House. Not dismissing the other Founders and their Houses, but Helga and himself had probably been the closest in temperament.

"Well, we had all better head down to the Feast," said McGonagall, looking distinctly pleased. "I must pass this hat over to Professor Flitwick for the Sorting."

They made their way through the castle, Merlin grinning at the prospect of another year in Gryffindor House. Although it had sometimes been full of prattish bullies, like Arthur had been when he first met him, he'd always enjoyed his time there.

They emerged into the Great Hall, and Merlin was blown away by a wave of nostalgia, seeing the Hall filled with eager students, floating candles hovering below the enchanted ceiling, golden plates gleaming at the four House tables just like it had done at the very first Opening Feast almost a millennium ago. The usual excited chatter of everyone there filled the room.

The chatter ceased slightly, as they made their way into the Hall. They were being stared at again.

But they determinedly ignored these stares, as they made their way down the Gryffindor table and seated themselves near those other two boys Merlin vaguely remembered from the battle: Dean and Seamus.

"Are you coming here this year?" Dean asked, staring at him.

"Yeah," grinned Merlin.

Seamus frowned slightly. "Aren't you a bit old?"

"He's just been Sorted into Gryffindor," said Ginny, defensively. "Besides, with everyone repeating years we're all a bit older than we should be."

At this point, McGonagall had reached the top table, and passed the hat to the man Merlin assumed to be Professor Flitwick.

She spoke aloud to the school: "It is traditional for the Sorting Hat to sing a song before the Opening Feast and Sorting Ceremony every year. But with recent events, I wish to forego this." She looked around at them all, her face grave. "Just a few short months ago, where we are sitting now was the site of a tremendous and horrific battle for the school's very existence. Many brave men and women died to protect the school, many of them students. I would now like to take a few moments to remember those who fought and died for the freedom we now enjoy in this school, to remember the students, some not much older than yourselves, who refused to abandon the school to the Dark forces that threatened it and ended up paying the ultimate sacrifice. Please, a moment's silence."

And the hall fell silent. There wasn't a sound, except a few muffled sniffles from those who'd lost a family member. Merlin looked down at his plate, waiting for it to be over. He wasn't just remembering the people who'd died in the recent battle, but everyone he'd known and loved over the centuries, everyone he'd watched die. How many times had he sat in this hall surrounded by friends-friends who all too soon grew old and died? Memories of the first Opening Feast again came back to him; Rowena almost crying with happiness, Salazar smiling for once, Godric giving Helga her golden cup as a present … so long ago it seemed now.
He looked across at Harry, who was staring resolutely down at his plate. Merlin frowned; Harry didn't still blame himself for those deaths, did he?

The moments silence was finished, and Flitwick moved forwards and began to read the names of the new students in a squeaky voice.

"Harry," a voice came from Merlin's left. He turned to see the Gryffindor House ghost drifted down the table towards the table towards them. Merlin felt an icy brick drop into his stomach. He quickly turned his head, and pretended to be absorbed in the Sorting, hoping he wouldn't be noticed.

"Harry," he said, finally reaching them. "I'm so glad to see you back. I was worried for you this last year, and I'm delighted you have returned."

"Thanks, Nick," Harry said, smiling.

Sir Nicholas smiled back. "I must say, I am looking forward to this next year, I believe we may just-"

And then he broke off. Merlin turned to see Sir Nicholas staring at him, his mouth open and his eyes wide.

Crap! thought Merlin. Please don't give me away!

The ghosts had never revealed Merlin's secret, he wasn't sure why, but suspected it was due to an understanding; they all knew what it was like to watch the world steam ahead, leaving them behind to remain unchanged. But they'd all urged Merlin to tell them the truth at one point or another, to reveal his true identity. He never had though, not because he didn't trust them, just because he'd felt … well, he didn't know what he'd felt- just that he shouldn't.

He'd known Sir Nicholas particularly well; he'd even been a few years below him when he himself had attended Hogwarts back in the fifteenth century.

Sir Nicholas continued to gape at him, his translucent mouth opening and closing a few times, as he adjusted his shock at seeing him there.

Merlin noticed that the others were all staring at him in confusion. Damn it, Nick! Don't be too obvious for goodness sake!

"What's going on?" asked Ron, sounding suspicious.

Merlin looked at Sir Nicholas pointedly, widening his eyes slightly.

Sir Nicholas got the message and turned to watch the Sorting as 'Donnelly, Samantha' headed up to the stool to be Sorted.

"Oh, I hope she'll be in Gryffindor," he said pleasantly, trying to recover, but failing miserably.

Harry turned to stare at Merlin, a question in his eyes.

Merlin just shrugged in response, and tried to look as puzzled as the others. But somehow, he didn't think they were convinced.

The rest of the Sorting passed without much incident, as did the Feast. McGonagall's Start-of-Term announcements were mercifully short, her announcement about the Order of the Phoenix garnering wide spread whispering and staring at Harry. She introduced the two new teachers Professor Tayne, an extremely old-looking man, and Professor Connolly, a middle-aged witch. Merlin looked at them,
and gently reached out with his mind, to brush against their consciousnesses. They seemed capable enough, and Merlin hoped they’d do well.

Before long, the feast had been dismissed, and the scraping of benches rang out over the Hall. Merlin hadn’t really enjoyed the Feast as much as he usually did; he’d been far too occupied thinking about Nick and reminiscing about the Founders. It was only a further reminder of the lies he was telling the others. A reminder of how Merlin was once again deceiving the people he cared about.

They all began to make their way out of the Hall, before they were stopped.

"Miss Granger!"

McGonagall was hurrying up the space between the tables.

"Yes, professor?" Hermione asked timidly.

"No need to look so afraid Granger." McGonagall said, almost smiling. "I just thought I should give you this."

And she held out a shiny silver badge in her hand. 'HG'

For a second Merlin frowned- a badge with her initials on it? But then Hermione squeaked excitedly and blushed profusely. Merlin kicked himself mentally; not Hermione Granger, Head Girl.

"Really, professor?" Hermione asked, almost hopping with happiness.

McGonagall smiled. "There's no one who deserves it more. That is, if you think you can cope with all the extra work?"

Hermione nodded, speechless, reaching out a shaking hand to take the badge from McGonagall.

McGonagall placed in her hand. "Good. Mr MacMillan from Hufflepuff shall be your counterpart. I trust you can properly liaise with him concerning the execution of your duties?"

Hermione nodded again, her blush growing deeper.

"I must say, Miss Granger, I am extremely proud to give this to a Gryffindor student," McGonagall said. "You’re the first Gryffindor girl to hold this position since young Mr Potter's mother, and before that, it was myself. I hope you can do us proud."

Hermione nodded weakly, looking almost as if she was going to burst into tears.

Harry and Ron, who were both grinning broadly, grabbed the slightly dazed Hermione and dragged her from the Great Hall.

"Come on, Hermione," Harry said. "What kind of Head Girl will you be if you can't even make a coherent sentence?"

"Oh, I'm so happy!" she gushed, her eyes suspiciously wet. "I never thought this would happen, what with us missing last year!"

They began to climb the marble staircase, Hermione still looking slightly dazed. A hint of sadness overcame her face.

"I just wish …" she trailed away. "I just wish my mum and dad could've known about this. They’d have been so proud!"
"And they still will be," said Ron firmly, reaching forward and giving Hermione a kiss on the cheek, slightly surprising her. Despite being an official couple, they rarely showed any public displays of affection. "When all this is over, we'll all go to Australia and find them, and you'll be able to tell them everything. They're going to be so proud of you, Hermione."

Hermione blushed even deeper, if that was even possible.

They remained in companionable silence until they reached the portrait hole for the Gryffindor Common Room.

The Fat lady looked down at them all.

"Password?"

"Uh," said Harry.

Ron groaned. "Can't believe this; it's the second time tonight!"

"Yeah, you'd think we'd have learned from the first time." Merlin laughed.

The Fat Lady caught sight of him, and started slightly.

"Well, I suppose I might make an exception tonight," she said, her eyes still fixed on Merlin. "After all you did in the battle …"

She swung forward and let them in. Ron grinned and climbed up without question, but Harry looked around at Merlin, frowning.

Merlin pretended to be undeterred by this, and climbed up after Ron, acting as though this was completely natural.

First Sir Nicholas and now the Fat Lady; was everyone out to get him? He got that it must be a surprise for him to keep popping up over the centuries, but really, did they have to react like that every time?

He followed Ron up to the boy's dormitories, where an extra bed had been added for him.

He said hi to the other boys that were in there, and began getting ready for bed, trying not to notice the suspicious glances Harry kept shooting him.

He got into bed, and pulled the curtains closed around him, and closed his eyes, tired.

So, he was back. Back at the school he'd partly helped to create one thousand years ago.

Thirteen hundred years old …

He wondered how much longer his secret would last …
Merlin awoke early the next morning. The room was silent, with the first rays of sunlight beginning to stream in through the window. He lay there for a few moments, still unable to comprehend that he was actually here.

He sighed heavily, and got out of bed, staying as silent as possible to avoid waking the others. He dressed hurriedly, pulling on the school robes he never thought he'd have to wear again. He had to admit, this century's uniform was slightly more comfortable than his last one; fashion in the 1860's definitely hadn't catered to comfort.

He grabbed his bag, crossed the dormitory and made his way down to the empty common room, and out through the portrait hole, intending to go for a walk somewhere before breakfast.

"Well, aren't you even going to say hello?"

Merlin whirled around to see the Fat Lady looking severely down at him.

Merlin grinned rather sheepishly. "I thought you'd be asleep."

The Fat Lady raised an eyebrow. "Of course you did. Are you sure you weren't trying to avoid me?"

Merlin smiled at her. "And why would I do that?"

"Because I know your secret," she said with a glint in her eye. "I know you aren't just an average student."

Merlin glanced quickly around the corridor, before moving in closer and whispering to her.

"Yeah, about that. Do you mind not being so obvious? The others are getting suspicious. Just treat me like every other person."

The Fat Lady frowned at him. "You are still refusing to answer my questions then?"

Merlin nodded. "Pretty much, yeah."

She sighed. "Why must you vex me so? You know how much I love a gossip."

Merlin laughed. "I'm sorry. Perhaps one day you will understand, but for now no one can. All I ask is that you don't mention my … er … longevity to anybody."

The Fat Lady tilted her head and looked at him for a long moment. "I see that shall have to do for now. I have never revealed your secret, Mr Emrys, and I never shall. But promise me you'll tell me the whole story one day?"

Merlin smiled. "I promise. You'll have such a story to tell it'll keep you and Violet gossiping for centuries to come."

She smiled rather wryly. "I shall hold you to your word. And yes, I shall try and be less obvious in
the future. But I advise you; these lies you keep telling, they'll come back to haunt you one day."

Merlin made no answer, but walked off down the corridor in silent wondering. He made off down
the marble staircase and emerged out into the grounds, the grass still dewy in the early morning.

He walked down to the lake, and flopped on the ground beneath a large tree, remembering all the
times he had performed this same action over the centuries. He looked out over the lake, its still
waters the same as every other time he had come down here with Rowena or Helena, or when
Godric had attempted to catch the Giant Squid. Merlin wondered if it was still around.

He looked over at the opposite bank, remembering with a smile a rather memorable event that had
taken place there a thousand years ago. Godric, determined to impress Helga, with whom he was
half in love, had attempted to get close enough to touch a Hebridean Black which lay there curled
up, asleep. Of course, it had woken up and caused chaos as it realised some puny human was poking
it and it had taken Merlin's power as a Dragonlord, as poor an effect as it had on modern-day
dragons, to calm it down and convince it not to eat him. The event had been forgotten by history,
even though it had been immortalised in the school motto: 'Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus' or
'Never tickle a sleeping dragon.'

He laughed as he remembered; Godric's hair had been singed, and his beard hadn't grown back for
weeks, Helga had taken pity on him, but teased him mercilessly. Rowena had rolled her eyes and
went back to her book frustrated at Godric's stupidity, and Salazar had laughed himself silly and
made a point of bringing it up at every opportunity he could.

Merlin leaned back on the grass, and his fingers began to absentmindedly tear out tiny blades. It was
still hard to believe how long ago it had been, that they were all dead now. Sometimes their loss
pained him as much as Knight’s.

He wondered again about that dragon. It had taken three tries before it had recognised his authority-
their minds were so beastlike it was hard to get through to them. It was as if they were hibernating,
their ancient wisdom locked away deep inside, forgotten about. It made him rather sad to think about
what their mighty race had been reduced to. It made him angry when he thought about how they
were limited to reservations and used by creatures such as goblins to their own ends. Even using the
dragons in the Triwizard Tournament had made him angry. It reminded him of Kilgharrah, and how
he’d been locked up underground.

He hadn't spoken to Kilgharrah for centuries; he'd never really needed to. He was just another
ancient relic from his old life. He wondered if he should call him now and ask for his advice.

And then there was Aithusa, who'd followed Kilgharrah into the wild centuries ago. Were they
worth talking to?

And what about this Gringotts dragon? Should he at least try to control it?

It hadn't hurt anybody, and Merlin didn't really see the point in trying to control it. He didn't want to
reveal his Dragonlord heritage.

He sighed. The Fat Lady was right; his past was coming back to haunt him, worse than it ever had
before.

He lay there for an hour or so more as the sun began rising higher and higher into the sky. He sat up
eventually, and looked out over the grounds again, drinking in the memories. A new day of school
was about to begin.
"Where d'you reckon he is?" asked Ron through a mouthful of porridge.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Don't be disgusting, Ron!" Her Head Girl badge, carefully polished, sat upon her robes and glinted as she moved.

Ron swallowed, and looked annoyed. He glanced at Harry. "He was already gone when we woke up. He's off somewhere."

"Well that's obvious," said Hermione sniffing, as she cut her bacon.

Ron shook his head. "I mean he's off doing something shifty."

"And what on earth gives you that impression?" asked Hermione haughtily.

"Look, I trust him and all," said Ron, looking at the other two, "But you can't deny there's something fishy about him. He's so … mysterious. He's hiding something."

"I think we all know that," said Harry, looking down at his still full plate of breakfast. He couldn't stop thinking about last night, the way the Fat Lady and Nearly Headless Nick had stared at him. Almost as if they recognised him … he just couldn't make any sense of it.

Ron nodded. "I think we should ask him."

Hermione frowned. "Don't be ridiculous, Ron. Just because he has a few secrets is no reason for us to go sticking our noses into his business. He's done nothing to make us not trust him."

Ron looked at her shrewdly. "Why are you always defending him?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione said, her face in a scowl. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you never see anything wrong with him!"

"For your information, Ron," Hermione spat, looking furiously. "I respect him. He's my friend. And I don't we should go around asking him about things he obviously feels is too private to-"

"Hey."

Hermione stopped speaking immediately, her mouth open as Martin sat down beside them. He looked around at them and smiled pleasantly. "I went for a walk around the lake this morning. Thought I'd explore the place a little. Hogwarts is amazing."

Hermione turned to face Ron with a smug smile on her face. "Yes, it is isn't it? We can show you around the castle later if you like, you never really got to see it at its best during the battle."

Martin smiled again. "I'd love that."

But there was something in his smile that made Harry wary. It was the exact same smile Dumbledore had used when pretending to be ignorant about something, like when he'd confronted Fudge about the DA, and how he'd acted when cornered on the Astronomy Tower.

Harry tried to change the subject and looked up at the staff table. "D'you reckon these new teachers will be any good?"

Hermione peered up at the table. "They look alright, I suppose."
Harry looked closely. The man McGonagall had introduced as her replacement for Transfiguration was a tiny old man, bent double with age. But there was something in his eyes that marked him as possessing a fierce intelligence. The new Defence against the Dark Arts teacher was a middle-aged woman, looking stern and severe, and rather 'McConagall-y'. She was probably not a person to mess with.

Ron frowned. "They look pretty serious, don't they?"

"Well they have to be, Ron," said Hermione matter-of-factly. "Look at the situation the world's in at the moment. It'll probably be a good thing if they're strict; it means we can really focus on our work."

Harry nodded. He agreed with her. If he had to be back here at school he wanted to make sure he was doing everything he could, and he was determined to work harder this year than he ever had before.

"Hey, Harry," Dean said, slipping into the seat next to Harry, along with Neville and Seamus. "So, when does the DA start back?"

"It'll have to be next week; McGonagall wants me to give her a lesson plan before we get started," replied Harry.

Dean nodded. "Making sure you aren't about to start teaching us Unforgiveable?" he asked with a smirk.

Harry laughed, but he didn't really feel like it. He was worried about taking over the DA again. There would probably be a lot more people now, and Harry doubted whether he'd be any good at teaching them all.

"You know," said Seamus. "Neville, Ginny and Luna did a pretty good job leading it last year when you lot were away … doing whatever it was you were doing."

Hermione perked up. "That's an idea," she said, a familiar expression of extreme thinking on her face. "There are seven of us now, maybe Harry could serve as the general teacher, and then the students could be split up according to year and each of us can supervise."

Ron frowned. "Seven?"

"Yes, seven, Ron, can't you count?" Hermione snapped at him.

Ron looked confused for another moment, then comprehension dawned and he looked at Martin, who in turn started.

"Me?" he asked, looking worried. "What help could I be?"

"You know as much defensive magic as we do, probably more," Hermione said. "You'd be perfect at it."

Martin looked panicked. "I'm not really good in front of loads of people," he confessed. "Besides, they won't know me."

"Nonsense," said Hermione. "All you'd be doing is supervising one year group, seventh year probably since you're more advanced than we are. And we all saw you at the battle. They'll trust you."

Martin still looked doubtful, but ceased in his objections. Harry was glad he was considering it; he
would definitely appreciate some help with the DA.

"Hello, you lot!" a familiar voice came from behind them. Harry turned to see Hagrid beaming down at them.

"Hagrid!" yelled Ron. "How are you?"

"I'm great, Ron, than's for askin'," he said. "Jus' came by teh give yeh all yer timetables. I'm Head of Gryffindor now, yeh know."

"We heard," grinned Harry. "That's brilliant, Hagrid."

Hagrid puffed out his chest, looking proud, while his eyes glistened. "Never thou' this would happen ter me. Firs' a teacher, now the Head o' House. Me dad would be so proud."

He gave them all their timetables and smiled down at them.

"I'm so glad yeh decided ter come back. Wha' abou' yeh all coming down teh me hut this evenin' teh catch up?"

"We'd love to, Hagrid," smiled Hermione.

Hagrid beamed at her. "I've missed you lot, yeh know." He turned to look at Martin, who had until now tried to look inconspicuous. "Yeh'd be welcome too. I saw wha' yeh did in the battle; any friend o' Harry's is a friend o' mine."

"Thanks," grinned Martin. "I'd love to. I've heard so much about you."

Hagrid nodded rather modestly, though still looking pleased with himself, and moved on down the table, distributing the timetables.

Ron seized his, and as usual, groaned. "Double potions, double Defence and double Transfiguration. Not a single free period today!"

"You need to be working hard, Ron," chided Hermione, buttering some toast. "It isn't all about free periods you know."

Ron scowled.

At that moment, Ernie MacMillan from Hufflepuff came over, and congratulated Hermione profusely on her appointment as Head Girl, and began to make arrangements for their duties. Ron rolled his eyes and began stuffing his face again.

"And I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you yet!" Ernie said, in his usual well-meaning yet pompous manner, looking over at Martin. "I saw you in the battle you know, you were very good. I'm Ernie MacMillan." He offered a pudgy hand, which Martin shook.

"Martin Emrys," he replied with a smile. Ernie's eyes widened.

"Emrys? As in the Druids and all of that? That's extremely interesting. I've always been fascinated with it all. The Old Magic and everything. I thought the Old Druidic families didn't like their children attending Hogwarts?"

Martin smiled fixedly. "Yes. I'm descended from them. I don't know much of the Old Magic, and I never had a formal education, so here I am."
"Well," nodded Ernie. "I'm sure you'll make a fine addition to Hogwarts. Pity you weren't in Hufflepuff."

Martin laughed, some hidden amusement behind his eyes. "Well, you can't argue with the Sorting Hat."

Ernie laughed as well, and went back to his own table. Harry looked closely at Martin. He himself had argued with the Sorting Hat, and he began to wonder whether Martin had as well. Luna had been sure he'd be Sorted into Hufflepuff, and Luna was seldom wrong about these things. Maybe he was supposed to be in Hufflepuff. But why then had he chosen to be in Gryffindor?

The rest of breakfast passed without further incident and they all soon headed off to Potions down in the dungeons. They queued up outside the door and Harry couldn't help feeling a bit strange as he noticed Malfoy wasn't here. He was probably back at Grimmauld Place; Kingsley had thought it too dangerous for him come back to school. He and his family had been deep within Voldemort's inner circle before turning against him and he was now in danger from both vengeful Death Eaters and the families of murdered victims alike.

Slughorn soon bounced into view, his enthusiasm in no way marred by the recent battle. "Well, come on then! In you go! We have potions to brew!"

They made their way back inside the familiar dungeons and settled in their normal seats, facing the blackboard. Martin sat next to Harry, and looked around the dungeon in interest.

Slughorn began the register. He paused when he got to Martin's name.

"Martin Emrys? Ah, yes, the new student. Professor McGonagall told me about you. Where are you?"

Martin raised his hand, and Harry was surprised to see an almost tentative expression on his face.

Slughorn frowned as he looked at him, and peered closer.

"Do I know you, boy? You seem awfully familiar."

Martin's face went blank. "I don't think so, sir."

"Are you sure?" Slughorn pressed. "I could swear I've seen your face before."

Everyone in the room was now staring at him, but Martin didn't even blink.

"Perhaps you knew my father, sir? He worked for some time in the apothecary in Diagon Alley?"

Slughorn frowned as he thought for a moment. Then he clapped his hands together in realisation.

"Oh yes! Matthew! Matthew Emrys! I remember now; he worked there during the fifties didn't he? You look very like him! He was an excellent potion maker, here's hoping you can live up to his brilliance."

He beamed, and then continued on with the register, exclaiming when he got to Harry's name, and congratulating him on his recent endeavours. But Harry was watching Hermione, who in turn was staring at Martin with an expression of curiosity.

It wasn't until they began brewing their potion that she spoke.

"I thought you said your father's name was Balinor?" she asked Martin.
Harry and Ron turned to look at him. He looked unfazed.

"It was. It was his birth name, his Druidic name. But in day-to-day life he often went by Matthew instead." He said rather calmly, grinding up some scarab beetles.

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Do you have one of these Druidic names?"

Martin didn't look at him. "Of course, all of us have them."

Ron stared at him for a few moments, before bursting out in a frustrated whisper. "Well? What is it?"

Martin hesitated for a moment, and stopped his work, biting his lip. "Dragoon." He said, a small smile on his lips.

Ron stared. "I can see why you changed it."

They went back to their potions, but Harry continued to watch Martin, who worked with a smile on his face, as though recalling some old memory.

Harry tried to concentrate on his potion, reminding himself that he was here to learn as much as he could to defeat Voldemort, although admittedly, he could see no possible use for a solution to cure warts.

But still, he couldn't help but be reminded of the fact that with every passing day that he knew Martin Emrys, there was just another mystery to add to the pile.

Merlin stood leaning against the wall outside the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, contemplating the last couple of hours.

He'd forgotten that Slughorn taught at Hogwarts. He'd known him several years ago, Slughorn often coming into the apothecary for his ingredients. They'd been fairly friendly, but not overly so. Merlin didn't often go out and work; he didn't need to after all. But he sometimes got bored and wished to be more involved in the world, and when he couldn't go to Hogwarts, he worked.

He was just grateful he'd changed his name since then. He hadn't thought Slughorn would have had such a long memory. He'd often lamented in his visits to the shop that 'Matthew' had never went to Hogwarts. Merlin was secretly grateful; he'd have hated to be forced into his 'Slug Club'.

He'd thought his lie was rather good, considering how little time he'd had to think of it but had kicked himself when he remembered he'd once told Hermione his father's name. He hoped his subsequent lie had been enough to dispel her suspicions.

He sighed to himself; lies, lies, lies …

The stern-faced new Defence teacher strolled up towards them, and let them into the classroom. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Martin found seats together near the back.

As he got out his books and quill Martin watched the woman as she set about organising her desk. She seemed very professional, likely an ex-Auror.

Martin brought out his wand and laid it on the desk in front of him, the first time he'd had to use it all day. That morning after his sojourn at the lake he'd patrolled the school boundaries as McGonagall had asked him to, and examined the wards placed there.
They seemed very well done; the Aurors and Ministry people had done a good job when they restored the place. He'd added a few of his own, using Old Magic; certain ones that might strengthen them. The Old Magic wards created by the Founders had long since faded with no one to renew them over the years. He'd also had to alter a few; these wards were very little use against Old Magic, and Merlin feared Voldemort might be able to do something to them with this new-found power of his. He added several more layers, including one that would prevent Voldemort from Transporting himself into the school like the way he'd removed himself during the battle; Anti-Apparition Jinxes were no good against that kind of magic. Of course, Merlin had created a slight loophole to enable that he himself would be able to Transport in and out.

The new teacher looked around at them all as they began to settle down. She eyed them beadily.

"Now, my name is Professor Connelly. I will tolerate no disobedience or sloppiness in this class. You are here to work, and to work hard. Your NEWTS are only a few months away and I expect you all to pass with flying colours. I will settle for nothing less. I do not tolerate laziness, and I do not tolerate failure."

Well, thought Merlin. *That's direct.*

She continued staring at them, almost scowling.

"I appreciate that in the present world climate you shall all be working extra hard, and wish to learn to defend yourselves. However, there is more to Defence than just learning a bunch of spells and throwing them at the enemy. There will be training involved, learning how to conceal yourselves, how to track the enemy, and above all, how to understand them. You cannot be expected to defeat the enemy until you can understand what you're up against. You will be studying many different forms of magic, old and modern, in an attempt to understand fully the types of magic you will be facing. This is completely vital. If there is a one of you who doesn't think you can cope with this I suggest you leave now, because I will not treat those who do not try with any sort of sympathy. I warn you now."

The class was in complete silence, no one dared to breathe. Merlin glanced at Harry, seeing him sitting straight backed and staring at Connelly with a look of fierce concentration. He was determined to succeed. He looked around, seeing similar looks on everyone's faces. They looked nervous, Neville in particular, but no one looked like they wanted to leave.

"Now," Connelly said, after waiting a few moments. "I want you to take out your books and read the first five chapters of *Advanced Defensive Magic*. You will read these at least three times, memorise them and make sure you know them inside and out. If you don't accomplish this by the end of this double period it shall be homework. I shall be testing you all tomorrow. The latter half of this week will be spent in practical sessions to see how much you have attained from the reading. I hope to impress upon you all the vital nature of understanding the magic that you're about to use before you hastily use it in self-defence. Understanding the theory will go a long way to improving your spell work, and although you will not learn the spells perfectly until you practise them, the theory should be of huge benefit. Now, to your reading."

She settled herself at her desk, and began looking through some papers. The class moved as one and began to read, staring at the pages in concentration. Some of them looked slightly disappointed that they weren't doing any practical work, but they focused all the same. Merlin had to admit, her teaching style was rather severe, but probably really effective. After all, back in Camelot he'd often read about spells for weeks in his tiny little room in Gaius' chambers, going over them again and again to make sure he fully understood them before attempting them. It was a sound method; it left little room for error.
He pulled his own book towards him, and began to read, finding himself bored within minutes. He'd read this before, it was the standard seventh year textbook back when he was last at Hogwarts in the 1860s. It was old, but still relevant. Nevertheless, Merlin found his eyes drooping.

"Mr Emrys?" a stern voice came from the front of the class.

Merlin was jerked back awake, to see Professor Connelly glaring at him.

"Are you incapable of getting a good night's rest, or are you simply bored of the chapter?" she asked in a dangerously calm voice.

"Um, neither, professor," Merlin said, trying to look alert. *I just have a natural incapacity for tolerating reading the same book for the hundredth time in as many years.*

Connelly raised an eyebrow. "Then I would suggest to you that almost falling asleep in class on your first day at Hogwarts isn't a smart move."

"Yes, professor," said Merlin, quietly. He wasn't a child! That was always the frustrating thing about coming to Hogwarts; having to pretend to be a simple student and to respect his 'elders', all of whom were centuries younger than him.

She crossed her arms. "Do you honestly expect to finish these chapters today if you continue this way?"

"I've already read the chapters, professor," Merlin said, rather recklessly; he really shouldn't be trying to show off. He should keep his head down.

"Is that so?" Professor Connelly said, eyeing him. "And I suppose you've read the entire book?"

"Yes, professor," Merlin said, trying not to sound rude. "I have."

"And why is that?"

*Because I bought the book from Flourish and Blotts the day it was published one hundred and thirty years ago.*

"I take my work very seriously, professor."

Professor Connelly looked at him shrewdly for several moments. Merlin tried not to notice that everyone in the classroom was now staring at him.

"Really, Mr Emrys?" she asked, standing up and walking to the centre of the classroom to get a better look at him. "Then I'm sure you won't be stumped by these?"

She waved her wand and summoned a stack of sheets into her hand. "This is the test I was planning to give the class tomorrow about these chapters. I'm sure it will pose no difficulty to you."

Merlin cursed his own stupidity. Why did he have to keep drawing attention to himself?

The test landed on his desk with a *thump* as Connelly wavered her wand in his direction. "You have until the end of this lesson, Mr Emrys." She said, almost threateningly.

Merlin sighed, and looked at the questions in front of him. They were fairly simple, and he was sure he would be able to answer them all perfectly. But should he?

He glanced around the room, to see everyone still shooting him inquisitive looks. Connelly didn't
take her eyes off her own work. Should he do the test to his own ability? It might draw him even more attention and suspicion. Then again, he wanted to see the look on Connelly's face when he answered them perfectly.

He picked up his quill and wrote furiously, answering each and every question to its fullest extent, even adding in bits of his own. The lesson wore on, and Merlin still wrote, determined to finish.

The bell went for lunch, and the students began to pack up. Merlin followed suit, having just completed the test.

"Wait a moment, if you please," Connelly called from the front of the classroom. She summoned Merlin's answer sheet to her.

The class sat and watched as she marked the test, holding its breath. Merlin noted in glee that Connelly's eyebrows rose every few lines or so as she read what he had written.

Finally, she finished. She took off her glasses and looked at Merlin evenly. The entire class followed her eye line.

"Quite correct, Mr Emrys." She said, rather warily. "Your answers are perfect and went far beyond the expectations of the questions."

Merlin tried not to let a smile creep through. If only Arthur could see him now; now it was Merlin who had the ego.

She watched him carefully. "It seems you will be quite the adept student." She still looked at him cautiously, as though trying to read his mind.

Merlin cursed himself silently. Why did he have to show off; now he was just going to raise suspicions!

She pursed her lips. "Ten points to Gryffindor for your flawless answers, Mr Emrys." She stood up, and the rest of the class began to leave. "Oh, and five points shall also be taken from Gryffindor. I told you, Mr Emrys, I do not tolerate laziness in my class. Although your answers were perfect, you were attempting to sleep during a lesson."

Merlin grimaced, and picked up his bag and left the classroom with the others, ignoring Connelly's curious expression.

They made their way to the Great Hall for lunch. Ron rounded on him.

"Okay, how the hell did you do that?"

Merlin shrugged. "I read the book back at Grimmauld Place. It's nothing special."

Ron goggled at him. "You actually impressed her, Martin. She couldn't believe what she was reading!"

Merlin shook his head nonchalantly. "She just didn't expect me to be able to answer them because I doubt she actually believed me when I said I'd read it. It wasn't particularly difficult. Hermione read the book back at Headquarters as well!"

Hermione shook her head. "I was looking over your shoulder at the questions. There's no way I could have answered them the way you did."
Merlin tried to laugh it off, again cursing his own ego. "You underestimate yourself, Hermione. I wonder what's for lunch?"

He went ahead and found a space at the Gryffindor table. The others soon sat beside him, still eyeing him suspiciously. Merlin groaned inwardly; he'd never been subtle when it came to trying to change the subject. Arthur had often pulled him up on that.

But they asked him no more questions during lunch, and Merlin tried to concentrate on his food, but this was made rather difficult by the fact Sir Nicholas was sitting a few spaces down from him and was staring at him openly.

Merlin felt himself growing hot as he realised other students, mainly from his last class were also staring at him. Why was he always such an idiot? He was supposed to be keeping a low profile!

Perhaps coming here had been a huge mistake; there's no way he could fit in here. There was more at stake now than there had ever been before.

Transfiguration passed rather quietly. The ancient old man (though still young when compared to Merlin) introduced himself as Professor Tayne and lectured them in a wheezy voice about advanced Transfiguration and their NEWTS. Though he looked frail, he sounded determined and not someone to take lightly. There was no messing about with him.

Merlin was sure to keep his head down this time, and didn't try and show off, instead he reined back his magic. He cast the spell to Transfigure the item in front of him several times, only performing it correctly once he noticed both Hermione and Ernie had done so as well. He was supposed to be here to be a student, someone with an unfulfilled magical education- he shouldn't be good at everything.

Before long, Transfiguration and dinner had gone past, and the four of them were heading down to Hagrid's hut on the edge of the grounds. Merlin looked at it in interest- it hadn't been here the last time he'd been at Hogwarts. He liked it; it had a homely feel to it, and it reminded him pleasantly of the houses in Ealdor.

A great barking greeted them as they approached the door and Merlin flinched; he'd never gotten along with dogs much, the hunting dogs in Camelot had particularly not liked him very much.

But as it turned out 'Fang', the most inappropriately named dog ever, was a giant softy, and before long they were inside Hagrid's small house, pretending to enjoy his tea and rock cakes.

"Now, young, Mr Emrys," Hagrid said, settling back in a gargantuan armchair. "I don' know much abou' you!"

"No one does," mumbled Ron.

Hagrid ignored him. "Tell me a bit more, won' yeh?"

Merlin felt his heart beginning to beat a bit faster, like every time he had to lie. "Um, what do you want to know?"

"What abou' yer parents?" Hagrid asked. "Yeh didn' say much abou' them before. Would I have known them?"

Merlin tried to stay calm as he thought of a story. Really, after centuries of practise he should be better at this by now. "Not much to say really. They didn't really associate with other people in the magical community, Druids prefer to stay together, you see. They don't use wands, so they don't really get involved much in the rest of the world."
"Is that right'?' asked Hagrid. "Me ol' dad used ter tell me stories abou' the Druids an' tha'. Never though' I'd get ter meet one."

Merlin smiled rather feebly. "Well, here I am."

Hagrid continued to probe him, asking him more questions about the Old Religion, and Merlin tried to answer as succinctly as he could without giving anything away, noticing that Harry, Ron and Hermione were watching closely.

Hagrid nodded. "Yeh've quite a story teh tell." He broke off looking almost nervous. "I uh, well, Kingsley told me yer Patronus is a dragon."

"Um, yeah, it is," Merlin said surprised. He only rarely used his Patronus; he knew it took a rare form and would raise questions. He wasn't aware however that Kingsley knew about it.

Hagrid looked awkward again. "Well, I was wonderin', seeing as how you know abou' Old stuff and that', I though' mibbe yeh'd know about' another old legend."

Merlin nodded. "Go on," he said, suspicious.

"Well, yeh see, I'd always heard of these legends, ever since I was a little boy, an' I always wondered if they were true." He looked at Merlin, biting his lip. "Yeh see, I'd heard of these things called … well, Dragonlords."

Merlin went rigid as Hagrid said these words. How on earth could he know? He was sure all the knowledge about that branch of magic had completely died out. He after all, was the last of that line, and even in the days of Camelot, few people had known about them. Then again, he really shouldn't be surprised. It seemed everything he thought was lost was turning up again these days.

Merlin tried to look casual. "Yeah, I've heard of them. They did exist at one point, but that last one died centuries ago."

Hagrid's eyes lit up. "They actually existed! Gallopin' gorgons! I'd always hoped they would be!"

"Um, what's a Dragonlord?" asked Ron.

You're sitting in a room with one, Merlin thought, wryly.

"Oh, they were 'mazin'," said Hagrid, his eyes glistening. "It's said they could control the dragons, not jus' tame them, but really control them. They were supposed to be kin teh the dragons; a dragon would always do what a Dragonlord said. They were really close, so they were."

Merlin tried not to snort as he thought of Kilgharrah. Yeah, really close.

Hermione turned to Merlin with a frown. "I've never even heard of them! Are you sure they were real?"

Merlin tried not to smile. Yes, I'm pretty sure.

"Yeah, they were real. It was a gift passed on from father to son. It was an innate ability; they could command the dragons, even from hundreds of miles away."

Harry looked confused. "What- they actually listened to these blokes?"

Most of the time, when they weren't so occupied making up ridiculous riddles.
Merlin nodded in answer; keep it simple.

"I don' suppose anyone could be a Dragonlord?" Hagrid said, unable to keep the hope out of his voice.

Merlin shook his head. "It was hereditary. The last Dragonlord died childless, so the gift died out with him."

Hagrid nodded, and tried not to look disappointed. Merlin refrained from rolling his eyes. He remembered that Hagrid had once kept a dragon in his hut, when Merlin had checked up on a younger Harry at Hogwarts, though he still had no idea why.

Ron stretched out in his seat. "Pity they're not around now. Charlie could really use some help catching that Gringotts dragon."

"It wouldn't have been any use," said Merlin. "The dragons the Dragonlords commanded were completely different. The ability may not have worked on them." He again wondered to himself if he should try with this dragon, it wouldn't do any harm would it?

"Different?" Harry frowned. "How?"

"Like the dragon that's Martin's Patronus," said Hermione knowledgeably. "They were much bigger, much more magically powerful and very intelligent. It's even said that they could talk."


Merlin smirked to himself; hopefully he'd have the chance to introduce Ron to Kilgharrah one day.

"It doesn' seem like it'll matter anyways," said Hagrid. "Tha' Gringotts dragon has done nothing to anybody. Abou' time it had some freedom."

"Yes, but Hagrid, what if it eats someone?" said Hermione reasonably.

Hagrid waved this away. "It's been loose fer four months now, if it was goin' to hurt anyone it would've already."

The conversation turned to other matters, and Merlin fell into a silent contemplation. Why hadn't this dragon hurt anybody? It wasn't behaving like a normal dragon at all. What if…

No, that was ridiculous. There were no other Old dragons, and the two that were remaining had flown overseas centuries ago.

Hadn't they?
Dueling Chamber

The next few days at the castle passed by rather quickly. Merlin kept to his new promise of keeping his head down in class and pretending to be an average student, not that he was succeeding. Even when he deliberately tried to sabotage his work he always managed to betray his true power. Professor Flitwick had squeaked in excitement at seeing his perfect Disillusionment Charm (or rather, not seeing it), Professor Connelly watched him like a hawk, grudgingly impressed with what she saw, trying to deliberately catch him out and always failing, Professor Tayne pronounced him to be a natural at Transfiguration and Professor Slughorn cried out in delight at Merlin's potions, even when he'd deliberately added wrong ingredients.

It wasn't going well. He sat in the library at a desk with Harry and Ron, finishing off some homework on Friday night, deliberately answering questions wrong. He hated pretending to be less than he was; he'd had enough of that in Camelot, but it was just something he'd had to get used to over the centuries.

He finished his Defence Against the Dark Arts essay with a flourish and laid down his quill, hoping the mistakes he'd written were at least plausible. Connelly's eyebrows had almost disappeared into her hair when she'd seen Merlin in their practical session earlier. He hadn't intended to use that powerful of a spell, but he'd been attacked unawares, it had been instinct!

"Done," said Ron next to him, pushing his essay back with a grin. "That should keep her happy for a while. You done yet?"

Harry was still writing furiously. "I finished it this morning." He said distractedly.

Ron frowned. "Then what are you writing?"

"The lesson plan for the DA," Harry answered his nose almost to the parchment. "And … I'm finished!"

He sat back with a sigh, his fingers splattered with ink. Ron grabbed the parchment and read it over.

"Starting a bit small, aren't you?"

Harry shrugged. "There'll be new people there this time. And besides, it can't hurt people to go over the basics."

Ron pushed it back. "You've got a thing for expelliarmus mate."

Harry grinned, and said nothing.

Ron looked around. "Hey, where's-" THUMP! A great dusty book had just been deposited in front of him, causing him to give great hacking coughs.

"Merlin's pants, Hermione! You gave me a heart attack!"

"Oh don't exaggerate, Ron," said Hermione huffily, slipping into a seat beside him, even as Merlin recovered from the 'Merlin's pants' exclamation. That one had always seriously creeped him out.

"What exactly is this, Hermione?" Harry asked tentatively, looking at the size of the book.

"Research," said Hermione promptly.
Ron rolled his eyes. "We've been researching that every night this week! There's nothing in these books about Old Magic, Hermione!"

"Oh shush, Ron," said Hermione, pulling the book towards her. "There are thousands of books at Hogwarts. We'll find something eventually."

Ron grumbled, but picked up a rather old book of his own. "Fine. But don't blame me when we find nothing. I thought you had some Head Girl stuff to do?"

"I've already sorted it out," said Hermione, already absorbed in the book.

"Of course you have," muttered Ron. "The day Hermione Granger isn't organised is the day my mum gets a tattoo."

Harry chuckled, and pulled a book of his own forwards. "It's not so bad, Ron. Some of this stuff is interesting."

Ron rolled his eyes again. "Yeah, but not useful. Remember all those times we've been stuck in this library searching for something? Nicholas Flamel, a way to breathe underwater, Horcruxes … when have we ever found what we're looking for?" He looked up to see Merlin hadn't taken a book of his own. "You not helping then? I thought you were able to translate the older stuff?"

"I am," said Merlin, smiling pleasantly. "But I've got my appointment with Professor McGonagall. Remember? I'm supposed to offer a weekly report on the school's security."

"Oh," said Ron. "I'd forgotten. Have you been doing those patrols and stuff then? When have you had the time?"

"Not everyone's as badly organised as you, Ron," said Hermione, turning a page. "You're supposed to be doing patrols as well, you know. You are a Prefect."

"Oh come on, Hermione! I've barely got enough time in the day to eat and sleep as it is!"

Merlin stood up and began packing his bag, recognising the tell-tale signs of one of Ron and Hermione's infamous fights.

"Hey, could you give this to McGonagall for me?" Harry gave Merlin his lesson plan.

"Sure," said Merlin, pocketing it and exiting the library on his way to McGonagall's office.

He pulled it out as he walked and glanced over it, approving. This really was Harry's strong point; he was excellent at Defence.

He reached the stone gargoyle, gave the password and was soon knocking on McGonagall's door.

"Come in."

Merlin entered, and found McGonagall sitting at her desk surrounded by a stack of papers.

"You may sit down, Mr Emrys, I shall be with you shortly," she said without looking up.

Merlin took a seat, feeling slightly intimidated, which was ridiculous; he'd faced many magical dangers and threats, yet meeting with a Headmistress made him nervous?

He glanced around the office, his eyes resting on the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, fast asleep.
He felt a small twinge of sadness. He had been a great man. Merlin wished he'd told him his secret, he had a feeling Dumbledore would have told no one, and it would have been nice to talk to someone about it.

He saw the images of the Founders behind McGonagall's desk as well, the oldest ones in the room. He looked at their faces sadly. He'd talked to them occasionally over the years, and they'd spied on private meetings between Harry and Dumbledore for him before, but it wasn't the same as talking to them in person. They were only an imitation.

He found his eyes drifting to Rowena's in particular, as always happened when he came here. As good a portrait as it was, it had just never captured the intelligence of her eyes. And equally, the portrait of Godric just didn't have his booming laugh, Salazar's cunning look or Helga's warm smile. Yes, imitations indeed.

The ceasing of the scratching of a quill alerted him to McGonagall's attentions.

He turned to face her. She gave him a sort of grim smile.

"Well, Mr Emrys, how are you settling in?"

"Fine," Merlin responded automatically.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "More than fine from what I've heard."

Merlin winced; of course the teachers would have told her of his 'aptitude'.

She regarded him shrewdly. "I am going to ask you a question, Mr Emrys, and I would like an honest answer."

Merlin nodded, worried.

She fixed him with a hard stare. "Do you really need to be here?"

Merlin opened his mouth to reply, and found himself almost lost for words. What was the point in lying?

"No, I don't," he answered her. "There is nothing that Hogwarts can teach me, academically at least."

McGonagall nodded. "I suspected as much. The reports I've been receiving have been astounding to say the least. It appears your power far surpasses that of any of your teachers."

Merlin looked at his feet, trying to be modest.

"I would like to know then why you have come to Hogwarts, if not to learn." McGonagall asked frankly.

Merlin looked at her. "Harry came back, and I want to make sure he's alright."

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "You're protecting him?"

Merlin nodded. "Yes. And the school to a greater extent. I can do good here, I know I can. I feel this is the best use of my talents."

McGonagall nodded. "Don't you think they would be better used in the Order of the Phoenix?"
Merlin shook his head. "No, I need to be here. This is what I'm supposed to do. There's nothing I can
learn here, but there's so much for me to do. I tried not to make it too obvious, but I'm not very good
at hiding my abilities." *Ironically.*

"That, is obvious, Mr Emrys," McGonagall said sternly. "Even when you make mistakes you
manage to let your true power shine through."

Merlin said nothing.

McGonagall sighed. "I suppose this is all beside the point isn't it? You weren't really here for an
education anyway. You're here to help protect the school. Have you been doing the patrols I asked
you to?"

Merlin nodded, and told her in detail about his observations and the way he managed to alter the
school's wards to prevent Voldemort Transporting in.

McGonagall nodded curtly, only looking slightly surprised at Merlin's ability to perform such
powerful magic.

"Very well, continue with the good work, Mr Emrys. Now, what about Mr Potter, has he completed
his lesson plan for the DA yet?"

Merlin nodded, and handed her the sheet of paper. She read it over quickly, and nodded. "That
seems satisfactory. Please inform Mr Potter that he shall be running two sessions a week, on a
Tuesday and a Thursday at seven o'clock; I will send out a general notice. Students will have to
decide which one to attend, it'll have to fit around their homework and Quidditch practises. Now, if
that's all, I suggest you get back to your common room."

Merlin nodded and rose to leave. As he did, he noticed that Dumbledore's portrait was awake, and
staring at him intently, a small smile on his face as his eyes twinkled behind his glasses.

He didn't say anything however, and Merlin left the office feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

Harry woke early the next morning, and got dressed quickly, intending to go for a walk somewhere.
He'd been working extremely hard all week, reading, researching, writing essays, he felt he deserved
a break- it was the most he'd ever worked at Hogwarts, even during his O.W.L.S.

And to add to all of this he was still trying to make sense of Martin, who was being as mysterious as
ever. Every day just led to more and more questions. Harry glanced over at Martin's bed, surprised to
see Martin sleeping in it; he was almost always up before everyone else.

Harry watched him a minute, wondering what secrets he could be hiding. A grunt from Ron in the
next bed roused him, and he headed out of the dormitory, down to the common room and out
through the portrait hole. On a day like this he'd normally head out on his broom, but he'd lost his
Firebolt the night he'd left the Dursley's and the new one he'd ordered from Quality Quidditch
Supplies hadn't arrived yet. He felt kind of guilty spending so much money on a broomstick that he
didn't really need, but he'd done it anyway. Besides, it was fast, and might be useful one day eluding
Death Eaters.

Harry sighed. Was all of his life going to be spent trying to calculate and examine every move he
made like this? He was turning into Mad-Eye Moody.
He soon found himself out in the grounds wandering around the lake, not really thinking about anything. He was too exhausted mentally to do so.

As the sun rose higher in the sky he went back into the castle and headed into breakfast, where he found the others and Ginny sitting there. He blushed slightly at the sight of her, and looked away hurriedly.

Ron passed him some toast as he sat down. "Thought you'd never get here. Where were you anyway?"

"Just walking," Harry shrugged.

He saw Martin watching him carefully out of the corner of his eye but ignored him.

"Well, what'll we do before the Order meeting tonight?"

"I thought we might spend some more time in-"

"I swear, Hermione, if you finish that sentence with the words 'the library' I'll go completely barmy," threatened Ron, waving his ketchup covered knife at her. "We've been working our arses off all week; we deserve a bit of a break."

"What, and you think Voldemort will be taking Saturday off?" sniffed Hermione disapprovingly.

"What are you all doing in the library?" Ginny asked. "Do you really have that much homework?"

Harry and the others exchanged glances, wondering if they should say anything. Their own research into Old Magic wasn't exactly breaking any rules, but neither did they want it to be common knowledge. Didn't Ginny deserve the truth?

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but found himself cut across by a new arrival.

"Hiya Harry," a female voice gushed from behind him.

Harry looked around to see Romilda Vane standing there confidently with her hands on her hips, smiling sweetly down at him.

"Um, hi?" said Harry.

Ginny raised her eyebrows, muttered something unintelligible and left, moving to sit beside Luna at the Ravenclaw table. Romilda took this as an open invitation, and slipped into Ginny's vacated seat.

She gazed adoringly at Harry. "Hiya," she said again, flashing him a dazzling smile. "How are you?"

"Um, fine?"

"Good," she smiled. "I was at the battle, you know, Harry. I was fighting as well. You were very brave."

"Um, thanks?" said Harry, wishing she was anywhere but sitting beside him.

She swished her hair behind her ear and leaned closer. "I hear you're part of the Order of the Phoenix now," she said dropping her voice.

Harry looked around desperately at Ron, to see him smirking.
"Uh …"

"Of course, you don't need to say anything," she pressed. "I read about it in the papers. But of course, I understand, it is a top-secret organisation."

"Yeah, and top-secret organisations usually prefer to stay top-secret," said Martin from across the table, looking at her pointedly.

She turned her gaze on him, and looked him up and down, a small smile forming on her face.

"Of course" she trilled, still staring at him. "I expect you're a part of it as well; I saw the magic you used in the battle. Very interesting."

She fluttered her eyelashes at him, causing Hermione to look at her in revolt, while Martin looked rather uncomfortable.

"Well, um …"

She smiled again, and stood up, flicking her long hair behind her. "I'll see you around."

She left, leaving Harry and Martin rather dumbfounded.

"Ha!" laughed Ron. "Now she'll be after you, mate! I warn you, the last time she tried to get Harry I almost ended up dead!"

Martin's eyes widened and he blushed slightly. "Oh, um … well I'd never …"

Ron laughed again. "Don't worry. I'm sure you could handle her. But why would you want to? Don't fancy having a girlfriend?"

Martin's blush deepened. "I think … I think I'm a bit too old for these girls."

"Nonsense," said Hermione. "There can't be that much of an age gap."

Martin laughed slightly at her words, looking amused, and fixed his eyes on the Daily Prophet that had just arrived. His eyebrows rose.

"Hey, Ron, your brother's in the paper."

"Where?" Ron demanded, knocking over a flask of pumpkin juice in his rush to grab it.

He pulled it towards himself, and Harry leaned over to read it with him.

**Gringotts dragon still on the loose**

Efforts have now been quadrupled in attempts to find the elusive Gringotts dragon, dubbed 'Puff' by the public, now in its fourth month on the run. The dragon escaped from Gringotts Bank at the end of April when Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger broke in to steal an item from a top-security vault. They then released the dragon and used it as a method of escape, one Diagon Alley resident calling it 'the freakiest thing I ever saw'. Potter, Weasley and Granger, whose reasons for breaking-in are as of yet unknown, but have been sanctioned and pardoned by Minister Shacklebolt despite Goblin protests, then left the security dragon by the side of a lake as they rushed off to join the Battle of Hogwarts.

Charlie Weasley, the elder brother of Ronald, and an expert in dragons spoke with us yesterday:
Obviously we're doing all we can to try and find this dragon. The entire country is being scoured in an attempt to find it. So far it hasn't been sighted at all or any trace of it been found. Although it is good news it hasn't attacked anybody, we have to consider the option that it may be biding its time. Dragons can last several months without feeding if required, thought they are more likely to be violent when in this state.'

When asked if he knew the reason for his younger brother's controversial break-in to the prestigious bank Mr Weasley reacted with annoyance.

"Yes, I do. And you're about as likely to get the answer out of me as you are to get a werewolf to play

fetch.'

Mr Weasley refused to give any more information on the Gringotts break-in itself but issued advice
to the public on what to do if the dragon is sighted (see page 4).

The Gringotts dragon is causing a stir internationally as experts remain baffled on how it's managed
to elude capture for so long.

'Dragons aren't usually this smart," said one that we spoke to yesterday. "We don't know how it's managed to vanish without a trace. This one, according to Gringott's records, is over two centuries old at least; an extremely advanced age, even for a dragon.'

The dragon is said to be pure white, extremely large and blind, with cuts and slashes around its muzzle, and likely to be violent if caught.

Ron looked up at Harry. "Get on the dragon, you said. Climb on, we'll be alright, you said."

"Well, we were!" said Harry defensively.

"Yeah and what if it goes and attacks someone because we let it go?" said Ron.

"It hasn't attacked anyone yet," said Hermione biting her lip.

"It will," assured Ron. "It'll be pretty annoyed at being kept underground for so many years."

"Well, what other way could we have gotten out of there?" maintained Harry. "Besides, it's two hundred years old! Maybe it's too old to go killing people? Perhaps it's died?"

Ron shook his head. "They would have found it if it was. But it is strange though; I've never heard of a dragon so old."

Martin took back his newspaper when Ron handed it to him, and Harry could tell from the look on his face he was thinking hard.

"Perhaps we need one of those Dragonlord people Hagrid was talking about," joked Ron.

"Yeah," said Martin, almost to himself.

Hours later, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Neville and Merlin were knocking on McGonagall's door, ready for the Order meeting that evening. The day had passed in a rather boring fashion, as Harry, Ron and Hermione had taken Merlin on a leisurely stroll around the grounds and the castle, as a 'tour'. Merlin had smiled and made interested comments, all the while thinking back to his previous times at Hogwarts and the fun memories he had; the Astronomy Tower that Rowena
had so loved, the kitchens where Helga had spent so much time in, the corridor where Peeves had once led an armed rebellion against the caretaker the last time he was here ... Not much had changed overall: the Whomping Willow was new, the Quidditch pitch updated and the classrooms slightly less bleak, but it was still the same old castle. Still filled with the same old ancient magic that the Founders had imbued into each and every stone.

"Come in," said McGonagall from inside her office, and they entered to find her standing by the fireplace with a pot of sparkling powder in her hands.

"Ah, you're here. Now come along! We don't have any time to waste!"

"You're coming too?" asked Neville.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "Naturally, Mr Longbottom. I have been an integral part of the Order since the day it was founded, since before you were even born. Why should I not?"

Neville blushed slightly.

McGonagall tore her gaze away from him and motioned to the others to draw closer. "You'd better hurry. This connection isn't going to last forever; Kingsley had to pull some strings at the Ministry to even get it operational in the first place."

They crowded around and one-by-one vanished in a spurt of emerald green flames. Merlin grimaced as he took his handful of Floo powder; he hated travelling this way.

He emerged spinning into the fireplace of Grimmauld Place, falling forwards with his momentum, and lay sprawled on the rug coughing up ashes. A split second later, another form had landed on top of him.

Merlin wriggled out from under the body, which he realised was Harry, stood up and held out a hand to help Harry up.

"Sorry about that. I'm not too good with travelling by Floo."

Harry grinned. "Me neither."

"Oh look! It's the little school children!"

They turned to see Fred and George standing in the doorway of the drawing room with amused smirks on their faces.

"Ha ha, very funny," grumbled Ron, who Merlin had just noticed sitting on the carpet dusting his robes of ashes.

"Thank you, Ron, your support means everything to us," they said, giving mock bows. "Come on you lot, the meeting's down in the kitchen."

"Then I suggest we'd better get going," said Professor McGonagall who emerged from the fireplace awkwardly, dusting ash from her normally pristine clothes and adjusting her hat.

Luna appeared revolving in the fireplace behind her. She stepped out gracefully with complete balance, and not a speck of soot upon her.

"I like travelling by Floo. It always tickles."

McGonagall turned to stare at her. "Yes, well, we'd better move down into the kitchen."
Merlin grinned. The more he knew of Luna, the more he liked her.

They all trundled down into the kitchen where Mrs Weasley embraced them all tightly, as though she hadn't seen them in a year instead of a week.

The meeting was soon underway, but there was little to say, it appeared nothing much had happened that week. Kingsley was late, and when he walked in through the door his face was grim.

"Alexandria Driscoll was found dead this morning," he said heavily.

Mrs Weasley's face crumpled. "Oh, I always liked her, we were at school together."

"What happened to her?" asked Mr Weasley, frowning behind his glasses.

Kingsley sighed, and seated himself at the table. "Looks like an accident; she drank the wrong medi-potion by accident, her eyesight was never very good."

The kitchen was silent for a minute, before Bill spoke.

"And now for the truth?"

Kingsley looked at him shrewdly. "There's no evidence for any foul play. It genuinely appears to be an accident."

"And the fact that she was the custodian for the Room of Records in the Department of Mysteries is a complete coincidence then?" Remus said sharply.

Kingsley took a sip of the tea Mrs Weasley had handed to him. "I'm glad you realise this. But, officially, with no evidence to the contrary, Miss Driscoll's death was a tragic accident."

"You think the Death Eaters got her then?" asked Fred.

Kingsley nodded. "I think it the most plausible scenario."

"Why would they have wanted her dead?" asked Ginny.

"Isn't it obvious?" said Charlie. "They want information from the Room of Records. Either that, or they're trying to throw us off the track."

"You haven't found anything else then, about the Old Religion?" Hermione asked Kingsley.

He shook his head. "Nothing of any importance. We've found references, thanks to Mr Emrys here, but nothing that will help us."

No one said anything for several minutes. Then the conversation turned to other matters.

"Still no luck with the dragon then, Charlie?"

Charlie groaned. "Nope. I'm going mad. How can it be hiding?"

"Maybe it's shy?" said Luna, looking into space.

Charlie glanced at her quickly. "It's more than shy. The Prophet's been on my back all day every day about when we're going to find it. I'm about to snap."

"Yeah, we saw that in the paper this morning," said Ron. "Are they really asking questions about
"Yep, said Charlie. "Stuff like: 'Is your brother a hardened criminal?', 'What was it he stole?', 'Is he hiding the dragon with his friends to use as a weapon against You-Know-Who?'"

Harry snorted. "A weapon against Voldemort? Would be kind of cool."

"Yeah, until you have to feed it," smirked George.

"Just so long as they're not using it against us. Who's to say they haven't caught it?" said Bill.

Ron shook his head. "Yeah, like it'd listen to anybody. The goblins had to keep it chained up to control it. I doubt You-Know-Who could get it to do anything for him. He'd need one of those Dragonlords for that."

Charlie laughed. "Dragonlords are just a myth, Ron, they never actually existed."

"Yes, they did!" said Merlin indignantly, cursing his hot-head when everyone turned to stare at him. "I mean, they were a part of the Old Religion. They died out at the same time the Old dragons did."

Charlie didn't look convinced. "There's no evidence to say that they did actually exist. They only live on in old wives tales."

Merlin frowned, but said nothing. He didn't want it too obvious that he knew more about them than anyone else born in this century would.

"Maybe they didn't die out?" said Neville hopefully. "Maybe there's one left and he can help us?"

"I highly doubt it, Mr Longbottom," said McGonagall brusquely.

Merlin smiled into himself. Perhaps it would be fun to let McGonagall know she was wrong for once. He was still seriously considering doing what he could to bring that dragon back, and hope against hope it wasn't his suspicions confirmed.

"How about our other little dragon? How's he doing?" McGonagall asked Mrs Weasley.

Ron frowned. "What other little dragon?"

"I think she means Malfoy, Ron," Hermione said resignedly.

Ron frowned again. "I don't get it. Why dragon?"

"Because, Mr Weasley," McGonagall looked at him sternly. "'Draco' is Latin for dragon."

"Ohhh!" said Ron. "I didn't know that. Wait, who calls their kid 'dragon'?"

"I dunno, who calls their kid 'Dragoon'?" Harry smirked at Merlin, his voice low. Merlin groaned; they hadn't stopped teasing him since he'd let slip his 'Druid name'. Arthur would be in hysterics right now. He'd always been determined to get his own back on Merlin for deceiving him like that.

McGonagall however didn't hear this. "Have you never heard the school motto, Mr Weasley?"

Ron shook his head, looking confused. McGonagall sighed.

"He's fine," said Mrs Weasley, interjecting. "He's still keeping to his room."
Kingsley looked up. "He should be making himself useful, not secluding himself like this. I'll have a word."

"It won't do you any good," said Fred. "He's a foul git and always will be. He either doesn't know anything, or he won't tell us. There's really no use keeping him around."

"Nevertheless," said Kingsley. "We are the only protection he has and I intend to keep him protected. Dumbledore always believed in mercy and second chances, and I have to believe in that also."

"Yeah, and Dumbledore also liked wearing long purple robes with yellow stars on them," muttered Fred under his breath.

The rest of the meeting passed rather quietly, and before long they were all back at Hogwarts. Merlin was still thinking furiously about everything they'd discussed. The Department of Mysteries really was starting to drive him crazy, that escaped dragon seemed to be haunting his dreams, and he couldn't brush off the lingering feeling of pity for the Malfoy boy and his desire to help him.

The next day passed in a very similar manner to the previous one. They explored the grounds, Merlin 'learned' about Hogwarts and they spent yet more time in the library.

Merlin sat there for hours bored out of his mind reading through the ancient journals. He was far older than all of these books, he'd read them all before, yet he had to keep up appearances. He wasn't sure why he was doing this; there wasn't anything here he could learn that would help him defeat Voldemort, but he sensed infuriatingly that this was the right thing to do.

He found himself reading Rowena’s books in particular, the ones she had written herself, letting his eyes trail the faded words written in her own hand. The usual wave of sadness enveloped him as he thought about her and the others, along with a sense of curiosity. Just why had they had the ability to use Old Magic? What use would it be in the present day?

As usual, Ron moaned, Hermione chided, and Harry just tried to get on with the research. Merlin soon found his attention drifting.

"Oi! You're not helping!"

Merlin jerked back to reality at the sound of Ron's voice, and tried to make himself look busy, but Ron hadn't been addressing Merlin.

"I'm doing other things, Ron!" protested Harry, waving a piece of parchment at him. "Once I've finished I'll start helping again!"

Ron scowled. "Is that more stuff for the DA? How much preparation do you need?"

"Actually Ron, it's Quidditch stuff," said Harry.

Ron's anger evaporated. "Quidditch? Well that's okay then."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

"What kind of Quidditch stuff?" Merlin asked, desperate for a distraction. He did like Quidditch- at least, better than its predecessors which had been far more dangerous and bloody enough that he doubted even Arthur would have enjoyed it.

"I'm trying to arrange practise sessions," explained Harry. "But with all this extra stuff we're doing
it's going to be difficult. The Slytherins seem to want to have the pitch every single evening."

"Typical," said Ron. "Even when Malfoy's off the team they're still managing to piss us off."

Harry nodded in agreement.

"Right, well we'd better be going or we'll be late," announced Hermione, standing up and packing her bag.

Ron frowned. "Where?"

She sighed. "The Auror practice sessions, Ron!"

"Oh," he said. "I'd forgotten."

"How can you possibly forget?"

Their bickering continued on for a good while, as Harry and Merlin just looked at each other trying to suppress their laughter.

They moved through the castle, to the place their timetables had listed as the location for the Auror classes. Ron and Hermione were still at it.

They soon emerged in a more secluded area of the castle and Hermione knocked hesitatingly at the door—she was nervous, Merlin could tell.

It opened almost immediately, and they were greeted with the sight of a bombastic young woman with bright pink hair.

"Tonks!" gasped Hermione. "We didn't know you were going to be the one teaching us!"

"What? I'm not the first person you think of when you hear the word Auror? I'm insulted!" she winked at them. "Come in, the others are already here."

Hermione shot Ron a look which clearly said, 'See, I told you so', but they all followed her inside.

They were greeted by the sight of a high-ceilinged room, about the size of a Quidditch pitch, with very little furniture. Several people stood in the centre of the room: Ginny, Luna, Neville, that Hufflepuff Head Boy (Ernie?), Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan and a few others who Merlin knew only by sight from classes. He assumed they must be members of the DA—Harry and the others greeted them warmly. Merlin knew he really should have tried to integrate more with the school and meet some more people. But it was an old habit; he hated making lots of friends—it just made it harder when he had to move on, which he inevitably always had to do.

Harry soon introduced him though. "Martin, this is Hannah, Susan, Terry, Anthony, Michael, Parvati, Padma and Lavender."

Merlin tried desperately to commit these names and faces to memory; it would make it easier for them to trust him.

They all stared at him curiously, and not for the first time Merlin cursed his own detachment; over the years he'd naturally distanced himself from people to keep his secret, but now things were different and he had to give them a reason to ingratiate himself to them.

"Hi," smiled one of the Hufflepuff girls, Susan he thought. "Is it true you're from one of the old Druid families?"
Merlin smiled back. "Yeah, it is."

The others in the room looked slightly impressed. Susan continued.

"My aunt used to talk about them. She worked at the Ministry, you know, and before she got promoted she used to work with them. They don't use normal magic do they? She had to make sure they would stick with the International Statute of Secrecy. Apparently some of them don't want to."

Merlin forced a smile. He hated the Statute of Secrecy. It was just the final result of the destruction of everything he'd worked for in Camelot.

"Well, my family wasn't one of them," he said still smiling. "We were always happy to abide by the rules. We weren't too traditional."

"Is that why you use a wand then?" Terry asked him, looking at Merlin's hand. "Don't the Druids never use them and that's why they're so weak?"

"Yes, most of us don't. We believe in the Old ways." Merlin answered starting to get uncomfortable with the questions.

"But the Old ways don't work do they?" Terry pressed. "I mean, your magic is limited isn't it because most of the Old knowledge has been lost."

I bet he's a damn Ravenclaw.

"Yes, that's true," said Merlin, trying to look casual. "But my family isn't as strict as the others. Me and my father chose to use wands."

They all still stared at him, and Merlin tried not to blush. Please … change the subject.

He hated all this excessive lying. Although he'd worked out his story perfectly he was still afraid of contradicting himself somehow, there was more at stake this century than ever.

"Come on guys, we don't need to interrogate him," Ginny interjected, smiling at him.

Merlin smiled back gratefully. He liked Ginny. He noticed Harry's eyes following her, his jaw tight. Merlin sighed inwardly. He hoped they could sort all this Voldemort mess out soon so they could be together. They both deserved to be happy.

"Come on, kids!" Tonks bustled over. "No time for chit chat! Gather over here!"

She put on her best teaching voice and tried to be professional, but Merlin still noticed she managed to stub her toe on the floor as she walked.

They did as she asked and they all moved over to one side of the cavernous room, where Tonks was waiting.

"What is this place?" asked Ron looking around, impressed.

"The Duelling Chamber," Tonks answered, sifting through a bag at her feet. "It was used back in the day when Duelling class was a part of the school curriculum. It's got specially enchanted walls to repel jinxes and other cool little features. I haven't tested most of them. Some of them are quite nifty; if you get injured a little door opens in the wall to give you out a healing potion, and the entire layout of the room can be changed to suit your needs. I had to get special permission from McGonagall to use this place; it hasn't been used in years and needs a lot of magical upkeep."
"Duelling chamber?" Ron repeated, his face indignant. "Hogwarts had a Duelling chamber we didn't know about? After all that hassle we went to in fifth year to find somewhere to have the DA? Why doesn't anyone know about it? It isn't even on the Marauder's Map!"

"It was built by the Founders," answered Merlin, who suddenly recognised the room from his younger days and old years at Hogwarts. Godric had built this place, and loved it more than any other part of the castle. "Duelling was a big deal back then. But then Defence Against the Dark Arts was introduced and a sole Duelling class wasn't deemed as necessary. The classroom wasn't used after that and the Hogwarts lay-out was changed. The castle changes every couple of centuries to fit the needs of the people in it. That's why the Chamber of Secrets’ entrance was located in a girl's bathroom even though when it was built modern plumbing hadn't been invented. McGonagall must have had to do quite a few spells to get the place to show itself again. The rooms always stick around, just in case they're needed again."

"Really?" asked Seamus, looking awed as he looked around the room, and as though slightly afraid the room would disappear again.

Tonks winked at him. "Professor McGonagall told me you were smart."

"How do you know all that?" Ernie asked with a small frown.

*Because Godric was obsessed with this place. And I used to have lessons here back in the fourteenth century.*

"Uh, I must have read it in *Hogwarts: A History,*" he lied.

Hermione shook her head. "I've read that book a dozen times; it talks about how the castle lay-out changes, but it's never mentioned a Duelling Chamber."

"Really? Well I must have read it somewhere else," Merlin shrugged, trying to calm himself. He'd never actually read the book himself. He'd practically helped *found* the bloody school and watched it over the centuries, there was nothing in that book he didn't already know. Of course, he should have known Hermione would know it inside out.

She frowned. "Which book?"

Merlin was grasping at straws here. "Uh, maybe one of those old books in the library? Some of them were written by Ravenclaw herself."

"Oi! Didn't I say no chitter chatter?" Tonks reprimanded. "Now, everyone take one of these."

She held out a fist full of long cloth rags.

Ron took one and wrinkled his nose. "What are these for?"

"They're blindfolds," said Tonks happily, still handing them out.

"Blindfolds?" asked Michael Corner. "I thought we were going to be learning how to duel?"

"You are," said Tonks.

His eyes grew wider. "You're going to make us duel blindfolded?" he asked incredulously.

"Eventually," Tonks said, having finished giving them out. "But for starters we're just going to get you accustomed to certain aspects of duelling."
"Now, I know you all want to learn how to duel and learn all sorts of cool new magic. You will, but first we have to go over the basics and build upon what you already know. You are all here because Harry mentioned to McGonagall that you were all exemplary in the DA, so I know that you can all produce Stunners, Shield Charms, Blasting Curses, several other combat spells, as well as a fair number of you are able to cast Patronuses."

She grinned at them.

"That's all well and good, but there's more to just learning these spells. You can't just go up against a Death Eater and cast a spell like you would in a classroom environment. You need to know how to duel. Stealth, tactics, agility and speed are all essential to being a good dueller. Often the victor in a duel isn't the most magically powerful, but is the one who is the one who is the smartest and able to think rationally in a dangerous situation. That's what you'll be learning in these sessions with me; skills that are taught to Aurors. Not just the spells themselves, but the knowledge of how to use them to their fullest potential."

Merlin nodded. He approved of her ideas, they were sound and wise. He had no doubt she'd be a capable teacher.

Then Tonks started grinning. "Now, what we'll be doing this evening is making you aware of your surroundings. This is vital in a duel; you must always know what is going on around you. If you don't, you're dead."

"I want you all to take a good look at this room. Notice how long it is, how wide it is, where the floor slants, where the furniture is. Then I want you to put on your blindfold and walk over to the other end of the room."

"That's it?" asked Parvati. "We just have to walk across the room?"

Tonks' eyes sparkled. "Of course, there will be difficulties. Some of the class will be lined up along one wall and will be shooting hexes across the room, also blindfolded."

The class looked at her in horror. Merlin had to laugh to himself. He was reminded of the time when Gwaine had also been horror-struck when he learned he was going to have to duel with Arthur blindfolded.

"But how are we supposed to defend ourselves?" asked Susan.

"You're not," said Tonks. "All we're doing is avoidance and manoeuvring. You're going to have to rely on all your senses at once. You're going to have to feel where a spell is coming from and avoid it in any way you can without raising a wand. There will be times in battle where you won't have time to cast a Shield Charm, or you'll have lost your wand."

Everyone still looked dubious, but Tonks didn't let it bother her.

"You all knew this was going to be tough. This is the sort of training Aurors undertake, and believe me when I say we only take on the very best. Not many people are ready for that sort of commitment and trials. You're all here because you're the best Hogwarts has to offer, and I'm here to mould you into the best the wizarding world has to offer. And that will involve a lot of hard work."

She walked over to the very top of the hall. "I won't have too many of you doing this at once because, well, the last time we tried this in the Auror Office with too many people we ended up head-butting each other. So ... Hufflepuffs up here first please!"
Hannah grimaced. "Why are we first?"

"Because I'm determined that you'll do my old House proud," Tonks said winking at her.

Ernie, Hannah and Susan joined her at the top of the hall and Tonks instructed the others to spread themselves out along the adjacent wall at intervals of a few feet.

"Now, blindfolds on!" Tonks ordered.

Merlin pulled his on feeling slightly foolish. His vision was completely cut off but he was by no means blind. He'd perfected the art of sensing his surroundings centuries ago. It was almost as good as seeing. He just let his mind expand and pick up on what was around him.

"Now," said Tonks, and Merlin felt her pass close by him. "You're all going to be casting spells straight ahead of you at random every few seconds. Don't aim for where you think you hear a noise. Just fire straight ahead. Any spell will do."

She passed by Merlin again and she took her place behind the line of Hufflepuffs.

"Go!"

Merlin started firing off spells at random as instructed, but let his mind wander. He followed the Hufflepuffs' progress in his mind, reaching out and sensing where they were.

Ernie had promptly started forwards when instructed and went face-first into a wall; Hannah took tiny timid steps in front of her, ducking continuously, and Susan walked forward cautiously but confidently, listening intently and ducking only when needed. Only she didn't duck when she ran straight into Merlin's Stinging Jinx and squealed loudly.

Merlin sighed inwardly. It was going to be tough to get them up to scratch, but he knew they'd be able to manage it eventually. He could sense the magical power each of them possessed, they just needed to be able to use it properly.

It was an unmitigated disaster. After the Hufflepuffs, the Ravenclaws tried, and then the Gryffindors, split into the boys and girls sections because there were so many more of them. No one managed to get right across the room without being hit by something or running into a wall or tripping, though many came close.

Ginny was really good, springing to the ground like a cat every time a jinx came near her, only caught out when Parvati ran into her from behind. Harry too was brilliant, but unfortunately managed to walk into a silent Stunner cast by Susan. Luna was … interesting. She practically danced her way across the room, nimble on her feet, seemingly without a care in the world, but was tripped up by a wand Terry Boot had dropped after being stunned by Hannah.

But, Merlin noted, it could have been far worse.

He himself could of course have managed to get across the room unharmed, but he was as ever committed to downplaying his abilities and so allowed Hermione to hit him with a Jelly-Legs Jinx.

Tonks was not discouraged and tried them all with different variations of the exercise. One was where the spell casters had to use their other senses to aim at the people crossing the room instead of firing randomly. Another was done individually. Someone stood blindfolded in the middle of a circle composed of everyone else (also blindfolded) who took it in turns to fire at the person in the middle, who was now able to cast a Shield Charm if they heard a spell coming. This exercise was doubly tricky, as with the Shield Charm there was a risk of rebound, so the people in the circle had to be on
alert as well in case they were hit with a runaway spell.

By the end of the evening everyone was in pain. No one had escaped being hit by a spell, and they were left bruised and in a bad mood.

Tonks was as cheerful as ever however. "Well, that'll do this evening. Don't be discouraged, this is tough stuff and I don't expect you to be masters right away. What I do expect is for you all to practise, and to try to apply this in everyday life. Go for a walk around the castle grounds with your eyes closed or something; make sure you are always aware of your surroundings."

"We'll meet back here at the same time next week and I hope you will all have practised and be ready for hard work. Some of you weren't trying your hardest today. And some of you really need to work on this as much as possible. Even my Teddy could have done a better job!"

Parvati frowned. "Her teddy bear?" she asked Lavender in a low whisper. Merlin suppressed a snort of laughter.

"Right, off you go then!" Tonks dismissed the class, who trundled off, rubbing their sore areas. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Merlin headed towards the door when Tonks called him back.

"Mr Emrys? Can I have a quick word?"

The others looked at him curiously, and Merlin shrugged and went back to Tonks.

"We'll wait for you," said Harry as they left.

Tonks waited until the door had closed, before she took a step towards him looking serious.

"You were one of the ones I was talking about, Martin. You were holding back," she said.

Merlin blinked. Was he that obvious?

She sighed and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Professor McGonagall told me about your conversation on Friday night. Your power is obvious for everyone to see. You shouldn't try to hide it."

Merlin glanced at the door.

"I don't want everyone to know. I don't want to stand out."

"I know," said Tonks. "But you're not here for a magical education, Martin, that much is obvious. You're here primarily to protect the school and to protect the students. If you hold back on your magic you can't do that. Use your full abilities here, Martin, if anything it'll help to encourage the others."

She smiled at him, and Merlin forced himself to smile back. He couldn't use magic to the full extent of his abilities; it'd draw too many questions. Like how he knew perfectly well how to use the magic of the Old Religion.

It was all about a balance he reckoned. He had to convince them somehow he was operating to the best of his ability without actually doing it. Everything was just getting ten times more complicated.

"All right," he said to her, hating the fact he was lying through his teeth to a woman he'd come to respect within the last couple of hours.

She patted his shoulder. "All right then, off you go. And watch out for them will you?"
Merlin nodded, and left the room to find Harry, Ron and Hermione waiting for him.

"What was that about?" Ron asked immediately.

"Oh, just talking to me about my technique," Merlin lied.

"Right," said Ron, obviously not believing a word.

Merlin ignored him and they headed off towards Gryffindor Tower.

"Well, that was interesting," said Hermione, clutching her side and breathing heavily. Merlin winced; it had been his curse she had walked in to. He was sorry he'd hurt her, but not sorry he hadn't tried to avoid her; she needed to learn.

"Yeah," said Ron, rubbing his head. "Who knew Tonks could be so brutal? You'd think being a mother would have softened her up a bit."

Merlin chuckled. "If anything motherhood just makes a woman even more formidable."

"It was good though," said Harry, thinking out loud. "I mean, it's a very direct teaching method. But I like it. It's true what she says, you can't just learn the spells and be done with it, just like in Muggle armies you don't learn how to fire a gun and head off to war right away. She's teaching us what it's really like. About how to survive."

Merlin nodded in agreement, but Ron just frowned and asked: "What's a gun?"

Harry started to explain but Merlin zoned out as something came over him so rapidly he staggered in the hall. His magic was crawling in his skin and writhing fiercely, spreading through his veins like fire. He started shaking uncontrollably, and fell to his knees, clutching his head in agony as his vision blurred. He couldn't breathe; something seemed to be pressing down on him from above which made it difficult. His eyes glowed golden, even though he'd cast no spell. He was covered in a cold sweat and he doubled over as pain wracked his body. Something was wrong, something was hideously wrong. His magic fought to be released, it was screaming out in some awful torment.

Someone was screaming his name, but he couldn't answer. He collapsed over on to his side, still shaking as the pain continued and the magic in his body roared through him in some powerful torrent.

Then he blacked out.

Merlin awoke to find Harry, Ron and Hermione standing over him looking worried. He blinked and tried to get them back into focus.

"How are you?" asked Hermione her face grave.

Merlin frowned as he realised he was lying in a white bed in a high-ceilinged room. "Where am I?"

"The Hospital Wing," answered Ron, looking pale. "You collapsed in the corridor. You were thrashing about in pain, then you passed out."

Merlin remembered, with an awful chill falling deep into his stomach. That awful feeling … he'd had it before.
"Well, I'm fine now," he said, sitting up so rapidly he made the others gasp and tried to get out of bed.

"I'll be the one to decide that, Mr Emrys," the school nurse chided as she stormed over towards him. Merlin groaned. "No, really, I'm alright."

She fixed him with a beady glare.

"You collapsed in a corridor, Mr Emrys. That is not alright."

She moved closer to him and started examining him, feeling his pulse, checking for a fever.

"I'm fine!" Merlin insisted trying to wriggle out of her grasp.

"Mr Emrys, I had a lot of time to examine you when you were unconscious," the nurse said. "I can find no magical or medical reason for you to have passed out like that. Therefore there is something wrong, and it isn't something I can fix until I know what it is."

"I was just feeling tired after the training," Merlin tried to tell her.

"No, you weren't," said Harry fixing Merlin with a knowing look. "It was almost like what used to happen to me when my scar hurt."

Merlin felt his stomach drop.

"I wasn't seeing into Voldemort's mind if that's what you're worrying about," Merlin said, his voice hard. "I was just tired and hungry; it's not a big deal."

"Looked like a big deal to me mate," said Ron. "It was like you were having a seizure or something."

The nurse grabbed his face and started looking into his eyes.

"Hmm," she said, and summoned over a clipboard and a quill. "I need to ask you some questions, Mr Emrys. We have little in the way of medical records for you."

Merlin sighed. He didn't need to deal with these questions right now. The sick feeling in his gut grew more and more. He needed to talk to someone, to Harry and the others, to the Order, someone very importantly. He didn't have time to answer medical questions.

"Now, Mr Emrys," the nurse said unfazed. "How old are you exactly?"

"Uh, twenty-two," Merlin invented. Yeah, twenty-two give or take thirteen centuries.

"Very good. Have you ever suffered from anything like this before?"

"No."

"Do you have any existing medical conditions?"

"No."

"Did you suffer any debilitating illnesses as a child?"

"No."
"Is there any history of illness in your family?"

"No."

"Have you come into contact with any contagious diseases recently?"

Well, unless you count the Bubonic Plague in the fourteenth century ... "No."

"Any recent symptoms of an illness?"

"No."

"You're not being very helpful."

"I'm telling the truth," Merlin was getting tired of this. He didn't have time to waste sitting in a hospital bed with a woman almost as bad as Gaius fussing over his health.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Very well, can you describe to me what happened in the corridor?"

Merlin scowled. "I began to feel dizzy. My head ached and I was hurting all over. Then I blacked out."

The nurse's eyebrow arched even higher.

"You don't care to elaborate on that?"

"Nope," said Merlin.

She sighed heavily, and stood. "Mr Potter, I believe I may have found a patient that tries my nerves even more than you ever did, which is some accomplishment." She turned to look at Merlin. "You'll stay here tonight so I can keep an eye on you. No objections," she said as Merlin tried to protest. "Until I know what it was that caused the blackout I'll be watching you carefully."

She headed off back to her office. Ron waited until he heard her office door shut before rounding on Merlin.

"Okay, and what's the truth?"

"Ron!" hissed Hermione.

"Come off it, Hermione!" said Ron. "He knows something more than he's letting on. Madam Pomfrey's gone, you can tell us now."

Merlin hesitated only for a second before speaking; they deserved to know.

"It was the Old Religion."

They immediately crowded closer around his bed, looking shocked.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"I felt something stirring, something evil." Merlin explained, trying to put it into terms they would understand. "I can sense the Old Religion all the time, and something happened, something very powerful."
"You mean, kind of like when Harry could sense Voldemort was doing something awful?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide.

Merlin nodded. "Something like that."

"Well, what happened?" Ron pressed.

"It was something evil, I know that much," said Merlin. "The magic in my body reacted against it, very violently. It was someone abusing the Old Religion's power. They were trying to do something."

"But what?" asked Ron. "It must have been You-Know-Who! What was he trying to do? Did it work?"

Merlin thought back to how it had felt. "No. I can't explain it. Someone, probably Voldemort, was trying to access a certain branch of the magic of the Old Religion, to do something awful, but it didn't work. He either wasn't powerful enough, or the Old Religion rejected it. It wasn't completed. I'm not sure how I know."

The others exchanged horrified glances.

"Have you ever felt this before?" Hermione asked.

Merlin was silent for a moment. Yes, he thought, it's happened before. When Morgana tore the veil between the worlds on Samhain to release the Dorocha, although that attack hadn't been as severe. He'd also felt it when Arthur had died. He'd felt it again when Voldemort, and other wizards had created their Horcruxes. He'd felt it when Lily Potter had sacrificed herself for her child. And one other time.

"I've felt it before," he answered finally. "But, not … not as powerful as this until now. At least since Arthur died."

"When did you feel it before?" Harry asked.

Merlin looked him in the eyes.

"I last felt it when Voldemort was resurrected in the graveyard," he confessed. "I felt the very same evil powers being enacted on the world. Only that time, they were successful."

Someone was messing with the powers of life and death. And Merlin could only dread what Voldemort was trying to do with them.
An Old Enemy

Merlin was released from the hospital wing on Monday morning despite Madam Pomfrey's objections. She could find nothing wrong with him, and Merlin reassured her that he was fine. She wasn't pleased, but could find no reason to keep him there, and only let him leave with the promise he'd come back for regular check-ups.

Merlin was glad to see the back of her and her incessant checks on his health- she reminded him painfully of Gaius. He went back to his lessons as normal and the rest of Monday was fairly uneventful.

But he was still caught up in thoughts of what he had felt the previous night. The powers of life and death … was that Voldemort's plan? Was this his idea for his 'true path to immortality'? How had Voldemort learned of these powers? What was he trying to do?

Harry and the others were just as preoccupied as he was. Hermione poured over her old copy of Ancient Forms of Magic in some desperate attempt to understand what had happened. They had asked him no more questions over what had happened, but Merlin could tell that Harry was again suspicious of him.

Merlin thought it through again and again, what had Voldemort tried to do? Obviously it wasn't another resurrection spell, he already had his body back, was he trying to make himself immortal using these powers? How would that even be possible?

It made his head hurt to even think about it all.

He sat with Hermione in the common room that evening doing their homework (he just had to laugh as he remembered that someone as old as he was, was still doing homework) still thinking about it. Harry and Ron had gone to an impromptu Quidditch practice, Harry having finally managed to secure the pitch for their training sessions, but Merlin could see that his heart wasn't truly in it. Still, Merlin hoped it would be a good enough distraction for him.

Hermione sighed and pushed away a heavy book from her.

"It just doesn't make sense," she said frustrated. "How could Voldemort have learned about all this Old Magic when it was supposed to have died out? I mean, it's not exactly like he could just wander into the Ministry and search for the instruction manual is it?"

Merlin closed his own book. "Maybe he'd heard of it from some other source?" Merlin didn't think this was likely though; there was no one other than himself who knew how to use this magic properly. Then again, his Death Eaters were in control of the Ministry for almost a year, maybe they were searching for it then? Merlin also didn't think this was likely either, there wouldn't be any instructions in the Ministry, he was certain of that.

Hermione leaned back in her chair and began to play with her hair absent-mindedly. "Maybe, but there's more to it I think."

Merlin agreed; there was something going on that had Merlin completely stumped.

"What could he be trying to do though?" moaned Hermione, covering her face with her hands.

I wish I knew, thought Merlin, absorbed again in his own thoughts.
At that moment the door to the common room opened and in trooped the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"How was it?" asked Merlin, hoping for a distraction.

"It was alright," said Ron, slumping down on the sofa, with Harry and Ginny sitting on either side. "We're all a bit out of practise, and Harry's stuck on one of the old school brooms till his new one gets here, but I reckon we've got a good shot this year."

"Do you still have all the old team?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah," said Harry. "With everything that's going on I don't think we'll have time for try-outs. Besides, the team was great the last time we all played together, I don't think we need anyone new."

"Better not let Katie Bell hear you say that," said Hermione. "Wasn't she the one who wanted Harry to host try-outs for the old team as well as the new players? Said she didn't want you to miss out on new talent."

"Yeah," said Ron, examining his nails, bored. "But we've got a great team. Even little Jimmy Peake's gotten better. Don't reckon we have to try anyone out this year. Unless you want a shot at it," he asked Merlin, smirking.

Merlin laughed. "No thanks. I like the game and all, but I don't think I'd be very good."

He had played Quidditch before, back when he was in Ravenclaw, a couple of centuries ago. He'd been okay, but nothing special; aided mainly through his superior reflexes and Old Magic instincts rather than any particular ability. He'd just felt like trying out everything new in Hogwarts, and back then, the existing form of the game had been relatively new.

"Well, I hope we'll win the Cup again this year," Ginny said. "Merlin knows we could do with a morale booster."

Yes, Merlin does know, Merlin thought wryly, and he hopes very much that you win.

The rest of the evening passed without further incident and everyone soon left for bed. Merlin stayed behind however, staring into the fire, thinking.

"Hello there," came a voice behind Merlin, and he jumped so high he almost fell out of his seat. He whirled around to see Sir Nicholas standing, or rather floating, behind him. Merlin calmed his rapidly beating heart; people rarely managed to sneak up on him without him being aware of it, but ghosts were exceptions as they didn't have a physical presence.

"What are you doing here?" Merlin asked, still recovering.

"I am the ghost of Gryffindor Tower," Sir Nicholas answered, rather stiffly at his less than gracious welcome. "I'm supposed to be here."

"I've never seen you in Gryffindor Tower before," Merlin said.

"Ah, but that isn't true is it?" Sir Nicholas said. "True, I don't often spend time here, but there was a time when you saw me frequently in this room. Remember? The year was something like 1484?"

Merlin blinked. "Yeah, about that …"

"No need to explain," Sir Nicholas said, waving his transparent hands. "I learned a long time ago that you would conceal your secrets for as long as you needed to."
"Uh, thanks?"

"However," Sir Nicholas said, looking at him shrewdly. "It still interests me how a boy who was two years below me at Hogwarts could pop up again and again over the years and still look the same as he did when I first met him five hundred years ago."

"Of course it would," sighed Merlin, sitting back down on the sofa. "But like you said, I need to keep this a secret."

Sir Nicholas drifted over to beside him.

"I understand, yet I still wish you would confide in me, or someone else at least."

"I can't," said Merlin.

Sir Nicholas sighed. "It must be hard for you to continually lie to your friends."

"You have no idea," said Merlin, running a hand through his hair.

"The reason you have for concealing this must be of vital importance," Sir Nicholas said, puffing up his chest. "And I am honoured that I at least know a little of what it is."

Merlin laughed. "And what is that?"

"That you've been waiting a very long time for something to happen," Sir Nicholas said, watching him closely. "I've been speaking with the other ghosts, and I know you've been doing this for at least one thousand years, perhaps even longer. Every time that you show up is at a time in the wizarding world that is relatively calm, and seems as if you're here purely out of boredom. But that you've chosen to show up at a time like this … well, it's rather interesting."

"How so?" Merlin asked, frowning.

"Something has happened," Sir Nicholas said. "You never usually draw attention to yourself, but now you've thrown yourself into a terrible war and allied yourself with a boy that the entire wizarding world is depending on. There has to be a reason."

"Yes, there is," said Merlin. "And I wish I could tell you."

Sir Nicholas nodded. "This is the time you've been waiting for all these years, I can tell. This may be your last time at Hogwarts, I fear."

Merlin nodded, suddenly feeling very sad. "Probably. There won't be much more need to come back if we accomplish what we have to."

"Then I am sorry to hear it," Sir Nicholas said, clapping a hand on Merlin's shoulder, making him feel like he'd just been doused in icy water. "You have been good company over the years, and every time you come here it keeps us ghosts whispering and theorising for a great while. I shall miss you. Although, I have to say that I will not miss you being Sorted into other Houses."

Merlin had to laugh. He liked conversations with the ghosts. He never had to worry about giving anything away. With them he could open up and release some of his pent up anxiety about all his secrets; they being the people who knew the most about who he really was. "I wanted some variety!"

Sir Nicholas shook his head, causing his head to wobble dangerously. "You should just have stuck with your original House. Your true House."
"I don't know what my true House is," said Merlin. "The Sorting Hat refuses to Sort me. I just pick where I go."

Sir Nicholas gasped. "You pick?" he asked indignantly. "But your first House was Gryffindor! I thought that meant you were truly a member of this House! Why won't the Hat Sort you?"

Merlin laughed at his expression. "I guess it's because I'm such an abnormality." He grinned. "You never know, I might be a Gryffindor."

Sir Nicholas scowled. "We have bets amongst ourselves you know, about when you'll show up and what House you'll be in. The Fat Friar is winning, and being very smug about it. You've been Sorted into Hufflepuff more often than any other."

Merlin smiled, but then frowned. "Wait, what do ghosts have to bet with?"

"You'd be surprised," said Sir Nicholas sardonically. "It's always annoyed me that you were in other Houses; I thought simply enduring all these centuries was brave enough to make you a Gryffindor, and I've always been proud of that."

Merlin grinned again. "Well, I'm glad you like me so much."

Sir Nicholas rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure why I do; all you ever do is move around mysteriously and refuse to answer our questions. It's very infuriating."

"I'm sorry," said Merlin sincerely. "I promise that I'll tell you one day."

"I shall hold you to that, Mortimer."

Merlin grimaced. "I always hated that name."

"Well, what are you calling yourself these days?" Sir Nicholas asked mildly. "I can never keep up with them all, so I just call you by the name you had when we first met."

"I haven't had that many names at Hogwarts!" Merlin said indignantly. "Besides, I'm Martin now."

"Oh," said Sir Nicholas, frowning. "Haven't you used that name before?"

"Yes, but apart from you lot, who's keeping track?" Merlin said. "Besides, it's back in style, and it's always easier to remember the name if I've used it before."

"Is that so?" asked Sir Nicholas. "Mortimer, Michael, Matthew, Martin … and what were the others? I forget."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "It's not important."

"Not really, I suppose," said Sir Nicholas offhandedly. "But it does make me wonder what your real name is. It must frustrate you to always have to use another name does it not?"

"Yeah, but I don't have a choice," mumbled Merlin. "My real name would draw too much attention."

"I should guess it would," said Sir Nicholas, looking at him so intently, it began to make Merlin uncomfortable. "Of course, your last name has always remained constant has it not? Emrys seems to be around everywhere you go."

"Well, I like it," said Merlin, trying to throw him off talking about it.
"I suppose you do," said Sir Nicholas. "It's a very powerful name is it not? Legendary in Druidic prophecy, they say. Associated in particular with one man."

Merlin felt his cheeks grow hot, and his heart start thumping wildly.

"You've been talking to the Grey Lady haven't you?" he asked, trying to calm down.

"Yes, I have. Never underestimate the brain of a Ravenclaw, particularly if that woman was born as a Ravenclaw," Sir Nicholas said lightly. "You helped raise her as a child, and she knows you better than all the rest of us put together, most likely. She has a theory you know, about you. We've all been discussing it."

"I'm sure you have," said Merlin. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm very tired so--"

"What are you going to do about it?"

Merlin turned to face Sir Nicholas, halfway to the boy's dormitory, seeing him floating there, with an extremely serious expression on his transparent features.

"I'm sorry?" asked Merlin, unnerved.

Sir Nicholas floated closer. "What happened last night. That's something to do with why you're here isn't it? What is it you're going to do about it?"

Merlin stood there in shock for several minutes.

"How d'you-"

"I'm a spirit, Mortimer," said Sir Nicholas. "I'm a pale imitation of life, and as such live constantly on the barriers between this world and the next. Something happened, I felt it. Someone was trying to access the powers that should not be meddled with, the powers that give both life and death."

Merlin felt cold all over. "I never realised you could feel that," he said faintly.

"Well, we can," said Sir Nicholas bluntly. "And I want your assurances that you are doing all that you can to defeat this evil, whatever it is. No one should be given access to such power. It is an affront to nature."

Merlin still stood there, slightly in shock. "Of course," he mumbled. "It's why I'm here. I'm doing everything I can to stop this."

Sir Nicholas' features softened. "I know you are, and I'm glad of it. I know that I can trust you. I feel it somehow, like some great power is telling me to. It must be this power of the Old Religion you and your friends keep discussing."

Merlin blinked rapidly. "You've been spying on us?" he asked, still in shock, but with a tinge of annoyance.

Sir Nicholas laughed. "A one thousand year old man turns up again to attend school when the wizarding world is being faced by the greatest threat in all its history? Of course we've been spying on you! We're not interfering; we're generally not allowed to interfere with the affairs of mortals. But you're not exactly mortal are you? The Bloody Baron in particular is very curious to know why you're so interested in the Old Magic."

"I'm sure he is," grumbled Merlin. "Can I never have any privacy from you lot?"
Sir Nicholas shook his head. "I'm afraid you'll have to resign yourself to the fact that we'll always be interested in you; how could we not be? Your continued existence is what keeps us entertained for decades at a time." He smiled, and looked very intensely at Merlin. "I would have thought you'd be used to it by now. After all, you must have been subjected to a lot of scrutiny during your years in Camelot."

"Yeah, but I-" started Merlin, but broke off as the full weight of Sir Nicholas had just said hit him. His eyes grew wide, and his heart hammered so hard he thought it might leap out of his chest. Did he just …

Sir Nicholas smiled as he took in Merlin's expression. "I take that as confirmation then?"

Merlin couldn't say anything, just stand there and look at Sir Nicholas in astonishment, and a tiny bit of panic.

"But, how …" he managed to gasp.

Sir Nicholas continued to smile. "I told you the Grey Lady had a theory. She's had it for a while now, but we were never sure. She was hoping you'd be in Ravenclaw this time around so she could pick your brain, but I got you instead, thank heavens."

Merlin still couldn't say anything. Sir Nicholas continued.

"You needn't worry; the others shall not hear anything from me if you wish it to remain secret. I'll admit though, even with this revelation there's still many questions that need to be answered."

Merlin nodded numbly. He couldn't believe this was happening! Though, he should have seen it coming. One thousand years of hanging around with the Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron should have taught him that they'd eventually figure it out. Helena always had been so smart. If her mother had seemingly worked it out one thousand years ago, then why shouldn't she have done the same? The only difference was that he'd never actually confirmed Rowena's suspicions.

Sir Nicholas took off his plumed hat and bowed deeply before him.

"I consider it to be an honour to have met you, and I sincerely apologise for that time in 1484 when I called you an incompetent buffoon when you accidently set fire to all my N.E.W.T. Transfiguration study notes."

Merlin frowned: he didn't remember that.

Sir Nicholas rose from his bow with a flourish, and a warm smile.

"I now regret, that I must leave you, the other ghosts will be clamouring for an explanation. Do I have your permission to tell them?"

Merlin sighed. "You might as well. Only make them swear not to tell anyone."

Sir Nicholas raised an eyebrow. "You still wish your identity to remain generally unknown?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "I'll raise too many questions. Just keep it to yourselves, I can trust you all not to say anything, you haven't so far. I promise to tell you the entire story one day, when all of this is over."

Sir Nicholas grinned broadly. "Then I shall wait patiently for that day and cherish it when it comes."
He bowed again, and began to drift off through the wall of the Gryffindor Common Room.

"I am honoured to be in your confidence," he said just before he disappeared. "If this is your last time at Hogwarts, then I should just say that I find you to be one of the finest men I have ever known and I shall look back on our acquaintance with fondness and pride. It appears you live up to the legends … Merlin."

And he drifted through the wall, leaving Merlin standing there in mild shock, with a warmth spreading through his body at the sound of his name, *his real name*. He grinned in spite of himself; perhaps keeping this great secret may not be as emotionally fraught as he first believed.

"Harry … Harry … hear me. You must come to me …"

"No, I don't want to."

"You must … this is your destiny … your true purpose … You are a result of the powers of the Old Religion. You must help me … only you can …"

"No … no …"

"You must, Harry. I need you to help me … I've been waiting for so long …"

"No … please …"

"You can free me, Harry … you can help me …"

"No!"

Harry jerked awake, drenched in sweat and shaking all over. The words still echoed in his mind …

"Harry, you okay?"

Martin was just entering the dormitory, looking at Harry in concern. Harry noted he was still dressed, having apparently been out somewhere.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, and rolled over in his bed, and tried to get back to sleep. He heard Martin move over to his own bed and get undressed. Harry just lay there, playing the dream over and over in his mind.

Merlin sat at breakfast the next day sipping his pumpkin juice as he read the day's paper. He was alone at the table, being down quite early to do his usual patrols of the grounds. His focus wasn't really on the words he was reading, but the conversation he'd had last night.

He looked up from his paper to see all of the four House ghosts crowded together, watching him with barely concealed awe.

He flinched. Sir Nicholas had told them then.

He wasn't sure what he felt about that just yet. It was a relief, it was true, but at the same time it made him slightly uneasy. Still, he thought, they already knew he was immortal anyway, did it really
matter that they had some extra information? As long as they told no one he was fine, and the fact that over ten centuries none of them had so far was encouraging.

He hoped they'd stop staring at him so openly though; people were beginning to notice. It was unusual for them all to be so close together at once on an ordinary day, the Bloody Baron and the Grey Lady usually stayed as far away from each other as possible, understandable considering their history, but now they were whispering to each other in a frenzied manner. Merlin could almost see the logical and intellectual mind of Helena Ravenclaw working furiously. She looked indignant, and understandably so. He had indeed helped raise her, arriving at Hogwarts when she was only three years old and staying until she began Hogwarts herself. He was closer to her than most, and she must be feeling the betrayal of trust in the same way Harry and the others would inevitably feel if they ever found out.

He groaned, maybe it had been a mistake- he should have tried to cover up his slip with Sir Nicholas. He looked at them pointedly, and they took the hint and drifted off to their respective tables, though still staring. Helena, uncannily reminiscent of her mother, stuck her chin in the air and ignored him haughtily.

He was distracted however by the arrival of Harry, Ron and Hermione, who all looked rather worried.

"What's up?" he asked immediately.

They slipped into the seats next to him and Harry began.

"It's about a … well, a dream I had last night. It's worrying me."

"I suspected as much," said Merlin. "You looked like some madman when you woke up. Did you honestly expect me to believe that you were fine?"

Harry nodded. "I wasn't, I didn't sleep all night." He glanced around, and looked slightly nervous. "I'm not sure why I'm so worried about it. It was only a dream."

"Yeah, and all this other stuff that's happened over the years has just been a dream," said Ron sarcastically.

"But that was different wasn't it?" said Hermione, biting her lip. "I mean, you don't have the connection to Voldemort any more do you? It can't be that again!"

"It wasn't," said Harry, shaking his head. "It was completely different from that. But it felt just as real."

"What was the dream?" asked Merlin.

Harry frowned as he remembered. "It was a voice. It was speaking to me, calling me by name. It kept saying that I could free them, that I was a product of the Old Religion and I could help them. They said they'd been waiting for ages, and the voice kept begging me for help. But it felt wrong, like something evil was inside my head. I felt this urge to just run away, to ignore the voice. It was sinister almost."

Ron looked confused. "D'you think it was Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it was a woman's voice."

Merlin frowned, an uncomfortable feeling settling in his stomach. "A woman? Did you see what she
looked like?"

"Yeah," said Harry, screwing up his face in concentration. "I got a vague image. She was young, pale, with long dark hair. She was very beautiful."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Of course, that's what you noticed about her."

"She was wearing old clothes," Harry continued as though he hadn't heard her. "Like a medieval dress or something. And I got this sense that she was powerful, really powerful, like she was ancient or something."

Ron frowned. "You think she was real? That she needs our help?"

"She's definitely real," said Harry. "But I've got this bad feeling about her."

"Still," said Ron. "I reckon we should try and help her. You said she wanted to be free? Then let's free her!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," snapped Hermione. "Just because she's beautiful doesn't mean she's a good person. Haven't we learned anything from Sirius? Maybe it's a trap!"

"And maybe she does need our help!" pointed out Ron.

Hermione scoffed. "I can't believe you, Ron. What do you make of this Martin? Martin?"

But Merlin barely heard her, his entire body had just frozen rigid. It couldn't be …

"Martin, are you alright?" Ron asked.

Merlin looked at him.

"Yeah, fine." He said in an emotionless voice.

_How could this happen? This shouldn't be happening!_

"Martin," said Harry, firmly. "There's something you're not telling us, something important."

Merlin looked at Harry to see the burning questions in his eyes, almost accusatory.

"It's nothing," said Merlin, still frozen in shock.

"Well, it obviously is!" said Ron impatiently. "What're you hiding? You can't keep it from us!"

"It's nothing!" Merlin yelled, and stood up, shaking. The others recoiled in shock. Merlin looked at them, barely registering their confused expressions at his outburst. He looked around; other people were also staring at him.

"I- I- need to go," said Merlin, feeling rather weak.

Ron scowled. "You're not going to leave until you've given us an explanation!"

"Oh yeah?" Merlin scowled back. "Just try and stop me. I dare you!"

And he stormed off down the Great Hall, ignoring the stares he was receiving. As soon as he was free of the Great Hall he broke into a run, and tore through the Entrance Hall and out through the front doors and into the grounds. He ran and ran, not stopping until he reached the lake and threw
himself on the ground breathing heavily.

*It couldn't be …*

He lay there for what felt like hours, trying to calm himself down, to assuage his thumping heart, to bring feeling back into his body.

Eventually he sat up. He already regretted his outburst, he shouldn't have been so, well, dramatic, but he'd just …

Harry's dream, the woman in it sounded too similar to someone he'd known before. And Merlin was afraid.

How long had he tried to forget about her, to stop feeling guilty?

It had been a continual source of pain throughout all these years. He'd tried to block her out, to move on. But she always found a way to pop back up again.

*It couldn't be her … it couldn't be Morgana.*

Images he'd rather have forgotten came rushing back; that final day, when Morgana had betrayed Arthur for the last time, how she'd laughed at Merlin, stopped him from protecting Arthur … how she'd brought about her own brother's death.

He breathed in rapidly, trying not to let himself be dragged under by the weight of his own emotions. No matter how many years had passed, that final betrayal still cut him to the bone.

But it couldn't be her! Merlin had seen to it that she'd never be in a position to hurt anyone ever again!

But he hadn't killed her, he'd only trapped her, in the same place she had trapped him when Arthur was riding into battle for the last time and he was powerless to stop her. She couldn't escape from there!

*You did,* a tiny voice echoed in his ear.

Merlin shook this thought away. He hadn't escaped, Morgana had set him free, wanting him to see the pain and suffering she'd caused to his loved ones. She hadn't counted on him being powerful enough to trap her there herself.

The Crystal Cave, where Merlin had been forced to watch the visions of Arthur's death on the field at Camlann; that was where she was, doomed forever to exist in a place outwith time itself and watch the outside world go by.

What had she seen in the crystals? Was she communicating with the outside world? How?

Merlin drew his legs up to his chest, and buried his face against them. Morgana … how could this be? *Why?*

"Where d'you think that loony's off to?" asked Ron as the three of them sat in the Room of Requirement, ready for the first DA meeting.

"Ron!" chided Hermione. "Don't be like that!"
"Why not?" asked Ron. "You saw him at breakfast! He completely flipped the lid! And now he's been missing all day!"

She looked concerned. "Something's wrong, really wrong. It made him really upset."

"That's obvious," said Ron. "But what do you think it is? D'you reckon he knows the woman?"

"That seems impossible though! Didn't Harry say she seemed ancient?"

"Yeah, well, with Martin, nothing would surprise me," grumbled Ron. "Doubt Merlin himself could figure that loony out."

"Stop calling him a loony, Ron!"

"Will you two shut up?" Harry said, interrupting. "We've got more important things to worry about."

The door to the Room of Requirement had just opened, and what seemed like a massive surge of people poured into the room. Harry felt his stomach clench in worry. He'd been preparing for this, but it didn't make him any less nervous.

Neville, Luna and Ginny made their way over to them at the front of the room, and they all waited in silence as people kept arriving, grabbing cushions, which the Room seemed to provide instantaneously, and settling themselves on the floor.

Harry felt his anxiety increasing as more and more people entered the room. There were far more people here than had ever been in it before; it seemed like half the school had turned up!

He supposed he should have expected this; McGonagall had after all made the announcement about the DA to the entire school. The only reason the DA had been so small in fifth year was because they'd only extended the invitations to the people they trusted, and as it was an illegal organisation, that had been pretty small.

But now, people of all ages were streaming in through the door. Many of them Harry recognised, some from the original DA waved at him, others looked in wonder at the room which they obviously hadn't known existed, some were timid first years, some were giggly girls who were staring at Harry, and some were just sitting watching the six of them up at the front of the room in awe. Harry even noticed a few Slytherins there. He was surprised to see them, but not unpleasantly so. Since Snape, he'd come to question his former prejudices.

Eventually, everyone was in, and seated on the ground, looking patiently at Harry and the others.

Harry took this as his cue, and stepped forward hesitatingly, feeling the eyes on him, and feeling uncomfortable. He really should be used to this by now!

"Um, hi," he started, rather lamely. "Well, I'm glad so many of you turned up. It makes a change from last time, but I'm happy so many of you want to learn to defend yourselves."

Many in the group looked smug as Harry said this, and Harry took a deep breath before continuing.

"I have to tell you though, you have to be committed to doing this. This is a serious defensive class, not somewhere to have some fun. And if you're just here because you want to know what me and my friends were up to last year or why we broke into Gringotts I suggest you leave now. That isn't important. What is important is that you learn some serious magic here, and how to apply it to real life situations."
No one left, though Harry saw some disappointed faces when he mentioned he wasn't going to be
telling them all the details of his personal life.

"So," he said bracingly, trying to dispel the nerves. "Well, those of you who were in the DA last time
will know how this works, but there'll be some slight changes this time around. We used to
communicate through coins so Umbridge wouldn't catch us, but since she's now in Azkaban and the
DA is fully legitimate we don't have to worry about that. There will be meetings twice a week here,
on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They'll both be exactly the same, so choose which one is better for you
in terms of your work load and other commitments."

Everyone was still listening intently, and Harry felt his nerves drain away as they had in fifth year.

"Well, every session we'll be focusing on learning new defensive spells, and how to use them
effectively," he said, looking around at them all. "I'll be the overall leader, but my friends have
agreed to help as there are so many more of you now. They've all been with me through thick and
thin and fought in battles with me and I trust them completely, and so should you. Each one will
supervise one particular year group; I don't want seventh years facing off with first years in duels, at
least at first. Here's how it'll work: Luna will do first year, Neville second, Ginny third, Ron fourth,
Hermione fifth, me sixth and Martin seventh."

Each of them waved as their names were mentioned.

"So, where's this Martin bloke?" Zacharias Smith asked.

Ron scowled at him. Although he'd just recently been bashing Martin himself, he was probably just
doing it for old time's sake.

"Something came up," said Harry. "I'm sure Martin will be here soon." At least, he hoped he would.
Martin's outburst this morning … it had only increased Harry's uneasiness. He still trusted Martin,
that overwhelming instinct wouldn't let him do anything else, but he was increasingly becoming
infuriated with him. Why was he so secretive?

Smith didn't look impressed. "What, he couldn't be bothered to show up for this?"

"I trust Martin," said Harry firmly, trying to believe his own words. "He's incredibly talented and
powerful and will be great for the DA."

"Is it true he can use Old Magic?"

"Is he an actual Druid?"

"Who is he?"

"Why's he never been to Hogwarts before?"

"Was he that guy during the battle?"

The questions came flooding in so rapidly and so loudly Harry had to make a loud bang with his
wand to get them to cease.

"All you need to know," he said firmly, "is that he can be trusted."

"Then why did he make that scene at breakfast then?" a younger Gryffindor student asked.

"He- he was upset," said Harry.
"Why?"

"Look!" Harry said, losing patience. "This meeting isn't about getting the gossip on the new guy at Hogwarts. If you want to discuss him like this, I suggest you do it on your own time, and not here."

"Well forgive us for being curious about the guy who's going to be helping teach us," said Smith. "He's secretive, shifty almost. Who really knows anything about him?"

"Watch it, Smith," warned Ron, pointing his wand at him. Harry almost snorted; Ron had been saying almost the exact same things about him just ten minutes prior.

Harry tried to change the subject. "We're here for defence, so I suggest we get started. I'd like you all to break off into your year groups and prepare to start."

The group split into seven and a great murmuring of excitement broke out.

"Right," said Harry, drawing the attention back to himself. "Obviously, with so many different ages in here, everyone will be at different levels. So first years, especially those of you who've just started, you may not be able to do some of the spells we'll be learning just yet. But you can always stay and watch and learn, sometimes that's the best way of picking stuff up. You can still benefit from this group even if some of the magic is too advanced for you. This way you can still be prepared for the sorts of magic out there that may be used against you."

"Okay, well, we'll be starting off small, some of the old DA might find this a bit too boring and easy for them, but it never hurts to go back over the basics."

"Does this mean then that it'll be expelliarmus again?" groaned Smith.

"Yes," said Harry, miffed. "Never underestimate how useful it can be. I've used it dozens of times to save my own life and that of others. It doesn't hurt to practise it, make sure you're still as good at it as ever, and be prepared for whatever comes at you."

Smith rolled his eyes. "Seriously? I've been able to this spell for years. What's the point of starting all this again if we're not going to learn anything new?"

"This is new, for a whole lot of people," Ginny retaliated fiercely. "You should be glad to go over it again and help the people who've never done it before instead of standing there moaning."

Harry felt a fluttering in his stomach as Ginny defended him. He tried to push it away.

Smith wasn't amused. "How useful could a disarming spell be? How is it ever going to help?"

"Expelliarmus!"

Smith's wand flew out of his hand and flew across the room, over the heads of everyone gathered there who watched it almost hypnotically, where it was caught by none other than Martin, who was leaning against the door almost casually.

"That useful enough for you?"

Smith's face flushed. "That wasn't fair! I wasn't looking! I wasn't able to defend myself!"

Martin raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that the point of this whole thing? You always have to be ready to defend yourself. You always have to be alert. If I was a Death Eater you'd be dead by now."

Smith was scowling. "Well, you're not. So give it back!"
For a moment it looked as though Martin wasn't going to. He examined the wand in his hand almost lazily, the entire room watching on tenterhooks. Then suddenly, he threw the wand back, so fast it was almost impossible to follow. Smith tried to grab it, but instead it hit off his head, and skittered to the floor.

Ron snorted. "For a Quidditch player you don't have the best reflexes, Smith."

Smith flushed even deeper as he bent over to retrieve his wand. Martin had moved through the crowds of people and stood by Harry's side, looking at Smith.

"You need to take a step back Smith and take a look around. We're all on the same side here, and we're all trying to achieve the same thing. There's no point in being difficult and causing dissent. Can't you just accept that?"

Smith didn't say anything, he just looked away from them all, his face still red.

"Right, well, I suppose we'd better get started," said Harry, trying to bring back some normality. "You can all begin with pairing off into twos and try disarming each other with *expelliarmus*, but be careful, with no many people in here and with wands flying about you'll have to watch yourselves."

They followed his instructions immediately, and the room was soon filled with red jets of light whooshing off in every direction, only occasionally hitting their target. It was obvious from the outset Harry was right to start off simply; even some of the older students couldn't cast it effectively. They'd obviously never had much practise.

Martin turned to face Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"Look, before you say anything, I'm sorry for what happened this morning. I reacted badly to something, and I panicked. I shouldn't have treated you like that."

Harry looked at him and saw sincerity in his eyes. "Alright, but why did it affect you like that?"

"Yeah, and where've you been all day?" Ron interjected.

Martin hesitated. "I've been … thinking. I've got a theory about Harry's dream, and if I'm right, it's bad."

Harry's heart stopped. "How bad?"

Martin looked around. "I can't tell you here. I'll explain when we get back to the common room."

"You'd better," grumbled Ron.

Martin opened his mouth to reply, but before he could an awry disarmer came towards him from behind, rushing forwards in a torrent of red sparks. Harry raised his wand to utter a Shield Charm, but before he could, Martin's eyes glowed golden and his head whipped around to the direction of the spell. The red light stopped in its tracks and hovered there in mid-air for a few seconds, before Martin's eyes glowed once more and the spell zoomed back to where it came from.

"Whoa!" said Ron, staring. "How did you do that? It was like you stopped time or something!"

Martin looked at him, and his expression was worried.

"Oh, it's a Druid trick. Completely instinctive."

"It's useful," noted Hermione in approval. "You sensed it coming didn't you? You didn't even use a
"spell!"

"Yeah, well," said Martin, looking away from them. "It's no big deal."

"No big deal?" goggled Ron. "You just pull a stunt like that and then try and shrug it off?!"

Martin avoided looking at him, and instead looked out at the new DA. "We should get out there and help; looks like they need it."

"But-" objected Ron, but Martin was already gone.

"What is with him?" Ron asked Harry. But Harry had no answer.

"Right, spill," demanded Ron, several hours later as they sat around the fire in the Gryffindor Common Room. Merlin was apprehensive; the DA meeting had been tense to say the least. Every time Harry or the others had caught his eye, he'd rapidly looked away. The meeting itself had been a success, by the end almost everyone was able to cast a perfect disarming spell, even the first years, who had no real experience, were able to make someone drop their wand at least. But still, Merlin had been distinctly uncomfortable throughout, especially when that Smith guy and other students would stare openly at him.

And now it looked like it was time for his interrogation.

"Well?" asked Ron, looking impatient. Harry and Hermione were staring at him intensely. Merlin sighed.

"Again, I'm sorry for the way I reacted, I just had an awful realisation."

"Which was what?" asked Hermione, on tenterhooks.

"Do you know who the woman was?" Harry asked.

Merlin hesitated for only a second. "Yes, I believe I might. The description you gave me … it sounded like, well, it sounded like the descriptions that were given of Morgana."

The three of them just stared. "Morgana?" gasped Ron. "Are you mental?"

Merlin shook his head. "No, it sounded like her, and like something she would do. She was definitely powerful enough to influence dreams, and she made mention of the Old Religion."

"Yes, but isn't she … dead?" said Hermione.

Merlin closed his eyes for a second, breathing in. "Not exactly," he finished.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Ron slowly. "She lived hundreds of years ago!"

"Yes, but she was never killed," said Merlin. "According to legend, she was trapped in a Crystal Cave, which existed outside of normal time, where she'd be 'doomed' to spend the rest of eternity."

"And you believe that?" Hermione asked sceptically.

"Hang on," interrupted Harry. "Didn't you tell me once that it was supposed to be Merlin who was trapped in this cave thing?"
"Yes, that's what all the Muggle legends say!" said Hermione.

Merlin snorted. "Since when have Muggles gotten anything right? Legends vary, but most of them agree that either Merlin or Morgana was trapped in that cave. And from what the woman was saying in the dream …"

"'Free me … help me …'" said Harry remembering. "You think it was her?"

Merlin nodded. "I think it's possible."

The others looked at each other shocked and Merlin winced inwardly. Was it Morgana who was doing this? He'd been so sure when he'd trapped her there that there was no way she could ever leave. It was physically impossible with all the spells he'd cast! How could she possibly have extended her influence from inside that cave?

Merlin, not for the first time, regretted his actions. He'd doomed her to an eternity of entrapment within that cave, never aging because of the time-trap he'd placed on the place. Perhaps it may have been kinder to kill her outright, but he'd been so angry at the time he'd wanted her to suffer. He'd been a fool; now she may be starting to cause all that suffering all over again.

"But why would she need Harry?" Hermione asked in fear. "And how could she contact him?"

Merlin had an answer for this, he'd been thinking it over all day, as he wandered the grounds and he wasn't pleased with the theory he'd come up with.

"Harry is a product of the Old Religion, and there are very few people alive to still have that power within themselves, and if they do, it's been diluted over the centuries. Morgana was born of that magic, but Harry acquired it after birth, when his mother sacrificed herself for him and gave him that protection from the Old Religion. That may be why Morgana was able to contact him from inside the cave, because of the magic within both of you. It may also be that Harry is one of the only people who'd be able to free her, as he has that magic within himself."

Harry blinked. "You mean, I could learn the magic of the Old Religion? Morgana of all people, needs me?"

"Yes," answered Merlin. "Morgana was known for her ability to manipulate people, perhaps she's hoping that she can convince Harry to let her go. But there's another possibility, if Harry doesn't do what she wants."

"Which is?" pressed Ron, still looking flabbergasted. But Hermione had just given a sudden gasp and covered her mouth with her hand, looking horrified. Merlin could see she had worked it out.

"What?" asked Ron, staring at her.

Hermione looked at Martin in barely concealed panic. "Harry isn't the only one with that magic is he?"

Merlin shook his head gravely.

"Who else has it?" Ron asked, still looking confused, but also afraid at the expression on Hermione's face.

"That protection that Harry has, the blood magic, which itself is straight from the Old Religion was shared with another, who now also has that power," said Merlin heavily.
Harry's eyes went wide. "Voldemort?" he choked out. "Voldemort took my blood into him the night he was resurrected, that means …"

"He has it now?" asked Ron in horror, finally comprehending.

"Yes," said Merlin. "Kind of ironic really. When he tried to kill you as a baby, he gave you a piece of his soul. When he tried to kill you in the graveyard, you gave him the magic of the Old Religion.

"But- but," said Hermione stammering.

Merlin interrupted her. "The magic Voldemort has inside of him was cruelly subverted during the ritual. I felt it that night in the graveyard when that magic, the power of life and death was corrupted. It's supposed to always be in equilibrium; for one life to be given, another must be taken. But that wasn't the case this time. He used an ancient Dark Magic ritual to come back, and what's worse, Voldemort used the power that had saved you as a child, and brought back his own body with it, thereby imbuing himself with the same power you possessed. But this is abhorrently wrong, that power was only ever meant for you. The fact that he even has it …"

Merlin broke off and took a deep breath. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I believe that this is how Voldemort was able to use the magic of the Old Religion. I also believe this is how he learned it in the first place. Harry wasn't the only one Morgana contacted. I believe she's been teaching Voldemort for afar for quite some time now."

Merlin sighed heavily, feeling every single one of his thirteen hundred years.

"I think this is what happened the other night when I collapsed. Voldemort was trying to access that power once again. He was trying to free Morgana. He's probably been trying for some time, but he hasn't succeeded because the magic within him is corrupted. Morgana probably reached out to Harry because she felt he may have a better chance."

Harry stared at him, his eyes wide.

"I could? But … I don't know anything about the Old Religion! Why doesn't she try and contact you? You've got that magic haven't you? Why me?"

Merlin almost laughed. "Morgana would never contact me, nor any other Druid. We would see right through her. She was probably hoping Harry wouldn't ask too many questions and rush off to help her. Voldemort may have told her about your 'saving people thing'."

Ron looked shaken. "Blimey, Morgana! I can't believe it! But wait, if You-Know-Who can't free her, and Harry knows the truth about her now, does that mean she can't get out?"

Merlin shook his head. "The only reason Voldemort hasn't succeeded is because the magic within him is weaker than in Harry. But he's learning, and learning fast, if that attempt he made the other night is anything to go by. As corrupted as his magic is, I believe it's only a matter of time before he succeeds."

Merlin closed his eyes as he said this. He didn't have to open them to see the horrified expressions they all had on their faces.

This was turning out ten times worse than he could ever have imagined.
An Old Friend

Merlin found himself almost asleep in classes the next day. He stared at the boards in classrooms and tried to look interested as the teachers told him stuff he'd learned centuries ago but found it even more difficult than usual.

He'd lain awake the entire night thinking. He kept going over the same things in his mind over and over again. He thought about Morgana in a way he hadn't in over a thousand years. The old guilt and despair came flooding back as he remembered his early days in Camelot, and wondered for the millionth time if things could have turned out differently.

Harry and the others were the same; Merlin knew for a fact Harry and Ron hadn't slept the previous night either, and he suspected Hermione had done the same. At breakfast that morning she had fallen asleep at the table with her head resting on an ancient copy of *Merlin and Morgana: The Golden Years of Camelot and their Downfall*, which she had been perusing at every spare opportunity she had, desperately trying to find out as much as she could. Merlin didn't try to stop her even though he knew that book was more or less entirely fictitious.

Professor Connolly had noticed his less-than-enthusiastic attitude in Defence Against the Dark Arts and assigned him extra homework: reading up on the early forms of Dark Magic practised by ancient warlocks. *Well, that would be easy,* he'd thought, *Morgana was a master at Dark Magic.*

People had been coming up to them all day and congratulating them all on a successful DA meeting the previous night, but neither Harry or any of the others had been particularly thrilled- there were much more serious things on their minds.

"You didn't have another dream last night did you, Harry?" Ron asked nervously, at lunchtime.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't sleep at all."

Merlin nodded, knowing the feeling.

Hermione turned another page in the book she was reading. Her eyes were ringed with black and she looked exhausted. "There *has* to be more information than this on Morgana! I mean, she's incredibly famous!"

"Most of what we know is just stories that have been passed down," said Ron. "My mum's full of them, but I bet at least half aren't true. Apparently there's not a lot of historical evidence for Morgana. Or Merlin for that matter."

Merlin smiled into himself. *I know. That's mainly because of me.*

He'd erased much of the history of his own time period; he didn't think the knowledge of the Old Religion should have been preserved to be used to ill effect in the future, not until the Old Religion decided to make its return to prominence. That and it had made it easier for him to remain hidden.

Hermione sighed, looking even more tired. She looked at Merlin. "I don't suppose the Druid families have any more information on her?"

Merlin shook his head. "I told you everything we know." *Well, at least everything relevant, half-truths that they were.*

Harry pushed his untouched plate away. "We need to go back to the library and keep looking for
information. We know the Founders had at least some knowledge of the Old Religion, they must have left something behind!"

Hermione nodded. "I think so too. We have half an hour before Herbology, we should get going."

"Wait a moment," said a voice from behind them. Neville had appeared. "McGonagall says she wants to see you in her office, Martin."

Merlin grimaced. He knew what this was probably about. "Thanks Neville." And as soon as Neville had moved off he spoke to the others again.

"Right, we're going to have to tell this to the Order. This is important, and it may help us defeat Voldemort, or at least prepare them by letting them know Voldemort isn't working on his own. Want me to let McGonagall know when I'm there?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I suppose the Order should know. Tell her, then we can all discuss it at the meeting on Saturday."

Ron and Hermione agreed, and Merlin stood up and left the Great Hall on his way to McGonagall's office. His feet were heavy as he walked; he wasn't looking forward to this.

"Oh, hello, Martin!"

Luna Lovegood had come around the corner. Merlin stopped.

"Hi, Luna," he said, dully, noticing that for some strange reason she was wearing a strange net thing over her hair.

Luna frowned slightly. "You're upset."

Merlin tried to smile. "McGonagall asked to see me; I think I'm in trouble."

Luna blinked, her eyes fixed on his face.

"That isn't it. Has a Wrackspurt got you?"

Merlin frowned. "What exactly is a Wrackspurt?"

"Oh, they're invisible creatures that float around and in through your ears to make your brain go all fuzzy," she said matter-of-factly. "I think Hogwarts has an infestation. That's why I'm wearing this net. It's too much trouble to bat them away all the time."

Merlin tried not to laugh. "Well, maybe that's my problem. His mind was so confused and messed up recently he wouldn't be surprised if it was due to a 'Wrackspurt'.

Luna nodded slowly. "Well, you'd better be careful. They can really cause trouble. You shouldn't let them bother you- you've got too many important things going on."

Merlin laughed hollowly. "I'll say."

Luna frowned. "You shouldn't worry, you know. You're a good man, and almost smart enough to be a Ravenclaw. You'll get us all through this."

Merlin looked her in the eye, to see her simple confidence in him glimmering there.

"How can you be so sure?" he asked quietly.
Luna smiled. "Because I can see things other people can't. Trust me."

She smiled sweetly again, and Merlin felt as though a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He remembered Helga Hufflepuff saying something very similar to him a long time ago. He hadn’t believed it then, but perhaps this time was different.

"Well, I'd better be going," Luna said, adjusting her hair net. "The Nargles stole my Transfiguration homework and I have to find it before this afternoon. Goodbye, Michael!"

She started to walk off, but Merlin turned to face her urgently.

"My name's Martin, remember?" he said, trying not to panic.

She blinked. "Oh, I know. But the Grey Lady calls you Michael, and I like it." She gave him a look that made Merlin extremely disconcerted, and she skipped off down the corridor humming to herself.

Merlin stood standing in the corridor, his mind buzzing as if fifty Wrackspurts had flown in there. He'd last used the name Michael when he was in Ravenclaw House in the eighteenth century. What had the Grey Lady told Luna?

Helena had been on and off cold to him over the centuries. At first, she had been furious when he had once again turned up, angry that he had apparently abandoned her and the Founders, and blamed him for Salazar’s arguments with the others, and her own estrangement from her mother. He had been rather close to her as a child, and such anger had only to be expected. She calmed down after a while though, but never again become the inquisitive and friendly child that Merlin had known. Every time he showed up at Hogwarts she would plague him with questions and demand answers. Unlike the other ghosts, she had a more personal reason for wanting to know the truth; he had been closer to her mother than probably anyone else over his long waiting period, and she knew it, and seemed to take it as a personal insult that Merlin would not tell her the truth.

He hated lying to her, the woman he had known since she was three years old, but he had nonetheless, often making their relationship rather strained at times. Had the discovery of who he was angered her so much she had been blabbing to Luna? He didn’t think so. Helena was still fond of him, for old time’s sake more than anything probably, and she had never revealed anything about him to anyone before now. It had probably just been a slip of the tongue.

He continued on his way to McGonagall's office replaying the conversation in his head. Did Luna know anything?

He knocked on the door to McGonagall's office still thinking about this, and McGonagall jerked it open almost immediately.

"Mr Emrys, glad you could join me," she said, her lips thin.

Merlin winced at her tone, and entered the office and sat down at her desk. She settled herself on the opposite side and almost glared at him.

"Mr Emrys, I'm sure you know why you are here. You missed an entire day of classes yesterday without so much as a word of explanation. I thought I had made it clear at the beginning of term that you were here to work and to work hard. Despite the fact you don't need the education what sort of example is this to set? You said you would abide by our rules and respect your teachers, and I believed you. Was I mistaken?"

Merlin sighed. "No, professor. I'm sorry, but I do have a reason."
McGonagall raised her eyebrows. "Oh really? Well I'd be delighted to hear it."

Merlin sighed again and launched into the explanation of everything he had discovered yesterday about Morgana and what he thought Voldemort's plan was. When he was finished McGonagall stared at him, her face pale.

"How can you possibly be sure of this, Mr Emrys?" she asked, her voice quiet. "How can you be certain that the woman in Potter's dream was Morgana, or that the dream was even real?"

"I know," Merlin answered simply.

McGonagall blinked several times as she attempted to compose herself.

"Well, this is certainly an outlandish theory, something I would never normally accept, but you are the resident expert on these matters. If you say this is true …"

She broke off and shook her head wearily, "I admit, I can hardly believe it myself."

"You should not doubt him, Minerva."

McGonagall jumped and glanced behind her, staring at the portrait of Dumbledore, who was lying in his portrait frame apparently fast asleep. Merlin watched him carefully; what did Dumbledore know?

McGonagall looked back to Merlin, visibly shaken. "Well, I see I have no other choice but to have faith in your instincts, Mr Emrys. I just wish they were not so extreme."

"As do I, professor," Merlin agreed.

She sighed, and began straightening the scrolls on her desk, her hands shaking slightly.

"I shall relay this information to the other members of the Order and we shall all discuss it in greater detail at the meeting on Saturday. In the meantime I suggest-"

The fireplace in the office burst into bright emerald flames, and a figure appeared within it, revolving rapidly.

"What in Merlin's name-," McGonagall gasped, as Bill Weasley came staggering out of the fireplace looking frantic.

"Quick, professor! And you, Martin! There's been another attack!"

"Why d'you suppose Martin's not back yet?" Ron asked halfway through their double period of Herbology as he loaded a pile of dragon dung into a gargantuan pot.

"McGonagall must really be laying into him" said Harry, trying to catch one of his Lopper seeds in order to plant it in the pot, even as it sprouted legs and began trying to escape. "Maybe it's because he missed his classes yesterday."

"Hmm," wondered Hermione. "I don't think that'd be the case. Professor McGonagall wouldn't drag it on this long; she'd just give him a detention or something and let him leave. It must be something else."

"What?" grunted Ron, as he tried to force his own seedlings into their pot as they wriggled, desperate
for freedom. "What could be taking so long?"

Harry just shrugged. He had a suspicion that Martin and McGonagall were discussing the latest plot with Morgana in greater detail, and he couldn't help but feel annoyed. He should be in those discussions as well. Martin may know more about Old Magic, but it was he who had had the dream in the first place!

Every time he thought about it, a chill went down his spine. Was Martin's theory correct? Had one of the most evil sorceresses of all time tried to contact him in his sleep?

He remembered her face; he pictured it vividly in his mind every time he closed his eyes. If Martin hadn't suggested that she may have been Morgana Harry would never, could never, have guessed. She didn't look anything like her picture on her Chocolate Frog card, and she didn't look evil in the slightest. She'd looked vulnerable and afraid, and if it wasn't for the gut feeling he'd had that she couldn't be trusted, Harry would have been completely duped into thinking that he should try and help her.

But was she Morgana? Harry couldn't really be sure, all he had were Martin's assurances, and he'd never even seen the dream! Plus, how could Martin be sure that she was Morgana when the woman had lived centuries before he had even been born? Why was he so certain?

Martin had told them all months ago that he knew very little about Old Magic, but it seemed increasingly that he knew more than he had previously let on. Just how much was he hiding?

At that moment, Neville came running in through the Greenhouse door and rushed over to them, red in the face and out of breath.

"Whoa! What's the rush?" Ron asked, as Neville bent over double in exhaustion and tried to speak.

"I was-just-up-in-the castle-" he panted, his face still flushed. "I was on an errand for Professor Sprout and I heard some news on the radio when I was up there!"

"What is it?" Hermione asked nervously, and Harry felt his heart sink. What could possibly have happened?

"The dragon!" Neville burst out. "The Gringotts dragon! It's been sighted!"

Harry felt himself relax a little. "Oh? Finally, I thought it was gone for good. Where was it?"

Neville shook his head, still looking half-mad. "You don't understand! It's on its way north! It's heading straight for Hogwarts!"

Hermione gasped, her hands over her mouth, and Ron yelped and knocked over his tray of seedlings, which scampered out of sight.

"Are you sure?" Ernie MacMillan asked from the next table over, leaning closely to hear. "If it was seen then why didn't they catch it?"

"It's too fast!" said Neville. "It's much faster than any other dragon and there isn't a spell that can hurt it! It completely ignored the wizards trying to catch it and it managed to escape them!"

"But if it managed to escape again how do they know it's on its way here?" Harry asked. "And why would it anyway?"

"The guy on the radio said it might be being attracted by Hogwarts' wards," Neville answered. "He
said magical creatures are more attuned to large concentrations of magic, and all the new protection around the school makes it stand out more."

Ron's eyes went wide. "Blimey, d'you think the wards will hold and keep it out?"

Neville looked worried. "The guy said the wards should keep it out, but then again there's still little known about the dragons and how powerful their magic is. It might not work. They're sending a bunch of experts to the school to try and catch it when it gets here."

Barely had these words left Neville's lips when a glimmering silvery object appeared in the classroom in front of Professor Sprout, who shrieked in surprise and dropped a plant pot. It was a cat Patronus, with square markings around its eyes. It opened its mouth and spoke with Professor McGonagall's voice:

"All students are to come to the Great Hall immediately. Further instructions will be given to you there."

Hermione squeaked, and clutched Ron's robes. "It's here already!"

Professor Sprout gaped at the Patronus a couple of seconds longer as it disappeared before snapping into action.

"You heard the Headmistress! Everyone, get back up to the castle. Drop everything!"

The class followed her instructions without question, a great murmuring breaking out amongst them all as they left the Greenhouses and began tramping back up the front lawns to the castle. Neville left Harry and the others and began filtering through the students, informing them all of the latest developments in the dragon situation.

Hermione was biting her lip. "Oh, I hope it won't get through the wards."

"It won't," Ron reassured her, clasping her hand in his. "They're too powerful. We'll all be safe."

Hermione didn't look any calmer. "If it gets in here and starts hurting people … it'll be our fault. We're the ones that set it free!"

Harry took Hermione's other hand and squeezed it comforting.ly. "It's no one's fault, Hermione. We'll be alright. The dragon experts will catch it long before it gets here."

They followed the mass of students into the Great Hall, where everyone was looking afraid and confused. Those who knew what was going on soon informed everyone else, and there was a barely concealed panic. Voices rose louder and louder as people began to cry out.

A large bang from the front of the hall soon had everyone lapse into silence. Professor McGonagall stood there resolutely in front of her students, looking at them all fiercely. She didn't look afraid, or panicked; she was in complete control.

"Thank Merlin that racket has died down," she said, practically glaring at them. "Now, if I can have your attention, I may be able to inform you all why you are here."

"It's because the dragon's coming!"

"It's You-Know-Who, he's controlling it!"

"It's gonna eat us!"
McGonagall let off another bang with her wand and raised her voice ever so slightly in the once again silent hall.

"*No one shall be getting eaten. Not on my watch,*" she said firmly, staring them all down. "Yes, there are reports that the escaped Gringotts dragon is making its way north in the general direction of the school. However, *this is no reason to panic.* I've brought you all here as a precaution only; the Great Hall is the most strongly protected part of the castle, and I would like everyone in the same place. There are qualified witches and wizards on their way here to deal with the dragon and I assure you, they are more than equipped to protect you. Now, you must all stay calm, and remain here until it has been deemed safe for you all to leave again. You are in *no danger.*"

"That isn't a normal dragon!" someone shouted. "The Ministry people don't know how to deal with it!"

"That is enough!" McGonagall said, shouting for the first time. "This is no time for hysterics! You shall all remain here until I say so, and you shall do so quietly and without panic. Let the people from the Ministry do their jobs. Now, all of you, sit down at your House tables and stick together, and show the Ministry how the students of Hogwarts react in a crisis: calmly and without fear."

More excited babbling broke out as McGonagall said these words, and heads were closed together to frantically discuss what was happening. Harry, Ron and Hermione ran forwards and took a seat at the Gryffindor table, which was rapidly filling with students from all Houses, as people discussed the situation with their friends. Neville was informing everyone in great detail of the news report he'd heard, Ginny was closeted in amongst her friends who were all desperate to ask her questions about Charlie and if he was going to be helping catch the dragon, Luna was sitting reading the Quibbler looking decidedly unconcerned, and everyone else in the hall were either deep in conversation or glancing up at the enchanted ceiling as though expecting the dragon to soar overhead at any minute.

"Blimey," said Ron, looking around at the fearful faces. "Just look at all the trouble one flying lizard can cause."

"That person was right though," said Harry. "This dragon is different from others- that's why it hasn't been caught yet. People are afraid of what it could do."

They fell into uncomfortable silence. Then Hermione gasped.

"Oh my goodness! We completely forgot! Where's Martin? Is he still out there?"

Harry felt something icy slip into his stomach. How could he have forgotten?

"Well, I'm glad you're concerned for my well-being, Hermione, but I'm perfectly alright." Martin's voice sounded from behind them.

Ron jumped. "Merlin's pants! Don't frighten us like that!"

Martin smiled, though he looked slightly annoyed at something Ron had said. "Didn't know you cared so much."

"Of course we do!" exclaimed Hermione, as Martin slid into a seat at the table. Martin smiled at her, though the smile didn't reach his eyes, as though he was distracted by something else.

"What happened to your robes?" Harry asked. He'd just noticed the right hand side of Martin's robes were ripped and covered with dirt, as though he'd been dragged along the ground, and the skin beneath was grazed and seeping blood.
Martin blinked, and looked down at his robes. "Damn. I forgot about that; took me off guard he did."

"Who did?" asked Ron, staring at Martin's arm beneath his robes, which looked extremely painful. "What happened? Don't tell me you took on the dragon yourself!"

"No, of course not," said Martin hastily, still looking preoccupied. "There was a Death Eater attack."

"What?!" yelped Harry, Ron and Hermione at once, drawing several looks from along the table.

"Here at the castle?" squeaked Hermione.

Martin shook his head. "No, don't worry. The Order sent a message to me and McGonagall and we went and helped take care of it."

Harry felt something cold had just stabbed at his heart. "Wait, the Order asked you to come and help? Why didn't they get all of us there?"

"There wasn't enough time," explained Martin. "McGonagall and I were in our meeting and we were the first ones the message reached, so we left straight away to go and help."

But Harry felt something rushing in his ears and make his body shake with suppressed anger.

"We're all a part of the Order!" he objected. "We were promised that if something happened we'd all be told so we could help, and now we find out that they asked you but didn't bother to tell the rest of us!"

"There wasn't time!" Martin insisted. "The attack was already going on. Bill only had time to get McGonagall to come, it was only a coincidence I was there as well!"

"Wait, my brother knew about this but didn't try and contact us?" Ron said, his tone indignant.

"Voldemort was attacking someone and you got to go off and fight while we were stuck in Herbology?" Harry said, his voice rising. "Didn't you think we'd want to help?"

"There wasn't time," Martin repeated urgently. "I'm sorry, but there wasn't even time to send a Patronus or anything. People were dying, they had to get all the people they could as soon as possible. They couldn't start tracking you all down!"

Harry was scowling. "But of course, they found you. I'm the 'Chosen One' and I wasn't told, but you're the guy no one knew until four months ago and suddenly you're the first one they call on?"

Merlin sighed. He'd known they'd take it like this, but he really hadn't had a choice. He'd only just managed to get there himself in time to save a whole bunch of Muggles, being hit by a curse from a Death Eater while he was distracted. It was regrettable, but it had been the right choice. He knew Harry was feeling useless at not having any fighting to do, but if there had been any time Merlin would have called on him without hesitation. If the fact that he himself had managed to be injured was any indication, he was severely out of practice with combat situations. Harry would have been useful.

"That's not important right now!" Hermione interrupted, though Merlin could tell she was also slightly put-out. "What happened? What people were dying?"

Merlin sighed. "Muggles."
The annoyance drained a little from Harry and Ron's faces.

"Muggles?" asked Ron. "They attacked a Muggle house? Those dirty cowards!"

Merlin shook his head. "Not a Muggle house. A Muggle museum."

Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at him their jaws open.

"A Muggle museum?" Hermione asked incredulously. "Why on earth could the Death Eaters want to attack a Muggle museum?"

"Some sort of terrorist thing probably," Ron said. "Trying to frighten the Muggles for fun and let the Ministry know how weak they are."

"There's more to it than that," Merlin sighed heavily. "They were searching for something in the museum and the collections off of display."

"What could they possibly be looking for?" Harry asked in confusion, all his anger gone. "It's not as if they need to steal stuff for money or anything. And if they were really looking for something why do it in the middle of the day? If they'd done it at night they might not have been caught."

"True," said Merlin. "But like Ron said, it spreads fear. They probably just wanted some Muggle-killing fun into the bargain."

"How many ..." Hermione trailed away, looking distressed.

"Seventeen," answered Merlin heavily. "Most of them were school children on a trip."

He saw their horrified faces and the anger growing there. He knew how they felt. Seeing those tiny bodies lying there, most of the victims already dead before Merlin had gotten there ... it had brought back some horrific memories. The evil Morgana had brought about in her day, the massacred Slytherin family, the persecution and hatred he'd seen over the centuries, the innocent children put to the stake during the witch hunts, most of them Muggles who had been falsely accused ... no matter how many centuries Merlin had endured, death was the one awful constant.

"So, what happened?" Ron asked in a flat voice, still looking horror-stricken.

"They'd accessed the vaults when I'd gotten there, and messed them up pretty badly," said Merlin. "It was obvious they were looking for something, but I don't think they found it. Some of the Death Eaters were distracting us out the front, and after we'd dealt with them the others scarpered before we could get to them. We managed to catch eight of them, but not before they'd killed all those people," he finished bitterly.

Hermione had tears beginning to leak from her eyes. "What was it they were after?"

Merlin shook his head. "I have no idea. Nothing of Muggle historical value could be of any worth to them, so they must have been searching for some magical article that may have been mixed in with Muggle stuff over the years, but I haven't a clue what it is."

Harry looked grave. "Maybe it's something to do with the Old Religion? Muggle archaeologists are always digging stuff up. Maybe they think some Old Magic thing can help them."

Merlin sighed. "Possibly."

The fell again into silence, each contemplating the horrific events of the day. Merlin laid his hated
wand on the table in front of him. Perhaps if he hadn't been using this bloody stick and was able to use his own magic he could have saved more people …

The sky above them darkened, and still no word came about them leaving. Ministry wizards rushed into the hall every half an hour to give updates, causing widespread panic every time they did so as people feared the dragon had come at last. Hagrid himself hadn't turned up in the hall, and Harry and the others began to fear he had gone after the dragon himself.

But as the hours dragged on there was still no indications of the dragon having come to the school. Merlin began drumming his wand against his knee nervously. These Ministry wizards wouldn't be able to handle this dragon if it turned up. Should he …

Plates of food began appearing on the House tables as the evening turned into night, and the students gorged themselves, quelling their anxiety with comfort food. Merlin didn't touch any of it.

"Does this mean the house-elves are still in the kitchen?" Hermione asked furiously, staring at the plates. "At a time like this they're still being forced to cook?"

"Relax, Hermione," said Ron thickly, stuffing his face. "They're in the basements, they'll be fine. Besides, the dragon wouldn't go after them. They'd barely be enough for one swallow."

Hermione looked at him disgustedly. "Charming as ever you are."

The night wore on as stars began appearing in the enchanted ceiling. The students weren't sleepy however, they all sat rigidly in their seats listening carefully.

"Maybe it isn't coming?" Hermione whispered, a habit everyone had fallen into as it got darker. "It should have gotten here by now."

"It's probably just waiting to pounce," Seamus informed her, his wand tightly in hand as though expecting the dragon to burst in through the doors at any moment.

Merlin snorted. "Dragons don't pounce."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "How do you know?"

Merlin opened his mouth to reply sarcastically, but was stopped short. Something overcame him, a warm feeling spreading throughout his body, such as he hadn't felt in centuries. The magic within him was revitalised, and rushed through him with renewed vigour. His senses were tingling, but not in the way they had when Voldemort had tried to summon Morgana several nights ago. This was a pleasant feeling. It was familiar, as though some ancient song was ringing out through his heart and reminding him of who he had been over thirteen hundred years ago. He felt himself gasp and clutch at his heart, which was beating rapidly, the warmth spreading from there to reach every part of himself, mind, body and soul. This was the Old Religion. It was here.

"Martin, are you-, " Ron began to ask, but was drowned out by a monstrous roar from the grounds.

Pandemonium erupted. Screams rang out through the hall.

"It's here!"

"It's in the grounds!"

"It's going to kill us!"
Hermione jumped and clutched on to Ron who himself had turned deathly pale. The older students rose with their wands outstretched ready to fight, the younger ones clutched each other sobbing, the teachers tried to restore calm, but the dreadful roars continued. And Merlin felt each of them deep within his soul. He knew that sound …

Panic continued to erupt but Merlin sat stock still in his seat. It couldn't be …

A white dragon …. Two hundred years …

A burst of flame erupted on the table in front of him making several students scream as though they thought the dragon had managed to get inside.

"What the-," yelled Harry.

Merlin stared straight ahead at where the fire had been, to see a single phoenix feather lying there. He picked it up slowly. He felt the power within it, the power of the Old Religion, and suddenly he knew what he had to do.

"Martin! What are you doing?!" shrieked Hermione, as Martin suddenly leapt out of his seat at the table and began running towards the doors of the Great Hall frantically.

Harry ran after him, and Ron and Hermione followed. Harry could feel the power that Fawkes' feather had left behind. He knew for some inexplicable reason, he had to follow.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing, mate?" yelled Ron.

But Martin didn't answer and just kept running. Students began screaming as he ran and tried to shout him back. Teachers began shouting after him.

"Mr Emrys! Where do you think you are going? It's isn't safe! Potter, Weasley, Granger, get back here!"

But Harry and the others ignored them. A couple of Stunner spells came soaring after them, but were stopped by a Shield Charm before they could make impact. Neither Harry, Ron nor Hermione had cast one, Martin had, wordlessly, and without a wand.

He reached the doors to the hall and the doors swung open immediately, though Harry could have sworn they were locked magically only a few moments earlier.

Martin raced out through the Entrance Hall, past Ministry wizards who were gathered there and Harry and the others followed. The wizards tried to stop them, but again, that mysterious Shield Charm stopped them.

They cried out in alarm as they watched the four youngsters run past them, but Martin paid them no heed, and neither did Harry.

What on earth was Martin doing, Harry wondered. Was he insane? Nevertheless, he had to go after him. He couldn't let him go out there on his own!

The emerged out on the front lawns, and no sooner had Harry, Ron and Hermione cleared the front doors, than they slammed shut, and glowed with some sort of magic. Harry could hear the wizards on the other side fruitlessly trying to open it again.
Martin was already far ahead, sprinting across the dark grounds. Harry followed, looking around for a sign of the dragon.

They'd reached the edge of the grounds, and Martin didn't hesitate as he stormed straight into the Forbidden Forest.

"IS HE MENTAL?" screamed Ron as Martin disappeared between the dark trees. "DOES HE WANT TO BE EATEN BY A DRAGON OR A GIANT SPIDER?"

Harry made no answer, but just followed, crashing through the undergrowth, and heard Hermione and Ron follow him, though Hermione was almost whimpering in fear.

Harry ran through the trees, barely managing to keep Martin in his sight. What was he playing at?

More roars sounded above them, and Harry ducked instinctively. He could almost sense the dragon as it soared overhead.

He emerged in a large clearing in the forest to find Martin standing there still in the moonlight, his face unreadable. He looked ancient, and almost intimidating. Harry was struck dumb.

Ron and Hermione soon joined him at his side and stood gaping at Martin.

"Martin, what are you doing?" Hermione moaned, clutching a stitch in her side.

But Martin gave no indication that he had heard her. Instead, he threw back his head, and a sound issued from his throat that wasn't entirely human, it was more of a roar than anything, and Harry felt a tingling in his spine as he heard it.

Then Martin began shouted strange words in harsh language in a voice that was dripping with power.

"O drakon, e male so ftengometta tesd'hup'anankes!"

"Are you insane?! What d'you think you're doing?" yelled Ron. But again, Martin gave no indication he had heard, and his eyes burned golden.

Harry felt something change in the earth. He could feel power radiating from Martin as he cast his spell. It ran through him like flames and he shivered all over at the power that was in those few words. Martin almost seemed to be glowing with magical energy. Harry felt his heart stop and his breathing increase. Martin was different … this was power.

He stared open mouthed at Martin as he continued to stand resolutely in the clearing staring up at the sky. There was an expression on his face that Harry had never seen there before. Like Martin's true colours were finally being shown.

"Right? You finished your nonsense shouting now? Can we go back inside now before the dragon shows up?" Ron shouted at Martin, who still continued to still there completely still, as though waiting for something.

Then Hermione screamed.

Harry looked up and felt his breath catch in his throat. The dragon, large, white and blind, was directly overhead. And it was coming straight for them.

He pulled out his wand and pointed it at the dragon, not really sure what he was planning to do.
"Get out of it, Martin," yelled Ron, he and Hermione pulling out their own wands. "Move out the way, help us!"

But Martin still stood there, looking directly at the oncoming dragon. Harry felt a thrill of horror overcome him. He was just going to stand there? He didn't even look afraid.

Harry cast a Stunner at the dragon even as Ron and Hermione did the same, remembering from the Triwizard Tournament that several Stunners at once might be able to take it down. But the dragon didn't even flinch.

It came closer and closer, and Harry prepared to run.

Then it landed, with a giant crash on the ground, almost making the trees themselves jump out of their roots. Harry raised his wand again, but something stopped him.

It didn't look the same as it had when they'd escaped on it from Gringotts. It was just as large, just as fierce looking, but there was something different. It looked even more pitiful than it had when it had been trapped underground. Its eyes were still milky white, and its scales were almost peeling from its body. Harry was no expert, but he could have sworn it was thinner as well.

It groaned as it lay there, a pitiful groan as it practically writhed on the ground. The gashes on its face and snout stood out against its white scales. It breathed in and out slowly, laboriously, and whined with every breath. It was exhausted.

Harry felt a small stirring of pity for the creature. The goblins had used and abused it for two centuries, and now it was faring even worse. It was almost like seeing some stray dog that no one had bothered to feed. Normally this would have made Harry even more terrified; it was obviously very hungry. But it was so pathetic looking Harry wondered whether it would have had the energy to attack him.

Martin stared at it for several moments, looking down at it with a curious expression on his face. He began blinking rapidly.

"Martin," Ron whispered frantically. "Get away from it! It'll attack you!"

Martin shook his head, a distressed expression on his face.

"Listen, Martin," said Hermione, looking terrified. "Let's go and get the Ministry people. They'll be able to look after it properly."

Martin shook his head again distractedly as though barely registering her voice. He took several slow steps towards it.

"Martin!" shrieked Hermione. "Get back!"

But Martin ignored her again, and continued stepping towards it. The dragon didn't even flinch.

Harry couldn't believe what he was seeing, he wanted to rush forwards and grab Martin and drag him back from the beast, but found himself fixed on the spot, horror-struck.

Martin had finally reached it, and kneeled down in front of it, his eyes glistening with tears. He stretched out a hand and placed it on the dragon's snout. It whined pathetically.
"Oh, what have they done to you?" Martin asked in despair, a single tear dripping down his cheek. "Aithusa …"

Then something happened which made Harry even more shocked, if that was possible.

"Emrys …" the dragon hissed, and leaned into Martin, laying its massive head on the ground.

Harry could barely breathe. What on earth was going on?
Revelations

Harry watched open-mouthed as Martin and the dragon apparently greeted each other. He couldn't move, he couldn't breathe.

How could this be happening?

Martin made no indication that he was planning on removing his head from the dragon's at any time soon, so Harry used the time to look at Ron and Hermione, who were also staring at him in shock.

They remained like that for several minutes. Harry tried to speak, but he couldn't. He felt as though he was watching this from far away. This was just too ridiculous!

The good news however was that the dragon didn't seem to want to attack anyone. It was just lying there, its large head touching Martin's, its ruined eyes hidden behind thick eyelids. Harry wanted to move forward, to grab Martin and run, but something stopped him.

Ron made a rasping noise in his throat, and began to speak in a deadly whisper as though afraid to startle the dragon.

"Martin. What the hell is going on?"

This time, Martin looked around, and stared at the three of them, as though seeing them for the first time. The dragon raised its head and looked in their general direction as well. Harry, Ron and Hermione raised their wands instinctively.

"Don't!" said Martin, gesturing to their wands. "She won't hurt you!"

Hermione's eyes went even wider. "Won't hurt us?" she practically squeaked. "It's a dragon!"

As if by answer, the dragon made a sort of muffled roar, which made the three of them jump.

Martin looked worried. "Her name is Aithusa, and she's completely harmless as long as I'm here."

They stared at him incredulously. Harry frowned.

"What do you mean? 'As long as you're here'?"

But Hermione gasped and her hands shot up to her mouth. "You- you can't be!"

"What?" demanded Ron, looking from Martin to Hermione in utter confusion.

Hermione lowered her hands, and looked at Martin, as though truly seeing him for the first time.

"You're- you're a Dragonlord!"

Harry felt as though he'd just been hit over the head with something very heavy. A Dragonlord? How was that possible? Hermione had to be wrong, though something about that statement seemed absurd.

Hermione continued gazing at Martin and the dragon who was still looking at her from behind those ruined eyes. "That's why your Patronus is a dragon and why you know so much about the Old Religion. That's how you knew she was here, how you did that spell that brought her down here, why she isn't attacking you!"
Martin nodded resignedly "I wanted to tell you, I just didn't know how."

"So you lied to us instead?" growled Ron. "Told us all that rubbish about all that Old stuff being extinct? How are we supposed to trust you now? What else have you been hiding?"

Martin looked desperate. "Please, Ron, I'm sorry. I'll explain it all to you, I promise. But I have to look after Aithusa right now. She needs me."

"She needs you?" asked Harry faintly. The dragon tuned to 'look' at him, and Harry felt an uncomfortable crawling sensation over his skin as though the dragon was looking right through him.

Martin nodded. "She's in a bad shape … please. I know you're going to hate me for lying to you, but it was the only way. I'm truly sorry. Please, you can still trust me. Just help me to help her, and I'll explain."

He looked directly into Harry's eyes and Harry felt the same way he had during the Battle of Hogwarts, when Martin had revealed his uncanny knowledge of the Horcruxes. He had to trust him, despite what his senses were telling him. Something deep within him was telling him to; was it the magic of the Old Religion that Martin had said resided within him?

Harry nodded, hesitantly, and Martin smiled in relief. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione who were still staring disbelievingly at the dragon. Ron still looked suspicious, underneath his barely concealed terror of the creature in front of him, but Hermione hesitatingly took a few steps forward.

"I trust you, Martin," she said simply, but her eyes were still fixed warily on the dragon.

Martin grinned now, and looked back to the dragon.

"I'm going to need some help," he murmured. He thought for a moment, then whipped out his wand, and sent a silvery form streaking through the trees.

"I've sent a Patronus to Hagrid, asking him to come and help," he explained, after they looked curious. "The less people know about her, the better."

"And why do you want … her … hidden?" Ron asked, eyes still fixed on the dragon.

"Because," Martin looked hesitant,"because Aithusa is no ordinary dragon. She's of the Old race of dragons."

Harry blinked. "So I wasn't imagining her speaking earlier?"

By way of answer, the dragon lifted its head again. "No … you were not … young one."

Harry, Ron and Hermione took a few steps back in shock, but that seemed to have exhausted the dragon, who laid its head back on the ground where Martin was still kneeling. He placed a hand on its snout.

"Rest, Aithusa, you're weak. I will look after you."

Aithusa sighed, and a puff of smoke furled out from her nostrils. She was breathing heavily, and lay there pitifully. Martin's eyes filled with tears again, and he looked angry.

"Those monsters! How could they do this to you?"

"The goblins?" Harry guessed. He could see Martin's point; even when he'd been afraid of being eaten by the dragon back at Gringotts he'd felt sorry for it and the cruel treatment it had suffered.
Martin nodded, almost too angry to speak. He ran his hands over the slashes and cuts on Aithusa's face.

"This is despicable. How they could treat another living creature this way … particularly one like Aithusa …"

His hands began shaking in anger as Martin's face went whiter than Aithusa's scales. Harry wasn't sure if he was imagining it or not, but Martin's hands seemed to be glowing slightly with a magic Harry didn't understand. The fury on Martin's face … Harry had only ever seen its like on Dumbeldore's when faced with evil. Not a furious rage, but a silent, quiet fury, that if anything, was even more dangerous.

Martin took a deep breath to compose himself and the magic began to subside slightly. Martin closed his eyes, and his hands stopped shaking. He opened them again and was now looking at Aithusa with a quiet determination.

A great crashing came from behind them as a hulking figure burst into the clearing with a crossbow.

"Martin? I got yer message! Wha' was so impor…"

Hagrid broke off as he took in the sight in front of him. He looked too stunned to move.

"Hagrid, I need your help." Martin said urgently. "She's very weak."

"But, how?" asked Hagrid in disbelief.

"Never mind that now," said Martin. "Please help me. I promise she won't attack."

Hagrid took a step closer in wonder.

"How d'ye get 'er to sit like tha'?"

"Martin is a Dragonlord apparently," said Ron drily. Hagrid looked at Martin in awe.

"I though' you said they'd died out? This is great!"

Martin looked impatient. "Please can you help me now?"

Hagrid nodded, and moved closer, though looking a bit wary. Harry could tell that no matter how much Hagrid loved dragons and dangerous creatures in general, he wasn't fool enough to approach a fully-grown dragon without caution.

"Eh, you sure she won' …"

"I promise not to attack you, friend of Emrys," Aithusa wheezed, sounding weak.

Hagrid almost jumped out of his skin. "Gallopin' Gorgons! She talks! She's one of them Old dragons ain't she?"

"Yes," said Martin, simply.

Hagrid nodded, still looking awestruck and approached Aithusa, and began to examine her carefully, looking over her injuries far more gently than you would expect from his great size. Martin watched him desperately.

Hagrid stepped back. "She needs a whole lotta rest. She's practically starved an' she needs a lotta
care. I can' do anythin' abou' those cuts or her eyes, but I can help 'er get 'er strength back. She'll be fine."

Martin nodded, and closed his eyes in relief. "Thank you, Hagrid. I might be able to help her cuts and her eyes myself."

"How?" asked Hermione eagerly.

Martin looked at her. "I have … certain branches of magic. But I won't do anything until she is stronger. It may be too much for her body to cope with."

Hermione nodded. Martin turned back to Hagrid. "Please, don't mention this to anybody. I don't want the entire Ministry to know she is here. She's of the Old Religion, and no one except the Order is supposed to know too much about that."

Hagrid nodded. "I won' tell a soul. You leave 'er here wi' me and I'll watch 'er for now."

Martin nodded gratefully. Thank you. I'll tell the Order eventually."

"I'll go back ter me hut and get some things for her," Hagrid said. "She'll need a lot o' feeding up."

"Thank you Hagrid," said Martin again, smiling.

"It's nothin'," said Hagrid. "It's all worth it just ter meet one o' the Old dragons. You'll have ter promise ter tell me the whole story, mind."

And he left, crashing through the trees once more. Martin turned back to Aithusa and looked at her affectionately.

"You'll be alright now, I promise."

"I trust you, Emrys," the dragon managed to get out wearily. "I have been searching for you, but I couldn't find you. I've called out for you during my imprisonment, but you did not answer."

Martin's eyes filled with tears once again. "I am sorry, old friend. If I had known … I thought you'd gone overseas with Kilgharrah!"

Harry felt something clench within him. Kilgharrah? Was there was another dragon around?

Aithusa blinked her great sad eyes. "I did. But the goblins extend their influence far beyond these islands."

"But how did they manage to capture you? You are far more powerful than any ordinary dragon!" Martin almost whispered.

Aithusa groaned in pain. "They lured me into a trap and then struck me with their swords. Goblin steel far surpasses that of humans. One single blow was enough to incapacitate me, the magic in the blade neutralised my own for a short period. But it was long enough. They chained me up underground and tortured me. I resisted at first; I was too proud to be used as their possession. But the pain … I gave up. I became beast-like; I forgot what it was to be free. Thus it was until I was released, and then I vowed to find you, but I could not. Until now."

The dragon wheezed again, the speech apparently leaving her exhausted. Martin placed a hand on Aithusa's forehead.

"Rest now. You must have had to use a great deal of energy to elude the wizards and keep yourself
hidden. You are safe now, and I promise that you will remain that way."

Martin stood up and turned to face the others. Harry was still staring at Aithusa in shock and pity. Gone was his fear of the dragon, all he felt was anger at how a creature could have been abused in such a way, especially a sentient one. Ron looked disgusted and Hermione had tears spilling down her cheeks.

Martin sighed. "I'm sure you would all like an explanation now?"

The three of them nodded. Harry felt the anger he felt at Martin return; he'd momentarily forgotten about it in his pity for the dragon.

Martin sighed. "Well, I admit, I lied to you when I said the Dragonlords and the Old dragons were extinct. I felt it was prudent to keep them hidden. The ancient relics of the Old Religion should be kept hidden until it returns, my people know that. I felt this was the best way to protect them."

"But it didn't did it?" pointed out Harry. "The dra- I mean, Aithusa, still got captured."

Martin nodded, looking distressed. "I know, and I blame myself entirely. But I wanted them kept a secret for as long as possible. I thought I would have sensed it if Aithusa or Kilgharrah were in trouble. Apparently I was wrong."

Harry frowned. "This Kilgharrah, is he another Old dragon?"

"Yes," nodded Martin. "He's much older than Aithusa, and much wiser. No offence," he added, as Aithusa raised her head in objection. "I thought Aithusa and he would stick together and he safe."

"We parted ways for a while," explained Aithusa. "We are too different. He sees me as an immature hatchling and wanted to give me the chance to grow wiser on my own. I tried to call out for him when I was captured, but he was too far away."

Martin looked even more ashamed of himself.

"This Kilgharrah," Ron said nervously, looking up at the sky. "He isn't going to be dropping in anytime soon is he?"

"No," said Martin, shaking his head. "I only used my power tonight on Aithusa."

"How do you use your power?" asked Hermione looking interested. Harry had to roll his eyes; there was a living breathing dragon sitting barely feet from them, and Hermione was still wanting the details.

Martin frowned, and looked genuinely puzzled. "I'm not sure. It's instinctive. Dragonlords and dragons are kin. I access that bond to command them, but I'm not allowed to abuse that power. We have a link, I cannot explain it exactly. I inherited it from my father when he died, but I didn't know if I could use it properly until I faced my first dragon and tried to command it."

"Which was just now wasn't it?" Hermione asked, her face almost suspicious.

Martin frowned. Hermione went on:

"I mean, you said your father was killed by Death Eaters didn't you? That couldn't have been so long ago, and Aithusa here has been at Gringotts for two hundred years." She was watching him closely as she said this.
Ron's eyes widened. "Yeah, that's right! The Daily Prophet said that! But she knows your name, and you know hers, which means …"

Harry felt a shockwave hit him.

"You're two hundred years old?" he managed to choke out.

Martin stood there looking panicked, his mouth opening and closing without a sound.

Harry looked at him in a whole new light. Things began to click into place.

Martin looked from one to the other desperately, but he didn't try to contradict them.

Hermione gasped. "But, how can this be possible?"

Martin sighed, and closed his eyes as though condemning himself. He opened them again.

"We … I mean, the Druidic families … we – we live longer than normal witches and wizards. The magic of the Old Religion within us keeps us alive."

Martin stared at them all evenly, though Harry could see in his eyes that he was doing some quick thinking.

"And what about your dad?" Ron asked. "Was he really killed by Death Eaters?"

Martin nodded almost mechanically. "He was."

"How long do people like you live for?" Hermione asked curiously.

Martin blinked. "I'm not sure. None of us have died of natural causes."

Harry still felt as though he was being lied to. But at the same time, he could tell that Martin wasn't doing it out of malicious intent.

"How old are you exactly?" Harry asked him.

Martin bit his lip, and looked worried again. "Let's just say, I remember when Dumbledore's great-grandparents were children and we'll just leave it at that."

Harry, Ron and Hermione all gasped in astonishment. Harry could hardly believe it, looking at the man in front of him. He didn't look older than his early twenties.

Ron was gaping at him. "But … but … that's so weird!"

Martin laughed hollowly. "Yeah, I suppose it is."

Ron's eyes grew wider. "When you said you were too old for the girls at Hogwarts … you weren't telling the half of it were you?"

Martin shook his head.

Harry's mind was still reeling. Martin was … Martin …

"You've been to Hogwarts before haven't you?" he managed to get out. "That's why the Fat Lady and the ghosts and Peeves recognise you?"

Martin nodded slowly. "It isn't normal in the Druid families, but yes, I came."
Harry wasn't finished. "And back at Grimmauld Place, you said you used to do horse-riding and fencing! That's because you're so old! You learned it centuries ago back when it was normal!"

Martin looked slightly surprised that Harry had remembered this. "Yes." He answered simply.

"So, explain this Dragonlord stuff." Ron said faintly, still overwhelmed.

Martin took a deep breath.

"My father was the last of the Dragonlords, ours is the only line of that race left. Centuries ago, Kilgharrah and Aithusa decided to leave Britain for somewhere they could hide in secrecy. I knew them both back then, when I was much younger. But … I didn't have the power to control them. My father did. When he was killed, I inherited the power, but I've never had to use it until now. I've never needed to. Modern-day dragons don't respond well to it, which is why I didn't try to do something sooner; I thought the Gringotts dragon was one of them."

Harry nodded, it made sense. But he still felt there was more to the story. Martin however, was not forthcoming.

"Alright," said Harry. "That makes sense. But why didn't you tell us from the beginning?"

Martin looked distressed again. "I told you, I had to protect them and their secrets. Can you imagine what would have happened if the Ministry had gotten a hold of them? Or Voldemort? It was better for everyone if they were thought to be extinct. It's my duty as a Dragonlord to protect them."

Ron frowned, but he looked less angry than he had before. "But what about this whole centuries-old thing? Why didn't you tell us that?"

Martin laughed, and it sounded almost genuine. "Would you have believed me?"

Harry had to admit, no he probably wouldn't have.

"That's why you know so much magic isn't it?" Ron asked.

Martin nodded.

"But doesn't it frustrate you?" Hermione asked, frowning. "Coming back here and pretending to be young and less than you really are? Being treated like a child?"

Martin smiled sadly. "You have no idea, Hermione," he said, his voice distant. "It's been torture. Living this long, having to pretend all the time. Watching people grow old and die and be powerless to stop it." His voice was heavy with emotion, and Harry felt a creeping of pity stir within him. No matter what Martin was continuing to lie to him about, this was genuine at least.

Hermione looked stricken. "How old are you exactly?" she asked, forgetting Ron had already asked this question.

Martin shook his head. "It's better if you don't know. It'd only freak you out."

Harry stared. That must mean he was seriously old!

"Do you remember the times of the Old Religion?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

For a long time, Martin did not answer, and instead looked up at the sky and the moon, which shone brightly above them. His face was unreadable. He then looked back down to earth, and exchanged a glance with Aithusa. Although the great dragon was blind, something seemed to pass between them,
like some silent communication.

"No," he said finally. "I'm not that old."

Harry stared at him for a long moment. He was lying.

But Ron and Hermione seemed not to realise the same thing.

"Pity," said Hermione. "It'd have been really useful if you could."

Martin bowed his head, and said nothing.

A great crashing alerted them to the fact that Hagrid was coming back through the trees. He emerged, with a great carcass thrown over his shoulder. Harry didn't even want to know where it had come from. A clinking of bottles indicated that Hagrid was also carrying several potions with him.

"Well, this is all I could get on short notice," puffed Hagrid, lugging the animal into the clearing. "I hope it'll do!"

Aithusa had sprang to her feet despite her weakness, wobbling, and tore into the bloody carcass with relish, eating as though she hadn't in several months, which, Harry reminded himself, she probably hadn't.

Hagrid chuckled. "I'm guessin' tha's a yes?"

He moved closer with some of the potions. He opened one of them and poured a salve into his massive hands, and began to spread it over Aithusa's peeling scales.

"This'll help with the aches and pains. Yer muscles must have seized up in Gringotts and yeh've overexerted yersel' recently."

Aithusa almost purred in contentment as Hagrid gently began to rub it in, focusing on the joints of Aithusa's wings.

Martin was watching them carefully.

Hagrid turned to him. "I'll look after 'er. Don't you worry yersel'. Yeh'd best be getting back ter the castle' they're in a right state, yeh scared them all stiff by comin' out here."

Martin nodded, but he looked reluctant. "I suppose we'd better …," sounding doubtful.

Aithusa looked up at him, her snout smeared with blood, but looking much happier. "Go, Emrys, I shall be fine here. I'm beginning to like this man."

Hagrid chuckled with glee as Aithusa said this, and ran over to retrieve another potion.

Martin nodded, and began to step back, Harry, Ron and Hermione following him.

"Wait."

Harry turned around to see Aithusa looking directly at him. He again felt a crawling sensation on his skin as the great dragon's unseeing eyes locked on his.

"I must thank you, young sorcerer," she said. "If it were not for you and your friends I would still be trapped underground in the dark and in pain. I owe you a debt."
Harry tried to shrug it off, but he couldn't get over the absurdity that a dragon was thanking him.

"It was nothing really. It was completely spur-of-the-moment."

"Nevertheless, the debt must be repaid." The dragon said. She paused for a moment. "This was intended by the Old Religion, I can sense its power within you. This was always supposed to happen. I owe my freedom to you, young ones."

Ron grinned. "Well …" he looked pleased however.

"I must also apologise for not helping you at the time. I was so beast-like after my imprisonment, and so hungry and angry, it was all I could do not to eat the three of you."

Hermione laughed nervously. "It's alright," she said weakly, still looking amazed that she was speaking to a dragon. "I'm glad we could help. What the goblins did to you was barbaric!"

Aithusa bowed her head.

"I am glad the three of you are here. You have proven yourselves worthy. You are the ones the Old Religion has been waiting for all these years. Do what must be done, and look after Emrys for me. He has a knack of getting into trouble."

Martin looked put-out. "I'm not that bad! At least I didn't manage to get myself stuck underground for two hundred years!"

"No, but you have been trapped in other ways," Aithusa responded swiftly. "You get into just as much trouble as Merlin did in Camelot all those years ago. You think humans would learn."

Ron gasped. "You knew Merlin?"

Aithusa bowed her head again. "Yes … I knew him." She sounded almost amused, if dragons could sound amused.

"What was he like?" Hermione asked in an almost reverent whisper.

Aithusa snorted, a stream of smoke coming from her nostrils.

"He was an idiot." She lay her head on the ground and let Hagrid continue to rub salve on her aching muscles.

Harry, Ron and Hermione just stared at her. Merlin, an idiot? Harry couldn't get over how strange that sounded, particularly when it came from a dragon. He felt a bit of a let-down. Since discovering all this stuff about Old Magic, Harry had come to regard Merlin with just as much awe as the rest of the wizarding world did, instead of the funny magician in the Muggle tales he'd heard as a child.

"Well, I think we should be going now." Martin said in a loud voice, looking annoyed at something.

"We'd better get back and explain to the others that we haven't been eaten yet."

He marched out of the clearing giving one last pained look at Aithusa, and Harry and the others followed, looking back at her; Hermione in particular looked as though she wanted to ask Aithusa more, but she looked exhausted, and she seemed to think better of it.

As they walked back to the castle Harry could barely keep track of his thoughts. A dragon! A real Old dragon! Martin was a Dragonlord? Who could have guessed this? He felt numb all over.

He looked at Martin's back as he walked. He was lying to them again, Harry was sure of it. He
hadn't told them the whole truth. Harry hadn't for one instant decided to doubt him or his trust in him. Martin was a good man, he knew that. But he was a good man who happened to have many secrets, and when one of them had been uncovered, he'd hastily try to cover some of the truth up.

Why was he still doing this? What could possibly be so important? Didn't they know enough already? Didn't they deserve to know?

Harry felt a simmering anger at Martin for concealing everything from them. When was he going to realise they could be trusted? He didn't have to keep everything to himself! He'd better have a damn good reason.

They emerged at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and heard panicked cries coming from the castle. Harry swore to himself, he'd find out what Martin was hiding, and why. Martin didn't have to hide this from them, and Harry was determined to know the truth. The whole truth.

Merlin tried to stay calm as they walked over the front lawns to the castle. He still couldn't believe everything that had happened.

For one of his greatest secrets to be so blatantly exposed as that… what had he been thinking? When he'd first sensed Aithusa's presence enter the grounds, he'd launched into action and raced off to help her. He'd barely even registered the fact that the others were following him.

He'd been desperate to find Aithusa, and rightly so once he saw the state she was in. Merlin rarely got angry, but he had been ready to kill every single goblin in Britain for what they'd done to Aithusa before he calmed down. He hated himself more than anything; how could he have not known this was going on? Why had he been so stupid not to call Kilgharrah and Aithusa every so often to make sure they were alright?

He'd been afraid, that's what it was. He'd convinced himself they'd be alright so that he wouldn't have to face them and be reminded of the past. So he wouldn't look at Kilgharrah and remember how he'd been the one to enchant Excalibur, or look at Aithusa and remember the time that she'd soared over Camelot in the middle of the day scaring the townspeople witless and scooping up Gwaine in her talons as a part of a practical joke by Merlin. It was too painful to remember those times.

But what was even more painful were the even more lies he'd had to tell. He'd been communicating with Aithusa telepathically the entire time, partially to make sure Aithusa was alright, but also to make sure she wouldn't reveal his identity.

Why had he had to do that? Why did he have to lie again? Why couldn't he have told them the entire truth? It had been the perfect time! Aithusa was right, he was an idiot.

He wanted to scream in frustration. These lies of his were rapidly falling apart at the seams. Maybe he should just tell them all the truth. The longer he went on without telling them, the angrier they'd be when they eventually found out. Like the way Arthur had been furious to the point of murderous when he'd found out Merlin's secret, angry at both the magic, and the deceit.

But Arthur had come around eventually, would Harry and the others do the same?

"Are you sure Hagrid will be alright back there?" asked Hermione nervously. "I mean, I know Aithusa's your- your friend and all, but, well, she is very hungry and …"

Merlin tried not to laugh. "The Old dragons never really went in much for humans," he assured her.
"Besides, Aithusa has to obey me. She has no other choice."

"So you could make her do anything?" Ron asked.

Merlin frowned. "Theoretically, yes. But I'm not allowed to abuse my powers. There's supposed to be balance in the world, and by using a dragon for my own ends would be in conflict with that. I'm supposed to protect them, not order them around. Although," he thought back smiling. "I did manage to make Kilgharrah give me a ride on his back a couple of times. He wasn't too pleased about that. He's 'not a horse' apparently."

Ron laughed, but Hermione looked outraged. "You mean she has no choice but to do what you say? That's slavery! That's just like what house-elves are forced to do!"

"It's nothing like that, Hermione," Merlin assured her. "We are kin. I'm only able to command her because she recognises me as her spiritual brother. If I was to abuse my power, the Old Religion would punish me, and Aithusa wouldn't be able to be commanded by me. It's more like she's being compelled, rather than ordered."

Hermione still looked unsure and a little miffed however.

"Why does she call you, Emrys?" asked Harry quietly. "Why not by your first name, if you're 'kin'?"

Merlin once again, painfully, thought of a lie.

"It's just what they do. Because the gift is passed from father to son they call us by our family name instead."

Harry nodded, but Merlin could see the suspicion in his eyes. Harry didn't believe him, not this time. He was beginning to see through his lies. Merlin cursed himself again for not disclosing the entire truth to them all when he had the chance. It wasn't as though they wouldn't have believed him; Aithusa could have backed him up. Was there still time …

A loud shriek came from the castle, and Merlin saw Professor McGonagall practically running down the front steps towards them, looking rather undignified. They'd apparently managed to pry open the doors Merlin had magically locked. From behind her came almost the entire Order of the Phoenix, including the whole Weasley clan with Minister Shacklebolt taking up the rear.

The four of them winced simultaneously; this wasn't going to be pretty.

"WHAT-ON-EARTH-WERE-YOU-THINKING-OF?!" roared Mrs Weasley, as she pelted towards them, her hair bedraggled, as though she'd only just gotten out of bed.

"Hi mum," Ron tried to smile jauntily, but it didn't work.

"Potter! Weasley! Granger! Emrys! Explain your foolish actions right now!" McGonagall glared at them. "Running out into the grounds whilst a dangerous dragon was on the loose? How stupid can you be?"

"Are you lot crazy?" yelled Charlie Weasley. "That thing could've killed you!"

Kingsley looked down at them all severely. "I would have thought that the four of you would have more sense than this!"

"Harry! What on earth were you thinking?" shouted Lupin, his face lined with worry.
It looked as though this could go on for a while, so Merlin held up a hand to stop them all.

"Please," he said, loudly. "It was all my fault. I apologise for the worry I caused you all, but I assure you it wasn't as bad as it seemed. If we'll all go into the castle I can explain."

"What is there to explain?" shrieked Mrs Weasley. "How can it possibly not be as bad as it seems?"

She looked half-mad with worry and anger.

"If we'll all just go into-,"

"We can't!" shouted Charlie. "The dragon's still on the loose!"

"I assure you, the dragon is no threat," said Merlin.

The all stared at him as though he was mad.

"The dragon isn't a threat? Have you completely lost it?" Fred Weasley asked.

"It isn't," said Ron, defensively. "Martin's a Dragonlord, everything's under control."

This time the silence was almost palpable. The anger and worry drained from everyone's faces as they stared at Ron as though he'd just announced that Merlin was actually a mermaid.

Taking advantage of the silence, Merlin spoke again:

"Please, let's just go inside and I'll explain everything."

This time, they did as he said, and went back inside still staring at him in confusion. No one said a word until they'd all secluded themselves in McGonagall's office and they'd all conjured a chair each. Mrs Weasley sank into hers in complete mental exhaustion.

"Now, Mr Emrys," said McGonagall, her voice faint, whilst still trying to sound as though she were in control. Explain."

"I am a Dragonlord." Merlin thought he might as well say it bluntly. "I inherited the ability to control and tame dragons when my father died. This evening I sensed the dragon's presence in the school grounds. It was an Old dragon, from the Old Religion, I could tell that right away. So I ran outside to deal with it, Harry, Ron and Hermione followed, though I didn't ask them to." The trio looked sheepish at this point. "I commanded the dragon to come to me, and she did. Her name is Aithusa, I knew her from years ago and I had no idea she'd been captured by the goblins or I would have done something sooner. She's perfectly harmless now; she's completely under my control. Hagrid is in the Forbidden Forest now tending to her."

The room stared back at him in disbelief.

"It's true," added Hermione. "We saw the whole thing. Martin did some strange spell and Aithusa just flew down in front of him. She's really badly hurt and she needed help. She's harmless, and it's true what they say about the Old dragons, she's really intelligent and she talks!"

"She talks," repeated McGonagall as though she couldn't believe she had heard it properly the first time.

"Yes, "said Martin. "And because she's one of the Old dragons I don't want her whereabouts to be generally known. She's of the Old Religion, and I feel she should be protected. She may be able to help us in the fight against Voldemort."
He looked at Kingsley as he said this, who nodded back, rather shocked.

"I'm sorry for causing you alarm," said Merlin sincerely. "But I felt her presence, and I panicked. I could feel her pain and I wanted to get to her as soon as I could."

Everyone in the room looked at each other incredulously for a few moments.

"Are you actually serious?" asked George in wonder. "You can command dragons?"

Merlin nodded.

"Yes, Aithusa is outside right now recuperating. I can show you if you'd like."

George shook his head hurriedly, "You're alright."

McGonagall was clutching at her heart. "This is really true?" she asked.

Merlin nodded again. "It is."

Charlie Weasley spoke up. "You're actually a Dragonlord? We learned about them in training, but we always thought they were myths! Are you seriously telling me there's a talking Old dragon out in the forest?"

"Yes."

Charlie's eyes lit up. "But that's amazing! Those creatures were supposed to have died out years ago! I've always been fascinated by them!" But then he frowned. "That's why this dragon's been able to evade capture isn't it? But why didn't you say anything before? We've been going mental trying to find it!"

Merlin sighed. "I didn't know the dragon was Aithusa. I thought it was a modern-day dragon; the Old dragons were supposed to have gone overseas years ago. And my abilities don't work as well on modern dragons, so I didn't think I'd be of any use."

Charlie's eyebrows rose. "There are more?"

Merlin groaned. He hadn't meant to reveal that. "There's one more that I know of. Kilgharrah."

But Kingsley was frowning now. "Aithusa? You know this dragon personally?"

Merlin felt a cold feeling run through him. "Yes," he said.

"But I thought this particular dragon had been a prisoner of Gringotts for over two hundred years?" Lupin asked sharply.

Merlin groaned inwardly. "Yes, she has. I'm .... I'm a bit older than I look."

The entire room stared at him again.

"I knew it," said Luna. Merlin jumped. He hadn't known she was here. "It's obvious. Your eyes are much older than the rest of you. You've seen horrible things over the years. And that must be why the Grey Lady calls you Michael. You've come here before."

Merlin wanted to bury his head in his hands. Why must she be so perceptive?

"Is this true?" Mrs Weasley asked, her face shocked. "You're hundreds of years old?"
Merlin winced. "Yes, but I'd rather you'd not ask how old exactly. Suffice it to say, I've been around for a while."

They all gaped at him. They began asking question after question, like Harry, Ron and Hermione had and he answered them all as well as he could, their astonishment only increasing.

McGonagall stood up eventually, and moved over to a point on the opposite wall. She tapped a brick with her wand, and a little hole opened up, like an alcove, just big enough to contain a piece of parchment.

"Michael Emrys," she said in a clear voice. There was a flash of white light and inside the little alcove, were a few sheets of parchment. Merlin looked at them with increasing dread.

McGonagall went back to her desk and settled into her chair. She read the parchment in front of her, her eyes growing ever wider. Everyone held their breath.

She looked over her glasses at Merlin.

"This is the record of your last attendance at Hogwarts, is it not?"

Merlin nodded, frustrated, and more than a little worried. If she went looking for more "Emrys'" she'd soon find a dozen different ones, all with a name beginning with 'M'. All she'd have to do then was ask the ghosts … she'd know he was at least one thousand years old! And that was if she didn't look for the times that Merlin had been a teacher at Hogwarts, which admittedly hadn't been very often. And if she knew he was a thousand, then it wouldn't be so much of a jump to guess that he'd been around at the time of the Old Religion.

He didn't know what was making him panic so much. Was it really that bad if they found out he had been? Would it really so be bad if they found out he was Merlin? They knew enough, or suspected enough as it was!

But something recoiled at the idea of telling them. Not just a feeling, or a passing fancy, but a great instinctive pull away from it. This wasn't the time. He felt like screaming again. He hated this!

McGonagall began to read from the parchment.

"Michael Emrys. It's all here. You were an exemplary student. Your teachers give you glowing reports … that sounds familiar. You gained twelve O grade OWLs and six O grade NEWTS. You were a Prefect, Head Boy, a Chaser on the Quidditch team. You were expected to go on to do great things."

Merlin winced.

Ron looked at him. "Blimey! You were perfect back then! You even played Quidditch! And there was you letting me think you knew nothing about it!"

McGonagall however looked disapproving. "Perhaps not so perfect, Mr Weasley, when you discover that Mr Emrys here was on the Ravenclaw House team."

Ron looked at him in mild hurt. "Ravenclaw?" he exclaimed.

The others made similar noises of shock.

"Come on, Ron," Merlin tried to smile feebly. "You said on the train you thought I'd be a Ravenclaw."
"So why are you in Gryffindor then?" demanded Harry.

Merlin looked at him evenly. "I'm here to help you, Ron and Hermione. I couldn't do that if I was in Ravenclaw could I?"

"Why not?" Luna said, looking and sounding less dreamy than she normally did. "I help them all the time!"

"Are you a Ravenclaw or a Gryffindor?" Ron asked, frowning. "What's your real House? Come to think of it, what's your real name? Michael or Martin?"

Merlin sighed. "This is beside the point."

McGonagall nodded, curtly. "I suppose it is. What's really important is that his story has at least some basic in fact."

Merlin tried not to wince yet again, as McGonagall emphasised the word 'some'. She knew as well as Harry did that Merlin was still concealing something.

She looked down at the parchment again. "I wonder, Mr Emrys, how can you bear to be back here again at your advanced age? Hogwarts must have changed a great deal since you were a first year in … 1781."

An outbreak of muttering and cries of surprise echoed throughout the room.

"1781?" Ron repeated next to him, his mouth open in shock.

"You're two-hundred and twenty-eight years old?" Hermione whispered unbelievingly.

"But he looks so young!" Mrs Weasley whispered to her husband.

"Yes, it has." Merlin said, trying to take the attention away from him. "But mostly to this new threat that faces us in this century. You've told the Order about Morgana?"

McGonagall blinked. "Yes, I have. But really, I think we should-"

"We should discuss it now." Merlin said firmly.

McGonagall's lips went thin. "Mr Emrys, really, you are in my office in my school and I really think you should show me some."

"Some respect? Is that what you were going to say, professor?" Merlin asked, his annoyance growing. He'd endured enough this evening without adding more to it. Didn't they see how important this was? "I do respect you, professor, I respect you greatly. But this threat from Morgana is far more serious."

McGonagall still looked annoyed. "Shouldn't the leaders of the Order be the ones to decide that? We, after all, have the most experience."

Merlin snorted. "Please! I've lived through the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and both World Wars; I think I know a bit more about warfare than you. I am an old man professor, I've seen many things over the years. Please do not treat me like a child. All I'm asking is that you treat me with some respect. I am your elder after all."

McGonagall looked at him in blank shock, blinking rapidly. Everyone else in the room had similar expressions on their faces. Fred and George were barely suppressing appreciative grins. Merlin
cursed himself internally. Why had he had to go and say that? He'd always had a big mouth. Arthur would be proud.

"He has a point, Minerva," Kingsley's deep calm voice sounded. "He is far older than any of us will ever be. We should listen."

Merlin smiled at him. Kingsley smiled back, but he was cautious, as Merlin knew he would be. He'd lied to them, and Kingsley had to re-establish his trust in him.

Merlin breathed a sigh of relief as the conversation turned to Morgana, not something he thought he'd ever do. They discussed this new threat, whether Voldemort would be able to summon her, and how powerful she may be. They were putting on brave faces, but Merlin could tell they were all terrified underneath. He knew they'd all grown up hearing horror stories about Morgana.

"I don't suppose you know where this cave is?" Kingsley asked Merlin.

He shook his head. "It used to be in a fixed place. But after Merlin supposedly trapped Morgana in the cave, he made it … well, he made it so it 'existed outside of time', so that no one would ever stumble upon it and free her. It's impossible to find it while that spell lasts. Technically, Morgana is dead, as she technically no longer exists. So Voldemort has to use the powers of the Old Religion to summon her; it's the only way to free her. It's a loophole Merlin obviously never anticipated."

Unfortunately, he thought to himself. How could I ever have guessed this would happen?

They all looked disappointed, and Merlin couldn't blame them.

"What about Aithusa?" asked Hermione suddenly. "She said that she knew Merlin, maybe she knew Morgana as well?"

Merlin winced inwardly. Yes, she had. And it almost killed her. Morgana's attempt to recruit her … it had been harsh.

"She won't be able to tell you much," said Merlin. "She can't locate the cave either. And besides, I'd rather she wasn't disturbed at the moment. She needs to rest."

They all looked disappointed again. "Does that mean I won't be able to meet her?" asked Charlie, crestfallen.

Merlin smiled, genuinely this time. "I promise I'll introduce her to you when she's better," he assured him. He didn't think Aithusa would mind; she'd always been more easy-going than Kilgharrah, and Charlie seemed to genuinely care for dragons.

Charlie looked slightly happier.

"What is to become of 'Aithusa'?" Kingsley asked, directing the question at Merlin. Merlin was surprised to be asked; until now Kingsley had always treated him as an older man would treat a younger one, the sudden change was unnerving, yet not entirely unpleasant.

"She'll need to stay in the forest for the time being, the goblins hurt her pretty badly, and she's exhausted herself the last few months," said Merlin. "I've put an enchantment around the clearing so no one can find her. Once she's better she may be able to help us."

Kinglsey nodded. "And what of this other dragon? Can he help us?"

Merlin grimaced. "Kilgharrah? He might, I suppose. But he's less … well, less good-natured than
Aithusa. He isn't violent or anything, he's just really, infuriatingly cryptic, and doesn't want to help normally."

Kingsley frowned. "He won't help?"

"I'm not sure," Merlin said. He didn't want to admit to everyone in this room that the real reason he didn't want to call Kilgharrah was because he was afraid of facing him again. Seeing Aithusa again, with the guilt and the memoirs can been bad enough. Plus, Kilgharrah was more unpredictable. "I'll call him once Aithusa's better, see what he says." He wanted to get them to stop badgering him about it.

Kingsley nodded. "Good. We can need all the help we can get. It appears Voldemort is once again issuing attacks."

Ron scowled. "Oh yeah, I forgot. Why would they attack a Muggle museum?"

Kingsley sighed. "I wish I knew. They were looking for something, we know that. They seemed in particular to be searching for artefacts from the early British medieval period, which makes me think they were looking for something from the Old Religion. Perhaps an old artefact of Merlin's?"

"Whatever they were searching for, they didn't find it," said Lupin. "Nothing was taken, which makes me believe there will be attacks at other museums, and more attacks in general. I suggest we coordinate patrols to try and guard …"

Merlin zoned out as the talk turned to guards and shift duties. What could they be searching for? What possible artefact from the Old Religion would Voldemort need? What could Morgana have sent him after? One of her old hairbrushes perhaps?

As the talks went on, Merlin cast a glance at Harry, who was thinking furiously. He suspected him. And Merlin knew the next few weeks were going to be difficult.

Harry lay in his bed that night, staring up at the hangings of his four-poster bed, going over the events of the day again and again.

He trusted Martin. But at the same time, he was angry.

He was a Dragonlord. He had lied to them again and again, and there was still so much that he wasn't telling them. Why had he kept Aithusa from them? He'd said it was to protect her, but Harry could tell there was far more to it than that. How old was Martin exactly? Could he be older? Could he have existed at the time of the Old Religion? Had he even known Merlin or Morgana themselves?

He'd attended Hogwarts before. That made sense; the ghosts and Peeves recognised him. But why did the Fat Lady recognise him if he'd been in Ravenclaw? And if Martin was as old as Harry suspected he was, how had he come to Hogwarts as an eleven year old boy in 1781? Polyjuice Potion? But then how would the ghosts recognise him? He must have used some other spell to make himself look younger. But why go to so much trouble? Or was Harry just overthinking things and Martin really was only two hundred and twenty-eight?

Harry laughed to himself bitterly. Only two hundred and twenty-eight? Just a few hours ago Martin had been twenty-two and now … How had all of this become so normal all of a sudden? Harry had
thought when he was off chasing Horcruxes that his life couldn't get any stranger. He had been wrong.

He needed to know more, but how?

Harry thought again and again, ignoring his extreme tiredness. He'd barely slept a wink the previous night, being afraid of another Morgana dream, and now he was lying awake for a second night. He had to do something! Voldemort was out there trying to bring the most powerful sorceress ever to live back from the dead and there was apparently nothing he could do about it.

What could Harry do against the magic of the Old Religion?

Could he learn it? Aithusa had told him he had the magic within him, so why couldn't he? Voldemort had it because it had been transferred into him from Harry, so didn't that mean Harry could learn it too?

But who could teach him? Martin said he didn't know much of the Old Religion, but Harry could tell he was lying. He'd seen the magic he could do; it was more powerful than Harry had ever seen. And he had a feeling he'd only just scratched the surface.

Would Martin teach him? Would Martin want to?

Perhaps this was his plan. He was here to use that magic while Harry was powerless to do anything.

As much as Harry trusted Martin, he wasn't sure if Martin would agree to something like this.

Could he learn on his own, he thought, his heart beating faster. The knowledge was supposed to be lost, but Harry remembered that the Founders had apparently practiced a form of magic similar to it. They must have left something behind!

They must have hidden it somewhere. But where? No one knew what the Founders had been like. No one knew where they could have hidden …

Harry sat bolt upright in his bed, a sudden thought occurring to him. There was someone!

He slipped out of bed, and pulled his dressing gown around him. He rummaged through his trunk until he found his father's Invisibility Cloak. He pulled it over himself, and began to creep to the dormitory door. He knew he should probably wait until morning, but the thought wouldn't leave his head.

He cast a glance back to Martin, who lay in sleep, a small frown on his face, as though remembering something horrid. Perhaps there were two things he'd ask her.

He made off down the staircase, across the common room and out through the portrait hole, and began wandering the corridors. He wasn't really sure which way he should be going; he just had to hope…

He wandered around for about an hour, up and down staircases and through practically every corridor in the castle, until-

A tall slivery ghost was gliding along the corridor in front of him.

"Hey!" called Harry, pulling his Cloak off and running down the hall.

The Grey Lady turned to face him, and frowned. "You should not be here."
"I needed to talk to you!"

She still looked annoyed. "It is the middle of the night, could it not have waited?"

"No," said Harry. "I need to ask you something. I need to know about the Founders."

She looked really annoyed now. "I assume you'll be asking more about which of my mother's precious possessions I stole?"

"No," said Harry. "It's about their magic."

Now she looked confused. "Their magic? What about it?"

"Was it ordinary? Like ours? Or was there something different about it?" Harry asked excitedly. Why had he never thought of asking her before? It would have saved hours of pointless research in the library!

She paused, and looked uncertain for a moment. "I'm not supposed to interfere in the lives of mortals …"

"This is important!" urged Harry. Now he knew she had something to reveal, his excitement was increasing. "I really need to know!"

She bit her transparent lip, and glanced around. "Yes, their magic was … different. It was almost eerie, the way they could do things. But it was only ever the four of them. For some reason they were the only ones granted the ability to use such magic. My mother tried to teach it to me, but was unsuccessful. They were frustrated that no one else could use this knowledge, and so recorded their magic for future generations, who might."

Harry grinned. "That's great! That's exactly what I'm looking for! Where is this knowledge?"

The Grey Lady looked uncertain again. "They hid it, in the castle somewhere …"

"Where?" asked Harry impatiently.

She sighed. "I'm not sure exactly. They realised that the books were dangerous in the wrong hands, and so split up their own ones, and hid them in their own special areas of the castle, so only the worthy could find them."

Harry felt his bubbling excitement increase. "Do you know where?"

The Grey Lady shook her head. "Not exactly no. They were hidden in places of great sentimental value to each of them, with enchantments protecting them from the unwary. I spent a great deal of my childhood searching for them. I was desperate to be as smart as my mother. But I never found them."

"Where would your mother have hidden hers?" asked Harry.

The Grey Lady sighed again. "I shouldn't be telling you this … it probably isn't the wisest course of action, yet I sense there is some greater purpose to this. She … she spent a great deal of her time in the library. She was almost solely responsible for creating it; she loved that place. If she hid it anywhere, that's where I would guess. Although my own searches there were fruitless, perhaps yours won't be."

Harry grinned broadly. "Thank you!"
She smiled weakly, looking thoroughly displeased with herself. Harry began to race off towards the library, but stopped, remembering something.

"Can I ask you something else?"

She sighed. "It appears you must."

"Oh come on, where's your inquisitive Ravenclaw mind?"

She eyed him beadily. "I inherited my mind from my father."

Harry chose to ignore this. "I wanted to ask … do you remember Michael Emrys?"

The Grey Lady's entire demeanour changed, and if possible, she went even paler.

"Why do you ask?" she said. Harry noticed she looked almost afraid.

"He's here in the castle," Harry answered her. "Only he's Martin Emrys now. He was in Ravenclaw wasn't he? Back in 1781?"

She bit her lip and looked nervous. "Well, yes… I suppose he was."

Harry stared at her. Why was she acting this way?

"Well, what was he like?"

She looked surprised at the question. "Well, he was … smart. Very intelligent and an able student. A perfect Ravenclaw."

Harry could tell she was hiding something."Didn't it strike you as odd that's he's still around? That he hasn't aged in two hundred years?"

There was no mistaking it now, she was hiding something. A silver blush had appeared on her cheeks and she avoided his eyes. "When you've been a ghost for ten centuries nothing surprises you anymore."

"Come on! Weren't you a little bit suspicious?" Harry asked, frustrated.

"Hmm, yes. I suppose. Now, you'd better run along before Mr Filch catches you."

And before Harry could say another word, she'd glided through the wall next to them. Harry watched the wall for several more seconds. Why was she acting so mysterious? What was it about the mention of Martin that had made her so nervous? Was she in on his secret- whatever it was?

Well, Harry decided, she wasn't the only ghost at Hogwarts; surely one of the others would remember him?

He waited a few more minutes in case she came back, but then pulled the Cloak back on and headed towards the library.

He pushed open the door cautiously, and crept inside. He looked around the enormous room, and his heart sank. How on earth was he to find anything in here?

He tried to think rationally, as a Ravenclaw would. She wouldn't have wanted these particular books to be found by just anybody, so they wouldn't be in the main part of the library. He made his way through the silent aisles, still under the Cloak, until he reached the oldest part of the library where
they’d been doing their research.

He glanced at the shelves of books, and he wanted to hit something in frustration. They’d already been searching here! If there was something important it would have leapt out at them before now.

He leaned against the wall, tired of all this continual disappointment, when he felt something poking into his lower back. He turned around to see a small eagle’s head carved in stone, protruding from the wall.

Harry felt his breath catch in his throat. Could this be it?

He examined the statue from every angle, touching it, pushing against it, even trying to ask it questions, but nothing happened. He was about to give up when he noticed the eagle's mouth was open, and a tiny gap was just visible, about wide enough to fit a pencil.

Or a wand.

Harry pulled out his wand, and inserted it into the eagle's mouth, almost up to his fingertips. Then, the eagle blinked.

He jumped backwards in fright, as the eagle began to speak in a melodious and accented female voice. Perhaps Ravenclaw's herself?

"The knowledge you seek is dangerous in the wrong hands. It will only be granted to a precious few. If you wish to continue further, you must prove yourself, and demonstrate your worth as a student of the Ancient Arts. Rowena Ravenclaw asks this of you:

Answer the riddles and gain the knowledge. Fail, and you shall never learn it."

Harry blinked rapidly, the excitement growing once again, but also with a tinge of dread. True, he'd managed to answer the Sphinx's riddle in the Triwizard Tournament, but he was generally hopeless at this sort of thing.

The eagle spoke again. "The first riddle is as follows:

'Cannot be seen, cannot be felt,
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.
It lies behind the stars and beneath the hills, empty holes it fills.
It comes first and follows after. Ends life and kills laughter.'"

Harry felt the panic he'd had at the beginning of the riddle begin to fade away. He knew this one! It had been in a book he'd read as a child, one of Dudley's one that he'd never touched and gave to Harry because he didn't want it. But what was the answer?

He thought carefully. Behind the stars … empty holes … ends life …

"The darkness!" Harry exclaimed, suddenly remembering.

"Correct," the eagle said. "The second riddle is as follows:

'What can run but never walks,
Has a mouth but never talks,
"Has a bed but never sleeps,
Has a head but never weeps?"

This one is harder, thought Harry, thinking furiously that he'd wished he'd brought Hermione.

A mouth, a bed … what had those? Something that runs …

"A river!" he said, the answer hitting him unexpectedly.

"Correct," said the eagle. Harry couldn't believe his luck.

"Now for the final riddle:

'A house... one enters it blind, one leaves it seeing. What am I?"

Harry gaped at the eagle. He didn't have a clue.

He paced back and forward in front of it, much as he had done with the Sphinx in fourth year. He had to keep calm and think it through. At least this time he wasn't at risk of being attacked by the riddler.

He tried to think outside of the box. Where do you go blind but leave seeing? Obviously it wasn't literal, so how did the metaphor come into it?

He continued pacing, the eagle's eyes following his movement. Where do you come out better than you were when you went in? A hospital? No, too obvious …

He tried to think in context. Why would Ravenclaw have chosen this riddle for the final one? What was significant about it? What was relevant in the tenth century to a woman trying to found a …

Suddenly a light bulb flashed in his mind.

"It's a school!" he practically shouted. "The answer is a school!"

"Correct," the eagle said. And the head began to retract into the wall, leaving a space behind it. He reached in excitedly, and pulled out a heavy book, as ancient as the ones surrounding him. On the front cover there was the Ravenclaw symbol emblazoned clearly upon it. As soon as the book was removed, the eagle moved back into place, looking like an innocent statue again.

He opened the ancient book carefully, and looked through the pages. He was disappointed when he found he couldn't read it, though he'd suspected as much; language and the methods of writing had changed over the centuries. He looked through it eagerly though, looking at all the illuminated pages with beautiful illustrations, reminding Harry of something he'd seen on a museum school trip at his Muggle primary school. It surprised him slightly that the pictures weren't moving though. He wondered why. He'd have to have Martin translate it- he would be able to wouldn't he? And Hermione perhaps may be able to …

His trail of thinking came to a close as his eyes fell on one of the illustrations, and he almost dropped the book. On the page was a glorious picture of Hogwarts, and the Four Founders. Gryffindor was painted in vivid red, with his red hair and beard practically leaping from the page, Hufflepuff’s charming and kindly face shone out at him, Ravenclaw's beauty was startling, as was her keen, intelligent eyes, and Slytherin looked deadly cunning, clad all in green, his eyes sharp and focused.

But it was the man standing behind them that Harry was staring at. There, standing between the front
doors of Hogwarts was a young man with pale skin, black hair and blue eyes, watching the Founders with an amused smile.

Harry looked closer at the man, taking in every detail. It was impossible …

The man in the one thousand year old painting … was Martin Emrys.
The next day, Merlin got up early and immediately went down into the Forbidden Forest, desperate to see Aithusa again. His dreams had been filled with memories of the past; the day Arthur died, they day Kilgharrah and Aithusa had left Britain, the day he'd poisoned Morgana and forever turned her against him. He was exhausted beyond belief.

He wondered perhaps if he should have brought Harry and the others with him, but he dismissed the idea immediately. They'd calmed down a little, and seemed genuinely interested in Aithusa, but he had to go on his own; they needed to talk.

He practically ran through the Forbidden Forest, impatient. He burst into the clearing breathing heavily. Aithusa lifted her enormous head and blinked mildly.

"I thought perhaps I may have been allowed at least a few hours rest after being on the run for four months, but it appears I was mistaken," she said sarcastically.

Merlin grinned in spite of himself. "That sounds more like you! How are you feeling today?"

He moved over and sat beside her cross-legged on the ground.

Aithusa sniffed dismissively. "I am better. The giant man is very kind, but I am still weak."

Merlin nodded. "Take your time and rest here as long as you want."

Aithusa bowed her head. "I am grateful, Merlin."

Merlin smiled as Aithusa called him by his own name. Being reminded of the past wasn't nearly as painful as he thought it would be.

"It's no bother, my friend. I must make amends after all. You've been trapped for two hundred years while I did nothing."

Aithusa shook her massive head. "Do not apologise, Merlin. I know you would have helped if you could. I do not hold you accountable."

"Still," said Merlin miserably. "I should have known better than to ignore you all this time. I should've checked on you."

"There is no blame on you, Merlin," Aithusa said. "I blame the goblins, and if I only had my sight and strength I would tear them all limb from limb."

"Are you sure you will be alright?" Merlin asked worriedly.

"Yes, do not worry. The giant man has given me much sustenance and I already begin to feel my strength return, the true strength of a dragon, something I had forgotten about in my imprisonment."

Merlin stood up and began examining her closely. What he saw made him angry. The slashes on her face were even more pronounced in the daylight, and Aithusa's scales, once shining white were dull, and peeling away from so long underground.

He wanted to help heal her, return her sight, banish the scars, but he reminded himself to be patient. Using magic as powerful as that on a creature as powerful as a dragon was very dangerous, even for someone like him. He would have to wait until Aithusa was restored to health, she would be able to
help guide the magic herself. If he didn't wait, it could seriously harm both Merlin and Aithusa.

"You seem old," Merlin said sadly. "I mean, you're almost as old as I am, but you've never acted like it. You were always the mischievous one; you used to drive Arthur crazy! But now, you seem different."

Aithusa nodded. "I have spent a long time in deep solitude and pain, and I have reflected much. That changes a dragon's thinking. Kilgharrah was different after his imprisonment, and that was for only twenty years. I am not the dragon I was."

Then suddenly, her tail whipped out from behind her, and hit Merlin's ankles so fast it took his legs out from under him and Merlin found himself falling flat on his back on the hard ground.

"However, I have not lost my love of mischief," Aithusa smirked.

Merlin laughed, though his ankles were bruised and aching. Aithusa joined in and they lay like that for a long time. Merlin closed his eyes and grinned. Why had he been afraid of this? He shouldn't be afraid of what lay in the past, but remember it with fondness. He and Aithusa were here, laughing and joking like they always had. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt as light as this. He didn't have to lie to Aithusa, to conceal things, to reveal only half-truths about his past … with Aithusa, Merlin could truly be himself.

Eventually, Merlin sat up. He may not be able to return her sight yet, but …

He reached out a hand to Aithusa:

"Þu fornimst adl fram guman!"

He felt the energy drain from him and he smiled; it had been a while since he had used his own spells. He sent the magic into Aithusa and throughout her body.

Aithusa smiled, her upper lip curling up to reveal her sharp white teeth. "Thank you. Much of the pain is gone now."

Merlin smiled. "It's the least I can do."

"Now," Aithusa shifted her weight, getting comfortable. "How can I help you? What has been going on the last two hundred years? I managed to perceive some of it during my imprisonment, but I need the entire story. The Old Religion is coming back into the world, I can feel it. But it is also being used for evil."

Merlin sighed, and began to talk, telling her the entire story about Voldemort and Morgana.

Aithusa listened quietly, but Merlin could tell from the rumbling in the ground beneath him that she was barely controlling her anger.

"Will we never be rid of that witch?" she spat, when Merlin had finished. "You should have killed her thirteen hundred years ago, Merlin."

"I know," said Merlin, running a hand through his hair. "We're in an even worse situation now than we were back then. This alliance with Voldemort, it can't be good."

Aithusa nodded. "This is evil tidings. But I have hope. This Potter boy is the only hope for the world now. He alone was chosen by the Old Religion to complete this task, and he alone can do it."
"I wish it wasn't," said Merlin sincerely. "He's still so young."

"He isn't much younger than you were when you first saved Camelot," retaliated Aithusa. "You shouldn't underestimate him."

"I'm not!" said Merlin. "But he's suffered so much all his life, it's unfair to ask this of him!"

"Unfair it may be, but that is the way of the world," said Aithusa. "He would never have been chosen if he could not do this. You must help him in any way you can."

"I'm trying," sighed Merlin. "But I don't think he trusts me anymore."

Aithusa thought for a moment. "I think it idiotic that you are hiding your identity from the boy, yet I sense that it is the right thing to do at present. He has much to do on his own before he is ready for that information. It may influence him in a way that the Old Religion did not intend."

Merlin buried his head in his hands. "I hate it!" he screamed, finally releasing all of his pent-up emotions. "I hate following the Old Religion with blind faith while it toys with me! I hate this lying and pretending! Harry deserves better! He deserves the truth! What will he think of me when he finds out? He will hate me for lying to him, and so he should!"

He broke off, breathing heavily. Aithusa nudged him with her tail, and Merlin looked up to find Aithusa’s sightless eyes boring into his.

"Did you not also say the same thing about Arthur Pendragon?"

Merlin blinked. "That was different."

"How so?" asked Aithusa mildly. "Arthur forgave you; his trust in you became stronger than ever. Your friends will understand."

Merlin shook his head. "With Arthur … he’d known me for years. He knew me much better than Harry does now."

"Yes, but in his eyes the crime was greater," said Aithusa. "You’d practised an illegal art and kept it hidden from the King, your friend. If Arthur can forgive you for that, Harry can forgive you for keeping your identity a secret. I can sense he has a forgiving heart, and he already trusts you, though not knowing you half as well as Arthur did. It will not be as bad as you anticipate. And I sense it will happen sooner than you think."

Merlin stared, his breathing stopped. "Soon? How soon?"

But Aithusa refused to say. "Now, I can't tell you that! Where would the fun be?"

Merlin laughed, only slightly annoyed. He should know better than to try and get a straight answer out of a dragon.

The sun rose higher in the sky. Merlin glanced up at it.

"I'd better be getting back to the castle. I'll be late for Potions."

Aithusa snorted. "I can't believe you still insist on coming back to this ridiculous school again and again. Don't you get bored?"

Merlin laughed, and stood up.
"Come on! I need something to do every century!"

"Then perhaps you should consider teaching?"

Merlin scoffed. "I've tried that. Couldn't handle it."

"I mean, teaching the Potter boy."

"What do you mean?" Merlin frowned.

"The magic of the Old Religion."

Merlin stared at her.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious," Aithusa said. Merlin raised an eyebrow, and made a disbelieving sound. "Alright, I'm usually serious. The Potter boy has the ability to use it, why not teach him? You did so with the Founders."

Merlin shook his head. "No one in this century is able to wield the same power as the ancient sorcerers did; it's physically impossible. Harry may have that magic within him, but he wasn't born with it. The Founders were, at least to some extent. Their magic was much greater than Harry's. He wouldn’t be able to come close to their abilities, let alone that of the likes of mine or Morgana's."

"Nonetheless, he may be able to use at least some of it, and that would be invaluable in this fight," Aithusa reasoned. "Think about it, Merlin."

Merlin sighed. The situation with Harry was far different than with the Founders, but perhaps Aithusa was right.

"I shall," he said, placing his hand on Aithusa's head again, then turned and headed back to the castle.

On his way across the Entrance Hall he was stopped by a shout from behind.

"Michael!"

Merlin winced as he turned around to see the Grey Lady floating there.

"Do you mind not calling me that?"

"Why not?" she asked, frowning haughtily. "Your friends already know that you once went by this name, what harm could I possibly do?"

Merlin scowled at her. She was annoyed at him, as he had expected.

"Not everyone knows, and I don't want it broadcast to the entire school."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she replied sarcastically. "Would you prefer that I call you Merlin?"

Merlin quickly glanced around the Entrance Hall to make sure they were alone.

"Helena … I’m-“

“Don’t try and say you’re sorry,” said Helena. “I’ve known, or at least suspected for a long time.”
“Then you’re not angry? You understand?”

“Oh, I’m angry,” said Helena. “After all these centuries you still didn’t have the courage to tell me yourself. Didn’t you owe it to me?”

“I know,” Merlin said heavily. “But … no one could know, Helena. Not you, not anyone, not until the time was right.”

“Why?” Helena asked, looking slightly hurt. “Why did you lie to me? To my mother and the others? We would have understood. Or was all that friendship just a lie as well?”

“Never,” said Merlin firmly, feeling a slight pang of pain at the memory of the lies he had told his friends, the truth he’d never been able to tell them. “I wanted to tell them.”

“Did not my mother know?” Helena asked. “Did you never tell her, even after everything?”

“I think she guessed,” said Merlin honestly, his voice quiet and thinking back to that last fateful time he had seen her. “But, no, I never actually told her.”

Helena shook her head. “You keep everything about yourself secret from everyone you love. My mother and the Founders, and now the Potter boy and his friends. Will you ever be free of it?”

“One day,” he said. “But not now.”

“I really don’t understand your need for secrecy!” said Helena frustrated. “What is so important about your identity that needs to be hidden? Why not tell them?”

“The time isn’t right-“

“The time is never right according to you-“

“Okay, I get your point,” he interrupted. “I know what a stupid situation I've found myself in. It’s the same situation I’ve been in almost all my life. Now, what is it you wanted?”

"I wanted to warn you," she said. "Though perhaps I mightn't have bothered."

"Warn me?" he asked. "About what?"

"Young Mr Potter," she answered. "He was asking questions about you. About your past."

Merlin's heart almost stopped. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing," she said frowning, almost insulted. "I didn't tell him anything about you. I played the ignorant card, which, as you know, for the daughter of Rowena Ravenclaw is very difficult. You remember how she never tolerated ignorance."

He felt relief at her words. "Thank you, Helena."

She smiled, her anger dimming a little, and their old camaraderie shining through for a moment. "I'm glad to help. Though I advise you that your charade won't last long. He was also asking about the Founders and the magic they used. You were the one that taught them that magic, weren't you? I remember quite clearly from when I was a child, all those hours spent in private lessons. I also remember how you seemed to be giving more private lessons to my mother than any of the rest, and usually rather late at night …"

Merlin blushed. "Nothing happened!" he said hastily.
She raised an eyebrow. "If it wasn't for the fact that you were so brainless sometimes I would be having some serious questions raised about my paternity."

She drifted off, ignoring Merlin's indignant splutters.

He began thinking back to the Founders days. Would Harry make a connection between himself and their magic? He was bound to, wasn't he?

He made off towards the dungeons again, still annoyed at Helena's last comment. The old rumours didn't fade easily, it seemed. He had indeed been … ahem, close, to Rowena, but not until long after Helena had been born. Damn Godric's rumourmongering!

Harry sat in Potions, grinding some beetles into dust, staring straight ahead. He wasn't really paying attention—neither was anybody in the class.

After they'd come back the previous night McGonagall had informed the students they could return to their dormitories, and they had went, albeit reluctantly, still afraid of the dragon.

Charlie had told the Ministry wizards to call off the search, and Kingsley had informed them all privately that the dragon was now in the possession of the Order of the Phoenix. They hadn't been too happy about that, thinking that it should be captured by the Ministry and taken care of properly, but Kingsley had overruled them. The Daily Prophet's headline that morning had accurately summed it up as: 'Secret organisation seizes Gringott's dragon. What are they planning?'

The stares had followed Harry, Ron and Hermione at breakfast that morning. Everyone had plagued them with questions, but they'd refused to answer any of them. Only the Order, Ginny, Neville and Luna knew the truth.

Martin hadn't been there at breakfast, and Harry wasn't sure whether he was happy about this or not. On one hand, he'd wanted to see him to confront him about the image in the book he'd found, but on the other, he was afraid of what he'd find out. Admittedly, the image was small, and simplistic with very little detail, but the resemblance was uncanny. Was Martin really one-thousand years old?

If that was the case, Harry's anger was increasing by the minute. He'd had the perfect opportunity yesterday to tell them the whole truth, but he hadn't. He'd lied to them again. It was reminding him of Dumbledore; the way he'd lied to Harry and concealed things from him because he thought he was too young to deal with them. He wasn't a child! Why couldn't Martin see that?

Why wasn't he here now?

He hadn't told Ron or Hermione about the book yet, he wasn't sure what he was intending to do about it. What could he do? He couldn't translate it, not without Martin's help, and he wasn't sure he was ready to show it to him yet. It lay wrapped up in a cloak at the bottom of his trunk until he made his decision.

At that moment, Martin opened the door and walked in. Slughorn glanced up from his desk.

"Martin, m'boy! It isn't like you to be late!"

"Sorry, professor," Martin said hurriedly.

"Well, I'll let it slide this one time," Slughorn said cheerily. "After all that dragon hysteria last night
"I'm surprised the entire school isn't still in bed!"

He looked closely at Martin. "It was awfully brave of you to charge out into the grounds like that. I hear you helped the Order of the Phoenix capture the beast!"

Martin smiled but made no answer, and slipped into his seat at Harry, Ron and Hermione's table, and began unpacking his bag. It wasn't until the class had begun its conversations again, and stopped looking at the four of them suspiciously that Harry spoke to Martin.

"Were you out with Aithusa?"

Martin glanced at him, and made sure no one was listening in before answering.

"Yes."

"How is she?" asked Hermione, looking concerned.

"She's better," said Martin. "Still weak, but if she's like I remember, she'll soon bounce back."

Ron nodded. "I still can't believe that what happened last night was actually for real. When I woke up this morning I thought I'd dreamt it all."

"So did I," agreed Hermione. "It's all rather fantastical isn't it?"

"Did she say anything about Morgana? Anything that could help us?" Harry asked.

Martin shook his head. "We didn't talk for long. We were just catching up mostly."

"I suppose two centuries is a long time to go without seeing your dragon," said Ron, drily. "Just think of everything that's changed since the eighteenth century. I mean, back then you still thought the earth was flat!"

Martin looked indignant. "No we didn't!"

Ron frowned. "Really? When was it discovered then?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly Ron, don't you know anything about history? It must have been fascinating though! I mean in the eighteenth century whole societies were changing! There were the American and French Revolutions around the time you were at school, and after that there was the Industrial Revolution, Queen Victoria, the invention of the aeroplane … and that's not counting all the wizarding history!"

Martin smiled in amusement. "I didn't really think about it as history at the time, it was just happening, and I dealt with it."

Harry was watching him closely. Was he really eight hundred years older than he said he was? Was that drawing in Ravenclaw's book really him?

"Still, you must have seen some amazing things!" Hermione had now completely abandoned her potion to talk to Martin. "I mean, so many important things have happened. Did you ever meet anyone famous?"

Martin laughed at her enthusiasm, and looked deep in thought. "Well, I did meet Charles Dickens once, he signed one of his books for me. He was a Squib you know."

Hermione's eyes went as round as saucers, and Harry also had to admit he was quite impressed.
"Who's Charles Chickens?" Ron asked, looking confused.

Hermione rolled her eyes again and continued probing Martin about the past. Martin answered her questions freely, looking happy to do so. Harry was still observing each and every action he made. He had said the previous night that he wasn't old enough to remember the Old Religion, but that picture in the book … if he was a thousand years old, then couldn't he be even older? Was he perhaps an actual Druid, and not a descendant of one? Had he known Morgana?

He looked at the potion's case Martin had given him for his birthday, the one he'd said belonged to Godric Gryffindor. Had it been given to him in person?

He was starting to question his own sanity now. His theories kept getting crazier and crazier. He didn't need to be obsessing over this. There was no point. What he had to do was uncover the truth before he went accusing him.

Hermione finally broke off, and looked at Slughorn a question in her eyes.

"Slughorn said he'd known your father, Matthew," she said quietly. "But that wasn't true was it?"

Martin sighed. "No. The man Slughorn knew fifty years ago was me."

Ron's eyebrows rose. "You knew him back then? How did you cope?"

Martin laughed. "He wasn't so bad back then."

"Are these Druid names real?" Harry asked. "You said yours was Dragoon, and your father's Balinor. Was that true?"

Martin hesitated. "No. My father's name was always Balinor. I've changed mine over the years; Dragoon was one of them, as was Michael and Matthew."

"So you lied to us?" Harry asked bluntly.

Martin looked guilty as he answered. "I'm sorry. But I couldn't exactly have told Slughorn that I was the same man he'd known back in 1951 could I? And it was just easier to pretend that I wasn't as old as I am. I thought it'd make things awkward."

"So you thought you'd make things less awkward by keeping a whole pile of secrets close to your chest?" Harry asked, his hand shaking.

Martin looked genuinely regretful. "I'm sorry. I have my secrets, but I want you to know, I'm only keeping them for good reason. It's not for any malicious purpose, I promise you. You will know all of them one day, I swear. It just isn't the time now."

"And when will be the time?" Harry asked. "You have all these secrets that you're not telling us, how are we supposed to know when you're lying to us? What reason could you have for keeping things from us? I thought we were all in this together?"

Ron and Hermione looked rather awkward as they watched this exchange. Martin looked at Harry calmly.

"We are, Harry," he said firmly, only a flicker of some unfathomable emotion in his eyes. "You just have to trust me. You know you do, deep down."

Harry stared at him a moment, before turning away and resuming with his potion. He was right. He
did trust Martin, despite all the lies, but he couldn't help but be angry, both with Martin and with himself. Why was he so pre-disposed to trust him? Why did he have this overwhelming instinct that he couldn't explain? Martin was giving him no reason to have faith, but Harry still had it.

Why?

The next couple of days were an attempt to return to normality, but they failed miserably. For one thing, there was a dragon to look after. Merlin was thrilled to see that Aithusa was rapidly recovering her strength. He went down there three times a day to check on her, sometimes with Hagrid and sometimes with Harry, Ron and Hermione, who were still more than a little wary of her.

Hermione seemed the most at ease with her, which surprised Merlin somewhat. She was asking her question after question about Camelot and Merlin and Morgana. Aithusa told her a little, but was always careful to conceal the details and not reveal too much. But she wasn't annoyed by her questions though; she confessed to Merlin that she found her to be very intelligent and engaging. At least for a human.

Harry and Ron were more inclined to just stand there in awe, but were slowly starting to warm to her. Aithusa liked them both as well, saying they were very brave and loyal.

Each day she got a little better, thanks to Hagrid's ministrations. Hagrid was only too delighted to be with her, and would often sit for hours by her side, just listening to Aithusa talk. Merlin had never seen him happier, though admittedly, he hadn't known him very long.

"Bin me dream ever since I were a little boy," he had sniffed, tearily, gazing at Aithusa. "Never though' I'd be so lucky."

Aithusa was still pressing Merlin to teach Harry some Old Magic, but Merlin was hesitant. If he did that, he'd have to reveal that he knew more about the Old Religion than he had previously said. And Harry's suspicions of him were higher than ever. There was something bothering him recently, and Merlin could only guess at what it was.

The second DA meeting had passed much in the same way as the first one had, but Merlin could see Harry's heart wasn't in it as much. He was preoccupied.

Friday evening soon came, and Merlin reported to McGonagall for his weekly check-in. When he entered the office, he was rather surprised to see Charlie Weasley and Kingsley there as well.

"Ah, Mr Emrys," said McGonagall. "Please sit down."

He did so. Charlie smiled at him.

"Don't mind us," he said. "We'll wait until Professor McGonagall's done."

Merlin nodded, thinking he knew why they were here.

Professor McGonagall soon got on with the meeting, asking him about the patrols he'd been doing and his observations of the week. Merlin answered her patiently, noting that her questioning was rather different than it had been before. She was obviously aware that she was speaking to someone far older than herself this time.

"Now," she said, looking more business-like. "What about the security for … Aithusy?"
"Aithusa," corrected Merlin automatically. "The enchantment I placed is still holding. No student would be able to happen across her accidentally. Only those who know where the clearing is can find it or lead others to it."

McGonagall nodded. "But what about … Aithusa … herself? Can she escape?"

Merlin felt riled. "Aithusa is an intelligent creature, and completely loyal to me. She is of no danger to anyone except our enemies. I will not restrain her, particularly after what she has been through."

McGonagall sighed. "I understand. I'm sorry if I caused you offence. It's still hard for me to comprehend the fact that there's a sentient dragon in the Forbidden Forest capable of human speech. I still think of dragons as dangerous animals. Again, I apologise."

Merlin nodded. "Don't worry about it. I understand it must be difficult to have a life-long belief overthrown like this. But I assure you, she's perfectly harmless."

McGonagall nodded. "Then I believe we are finished for this evening, Mr Emrys. Minister?"

Kingsley stepped forward.

"Hagrid tells me Aithusa has recovered some of her strength. Would it be possible for me and her to meet? I must confess, I'm rather enthralled at the idea to converse with a dragon straight out of legend."

Merlin nodded. "Yes, she's stronger now. And she's been eager to meet you too, Minister, and you, Charlie," he added.

They both grinned, looking rather like excited school boys.

"Well, can we be off then?" Charlie asked eagerly.

Merlin laughed. "I suppose so." He stood up and made to leave. He paused and looked back at Professor McGonagall. "You'd be welcome too, professor. Perhaps once you met her you wouldn't be so afraid that she's dangerous."

She looked startled. "Me? Meet a dragon?" She looked almost nervous for a moment, before she stood up confidently. "I'd be honoured to meet her."

Merlin grinned, and they all left the office. Five minutes later they were in the Forbidden Forest, making their way through the trees.

"How much further, Mr Emrys?" McGonagall asked, as a branch snagged her hat for the tenth time.

"We're almost there!" he called back. "Here we are! Aithusa, I'd like you to meet the Headmistress of Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall, Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Charlie Weasley. Everyone, this is Aithusa."

He jogged across the clearing to stand next to Aithusa, watching with glee the astonished and awe-filled faces before him. He couldn't help but laugh.

Aithusa bowed her head.

"I am honoured to meet friends of Emrys'."

Professor McGonagall's eyes went wide, and her face pale. "Merlin's beard. I can hardly believe it!"
Merlin frowned and absentmindedly touched his clean-shaven chin as he always did when he heard this particular exclamation. He didn't have a beard. He'd *never* had a beard!

Kingsley looked up at Aithusa reverently, and Charlie was grinning like a five-year old child on Christmas morning.

"Wow! I'm so glad to meet you!" he exclaimed. "I've always admired your race. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to meet with one of the Old dragons!"

"Well, now you have," said Aithusa, and Merlin thought he could hear a note of smugness there in her voice. "Emrys tells me you are a dragon expert?"

Charlie nodded excitedly. "I am. But no modern-day dragon even compares to this!"

Aithusa laughed, though the others jumped back in alarm at the sound. Merlin supposed it was only he who recognised it for what it was.

"No they do not. I am *far* superior."

"Stop being so arrogant," Merlin said, nudging her in her side. "I am an ancient dragon, more powerful than any other living creature. Why should I not be?"

Merlin rolled his eyes.

Kingsley stepped forwards, smiling. "Why not indeed? I have never before seen such a magnificent creature as I have this day."

Merlin rolled his eyes again; way to boost her ego.

Aithusa sounded smug again. "I thank you for your compliment. But I am not at my best, I'm afraid. I have suffered deeply, and my wounds still live on."

Kingsley frowned, and Merlin saw his eyes sweep over the marks on Aithusa's face and her unseeing eyes.

"I am deeply sorry for what happened to you. I want to assure you now, that I will be proposing new legislation at the Ministry to prevent this type of cruelty at Gringotts ever happening again. You have my word that no dragon, Old or modern, shall ever suffer this way again."

Aithusa bowed her head. "You are a good man, and a strong leader. I think I like you."

Kingsley grinned.

A few more words were exchanged, McGonagall, Kingsley and Charlie still looking awed.

"Professor, there was one thing I wanted to ask you," said Merlin, remembering. "When Aithusa is strong enough to fly again, would you let her fly around the grounds? Nowhere near the school of course."

McGonagall blinked, and looked at Aithusa uncertainly. "Well, I suppose, yes."

"Thank you," said Aithusa. "I shall not forget these acts of kindness. You have all shown such generosity as I have not known in two hundred years."

They looked thrilled at her gratitude, and Charlie continued to prattle on excitedly, whilst Kingsley
and McGonagall questioned her more succinctly. It was almost an hour before they decided to leave, and they did so reluctantly.

"You're so lucky, Martin," said Charlie as they headed back to the castle. "To have someone like that as a friend … You must be very close."

"Well, we've been out of contact for a while, but yes, I hope we can be close again," said Merlin, looking back at the clearing. And he meant it. Now Aithusa was back, he didn't have to feel so alone any more.

Merlin emerged back in the common room later that evening to find Harry, Ron and Hermione sitting around the fire, Harry and Ron in their Quidditch robes.

"Out visiting Aithusa again?" Hermione asked as he sat down.

Merlin nodded.

"How is she?" asked Ron. "I'm really starting to like her. Yeah, at first it was scary talking to her, I mean, after everything Hagrid's subjected us to who wouldn't be? But she's a pretty cool person- I mean, dragon."

Merlin laughed. "Yeah she is. And she's getting better every day."

"Good," nodded Harry. "D'you think she'll be able to help us with Morgana?"

Merlin's heart went heavy again. "Perhaps, I'm not really sure just now. Her magic hasn't come back fully yet, and until then she's limited to what she can do."

"Even if she can't," said Ron. "It's still pretty cool to have a dragon on our side. Think she'll let us ride her?"

"We already have," said Hermione, peering over the top of her book.

"Yeah," said Ron, waving his hand. "But I mean properly. Last time we were all holding on for dear life and terrified she was going to eat us!"

"I'll ask her," said Merlin, a laugh in his voice. Aithusa was definitely more inclined than Kilgarrah to offer lifts to humans, Gwaine in particular had enjoyed soaring around on her back, though admittedly, only when drunk.

Hermione exclaimed out loud suddenly, making them all jump.

"Ooh!"

"What?" yelled Harry and Ron, who'd both leapt to their feet their wands outstretched, but Hermione was staring at her book.

"Merlin's pants, Hermione!" said Ron, not seeing the wince on Merlin's face at 'Merlin's pants'. "What is so important?"

"Look!" she squealed, and laid the book she was reading in front of her on the table in front of the fire.
They all crowded around, and Hermione read aloud, translating from Ancient Runes as she went along. "This came from one of Ravenclaw's books! Listen!"

‘One thing my fellow Founders and I have always striven for is the mastery of those arts that have long been forgotten by the rest of the word. The magic of the Old Religion is one of these. The magic from the times of the likes of Merlin and Morgana has long been studied, but all knowledge seems to have been forgotten. I and the other Founders were brought together by shared love of these ancient arts, and were determined to learn them. We thought perhaps we would have more success than previous generations. We each felt it deep within ourselves; our magic was different than the rest of the world. It was more powerful, more instinctive. We studied for hours and hours in an attempt to learn this magic, but we had limited success.

Then one day, in a most unusual manner, a strange young man appeared at Hogwarts castle, then only in the beginning of its construction, and claimed to be a practitioner of Old Magic. At first of course, we dismissed this as charlatanism. But a most unusual occurrence took place. Godric's beloved phoenix settled upon the man's shoulder, and we were convinced. Such a creature's faith must be an indicator of a true heart.

He healed my daughter from a ravaging illness as easily as anyone else plucks a thorn from a wound. He helped us, in every way possible. He taught us some of the Old Magic, but adapted. We formed a new type of magic, an amalgamation of the Old and the New. It made us powerful, and it made us wise. The man, Emrys was his name, disappeared several years after the school was founded, and we never saw him again.

However, when we attempted to teach this magic to our students, something would not work. It appeared we were the only ones able to use such magic, much to our frustration.

But we were not about to let all our hard work be in vain. We resolved that the magic should be preserved for future generations, in the hope that one day they could learn it, where our students could not. Emrys had warned us not to do this, but, I confess, we did not heed him. We felt the magic should be passed on, and not erased as he seemed to wish.

We used precautions however, as he had thought it so urgent. We each hid our own records of the magic within the castle, each in our own special areas, with enchantments to guard them from the unworthy. We hoped that one day this would be uncovered, and this magic could once again be taught.'

Merlin's first thought was … Crap!

He'd never once thought in all this time they'd spent researching Old Magic from the Founders days that he'd be mentioned. Looking back, this was so incredibly naïve he might again be a gangly youth trying to fight Arthur on his second day in Camelot all over again.

How stupid had he been?! Of course he'd be mentioned! He taught them how to fuse the two methods of magic. He’d lived with them for over eight years, helped them found the school. He’d been there throughout the very first years of the school’s existence. He’d been their friend. Why wouldn’t they have mentioned him?

When he’d left the school, he had wiped his name from all official documents, and prevented his name ever being recorded by future documents that related to the founding of the school, to ensure his name wouldn’t be recorded by history. He had, however, neglected to wipe his name from existing and future unofficial texts. It was like a slap in the face. How could he have been so thick?

With the name Emrys, the mention of the phoenix and the Old Magic …. It was practically a giant
luminous arrow pointing straight at him!

Harry, Ron and Hermione turned to stare at him, and Merlin tried not to panic.

"Emrys?" asked Ron, looking confused. "But, how?"

Merlin started laughing, though he felt like doing anything but. "My father," he said, frantically trying to find a way out of this. "He was very old when he died, I'm not sure how old exactly—he never got the chance to tell me. It was probably him she's referring to."

Hermione frowned. "Your father?"

Merlin nodded, hating himself for lying. "He never told me he was around in the time of the Founders. But then again, it makes sense. How he was able to teach me all those old languages, how he got that potions chest from Godric Gryffindor… I thought he was just a scholar and an antiques dealer!"

But Ron still looked puzzled. "But, that phoenix thing…"

"Phoenixes are incredibly intelligent," said Merlin. "It probably recognised me as Balinor Emrys' son. It doesn't strike me as unusual that Godric's phoenix would be the same one as Dumbledore's. They are immortal after all."

Ron and Hermione looked less suspicious, but Harry was still staring at Merlin.

"But what about these books the Founders hid around the castle?" Hermione asked excitedly. "I was right! The information is right here in the castle! All we have to do is find it!"

Merlin tried not to scowl. He couldn't believe that the Founders had hidden this information in the castle! He had told them that it had to be erased! That no one could ever learn it! He didn't care what enchantments they'd placed around it, it was too risky that it'd end up in the wrong hands! If the Founders weren't dead and buried he'd strangle them all for not listening to him! Then again, they had never been happy with his decision, Rowena and Salazar in particular. He should have known they would have found a way around it.

"I already have found it," Harry said quietly.

They all wheeled around to face him. "You what?" yelped Merlin.

He stared up at them all evenly. "I went to talk to the Grey Lady, and she told me about the books."

*Helena, you sly little vixen*, Merlin thought angrily to himself. *Why didn’t you mention this in our conversation yesterday?*

"And?" asked Hermione on bated breath.

"I went to the library, and I found a statue of an eagle. I had to answer some riddles, like the way you do to get into the Ravenclaw Common Room. I got her book."

They all gaped at him for several minutes. "Well?" demanded Ron. "Where is it?"

Harry disappeared up to the dormitories for a couple of moments, and reappeared with an ancient book with an eagle brand on the front. Merlin felt a tingling of dread. What had Rowena been thinking leaving this behind? Hadn’t he told her how important this was to him?

Harry flipped open the book. "I can't read the writing, but I did look at the pictures, and I found this."
He pushed the book across to Merlin, Ron and Hermione. There on the page in front of him, was a picture of himself. **Damn!**

It was small, and not very clear, but Merlin could still tell that it was himself. It must have been drawn long after he’d left the school, probably by Helga. She never made her illustrations move; she liked the static nature of them. It reminded her of how much she wished sometimes that time could stand still.

"Wow," he said, frantically trying not to react with panic on his face. "It's my father. Looks just like him."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Your father?"

Merlin nodded. "Yeah, I look a lot like him."

"It's eerily similar," said Harry staring at Merlin.

"Yeah," said Merlin. "It is a little. Like you look eerily similar to your father."

He winced inwardly as he said this; that was a low blow.

Harry frowned. Merlin spoke again:

"What? Did you think it was me or something?" he asked jokingly.

Harry didn't answer for a moment. "Well, you've got to admit, it does look suspicious."

Merlin laughed. "Yes, it does. But I'm not *that* old. I *do* look an awful lot like him, but that's not entirely unusual is it? Didn't Hermione tell me once that when you went back in time you mistook your own self for your father?"

Harry blinked, and glared at Hermione, who looked sheepish.

"I don't know," said Ron, squinting at the picture which Merlin saw mercifully wasn't too detailed. "It isn't *too* similar. This guy's fatter."

Merlin whipped his head around to face Ron and only barely managed to stop himself crying out in indignation. **Fat?**

Harry still didn't look convinced, but he seemed to calm down a little. "Can you read it?" he asked, quietly.

Merlin opened the book at the very first page.

*Here follows the personal account of Rowena Ravenclaw of Hogwarts Castle. This book shall be chronicling my studies of the magic of the Old Religion and the way in which my fellow Founders and I have incorporated this into everyday use. I record it here in the hopes that future generations will be able to use this magic to the best of their ability, as I myself have done.*

Reading the words was like a slap in his face. They really had got one over on him hadn't they?

"Yeah, this is definitely the right book," he said.

Hermione grinned broadly, and began flipping through the pages excitedly. "Some of the spells are in Ancient Runes! I can read some of this myself!"
"That's great and all, Hermione," said Ron. "But there are four books, and we've only got one."

"Then we'll just have to find the other three!" she said, unfazed.

Ron rolled his eyes at Harry. "Where d'you reckon they'll be?"

Harry responded: "The Grey Lady said they were in places of great sentimental value to each of the Founders."

"Hmm," said Hermione. "D'you think Slytherin's will be in the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Yeah, nothing says sentimental like 'giant room built for holding a deadly serpent to kill off kids'," replied Ron sarcastically. "Besides, we won't be able to get in. Harry can't speak Parseltongue anymore!"

"But you can imitate it like you did last time!"

"That was a complete accident! Besides, I can't remember it now!"

"Well, you'll just have to!"

The sound of Hermione and Ron's bickering suddenly was drowned out as a great pain overcame Merlin. His magic was once again boiling and writhing within his body. He was in agony. He fell to his knees, crying out in pain. His entire body was twitching and his eyes burned gold. He heard Aithusa cry out in a similar manner in his mind before everything went black.

"Was it Morgana again?" Hermione whispered to Harry, as they crowded around Martin who lay unconscious on the floor of the common room. They'd decided not to take him to Madame Pomfrey, they knew what was afflicting him after all, and there was nothing she could do.

Harry only shrugged in response his heart beating rapidly, but Martin spoke from the ground, his voice weak.

His eyes fluttered open feebly, and the three of them looked down at him in concern.

"Yes, it was her, or rather Voldemort trying to free her," he said, weary.

"And what happened?" asked Ron nervously.

Martin shook his head. "It wasn't successful, he failed again."

They all breathed a sigh of relief. But Martin didn't.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked. "It's a good thing isn't it?"

But Martin looked grave.

"He was closer that time. Much closer. I could feel Morgana's life force for a split second before she was pushed back. If he tries again, she'll be free."
The Return

The next day dawned early, but Merlin took no joy in it. Morgana was inches away from being freed from her prison and there was nothing he could do.

The cave no longer had a physical location on earth, he couldn't go there, he couldn't add more enchantments to the originals. His spell wasn't being broken; Voldemort was just finding a way around it.

Why had he never thought of this? Why had he had to have been so weak back then? His past was catching up with him in a way he could never have imagined.

"Why so miserable, Merlin?" asked Aithusa thickly, through a mouthful of meat, as they sat together in the Forbidden Forest.

Merlin sighed. "Isn't it obvious? You felt what happened last night. Morgana will soon be free."

Aithusa blinked. "Yes. And you shall defeat her, just like last time."

"I wish I had your confidence," said Merlin bitterly, picking up a stick from the ground and throwing it as far as he could in anger.

"Byrne!" he shouted, and the stick exploded in a burst of flame.

Aithusa watched it calmly, following its flaming path with her great sightless eyes, sensing it rather than seeing it. Then she turned to Merlin and fixed those ruined eyes firmly on his face.

"The entire wizarding world utters your name with awe. There is a reason for that, Merlin."

Merlin shook his head. "They are in awe of the legends. Not me."

"Yes, and you are decidedly far better than the legends suggest," said Aithusa. "I know that you and the Potter boy shall defeat this evil. And do not argue with a dragon."

She gave Merlin a warning look, and started tearing into the bloody carcass again, leaving Merlin deep in thought.

"Sssssshhhhhhhshhh," hissed Ron, for the hundredth time that morning, but the tap in the girl's bathroom on the second floor didn't budge.

"This is hopeless," said Harry, sitting on the ground next to the sink.

"Well I'm trying my best, mate!" said Ron huffily. "It was hard enough the first time!"

"Sorry," said Harry, regretting his words. "It's just so frustrating!"

"I know," grimaced Ron. He resumed hissing again aimlessly, and Harry turned to Hermione.

"Any luck?"

She frowned, her nose stuck in a book entitled. 'Parseltongue: The Secret to Serpentine Success.'
"Nothing. This book is absolutely useless. The guy who wrote it wasn't even a Parselmouth. He has no idea what he's talking about."

Harry sighed, he'd expected as much. Parseltongue wasn't really a language you could learn.

Ron gave up, and slumped down on the floor beside them. "We're never going to get in, unless we get a real snake in here."

"And how do you suggest we get it to say the word 'open'?" asked Hermione sarcastically.

Ron scowled. "It was only an idea! What else are we going to do? Do you know any Parselmouths?"

Harry felt slightly guilty, though he wasn't sure why. He was glad the piece of Voldemort's soul within him was gone, but at the same time, and small part of him wanted it back. Not just for the Parseltongue, but also for the connection. A much as he'd hated it, he had to admit, it had been useful in figuring out what Voldemort was up to.

They sat there aimlessly for a while, not really sure what to do. Hermione kept flipping through the book, and Ron kept trying various different hissing sounds, and Harry tried desperately to remember what it sounded like, but Parseltongue had always sounded like normal words to him.

"This is an odd meeting place," said a casual voice from behind.

Martin had appeared suddenly from behind.

"Blimey!" said Ron. "Where'd you come from? We tried to find you this morning."

Martin frowned. "I went out to see Aithusa. She felt the attack last night as well."

Harry sat up straighter. "And did she have anything to say?"

Martin shook his head. "Just that 'we shouldn't worry' and 'everything will turn out all right' and 'we have the power within us'."

Hermione frowned. "What does that mean?"

Martin rolled his eyes. "Dragons are notoriously cryptic, Hermione. I gave up trying to understand them centuries ago."

Harry felt a little chill run through him as Martin said this. He still found it strange to comprehend that Martin was so old. It still freaked him out.

"What about that other dragon?" Ron asked. "Can he help us?"

Martin laughed bitterly. "Kilgharrah? He's even worse!"

He looked down at them and frowned. "I guessed you'd be here. Any luck?"

"Nope," said Harry, deflated. "There's no way in."

"Hmm," wondered Martin, a far-off look in his eyes. "Perhaps there is a way."

"What is it?" asked Hermione urgently, throwing her book aside.

But Martin shook his head. "You wouldn't agree to it."
"Well why don't you just ask and find out?" asked Ron impatiently.

Martin turned to Harry. "Legilimancy." He said simply.

Harry felt another chill run through him, as Martin's eyes met his.

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly, not liking the sound of it.

"The knowledge is still within you Harry," Martin explained. "It's just hidden; like a repressed memory. You can't use Parseltongue naturally anymore, but your memory of using it is still there. I could find it."

"You can use Legilimancy?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Martin nodded. "I don't like using it, I hate it in fact. But what other choice do we have?"

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, and saw they were just as uneasy as he was. As much as he trusted Martin, he didn't like the idea of someone poking about in his memories. Snape had done enough of that.

"I don't know," said Harry. "I mean, I don't think you're about to hurt me or anything, it's just that …"

"You like to keep your thoughts to yourself," Martin nodded. "I understand."

"Perhaps there is another way," said Hermione thoughtfully. "I mean, if the memory is still there …"

"What?" asked Martin.

She bit her lip. "If we had a Pensieve …"

Ron's face lit up. "Of course! If Harry can put his memory into the Pensieve we can look it again and see what he said!"

"Seems like an awful lot of trouble," said Harry unconvinced. "Where are we even going to get a Pensieve?"

"McGonagall might let us use Dumbledore's-"

"I'd rather she not know," said Harry hastily.

Hermione looked confused. "Why not? We're not doing anything wrong! We're just trying to get more information on the Old Religion to help the Order! I thought we said at the beginning that we were only going to keep it secret for as long as we couldn't find anything? Why shouldn't people know?"

"I just think we should keep it to ourselves alright?" Harry retorted. He didn't want to involve anyone else. If Martin and Aithusa were right, he had the power of the Old Religion inside of him. He may be able to learn it; he could strike back at Voldemort. He felt this was something he wanted to do on his own as much as possible. Besides, it just felt right. This is the way the three of them had always done things, and it had always worked out alright.

Hermione dropped the subject.

"Your only choice then, is Legilimancy." Martin said, looking down at Harry.
Though it made his very insides crawl with discomfort at the thought of it, Harry nodded. They had to find Slytherin's book.

"Who's using Legilimancy?"

Moaning Myrtle had come floating into view, picking at a spot on her chin.

Ron groaned. "Can't we have any privacy in here?"

"You are in a girl's bathroom," retorted Myrtle, annoyed. "If I want to eavesdrop I will! What else have I got to do around here?"

"Haunt a sewage pipe?" grumbled Ron, but she didn't hear. She turned her mooney gaze on Martin and her eyebrows rose.

"I haven't seen you in here before!" she said. "Are you trying to break rules as well?"

"We're not breaking any rules!" said Hermione.

Myrtle looked at her. "Then why were you annoyed that I was listening in?" she asked. "I'd think someone like you would know better than to break rules," she gestured to Hermione's Head Girl badge.

"I don't think I've ever seen you before either," said Martin, looking at Myrtle in interest. "How long have you been here?"

"Oh, about fifty years," she gushed, looking flattered at his attention. "But why do you ask?"

"I thought I knew all the ghosts around here," said Martin quietly. "You weren't here the last time I was at Hogwarts."

Myrtle's silvery eyebrows shot up into her hair, and she backed off looking startled. "You're the Emrys boy!" she said, pointing at him. "You're the immortal one!"

Martin smiled, though his smile was concealing something deeper. "I'd hardly say immortal, I'm only 200 or so."

She frowned. "But I thought-

"It was nice to meet you," Martin said, interrupting her. "Come on, you lot. We'd better get down to lunch before it's all gone. We can do our thing later."

Martin's swift change of subject was not lost on Harry, but he followed Martin nonetheless, down the staircase and into the Entrance Hall.

What had Myrtle been about to say?

_That had been close_, Merlin thought to himself. He'd no idea Hogwarts had a new ghost. She obviously knew he was always popping up over the centuries, but not that he was Merlin. She must not socialise with the other ghosts very often, or she would have given him away.

Was she the girl that was killed by the basilisk? Merlin only knew vague details about Harry's early life at Hogwarts. He'd checked up on him every so often, but more or less left him to his own
devices, trusting him to Dumbledore's care. Maybe he shouldn't have; Harry had barely managed to survive his years at Hogwarts.

They had just descended the marble staircase into the Entrance Hall, when another thing Merlin wished to avoid suddenly popped up.

"Looky looky!" Peeves cackled, zooming around Merlin's head. Mercifully, he'd managed to stay away from Peeves since that encounter after the battle, but it appeared he'd finally caught up with him. Peeves hadn't exactly been discreet back then, would he now?

"It's Emrys! He's back! Ha ha ha!"

Merlin ducked, as Peeves tried to dive-bomb him.

"Getting a bit old now, isn't he? Is he sure he doesn't need this?"

Merlin ducked again as Peeves threw a walking stick at him.

"Leave me alone, Peeves!" Merlin shouted.

Peeves just cackled some more. "Getting crabby in his old age isn't he? Peevsie remembers his first time at the castle, oh yes, caused a bit of a stir!"

Merlin's heartbeat quickened. Peeves had been at Hogwarts from the very beginning. He knew that Merlin had been friends with the Founders.

"Get lost, Peeves!" roared Ron, trying to hit him.

Merlin winced. *That wasn't the best idea!*

Peeves just floated higher, out of reach. "Do Potty and his friends know the truth? Is Emrys lying to people again? Naughty naughty you'll get caughty!"

Merlin whipped out his wand, only to have Peeves grab it and start twirling it like a baton. He didn't have time for this.

Merlin noticed with a sudden dread that Harry was watching Peeves with an almost curious expression on his face. Damn Peeves!

He laughed some more. "Peevsie knows the truth now. The whole truth! Wonder what his friends will think when they know that he's actually-"

"Ceolwærc!" Merlin yelled, as his eyes burned.

Peeves started gagging and clutching at his throat. His eyes popped and he made retching sounds, before a giant toad plopped out of his mouth and onto the floor of the Entrance Hall. The students in the immediate vicinity roared with laughter as Peeves looked outraged. He scowled, and dropped Merlin's wand. After Merlin had bent down to retrieve it, he stood up and saw Harry was the only one not laughing.

Everything was teetering dangerously close to the edge now. What had the ghosts been thinking telling Peeves Merlin's identity?

"That was brilliant!" wheezed Ron as he laughed, leaning on Hermione for support. "How did you do that?"
Merlin only smiled.

"It was Old Magic wasn't it?" asked Harry. "I thought you're always going on about how dangerous that stuff is. How no one really knows how to use it anymore? You seem to be pretty good at it for someone who's never studied it."

"It's instinctive," said Merlin, beginning to panic. "I only know a few spells that's been passed down the family. I don't really know that much."

"Really?" said Harry sarcastically, looking thoroughly annoyed. "Because it seems to me, that whenever something strange happens to do with the Old Religion, you always seem to have an answer!"

Merlin blinked rapidly. "I just-"

"What?" said Harry, raising his voice. "What is it that you're hiding from us? You can trust us, Martin! We trust you, the least you could do it return the courtesy instead of lying to us! What was it you said to Smith at the DA meeting? 'We're all on the same side so there's no point in being difficult.' So why are you? Why can't you just tell us the entire truth?"

Merlin's mouth opened and closed a few moments in shock. What was he supposed to say? Should he finally tell him the truth?

"I-" he said, trailing off as he instinctively shied away from revealing the truth.

"Forget it," spat Harry, the hurt evident on his face. "After all, why would you bother to tell us? We're only children to you aren't we? Not like Emrys, the ancient all-knowing one".

Merlin felt like he'd been slapped in the face as Harry said this. Was that what Harry thought of him? Did he honestly believe that?

Harry turned and started to storm off towards the Great Hall. Merlin watched him go. He couldn't let Harry feel this way! He had to do something!

"Harry!" he called, but he didn't turn around. Merlin started to go after him, Ron and Hermione at his side, who'd watched the entire exchange with distressed looks on their faces. "Harry!"

Harry finally turned and looked at Merlin, but Merlin couldn't see him. Agony exploded in his head, and everything went black.

'My lady ... welcome to the twentieth century.'

'My lord ... it is a relief to be free after so many years. You shall be rewarded for this.'

'Any reward from one such as you would be an honour indeed. Together we shall accomplish great things.'

'Indeed.'

'The magic of the Old Religion and the magic of the New shall be combined at last. The Lady Morgana and the Lord Voldemort, the world shall tremble at our feet.'

'As it should. I intend to make it pay for my long imprisonment.'
'Help me to destroy the Potter boy and I shall take great delight in helping cleanse the world of the unworthy with you.'

'It would be my pleasure. But I have my own thorn in the side to deal with first.'

'The Druid boy I saw at the battle? What significance has he?'

'He is no mere Druid. He has wronged me greatly.'

'Then he shall pay. But how can this boy be someone you know? Is he not too young?'

'I have seen his image in your mind. It is the same 'boy' I knew thirteen hundred years ago. How he has endured I know not, but it must have been to torment me, it has always been his want.'

'Who is he?'

'… Merlin …'

Merlin jolted awake, breathing heavily, and sweating all over. He was lying in the Hospital Wing, the light outside indicated it was early evening, and Madame Pomfrey bustled about the ward. But Merlin didn't register any of this.

She was back.

Merlin ran through the corridors of Hogwarts like a bat out of hell, ignoring the people that stared at him as he ran. He knew Madame Pomfrey would have his blood for up and leaving like that, but frankly he didn't care.

He raced past portraits, whose occupants cried out as they saw him. He had to get to McGonagall's office.

Merlin!

Merlin jerked to a stop as he heard Aithusa's voice in his mind.

Aithusa! You felt it then?

Of course! You must warn the Potter boy!

I'm on it.

Take care, Merlin! She knows you live still. She will not stop hunting you!

I know.

Merlin breathed a sigh of exhaustion and despair, and leaned against the wall of the corridor where he was standing, and sunk to the floor. Morgana was back …

He closed his eyes, feeling every bit as ancient as he truly was. Why was he here? Why was he alive? Why couldn't he have died like Arthur and Gwen and the others? Why did he have to live to see this?

Because you're the only one who can do anything to stop her, a voice said in the back of his mind.

Merlin opened his eyes, and stared straight ahead. He had to stop her; he was the only one who
His eyes drifted upwards, and he noticed he was sitting opposite the portrait of Camelot Harry had caught him staring at one day after the battle. What were the odds this was the portrait he'd stop at? The Old Religion was telling him something.

He stood up and walked over to the portrait like he was in a dream. He drank in the sight in front of him, his eyes lingering on every detail. He felt tears beginning to prick at his eyes. _Camelot …_

He lifted a hand, and let his fingers trail over the painting. It was a Muggle painting, Merlin remembered it being installed here when the school was first opened. He'd thought it was appropriate. The Founders had been inspired by the values of Camelot, and wanted its legacy to linger on. In Merlin's first life, Camelot had become a centre for magical learning and tolerance, now that legacy was being carried on in Hogwarts centuries after Camelot had fallen into ruin.

The trees in the painting were static, the flags on the castle didn't blow in the wind, smoke from the lower town hung in the air forever, never to be dispelled. The people wandered about, frozen in time. Knights fought in the training arena, their duels never to be won.

_Camelot was gone, Merlin told himself. It was never going to come back, things would never be the way they were. But that didn't mean he should give up. As long as he remembered, Camelot would never be forgotten. The world _could_ be safe again._

His eyes drifted up to the palace and a certain window on the eastern wall. Standing in the window frame, were Arthur and Guinevere, arm in arm. They were so small, only Merlin knew they were there. He looked at Arthur's face, immortalised as he was in his youth, not long after his repeal of the laws against magic, when everything had been good.

"I'm doing this for you Arthur,” Merlin muttered, his eyes fixed on Arthur's face. "I'll finish the task that you started. Morgana will never hurt anyone ever again. I promise you."

Merlin could have sworn he saw Arthur smile. He turned away from the painting and continued running down the corridor.

He felt tears on his cheeks, not tears of sadness nor or regret, but angry ones, ones of determination. Morgana was his responsibility, and he'd be damned if he'd shrink away from it.

He reached McGonagall's office, gave the password, and bolted up the stairs and in through the door. The office was empty, not that Merlin had expected her to be here. She must be at the Order meeting.

Without hesitating, he crossed the office, and seized a pile of Floo powder, ready to go to Grimmauld Place, when a sudden thought struck him.

He turned around and headed to the back of the office, where four large paintings were hanging.

"Oi! Wake up!" he shouted. The occupants of the paintings didn't stir.

He lost his patience.

"_Brynet!_"

Four jets of fiery sparks flew from his outstretched hands and struck the portrait's occupants on the face. They each squealed, and jumped, looking around for the disturbance of their rest.
"Oh, decided to join me then?" Merlin said sarcastically.

"There are less invasive methods you know," said Salazar Slytherin, brushing soot off of his robes. "Buckets of Bubotuber pus perhaps?"

"I don't have time for this!" Merlin said, his impatience only increasing. "I want to talk to you lot!"

"What about?" asked Godric Gryffindor, regretfully examining his singed beard. "What could possibly be so important?"

"Morgana has returned." Merlin said, hearing the words aloud felt like he was being stabbed through the heart.

"What?" gasped Helga Hufflepuff, her hand across her heart. "But that is terrible news!"

"Yes, it is," said Merlin. "I'm sure you all know what's happening. I told McGonagall my theory the other night and I don't for a moment believe you were really asleep and not eavesdropping. So I want some answers."

"You expect advice on how to defeat her?" Rowena Ravenclaw asked sceptically. "Her powers were far beyond anything we could do. You know that. You have the power of the Old Religion yourself, properly, not just the crude fusion of the two magics that we practised."

"I know," said Merlin. "I don't need your advice. I'm here to ask you something else, like 'Why the hell did you leave records of the magic you studied lying around the castle when I expressly told you to erase it all!'"

They gave each other shifty looks.

"Well," said Godric slowly. "We didn't want it all to be for nothing …"

"That knowledge deserved to be preserved!" maintained Rowena, as determined in her argument as she had ever been. "We couldn't just let it be forgotten!"

Merlin groaned. "It was supposed to be forgotten. That knowledge is dangerous in the wrong hands!"

"I told you disobeying Emrys' wishes was a bad idea," Helga reprimanded her fellow Founders. "We should never have betrayed his trust like that!"

"We didn't exactly leave it lying around for anyone to find," said Salazar, annoyed. "We made it so that it would be extremely difficult to find!"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Well, Harry's found Rowena's stash."

She raised her eyebrows looking grudgingly impressed. "Really? Those were some of my toughest riddles! Perhaps he is truly a Ravenclaw at heart!"

"Don't deceive yourself, Rowena," said Godric. "Harry is a Gryffindor through and through."

"Impossible," said Salazar. "The child has a brain, and a cunning one. That certainly doesn't fit the match of a typical Gryffindor. He should have been a Slytherin."

"I think he would have made a fine Huffle-"

"Enough!" shouted Merlin. "It doesn't matter! All that matters is that Harry has that information
"And why is that a bad thing?" asked Helga, a small frown on her face.

"Because! The knowledge should have been forgotten!" Merlin repeated.

"Why?" asked Salazar. "Perhaps this was supposed to happen. The child showed great initiative in finding the knowledge; perhaps this is your Old Religion indicating that the child is ready to learn its secrets?"

"Harry can't learn that magic!"

"Why not?" asked Rowena. "What other way is he to defeat that awful offspring of Salazar's?"

"What has the fact that he's my descendent got to do with anything?"

"Come on, Sal, you have to admit, there are certain similarities …"

"There is no such thing, Godric! And refrain from calling me that!"

"What, Sal?"

"Yes … Ricky."

"Oi!"

"For crying out loud!" Merlin yelled. "You've been around for a thousand years! Haven't you finally learned to get along?"

Salazar huffed and crossed his arms over his body, whilst Godric did the same. "Perhaps we would have if some bright young person hadn't decided to stick us side-by-side for ten centuries!"

"You aren't exactly easy to get along with either, Salazar!"

"Enough!" yelled Helga. She whipped out her wand and pointed it at the two of them. "I've had enough of this. Talk to each other civilly or I shall turn you into creatures that wouldn't look out of place lurking at the bottom of ponds."

They looked at her wand rather warily, and ceased their arguing.

"Anyway," said Rowena, who'd listened to the entire exchange looking rather bored. "This Voldemort won't be defeated using normal magic. Why should the boy not learn the magic he wishes?"

"It's too dangerous!" said Merlin. "He wasn't born with the magic. It isn't in his blood like it was with other magic users back in the old days. He can never harness its true power."

"Neither could we," said Helga reasonably. "You taught us a way to use both the Old and New."

"But."

"You will be there at every point to help him," said Rowena. "Under your guidance, he will learn quickly. Just like we did."

Merlin stared at the four of them, feeling outnumbered. He didn't have anything to say back to them, every argument now seemed feeble in comparison. He knew he could never outwit a Ravenclaw.
Rowena had always had that effect on him.

"I just don't want him to hate me," he said quietly. "Once he finds out the truth about me … he'll never trust me again."

"That's a risk you'll have to take," said Godric, unusually serious. "The greater crime would be to leave him unprepared."

"You are loyal, just and true, Emyrs," said Helga, a smile on her face. "Harry will see that."

Merlin tried to speak, but found his throat was constricted with emotion. He'd missed them. Perhaps he’d never been as close to them as he had been to his friends in Camelot, but they were the first ones he'd met after those days had ended that he'd befriended. He’d spent years with them, shared so much with them. They'd brought meaning into his aimless wandering. He'd had a purpose with them. Perhaps he would have again.

"Alright," he said, defeated. Aithusa had told him much the same over the past few days. Perhaps they were all right. "Where did you all hide your books then? How can we get to them?"

"I thought you didn't agree with our methods?" Salazar asked, bored, examining his nails.

"Come on, tell me!"

"The books may only be found by those who are truly worthy," said Godric. "If we told you … well, it wouldn't be fair."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "So I have to earn them? Like a quest?"

They said nothing, and Merlin groaned. Even after a thousand years they were still managing to annoy him.

"Perhaps the journey itself will help you to realise that you are not on your own. The four of you may discover many things. You will need your trust and your love to succeed."

Merlin wheeled around to see Dumbledore's portrait smiling at him, his blue eyes twinkling. He'd heard everything.

Merlin felt as if he were being x-rayed by those blue eyes, and for a moment had a panic as he wondered whether portraits could perform Legilimancy. Did he know the truth? Had he known all along?

He looked back to the Founders; even they had never known his true identity. Or at least, never voiced their suspicions aloud.

"All right then. I'll teach Harry. But first … Salazar: how do you say 'open' in Parseltongue?"

"So we have no new leads?" asked Remus wearily. His eyes were sunken and his face haggard. The full moon was obviously approaching. Tonks squeezed his hand reassuringly over the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place.

"No," said Arthur Weasley bluntly. "Two museums have now been attacked this week. Thirty-two Muggle dead in total now. And we still have no idea what they're searching for."
No one spoke for a moment, and Harry felt his heart weigh heavily in his chest. The second attack had come that afternoon, not long after he, Ron and Hermione had seen Martin off to the hospital wing. They'd arrived only in time to find the last of the Death Eaters leaving, a trail of bodies behind them.

"What could possibly be so important?" Mrs Weasley asked, her eyes rimmed in red. She'd also been there that day. There had been more dead children there, and Harry felt secretly that she shouldn't go near a Boggart for a few weeks. It had shaken her up; he knew her greatest fear was that one day one of her own children would be killed.

"I don't know," sighed Kingsley, running a hand over his face. "It must be some old relic of the Old Religion; it couldn't be anything else."

"Maybe it's knowledge that they're looking for?" suggested Percy. "They didn't find anything at the Ministry did they? Maybe that's what they're after?"

"I don't think so," said Charlie. "Remember what Martin was saying? He thinks Morgana has been teaching You-Know-Who the Old Magic, he doesn't need spell books or anything. Besides they weren't searching the museum's archives. Maybe it's some relic needed for a spell? Didn't the Druids use a lot of those?"

Everyone automatically turned to Hermione who blushed slightly. "I think so," she said nervously. "What little records there are speak of holy Druid relics that they used in their magic. But there weren't any specifics."

"Of course there weren't." muttered Harry.

"Well, I theenk zat we are looking at zis all wrong!" said Fleur. She'd only recently returned from France, having spent a month there with her parents after the death of her grandmother. "Zair 'as to be somezing we are missing!"

"Yeah, everything," said Fred gloomily, holding a cloth to a deep gouge in his arm he'd sustained in the battle.

"Do you think this might have something to do with what happened to Martin today?" Neville asked. He had been in the Entrance Hall and saw the whole thing.

"What did happen?" Bill asked.

"He collapsed, like the first two times when You-Know-Who was trying to summon Morgana," said Ron. "Only this time it was different. He's never been unconscious this long before. It's like he's in a coma or something. It's not the continual pain like the last twice."

An ominous feeling permeated the room.

"Do you think that means …" Ginny trailed off, not wanting to finish her sentence.

"Something evil happened today," said Luna. "I felt it. Like a nasty feeling in my stomach."

Harry glanced at her in mild curiosity. She felt something? Did that mean she had Druid ancestry like Martin? Or had she just been eating too much of her father's Plimpy soup?

"We need to find out from him what exact-" Kingsley began, before stopping and frowning. He stood up suddenly and stormed over to the door, opened it and reached out to grab something which squeaked loudly.
He came back into the room dragging Malfoy by the ear.

"Why were you spying on our meeting?" Kingsley demanded in his deep voice, sounding almost scary.

"I wasn't!" Malfoy shouted.

Kingsley glared.

"Really, I wasn't!" squeaked Malfoy, quailing under Kingsley's glare. "Your door's Imperturbable; how could I have been listening in?"

Kingsley raised an eyebrow. "You know the door's Imperturbable? You tried to listen in and were unsuccessful?"

"No!" shouted Malfoy, looking terrified at his slip-up. "I was trying to get in! I … I might have some information for you!"

"Oh really?" asked George, raising his wand. "And why haven't you mentioned this before?"

"I didn't think it was important!" said Malfoy. "And … well, I didn't trust you. Then I heard the Mudblo … Granger … talking about Morgana on the way down from the drawing room."

Kingsley's demeanour changed. He dragged Malfoy over to a chair and deposited him in it roughly. "Speak, and do not even think of lying."

"Why would I?" grumbled Malfoy.

"Why would you tell us the truth?" Harry asked him quietly.

Malfoy looked up and him, and for the first time since Harry had known him, he didn't see a condescending smirk there, or a scathing comment on his lips.

"Because I'm not like them," he said, looking directly at Harry. "My aunt thought having pure blood made you perfect, but she was insane, and I don't want to end up like her. I won't end up like her."

Harry and Malfoy exchanged a long look. Harry wondered if he was thinking back to the conversation they'd had before he'd come back to Hogwarts.

Harry nodded. "Alright then."

Malfoy looked away. "I don't know if I can be of any help. And I know you don't trust me. But even though we have our differences, I don't want the Dark Lord to succeed any more than you do. Believe if you want that I'm only doing this to save my own skin, but don't doubt that I want him dead as much as anyone."

Kingsley looked from Malfoy and looked around the table, to see expressions of shock, disgust, confusion, pity (from Mrs Weasley) and hesitancy.

"Well then …"

But before Malfoy could speak, Martin came bursting into the kitchen, looking frenzied.

"Mr Emrys!" yelled McGonagall in shock. "You are ill! You should not be out of bed!"

Martin shook his head frantically.
"You don't understand. It's happened. Morgana is back."

The expressions of horror that Merlin saw before him only strengthened his resolve to see Morgana defeated. He wasn't going to be afraid; he wasn't going to wallow away in self-pity regretting what he'd done centuries before. He was going to fight her. And fight the fear she brought with her.

"Are you certain?" Hestia Jones asked breathlessly.

Merlin nodded. "Without a doubt."

Pandemonium broke out, as people began to speak over each other in their panic. Mrs Weasley sank into a chair looking pale, Ron's eyes went as round as saucers, Neville slipped off his chair, and Fleur began jabbering away in French to her husband, who stared at her blankly.

"Silence!" commanded Kingsley in that great powerful voice of his. He turned to Merlin. "What else have you to say?"

"She has allied herself with Voldemort like we thought," said Merlin reluctantly. "But I don't believe this is reason to panic. We will fight her, and we will defeat her."

"How can you know that?" whispered Tonks, clutching her husband's hand tightly.

"Because," Merlin said fiercely. "The Druids have a score to settle with Morgana. And I will not rest until she is dead and can cause no more suffering, like what should have happened centuries ago."

They all looked rather alarmed at Merlin's vehemence, but said nothing. Harry was staring at him.

Merlin looked away, and his eyes settled on the person he hadn't seen before in the room.

"What are you doing here?" he asked the Malfoy boy.

Malfoy looked slightly surprised at being spoken to civilly; the last time they'd spoken hadn't been particularly pleasant.

"I was going to give some information," he mumbled. "But it doesn't really matter now."

"Tell us anyway," said Kingsley, forcing his worried features into something more friendly, though still wary of the boy.

Malfoy looked down at his feet. "It's redundant now anyway. I sort of knew he was trying to summon Morgana …"

"What?" yelled Ron. "You knew all along and you didn't say anything? You dirty little ferret!"

"I didn't know for sure," Malfoy yelled back. "He was asking me to help him try and free 'her' but I didn't know who the 'her' was. I guessed as much though, eventually. She spoke to me in a dream."

"A dream?" asked Harry curiously.

"Why would he need you?" asked Hermione.

Malfoy looked at her for a moment, and made a funny expression on his face, almost like he was trying not to sneer at her.
"I'm from a Druidic family, way back. My ancestors gave up the Old Ways when Hogwarts was built, so none of us have used the magic for centuries. But the Dark Lord thought I might be able to help him anyway. I couldn't, so he hurt me."

He looked away from them all as he said this, and Merlin felt a small stirring of pity for the boy. He hadn't known the Malfoys had been Druids way back; he wondered if he'd known his ancestor in Camelot.

It made sense however. All modern-day wizards had a little of the Old Religion inside of them; it was what enabled them to use modern magic, though it wasn't very powerful, thus the need to use a wand with a magical core to direct the magic. There had been wizards like that in Merlin's day, but they had been rare, and weak, never very important. The Old Religion made people magical, but only certain people, like Merlin, were able to use the magic directly from the Old Religion itself.

The modern wizards descended from the Druids however had this magic slightly stronger in their blood. Even those who'd given up the Old Ways years ago still had a little of it, though much reduced in power. Enough for Morgana to contact Draco in a dream, but not enough for him to learn how to use the magic.

That's why she had turned to Harry. He did have that power.

Mrs Weasley looked distressed. She made as though to try and comfort Malfoy, but thought better of it. If Merlin remembered correctly, Malfoy didn't respond well to kindness. He'd never experienced enough of it.

It was a pity. Malfoy wasn't truly evil; just an example of how tragically wrong someone's life could go when they were being brainwashed into serving a cause they didn't believe in.

But now he was trying to help them. He'd turned against the evil that had tried to corrupt him. He was the exact opposite of Morgana.

Merlin moved forwards a little and laid a hand on Malfoy's left forearm. He jumped slightly at the touch.

"You're doing the right thing by helping us," Merlin told him. Malfoy looked away from him hurriedly. Merlin cast his eyes downward to hide their golden glow as he cast his spell.

He removed his hand from Malfoy's arm, now pale and unmarked beneath his black robes. He wouldn't discover the removal of the Dark Mark from his arm until hours later.

He was no longer one of them.

"What else have you to tell us?" Kingsley asked Malfoy.

The boy turned back to him. "Not much. I know he was searching for something though, something Morgana had told him to get."

"What was that?" asked Lupin eagerly.

"I don't know," said Malfoy. "He made my father and my aunt search their vaults at Gringotts for this artefact, whatever it was. He thought it was really important, and that their ancestors might have gotten it years ago."

"So he searched magical places before he tried the Muggle ones?" Mr Weasley asked, looking thoughtful. "It must be something from the Old Religion then. If he was searching a Druidic family
"But what could it be?" asked Tonks, frustrated. "If we only knew, then we could get to it first!"

"What would Morgana want?" pondered Ginny. "What does she need for some big spell?"

Everyone turned to look at Merlin. "I don't know," he said, honestly stumped. "There were things like crystals and amulets used in spells, but I can't think of anything specific that she'd want."

Everyone looked disappointed again.

The meeting lasted only another fifteen minutes as more half-hearted theories were offered, but nothing hit Merlin. He just couldn't understand what Voldemort would be searching for in a Muggle museum. Anything magical would have been disturbed by the Muggles long ago, the Ministry would have noticed if one of the Muggle's ancient bracelets starting glowing and heating up for no particular reason.

So perhaps it was an object that just looked ordinary.

Eventually Kingsley called a halt to the meeting, and everyone rose to leave, their faces solemn.

"I need hardly impress upon you all the seriousness of the situation we find ourselves in," said Kingsley gravely. "But I believe Martin is right. We can defeat this evil. In any way that we can, together," he said, eyeing Malfoy, who was looking distinctly uncomfortable. Merlin guessed it would be a while before he managed to look any of them in the eye without feeling either contempt, or guilt, or a mixture of both.

They all tramped back upstairs with gloomy faces and one-by-one Flooed back to McGonagall's office.

Merlin emerged back in the office, and brushed off his robes, catching the eyes of the Founder's paintings as he did so.

He turned around and saw Dumbledore looking down at him with a meaningful look in those azure eyes of his.

He knew what he had to do.

"Martin? Come on." said Hermione. Martin was staring at Dumbledore's portrait with a funny expression on his face.

Harry looked at Dumbledore to see him regarding Martin with that all-too-familiar look in his eyes. He wondered what Martin was thinking.

Martin turned at the sound of Hermione's voice.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

The left the office in silence, and Harry waited a few moments before turning to Martin.

"Did you know him well?"

Martin looked at Harry, and knew exactly who he was referring to.
"No," he confessed. "I spoke to him a few times, mainly about you, and what I could do to protect you. But I didn't really know him at all. Only enough to know that I respected him."

"Even though he was younger than you?" Ron tried to joke, but Martin only smiled briefly before saying:

"Age is no indicator of wisdom. I myself am old, older than I care to think about, but I'm often finding myself in situations where I've been ridiculously foolish. My old friends would have called me an idiot, and they're right."

"Your old friends?" asked Harry. "You've spoken about them before, and your old mentor. You said he was dead so …"

Martin sighed heavily. "Yes. All my old friends are dead. They grew old, and they died, and I was left to linger on."

Hermione looked upset. "That must've been hard."

"Yes, it was," Martin said to himself. "But I found it was easier to remember them as they were, and the fun we had. It would only drive me mad otherwise. I remember those times happily, and don't linger on the fact that they're dead. They once were alive, and we lived, that's all that matters."

Harry didn't know what to say. He'd been so angry at Martin for concealing things from them; he hadn't stopped to think about what it had been like for him to be hundreds of years old. No wonder he was always so secretive, to have such a heavy burden …

"Did Dumbledore know?" Again, Harry didn't have to specify what he was referring to.

"No," said Martin. "I never told him much about myself. But I'm beginning to think that he knew more than he let on."

Harry nodded in answer; he knew what that felt like.

Martin seemed to be walking very slowly, waiting until Ginny, Neville and Luna had all vanished out of sight, before heading off down the staircases.

"Um, Martin? The common room's this way?" Ron said, pointing vaguely.

"We're not going to the common room," said Martin, but didn't say anything else.

Harry followed at Ron and Hermione, shrugged, and went after him.

The followed him for several minutes. Nearly-Headless Nick passed going the opposite direction. He gave Martin a strange look as he passed, a sort of a grim acknowledgement, but said nothing.

Eventually, Martin stopped, and pushed open a door.

Harry followed, and found himself in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"What the-" said Ron. "Are we going down there now?"

"Yes," said Martin, and moved over to the sink where the entrance lay after examining them to find the one with the copper snake.

Harry felt himself go rigid. "You mean, you're going to do the Legilimancy thing?" he tried not to panic. He trusted Martin, of course he did, but it still made him uneasy.
"Nope," said Martin, eyeing the snake carefully. "I found a way around our little problem."

"Which is?" Ron began to ask, but Martin had begun hissing at the tap, making the strange noises in the back of his throat.

*That isn't going to work,* thought Harry. But, it seemed he was wrong.

With a great clunking sound, the sink slid out of place and revealed the giant pipe which led to the Chamber of Secrets.

"How did you do that?" he asked in astonishment.

Martin grinned cheekily, looking more like a school boy than a centuries old sorcerer. "I asked the portrait of Salazar Slytherin in McGonagall's office."

Harry gaped at him. Had it really been that simple?

"He told you how to get into the Chamber?" Hermione asked incredulously. "Why?"

Martin grinned again. "Just my natural charm."

He stepped up to the pipe, looked down it and wrinkled his nose. "Urgh, don't fancy it much."

He sat down on the floor and began to lower his legs in.

"Wait!" said Hermione. "Won't we need brooms or something? To get out I mean?"

"Don't worry," said Martin. "I'll handle that when the time comes."

And with another cheeky grin, he slid out of sight.

Harry had to laugh. He moved up to the pipe, and lowered himself into it, not quite believing he was doing this *again.*

It was much the same as he remembered from second year. The pipe was slimy, cold, wet, thoroughly disgusting. Only this time, shooting down the pipe at lightning speed around all the twists and turns wasn't nearly as bad; he knew this time there was no giant snake at the end ready to kill him.

He was deposited roughly on the ground as he emerged from the pipe, landing on piles of animal bones.

Martin helped him to his feet, and then looked around. "Pretty miserable place isn't it?"

Harry agreed, as Ron and Hermione came shooting out at his feet. Ron stood up and shuddered. "That's the *third* time I've had to do that!"

Harry laughed, and reached forwards to help Hermione up, who was looking around disgustedly.

He tried to move on down the tunnel to where the Chamber lay, but Martin stopped him, and looked at the three of them seriously.

"Please, before we go any further. I want to say something."

Harry nodded, interested. Martin sighed, before he continued.
"I know you're angry that I've been keeping secrets from you all. I'm sorry, I truly am. I hate it. I hate lying, and I hate deceiving you."

He said all of this with a sincerely regretful expression. He continued:

"And I'm sorry, but I can't tell you everything about me, not yet. I know it's the last thing you want to hear, but I can't tell you just yet. The time isn't right yet, and I'm not sure I'm ready for you to know. I hate carrying this secret around with me, and I want you to know that. Please don't ask me to tell you what it is, at least, not yet. I don't think I could tell you. Call me a coward if you want, but don't doubt that I'm sincere in wanting to help you all. I just want you to accept that I have my secrets, and for good reason."

He looked at Harry, desperation in his eyes.

"I don't want you to ever think I'm concealing this from you because I don't trust you, or because I want to laugh at you behind your back. I do trust you, Harry, I'm just not ready for anyone to know. I will be one day. And I don't think I'm better than you because I'm so much older, if anything you're only proving daily what a foolish old man I am. I respect you, Harry, a great deal, certainly a great deal more than any respect I deserve. I know you have every right to hate me for lying to you all, but I want you to know: out of all my years I've never met greater human beings than I have now. You remind me of my old friends so much sometimes it hurts to think of them, but I'm proud of you all for everything you've accomplished, and I only hope you can continue to trust me despite all my eccentricities."

He finished, and breathed out. "There."

Harry stared at him for a long moment. "I do trust you, Martin," he said honestly. "And I respect your right to keep your secrets. But sometimes I just feel that you're concealing things from me because you think I'm some sort of child who needs to be protected."

Martin nodded. "I realise that, and that's why I've decided to do this." He closed his eyes for a moment, as though gathering some courage. "I've lied to you about one important thing. And I'll tell you the truth about it now. But I'll tell you now; this isn't the only secret I have. There's one more, and I wish to keep that one just a little longer."

Harry nodded; he could respect that. "So, what is it?"

Martin sighed again. "I told you I know little about the magic of the Old Religion, that the knowledge was lost and I can only use a little of it. That was a lie."

Harry nodded. He'd suspected that, but it made him feel warm inside to think that Martin was finally coming clean. He could see it was hard for him, and it made Harry wonder what reason he had for concealing so much. It was obviously troubling him a great deal, and Harry felt a little ashamed at his earlier accusations.

"I can use the magic of the Old Religion," said Martin very quickly. "And I don't just mean these little tricks that I've been doing. I mean, properly. I've studied it, and I can use it perfectly, to its fullest extent. I'm powerful, much more than any modern wizard. I don't need to use a wand, in fact, I hate using the bloody thing- it's far too restrictive. Voldemort's magic, even Dumbledore's, is no match for mine."

Martin finished, and looked at them almost nervously.

They could only stare.
"Are you serious?" gasped Ron. "You mean all that powerful Druidic magic? You can use all of it?"

"Yes," said Martin. "I'm technically not a descendent of the Druids, I am one."

Harry exhaled in shock. He'd known Martin was concealing something, but this …

"How did you learn it?" asked Hermione, looking awed.

Martin looked slightly nervous again as he spread out his hand and said: "Bōc onbregdan!"

His eyes flashed golden, and he stood there waiting, and they watched him with bated breath. A few minutes later, a whooshing sound came from behind. A book, ancient and heavy, came soaring out the pipe, and Martin caught it. Martin looked back up the pipe and his eyes flashed gold. A thunking sound told Harry he'd slid the sink back into place.

He held the book out to Hermione, his expression guarded.

"This book taught me everything I needed to know."

Hermione took it reverently, and Harry and Ron peered over her shoulders as she began to flip through it eagerly. The pages were written in a language Harry didn't understand, but it was filled with illustrations and diagrams, spell charts, poultices, magical creatures Harry had never heard of … it was filled to the brim with magic. Someone had written in the margins in a small script, similar to the way Snape had written in his potions book, adding annotations here and there. Pages obviously not originally from the book, had been slotted in offering yet more additional information about particular spells. Harry had no doubt Martin had learned everything from this book; it was almost as if this one book had more information in it than the entire Hogwarts library.

Hermione looked up at Martin, her face lit up in excitement. "But this is amazing! We can use this to defeat Voldemort and Morgana!"

Martin shook his head. "I'm afraid not. It's impossible for any of you to learn this sort of magic any more. Only those born with the magic in their blood can use it properly. Voldemort used it during the battle, but the more I think about it, the more I think it was the fusion of the two types of magic that the Founders possessed. That must have been what Morgana taught him; if he'd had the power proper, like I do, he wouldn't have had so much difficulty in freeing her. I could have done it myself on the first go. I think he's using the amalgamation, remember, he has the Elder Wand. That and the Old Magic combined makes him very formidable."

"You could have done it yourself on the first go?" asked Ron in astonishment. "Just how powerful are you? How powerful is the magic in this book?"

Martin smiled ruefully. "Hermione, check the inside cover. The name of the book's former owner is written there."

Hermione frowned in confusion, and opened the book as Martin had said, and Harry saw that a name was indeed written there in Ancient Runes.

Hermione gasped, and almost dropped the book in surprise. She looked up at Martin with a look of utmost shock and disbelief on her face.

"Who was it?" asked Ron, impatiently.

She blinked a couple of times, and double-checked the name in front of her. "But …."
"Who is it Hermione?" Harry asked, curious himself.

She laughed nervously. "It says …. Merlin."

Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He could almost feel power radiating from the book. Ron's mouth dropped open, and he looked at the book like it was some precious cargo that had to be protected.

"Merlin?" he asked, hardly daring to believe it. He turned to look at Martin. "How did you get Merlin's spell book?"

Martin smiled. "It's been in the family a while."

Hermione's face looked even more shocked if that was possible.

"In your family? Emrys! You said that there was a family myth that you were descended from Merlin, it's not a myth is it? It's true!" She frowned a moment, thinking. "But your father … he was at least a thousand years old, your people live really long, and most sources date Merlin to be from around 600AD so …" her eyes went even wider. "You're a really close relative! Possibly even his grandson!"

Martin looked as though he was trying not to laugh. "Yes, I suppose."

Ron's mouth opened and closed rapidly. "But, you didn't know your father was around at the time of the Founders! Maybe he was even older! He taught the Founders didn't he? Maybe he was Merlin!"

Now Martin didn't even try to hold in his laughter. "I doubt it, Ron," he said, an amused glint in his eyes. "I think I would have noticed."

But Harry was still reeling from the possibility that Martin may be Merlin's grandson. No wonder his magic was so powerful! No wonder he was so secretive!

"Do you think you have the power to defeat Morgana?" Ron asked wide-eyed.

Martin's whole demeanour changed, and his face darkened. "I don't think, I know. I'm the only one who could possibly defeat her. I'm the only one whose magic is powerful enough."

"But what about Voldemort?" said Harry. "How am I supposed to defeat him if he's learned this fusion thing?"

Martin smiled again. "That's why we're here. To find the rest of the Founder's books. I'm done lying to you about everything Harry. I'm going to prepare you in every possible way for battling Voldemort. If you like, I'll teach you the magic."

Harry blinked in astonishment. "You would do that?"

Martin nodded. "I should have done this from the start instead of trying to hide everything from you. Aithusa's not been leaving me alone about it. I reckon it's time you learned it. But be warned, it's dangerous. Although you have the magic within you, it was transferred after birth, and isn't fully integrated into your body. You won't be as powerful as me; I was born with the magic. But if Voldemort can learn it, so can you. It'll be hard work. Think you can manage it?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, I think so."

Martin grinned back. "Good, then let's go find this book."
He turned and started to head down the passageway, but Harry called him back.

"Do you swear to me, that there really is only one other thing that you're keeping from me?"

Martin turned and looked at Harry seriously. "I promise you. Just one secret left."

"And will you tell me it, one day?"

"Yes," said Martin. "One day, probably very soon if Aithusa is any reliable source."

Harry nodded, trying not to let it bother him that the dragon knew the secret he was being denied.

"Then let's go."

Merlin moved along the passageway behind Harry, Ron and Hermione, his heart beating fast. It was almost exhilarating to have let Harry and the others know at least one of his secrets. He was starting to relax in a way he hadn't in thirteen hundred years. The ghosts knew, Aithusa was there to talk to, Harry knew at least half of the truth … it was all coming together.

He'd been nervous to the point of throwing up when he'd told them about his powers. He'd been afraid they'd treat him differently when they discovered how powerful he really was, like when they found out he was older than he looked, despite pretending to be only a measly two hundred. True, at first, they'd been slightly overwhelmed, but they didn't judge him. It would take a bit of getting used to, but Merlin could tell that they respected him a little bit more for opening up a little.

Still, his greatest secret lay hidden. He'd come so close to telling them! But he'd been stopped. He wasn't sure if it was the Old Religion telling him it wasn't time, or his own weak will. It was like every time in Camelot when he'd been inches away from telling Arthur the truth, but chickened out. It had gone on for years, until he was caught in a web of lies so thick that Arthur had come very close to never forgiving him for the years of deceit when he'd finally found out. Was he in a similar situation now?

He was terrified, he admitted it. He didn't deserve to be in Gryffindor House with the three of them.

He'd seen their reactions when he'd admitted to having Merlin's book, when they'd speculated that he could be Merlin's grandson … the looks on their faces at the possibility of such a distant connection … How much more extreme would their reactions be if they found out he was Merlin himself?

They'd never see him the same way again. And he didn't want that.

But he owed it to them. They would find out one day.

They passed by a colossal snake skin in a partially collapsed passageway. Merlin looked at it with alarm. That thing had been huge! What had Salazar been thinking?

They clambered through a small hole at the top of a huge pile of rocks and scrambled down the other side, soon coming upon a pair of doors with emerald eyed serpents.

They all looked at Martin, and he hissed the correct phrase. He was slightly surprised it had worked both times; he wouldn't have put it past it for Salazar to have taught him a Parseltongue swear word instead.

They emerged into the massive chamber, and Merlin looked around in awe. Wow, Salazar, you were
busy.

The basilisk lay at the far end of the chamber, bones now, and Merlin stared in astonishment. Harry had killed that thing when he was twelve?

"Right, now what?" Ron asked Harry, but Harry just shrugged.

"In the library there was a statue of an eagle for Ravenclaw's book. Maybe something with the Slytherin symbol on it?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Harry, this place is filled with snake statues!"

Merlin looked around; he had a point. Harry pulled out his wand and cast *lumos*. "We better split up and have a look around."

Ron and Hermione lit their wands too, but Merlin just held up his hand and muttered "*Leoht*". They glanced in astonishment at the light hovering above his palm and he grinned at them.

"What? I don't have to hide it anymore, right? And I hate using a wand."

He moved off grinning before they could say anything, and began examining the chamber from top to bottom.

After half an hour of searching, still nothing had come up. "Anything?" he asked Harry and Ron as they grouped together again.

"Nope," said Ron. "Maybe it isn't here?"

"It's here," said Harry.

"Hey! Over here!"

They rushed off to Hermione who was standing at the base of the colossal human statue at the head of the chamber, holding her wand up against something.

"There's a tiny little snake here on Slytherin's statue."

"That isn't Slytherin," Merlin said automatically, cursing himself as they looked at him questioningly. He thought of a hurried explanation. "It doesn't look anything like his portrait in the Headmistress's office. If I had to take a guess I'd say it was Herpo the Foul."

Ron frowned in confusion. "Who?"

"The man who bred the first basilisk, Ron," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Really, Martin? Well, it makes sense I suppose."

"Yeah," said Ron. "If Slytherin really was that ugly why would he want it made fifty foot high?"

Merlin laughed inwardly. *What would Salazar think of people mistaking him for someone this ugly? He'd always been so vain about his looks.*

"Anyway," said Hermione business-like. "There's a tiny little snake here, see?"

Merlin squinted at the tiny little mark over the foot of the statue. It could be …
Hermione looked at him expectantly. "Well, try speaking to it."

Merlin obliged, and hissed at the statue's foot, feeling rather foolish. Maybe Merlin was forgetting how to imitate the sound? *Or maybe it was just a mistake on the part of the stone-mason and not a snake at all.*

Then, a great grinding noise erupted from beneath them. They all jumped back in alarm as the floor slid away to reveal a podium rising from the ground below on which were two serpent-headed statues sitting on a small wooden box about large enough to conceal a book.

The statues rose higher and higher until they were eye-level, and then they stopped. The four of them just stared for a moment before the serpents began to speak in unison, in a voice that Merlin recognised as being that of Salazar Slytherin's:

"The knowledge you seek is dangerous in the wrong hands. It will only be granted to a precious few. If you wish to continue further, you must prove yourself, and demonstrate your worth as a student of the Ancient Arts. Salazar Slytherin asks this of you-

"That's just what Ravenclaw said," muttered Harry.

"Prove our worth?" asked Hermione. "Does that mean each of the Founder's is setting challenges for us? But what if we hadn't known Parseltongue?"

"Then he'd expect you to exhibit Slytherin cunning and sneak into the Headmaster's office to ask his portrait," Merlin smirked. Cunning indeed. Salazar had hinted as much earlier that evening. But before Hermione could answer, the serpents began speaking again.

"Solve the puzzle and gain the knowledge, fail, and you shall never learn it."

"You are standing before two serpents- one shall open his box and grant you the knowledge, and the other shall open his and reveal nothing. One of the serpents always lies, and one of them always tells the truth. You have one question to ask of the serpents in order to find out which one has the knowledge you seek. What question shall you ask?"

Merlin, Harry and Ron stared at the serpents dumbfounded for a few moments.

"Another riddle?" asked Harry. "I thought that was Ravenclaw's thing?"

"What's it supposed to mean?" asked Ron, screwing up his face in confusion.

Merlin just stared at them, Trust Salazar to be difficult.

But Hermione clapped her hands together looking gleeful. "It's logic! It's a simple logical puzzle! It tests your cunning and resourcefulness! Very Slytherin!"

"Yeah, and how does that help us?" asked Ron sullenly. "We're not Slytherins."

"Don't underestimate her, Ron," said Harry, looking amused. "She was like this when she was solving Snape's puzzle when we went after the Philosopher's Stone in first year."

Hermione started pacing up and down in front of the serpents, a look of deep concentration on her face, playing with a flyaway bit of hair, twisting it around her finger as she thought.

"Well?" said Ron.

Hermione glared at him, and Harry pulled Ron away from her. "Best let her get on with it. We'll
never figure it out, let her."

Merlin almost laughed at the scene in front of him. This was just so typical of the three of them. He himself had no idea what the puzzle meant. He might be able to solve it if he thought hard enough, but it seemed like too much effort, and Hermione seemed to have it sorted.

He sat down on the floor beside Harry and Ron as Hermione continued pacing, muttering to herself.

Finally, she clapped her hands together and said: "I've got it!"

She walked up to the two serpents confidently as Harry, Ron and Merlin struggled to their feet.

She looked at the left serpent pointedly. "Would the other serpent tell me that you have the knowledge?" she asked it.

There was a pause, and then: "No."

Hermione looked satisfied. "Then you have the knowledge."

The serpent made no motion for a second, and then it dissolved, and melted into the chest, which creaked open with a slight puff of dust. Hermione reached in, and pulled out an ancient book, and turned around to face the others looking smug.

Ron looked at her blankly. "How did you figure that out?"

"It was easy!" said Hermione, still looking pleased with herself. "If that serpent was the one telling the truth then he would have said 'no' because the other one would have lied and said it didn't have the knowledge. If he had said 'yes' then I would have known it didn't have the knowledge because that would mean the other serpent would be lying and saying it did have the knowledge when it didn't. If that serpent however had been the lying one then 'no' would mean that the other one would have said 'yes' because it did have the knowledge. But if it had said 'yes' then it would have been lying because the other one would have said 'no' it didn't have the knowledge. You see, this sort of puzzle means that no matter which one you ask, one won't know which one is telling the truth, therefore, you have to create a situation where you get both a truth and a lie applied one to the other. If you ask the truthful one, you'll get a truth about a lie, but if you ask the lying one, you'll get a lie about the truth."

Ron and Harry stared at her.

"How the bloody hell does your mind function?" goggled Ron. "That makes no sense!"

"Well, we've got the book, the method doesn't really matter," said Merlin, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah," said Ron blankly, still staring at Hermione as though seeing her for the first time.

Harry smirked at his expression, and Hermione's blushing. "So, Martin? What's your solution for getting out of here?"

Merlin grinned, and gestured for them all to come closer. "All of you, put a hand on my arm."

"Martin, we can't Apparate inside of-" Hermione tried to begin but was drowned out by Merlin's spell.

"Brūcan ūs op se hlīfian!"

The inevitable whirlwind swirled around them as they were spirited out of the Chamber and
deposited a few seconds later in the Gryffindor Common Room.

The three of them lay on the floor gasping wildly. Merlin chuckled. "Yeah, sorry. Forgot to warn you. Takes a bit of getting used to."

Hermione stared at him. "What was that?"

"The Druid form of Apparating," explained Merlin. "Modern enchantments can't stop it; Anti-Apparition Jinxes are useless against it."

Ron struggled to his feet. "That was so cool!"

Harry stood up grinning, also looking thrilled.

But Hermione was frowning. "Hasn't it occurred to you that Voldemort or Morgana might use that method to get into the school?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "And I've already altered the school's wards to stop it from happening. Only I can do that within the school boundaries."

Hermione closed her mouth in shock, looking deeply impressed. To stop the awkwardness of them all staring at him, he took the book from Hermione's hands and looked through it, recognising Salazar's elegant handwriting.

"Why don't you let me look through this? And Ravenclaw's one as well, plus the others when we find them. I'll see what sort of stuff the Founders were up to and see if I can't teach it to you, Harry."

Harry nodded, and reached into his bag and removed Rowena's book from it. Martin frowned.

"Rowena Ravenclaw went to a lot of trouble to keep this hidden for a thousand years and you carry it around in a schoolbag that anybody could steal?"

Harry looked slightly sheepish, and Merlin sighed. "You have to be careful with this knowledge. We can't let just anyone find it! It's too dangerous. We don't know what Morgana's taught Voldemort, maybe there's some stuff in here that he doesn't know about yet. Keep it hidden when you're not using it!"

Merlin had to admit, he was still more than a little annoyed at the Founders for hiding this information in the first place. He gathered up the two books in his arms and began to head towards the dormitory staircase.

As he began climbing the stairs, he heard Ron mutter to Harry:

"Okay, now I believe he's an old man. He's grumpier than my Great-uncle Willy!"
"Well?" asked Ron impatiently. "Have you found anything out yet?"

Merlin looked up at him from his reading and scowled. "I'm not even finished the first page."

The two of them were sitting in the Gryffindor Common Room in the mid-afternoon on Sunday, Ron finishing a Transfiguration essay that everyone else had done days ago, and Merlin reading through the books belonging to Salazar and Rowena.

Ron scowled. "Come on! Give me something!"

Merlin sighed. "For the hundredth time Ron, you can't learn this magic! Even Harry will have a tough time trying to learn it!"

"Yeah, but surely there's something interesting written there?" Ron asked, peering at the book. "I mean, even if I can't learn it, it's all pretty cool stuff."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "You're interested in a book?"

"It isn't an ordinary book!" said Ron defensively. "And besides, I'm bored stiff with this essay! What's that old git writing about?"

Merlin tried not to flinch; Salazar hadn't been that bad. Not most of the time anyway. "He's talking about how they've managed to channel the Old Magic through their wands."

He didn't really need to be reading through these books, he'd already taught people this magic before. But it was certainly good to refresh his memory, and each of the Founder's unique little thoughts on how they'd accomplished the magic was helpful. It didn't matter how much Merlin had taught them, only they had known themselves how difficult it was to fuse the two. Merlin had no idea.

Ron slumped back. "Well, tell me when there's something interesting."

Merlin turned the page as Ron went back to his essay. He was taking notes every so often; Salazar's thoughts on using elemental magic with a modern twist, what to avoid, mistakes he'd made … it was fascinating reading. Salazar had discovered many ways of using the magic even after Merlin had left Hogwarts and the Founders to their own devices; he certainly didn't remember teaching them how to turn themselves into animals without wands and without being Animagi.

The portrait hole opened and in came Harry and Hermione looking disappointed. "No luck then?"

"Nope," said Harry. "We searched the kitchens top to bottom, we couldn't find anything."

"Well, you did get your information from a Chocolate Frog card," said Merlin wryly, turning another page. "They aren't exactly a wealth of accurate information."

"One of the four celebrated Founders of Hogwarts, Hufflepuff was particularly famous for her dexterity at food-related Charms. Many recipes traditionally served at Hogwarts feasts originated with Hufflepuff," read Hermione from the card they'd nicked from a first-year's collection that morning. "She must have hidden hers in the kitchens!"

"Hmm," said Merlin, trying to think of where Helga would have hidden hers. "Maybe not. Perhaps
the kitchens weren’t her proudest achievement?” Helga certainly had resented the fact that everyone had seemed to regard her as the pathetic one. As much as she’d loved the kitchens, such a cliché housewifely location probably wasn’t her thing.

"Then what was?” Harry asked, throwing himself down in a chair. "What else do we know about Hufflepuff?"

"Not much,” said Hermione. "No one seems to have bothered to write much about her."

Merlin frowned. That wasn’t right. Helga had been just as important as the others when it came to founding the school. Just because she accepted anyone into her House and valued simpler qualities such as loyalty and hard work instead of the more glamorous ones didn’t make her any less powerful. Anyone who’d known her knew to avoid her when she was in one of her uncharacteristic bad moods.

"Can't you ask the Grey Lady? Maybe she knew Hufflepuff? Or the Fat Friar?” Ron asked.

"I already have,” said Harry sighing. "But the Grey Lady just told me how much she’d loved the kitchens, and the Fat Friar just gave me a lecture about the noble House of Hufflepuff through the centuries. Took me half an hour before I realised he hadn't actually known her in person."

**Nope, he'd been her great-great-great grandson,** thought Merlin to himself.

Hermione sighed in frustration. "I just can’t think! Every mention of Hufflepuff talks about her kindness and tolerance, but none of them mention any specifics! I mean, what was special to her in the school?"

**Everything, thought Merlin. Hogwarts itself was her greatest achievement and she was prouder of that than anything. She didn't have favourites.*

"What about Gryffindor?" asked Ron. "Any leads on him?"

Harry and Hermione shook their heads. "I can't think of anywhere in Hogwarts particularly related to bravery, or Gryffindor, except for this common room and we've searched that already. Also, from what Martin says the Founder's portraits won't tell us anything.”

Ron frowned, and stood up and walked over to a bunch of first-years trading Chocolate Frog cards. Ignoring their protests, he rifled through their collection and pulled out one in particular.

"I'm a Prefect, I have to confiscate this," he said casually to them, as he returned to the table, leaving them staring in indignation.

Hermione scowled. "You give that back!"

Ron rolled his eyes. "I will in a minute. Listen: "One of the four famous founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Godric Gryffindor was the most accomplished dueller of his time, an enlightened fighter against Muggle-discrimination and the first owner of the celebrated Sorting Hat."

Harry suddenly looked thoughtful. "Duelling?"

Hermione gasped. "Of course! It's in the Duelling Chamber!"

Merlin grinned, feeling stupid. Of course it was! Godric had loved that place! It had been his idea. He spent hours there at a time.
"That fits!" he said. "We'll have to check it out after the lessons tonight."

They all nodded in agreement.

"When are you going to start teaching me then?" Harry asked, looking hopeful. Merlin stared at him for a long moment.

"Not just yet Harry, be patient. Wait until we have all the books and I've read through them. We have to be certain of what we're doing before we start. It could be dangerous for you."

Harry nodded, but looked disappointed. "Alright. But what about Voldemort? He managed to learn it from Morgana!"

"Yes, but Voldemort has shown in the past with his Horcruxes, that he's willing to take risks," said Merlin seriously. "And Morgana was contacting him with her mind. It was more Legilimancy than anything, and I'm sure you don't want it to try it that way. It could overwhelm you. Besides, Morgana won't know what she's doing; she's liable to make mistakes. We aren't going to let that happen. Just concentrate on your Auror lessons and running the DA for now Harry. Let me sort through all of this."

Harry sighed. "I just don't like the thought of doing nothing. Can't you teach me anything?"

Merlin looked at him for a moment, thinking hard. "I'm not really sure what form all of this will take yet Harry, whether you'll be best suited to using Old spells with a wand, or using modern spells without a wand. It'll take some figuring out. But, in the meantime …"

He turned his chair towards Harry, and looked him in the eye. "If you want to be able to use this magic Harry, you're going to have to be able to sense it within you. Can you do that?"

Harry frowned. "Not really. I can't really feel it. But sometimes, I feel some sort of instinct telling me to do something. And when I'm near you that feeling gets stronger."

Merlin was slightly surprised by this. "That's the Old Religion, Harry. It's reacting to my presence. But you're going to have to make sure you can feel it at all times. You're going to have to be able to feel its strength and its power within you. You're going to have to concentrate, really, really hard. Close your eyes if you want to. Don't just think that you have it. Know that it's there."

Harry closed his eyes, and his face went blank. "What, like some sort of meditation?"

Merlin laughed. "Sort of. Only when you can feel the power literally beneath your fingertips will you be able to use it."

It felt strange instructing Harry this way, the same way it always had when he'd taught younger pupils, and when he'd taught the Founders. Sensing the magic within him had always come naturally to him; it struck him as weird that people found difficulty with it.

"When you feel it, Harry, when you can literally feel it running through your body, hold out your wand, and say leoht."

Harry was silent for a few moments, his eyes still closed tightly. Ron and Hermione watched anxiously.

Finally: 'Leoht.'

The tip of Harry's wand ignited in light, brighter and stronger than lumos. Harry opened his eyes in
surprise and cried out, and the light faded.

Merlin was grinning, but Harry looked disappointed.

"It only lasted a few seconds!" said Harry deflated.

"Harry, that doesn't matter, the point is you did it!" said Merlin enthusiastically. "That was amazing for your first time. That was a spell from the Old Religion, and you used that magic to cast it, but directing it through your wand as you did made it even stronger than you would normally have been able to cast. That's how the two are fused. You can't cast the spells on their own like me, but through a wand ... you will."

Harry smiled, but sank back in his chair. "I feel tired."

"You will," nodded Merlin. "This sort of magic is far more physically exhausting. That's why it's so dangerous. You have to master the ability to call upon it and end it at will before you try the big spells."

"But, his eyes didn't even go all glowy!" said Ron, frowning.

"That's because he didn't use enough of the magic within him," said Merlin. "He only scratched the surface, and that's why it didn't last very long."

"But when I tried to go deeper," said Harry slowly. "It was like some massive big abyss inside of me. It made me afraid to go too deep, like I wouldn't be able to get out again."

Merlin nodded. "You'll have to get used to that, and be able to harness it properly. These books are full of methods for helping with that."

Harry nodded. "I think I'll wait a while before trying again. I feel really weak all of a sudden."

"Yes," said Merlin severely. "Don't go trying this on your own, Harry. If you want to practise while I sort out how to teach you, just try and do that meditation thingy. Just try and sense the magic within you, try and always be aware of it. Just being aware of it will help loads; it'll make you more aware of your surroundings and increase your reflexes. Just don't try any other spells when I'm not here."

Harry seemed to agree. "I didn't realise it was like that. There's so much concentration needed, and I barely even did anything."

"Well, why do you think no one uses it anymore?" said Merlin. "The Old Religion fell into decline and made it so that people no longer had the power to use this sort of magic. Perhaps you can now appreciate just how powerful this sort of magic is. Think of how much energy you had to use to light your wand for a few seconds and compare that to the sort of magic Morgana will be using."

He finished on a serious tone, and went back to his reading.

"And that's the sort of magic you can use as well?" Harry asked, a new appreciation in his voice.

"Yes," said Merlin quietly, but didn't elaborate. He didn't want to go into just how powerful he was in front of them.

The fell into silence for a while, Merlin still reading through the books in front of him while the others caught up on the homework they had due. Merlin was almost sad when reading; he could almost hear the Founder's voices as he read, remembering the times they'd shared.
It had taken years to teach them properly, and there had been many ups and downs along the way.

Would it take as long for Harry?

After dinner, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Martin headed up to the Duelling Chamber with renewed vigour. Harry was looking forward more to after the lesson when they could search for Gryffindor's book. He was almost not bothered about the lesson itself.

The arrived in the hall to find all the others waiting for them. Tonks hadn't arrived yet.

"Hello!" Ernie greeted them warmly. "Have you all been practising? I have. Though of course, there hasn't been much time with all my Head Boy duties."

He puffed out his chest importantly as he said this, and Ron raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, been practising loads," Ron said.

Lavender and Parvati were giggling away as usual, Luna was staring into space, Ginny and Neville were deep in discussion, and all the others milled around twirling their wands absentmindedly, waiting for Tonks to arrive.

But when she did, she wasn't alone.

"Mr Ollivander!" Luna exclaimed happily. "It's lovely to see you again!"

"Likewise, my dear child," Ollivander bowed in her direction. "Is that wand I made for you satisfactory?"

"Oh yes," she smiled. "Just right. Doesn't attract too many Nargles."

Harry and Ron exchanged a look, and then had to turn away before laughing. He looked at Ollivander instead. He was looking much better than the last time they'd met. His colour was back and his face had lost its hollowed out, gaunt look it'd had after such a long imprisonment and endless torture sessions.

"Mr Ollivander has kindly agreed to perform a Wand-Weighing for us," said Tonks brightly.

"It's the least I could do," Ollivander said. "After all, there are several in this room to whom I owe my life."

Those concerned looked away embarrassed, but Ollivander continued to stare at them.

"What's a Wand-Weighing?" asked Parvati.

"Well, it's a ceremony performed every so often on wands to check that they're in working order," said Tonks. "Harry's already been involved in one. It's standard procedure before the Triwizard Tournament or other important events, and the Auror Office has one once a year. Basically, it's just to check that there are no major faults with your wands."

Ollivander smiled rather eerily, and stepped forwards, his hands extended. "Who shall be first?"

Everyone looked at each other uneasily; no one seemed to want to surrender their wand.
"I'll do it," said Luna, skipping forwards and offering her wand to Ollivander.

It wasn't much different from the Wand-Weighing Harry had been a part of previously. He took each wand, examined it closely, announced its length, core and wood, and experimented with it, only occasionally uttering such phrases like: 'It's a little sluggish, take some of this potion and steep the wand in it for three nights and you'll find the reaction time much reduced' or 'A little battered I see, think about having it mended, a few more knocks and its potency will be reduced by up to half.'

When it came to Harry, he smiled again. "Mr Malfoy's wand still suiting you, Mr Potter?"

"Malfoy's wand?" asked Ernie, frowning. "Why do you have his wand?"

"Mine got broken, and I won this one off of him when we escaped from Malfoy Manor," explained Harry.

Ollivander examined it closely. "Its allegiance is to you, certainly. But your allegiance is not to it, I fear. You still prefer your old wand?"

Harry nodded; he still had the pieces in the mokeskin pouch Hagrid had given him for his birthday. He still didn't have the heart to throw them away.

Ollivander nodded slowly. "Yes, I see that very clearly. The wand is in perfect order, Mr Potter, but unless you wish for it to lose its allegiance, I suggest you begin to let go of your old wand."

He moved on to Hermione and Ron's wands and pronounced them in perfect working order and then moved on to Martin, who was last, and held out his wand reluctantly.

Ollivander took it and gasped audibly. "Good heavens! I have never seen such a wand before!"

"What, didn't he buy it from you?" Michael Corner asked.

Ollivander looked quite astonished as he continued examining the wand. "It is certainly of Ollivander's make, but it was not crafted by myself, nor my father, nor even perhaps my grandfather!"

Harry looked sharply at Martin, whose face was passive. Of course, his wand would be an old one; he was old himself.

Ollivander ran it through his fingers. "This is of the ancient designs, back when wands were crafted from whatever wood was freely available and whatever core the person themselves wished. Back then, it could have been anything. It is only in recent times Ollivander's has limited the wand cores it uses to dragon heartstring, unicorn hair and phoenix tail feathers. This wood … I have never seen its like before, and the core …"

Martin looked straight back at Ollivander without flinching. "It's been passed down in my family for years," he said. "It belonged to my father before me, and he said that the wood came from the trees on the Isle of the Blessed."

Ollivander gasped again. "You are from a Druidic family?" he asked in astonishment. "Well, well, well, that certainly explains a few things. The wood is from the Old Religion I see, very powerful … I have never seen such a wand! But what is the core?"

Martin blinked. "Two dragon scales," he said, his face blank.

Ollivander's eyebrows rose. "Not ordinary dragon scales," he said, his voice creeping with mystery.
"The Old dragons. But how did your ancestor come by such a rare substance? What Old dragon would possibly consent to relinquish its scales?"

Martin shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know. The wand is very old."

"Yes," said Ollivander. "It certainly is. Almost eleven hundred years old I would wager."

Harry and everyone else in the room stared at the wand in renewed astonishment.

"Old dragons?" asked Ernie. "I've been reading about them, ever since that Gringotts dragon made an appearance. It was behaving almost like one of them. It was very intelligent."

"I thought those sorts of dragons were just a myth?" frowned Anthony Goldstein.

"Oh, they aren't a myth," said Ollivander, his eyes gleaming as he looked at the wand. "They were very much real."

He made the room snow for a moment with Martin's wand and then passed it back to him, his eyes still glinting. Martin stared at him the entire time.

"Right, everybody!" Tonks said, clapping her hands together. "We're going to be building on what we were practising last week! A mock battle, so you can put your sensory and manoeuvring skills into action and see how they would help you in real life. There will be very little light, so you'll have to rely on your other senses to avoid getting hit. The team with the last man standing wins! Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw vs. Gryffindor! Get ready!"

The Gryffindors moved over to the other side of the room, which had suddenly changed to look more like an obstacle course than anything. Pillars grew up out of nowhere, as did arches, holes in the ground, great hill-shaped mounds and other obstacles.

As they got into position, Harry turned to Martin. "Dragon scales?"

Martin smiled. "Yeah, one from Kilgharrah and one from Aithusa. The type of magic I use is so powerful that only a magical core from the Old Religion is strong enough to cope with it. Phoenix feathers work as well, but they're not as powerful, and modern-day dragons and unicorns aren't as pure as the old ones so their cores are useless to me."

"And your wand, it's eleven hundred years old?" asked Hermione, just as they were getting ready to begin.

Martin nodded. "Looks like my father was even older than I believed. This wand belonged to him."

Harry looked it again, wondering at its age. How could it possibly be that old? Was it because it was composed of the Old Religion? Harry wished he had his old wand back; if phoenixes were from the Old Religion, then perhaps he'd need all the help he could get in mastering the magic Martin was trying to teach him.

"Right! Let the battle begin!"

Almost two hours later the entire class sat on the floor of the Duelling Chamber just as bruised and battered as they had been last week. Merlin wasn't however; he'd taken Tonk's advice to heart and hadn't held back as much. He alone had escaped unscathed.
There was certainly an improvement on last week. It was almost half an hour before anyone on either side had been hit. The battle had been fast-paced and furious, and Merlin was greatly impressed with what he saw. These people were certainly the best that Hogwarts had to offer, and he was proud of Harry for being the one who had taught them all in the first place. He had no doubt that everyone in the room would be more than a match for any Death Eater they came across.

"Thank you, everybody!" said Tonks brightly, looking down at them all. "That was excellent! Your reflexes and sensory skills are improving! Just remember, you have to be aware at all times. You can't let your guard down for even an instant! That was where you went wrong, Parvati."

Parvati, who had suddenly grown a tail, scowled at her, and tried to hide it again. Tonks hadn't been able to remove it, and had told her to just let it disappear on its own. Merlin had to laugh into himself; it was his spell that had done it, even though they'd been on the same side, trying to catch her out. He knew it was immature, but … well, with all the dark stuff going on he'd needed a laugh. He'd remove the tail before classes started tomorrow morning.

"All of you still need to work on this, and you all need to remember that it isn't always the strength of the spell that will determine the victor, but the way you use the spell. Some of you were exhausting yourselves with powerful spells and opening yourself up for attack. Even the simplest spell can save your life. I once knew an Auror who used wingardium leviosa to levitate a Death Eater out a window!"

"Wonder if it was Mad-Eye," Ron whispered to Harry, and they both smirked.

"Okay, that's about all for tonight! Keep practising, and we'll meet back here next week!"

She dismissed them all with a cheery grin, and everyone began scrambling to their feet and rubbing their aching arms, or in the case of Parvati, hiding their tails, and heading towards the doors. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Merlin stayed behind however.

"Aren't you coming?" asked Tonks, standing in the doorway after everyone else had left.

"I thought we'd stay a bit longer and practise," said Merlin.

Tonks raised her eyebrows, and looked at Merlin, and then at Ron whose nose had turned green and warty.

"You want even more practise? Aren't you all exhausted?"

"I think we should stay just a while longer," said Merlin, looking at her meaningfully.

Tonks frowned a little, but nodded. She'd seen something in Merlin's eyes as he'd spoken, and an unsaid agreement passed between them.

"Alright, but make sure you don't wear them out, Martin."

Merlin smiled. "I won't."

She hesitated a moment longer, and then turned and left.

"Great," said Ron. "Right, Martin. Can you fix my nose?"

Merlin laughed, and placed his hand level with Ron's face. "Hyrden"

His eyes flashed, and Ron's nose glowed, and then returned to normal. He touched it gingerly, and
looked at Merlin grinning.

"I love this Old Magic!"

"Hermione could have done the same thing with a normal spell," said Merlin modestly.

"Yeah, but the thing where your eyes go all golden, it looks really cool."

Merlin laughed. "Thanks."

He turned to Harry, and watched him carefully. "Was what Ollivander was saying true? About your wand?"

Harry nodded. "It obeys me and all, but I think I just preferred my old one."

"Do you have it on you?" Merlin asked. Could it work … he wondered to himself.

Harry nodded, and withdrew the pieces from a pouch around his neck. Merlin took them in his hands carefully and examined them. The phoenix feather was clearly visible and Merlin could feel the power radiating off of it. It was of the Old Religion; if Harry had this wand … it may help him with his studies.

Merlin thought for a moment longer, and held his right hand over the wand: "Fæstnian."

The wand was engulfed in a bright golden light, and a second later, it lay in his hand, good as new.

He handed it back to Harry, who was staring at it as though he couldn't quite believe what had happened.

"You should have said sooner," said Merlin grinning. "I could have fixed it months ago."

Harry looked up at him, grinning broadly. "I can't thank you enough!"

"Don't mention it," said Merlin. "It'll help you with the Old Magic, phoenix feathers are very powerful."

Harry ran his hands over his wand reverently, still grinning insanely. He thrust Malfoy's in his pocket without a second thought, and sent streams of multi-coloured sparks through the air with his wand, looking gleeful.

Hermione was watching him in appreciation. "Every time I see you use Old Magic I just get more and more impressed," she admitted. "I can't quite believe how powerful it is!"

"You haven't seen anything yet, Hermione," Merlin said sadly. True, Old Magic was great, and he loved it. But it also had a greater capacity for evil.

There was an awkward silence for a moment, before Ron said. "Well, hadn't we better keep on searching?"

They all agreed, and moved off in opposite directions searching, Harry still admiring his newly repaired wand. Merlin checked over every nook and cranny, but could see no indications of a hidden compartment.

"You lot found anything?" he called, moving over to where the others were.

"Nope," said Ron grumpily. "Not a single lion emblem anywhere."
"Perhaps it isn't a lion we should be looking for?" Hermione wondered.

"Ravenclaw's and Slytherin's books were hidden behind an eagle and a snake," Harry pointed out. "It makes sense that Gryffindor would hide his behind a lion."

Yeah, thought Merlin. But as great a man Godric had been, he hadn't exactly been known for his intelligence.

He looked around the room again in frustration. Where could it be?

Then, something caught his notice. The back wall was sticking out at him for some reason. He frowned and looked at it again. What was it about the wall that made him so suspicious?

"Martin?" asked Harry. "What is it?"

"That wall," Merlin muttered, suddenly realising. "It's different from the others. It's wood panelling, the others are stone."

"So?" frowned Ron, but Hermione gasped in realisation.

"That means the wood was probably added later!"

Merlin nodded. That wall certainly hadn't been panelled when he'd last been here in whatever century it was.

They all moved over to the wall and Ron placed his hand over it.

"How are we supposed to get behind this? It's solid wood! I don't reckon McGonagall would be too pleased if we started hacking away parts of the castle."

But Merlin ignored him. He placed his hand next to Ron's and incanted: 'Holt swindan'.

The wood seemed to melt away from the stone behind it, leaving the wall exposed and faded looking.

Ron gaped at him. "Blimey! I don't think I'll ever get used to your magic!"

Merlin smiled, but inwardly winced. How much more would Ron be unnerved when he finally learned the truth about who he was?

Harry had suddenly just pointed at a spot in the centre of the wall.

"Look," he murmured.

An ornate lion was carved there in the central block, his paws raised as though to strike. This was it.

"What are we supposed to do?" asked Hermione.

"Well, for the other two we had to 'prove our worth',' said Harry slowly. "Show our intelligence for Ravenclaw, our cunning for Slytherin …I'm guessing we'll have to prove our bravery."

"But how?"

Harry frowned for a moment, and moved over to the engraved stone and laid his hand over it. Nothing happened.
Merlin was stumped. He was just about to suggest they try something else when the lion on the wall suddenly roared and glowed golden, as Harry's hand was still laid upon it.

"Enter, if you dare," the lion spoke in Godric's deep voice.

Hermione frowned. "Enter? Enter where?"

But Harry had stepped forwards, his hands outstretched and placed them against the wall. Slowly he pushed forwards and his hands sunk deep into the wall. He glanced at the other three and shrugged. "See you on the other side."

And with that, he sunk his entire body into the wall and disappeared. Ron cried out in shock. "Blimey!"

Merlin stepped up to the wall after Harry, and repeated the action. His hands tingled as they passed through the wall. He took a deep breath and pushed his body through the wall.

It certainly wasn't anything like the barrier at King's Cross. It felt like he was forcing himself through a pile of quicksand. He stepped forwards, and a most peculiar sensation began, almost like he was Apparating, but not actually moving.

He emerged on the other side gasping. He collapsed to his knees, breathing heavily. That was something he definitely didn't want to repeat.

He stood up and looked around. He was in a small chamber, lit by lion-shaped lamps on the wall. It was rather dusty and stale feeling. Merlin had to admit, Salazar's secret chamber was far more impressive.

"Hey, you alright?" Harry asked him, standing to the left of him. Merlin turned to face him.

"Yeah, weird isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Harry, even as Ron and Hermione forced their way through as well. Ron looked rather green and clutched his stomach. "Urgh. Remind me again why I'm a Gryffindor?"

Hermione looked around in interest. "Hmm. I wonder how we're supposed to prove our bravery in here?"

"Maybe it's something to do with that?" Ron asked, pointing.

They all turned to see a sword sticking into the ground in front of them, its end embedded deeply into the ground. It looked as shiny as the day it was forged, and was heavily encrusted with rubies.

"What, is this some sort of Excalibur deal and we've to pull the sword out of the ground to prove our worth?" Harry asked frowning.

Merlin smiled as he remembered back to the time Arthur had pulled Excalibur from the stone. He'd never gone anywhere without that sword from that day forth, even keeping it beneath his pillow, annoying Gwen to no end. Eventually she'd realised it was the same sword that her father had forged and Merlin was in serious trouble for making up the ancient king story. Though by that time, Arthur had found out about his magic and was less annoyed than he would have been. It'd certainly had a full life; Merlin had given it back to the Lake of Avalon after Arthur's death. He wondered what had become of it.

Ron had gone up to the sword and examined it closely. "It doesn't look deep or anything. It just
looks like it's sitting here waiting for someone to pick it up."

"Waiting for what?" asked Hermione, and as if on cue, something happened.

There was a glowing white light in the middle of the room, and out of the light appeared a man in shining plate armour. His visor was down, his face concealed, the only sign of identification being the Gryffindor sigil on his shield.

Merlin felt his magic spike within him. This was powerful magic indeed.

The knight spoke, again with Godric's voice: "The knowledge you seek is dangerous in the wrong hands. It will only be granted to a precious few. If you wish to continue further, you must prove yourself, and demonstrate your worth as a student of the Ancient Arts. Godric Gryffindor asks this of you:

"Prove your courage and fortitude. Then the knowledge will be given to you. No magic can be used. Your magic is nullified whilst in this room. Prove your worth."

Merlin panicked slightly as he realised the words Godric spoke were true. He could feel the magic inside of him as always, but for some reason, he couldn't cast a spell with it. Harry and the others started trying with their wands, but to no avail.

Merlin suddenly had a newfound appreciation for Godric. There was little magic in the world left that was able to control him. Godric's spell in this room must be a combination of the Old and New, something that Merlin, rather ironically, had taught him. Perhaps Godric's chamber was more impressive than Salazar's.

The Knight suddenly withdrew a sword from his scabbard, glinting in the dull light of the chamber, the sound ringing through the room sharply.

Ron jumped back as the Knight slashed his sword through the air. "What? We have to fight it?"

The Knight suddenly started walking towards them, its armour clanking at every step, the sword outstretched.

They all backed against the wall. "Martin!" yelled Hermione. "You'll have to fight it!"

"Me?" yelled Merlin "Why me?"

"Didn't you learn sword fighting in the 1700s?" Harry shouted, watching the advancing Knight with wide eyes.

"Yeah! But I'm a bit out of practise! I haven't used a sword in a while!" Merlin shouted back. This was true; he hadn't needed to in at least five hundred years. He'd always shied away from violence, Muggle and wizard alike. He'd only used weapons when there was literally no other option without revealing his magic to someone.

"Still! You're the only one who knows how!"

"Didn't you kill a basilisk with a sword?" Merlin yelled at Harry. He was more than a little annoyed at having to do this. He'd been pretty decent with a sword in Camelot, but compared to Arthur or any of the Knights …

Nevertheless, what choice did they have?
He leapt forward and seized the sword in the ground and lifted it in a defensive position, feeling the memories come flooding back.

The Knight leaned in and-

*CLANG!* The swords collided in a great resounding crash as Merlin parried the blow easily. The Knight was strong, and Merlin's sword was heavy, and he was thrown a little off balance. The Knight lunged, and Merlin ducked out of the way and responded with a lunge of his own, but found his attack easily blocked. He ducked as the Knight aimed another blow at his head, and jumped forwards to slash at the Knight, but again found his attack blocked.

He leapt backwards, light on his feet, trying to assess the situation. *Right, what did Arthur always tell me* …

He observed the Knight was slow, which meant he should attack quickly and concisely, conserving his energy. He leapt forwards again and jabbed again and again at the Knight in quick succession, twisting his sword here and there, trying to breach the Knight's defences, hoping to catch him off-guard. But the Knight raised his sword to block his attacks every time and as Merlin's sword collided with his a jarring sensation reverberated up his arm and Merlin's arm began to ache. The Knight was incredibly strong.

He danced around, ducking and avoiding the Knight's attacks nimbly. He didn't have a hope of wearing him out; it wasn't flesh and blood.

What would Arthur have done if he was here? Laughed at him probably; he was insanely out of practise, and everything he'd learned seemed to have leaked out of his head. What had Arthur taught him?

*Use your opponents weaknesses against him* … he didn't have any!

*Distract him* … he wasn't even real!

*Tire him out* … again … he wasn't even real!

*Come at him out of the sun* … there is no sun!

*Study his methods well before-hand* … too late for that.

*Get him angry and losing focus* … he isn't real!

*And above all … don't be an idiot Merlin.*

What was he supposed to do? There had been a reason he'd never fought in battles without his magic back in Camelot!

Then suddenly, one tiny memory came flitting back into his mind:

*Use his own strength against him.*

Merlin leapt back from the Knight and feinted to the left. The Knight lunged forwards and struck out furiously. Merlin used the Knight's momentum to come at him from another angle, and with a resounding crash whacked his sword against the Knight's hauberk.

The Knight wheeled around to strike at him hard, but Merlin nimbly ducked out of the way, and darted around behind him and jabbed at him, striking the Knight's armour again.
The Knight once again turned and raised his sword as he went, ready to slash at him, but he lost his balance and stumbled, and Merlin struck out again, this time aiming precisely at a weak point in the armour, remembering that Arthur had always done the same thing.

His sword went in between the armour plates, and Merlin expected to feel the usual sensation of the sword hitting flesh, but it didn't come. He leapt back in mild shock as the Knight attacked again. A blow like that should surely have slowed him down, but it wasn't affecting him in the slightest.

But Merlin didn't let this faze him. He continued in the same manner, ducking and diving, using the Knight's own seemingly endless strength to his advantage. He parried, and lunged and their swords hit in rapid fashion, clanging together so loud it made Merlin's ears ring. Their blows increased in speed and rapidity as more and more came back to Merlin from the old days. His arms ached, and the perspiration beaded on his brow, but he didn't give up.

Ron whooped as Merlin landed another blow on the Knight, this time, the sword penetrating right through the Knight's armour, thinking Merlin had won. Merlin was almost certain too, a blow like that should be fatal. But the Knight didn't even seemed to acknowledge the wound, and fought on regardless.

Merlin, surprised, didn't raise his sword in time, and felt instead, the sting of the blade as it sliced across his chest.

He fell back with a cry of pain, feeling the ground rush up and impact him even as blood began to pour from his wound. He clutched at it in agony. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd been injured by a sword.

The Knight stood above him and raised his sword. Merlin looked up in horror. Was it possible that someone like him who'd endured for centuries could be killed by a simple mortal wound?

"Hey!"

The Knight turned to see Harry, who had dived for Merlin's discarded sword and was pointing it at the Knight.

Merlin groaned. Harry couldn't fight this thing! He wasn't even holding the sword right!

The Knight began advancing on Harry, and Merlin tried to sit up and stop him, but every motion he made was agony, and the blood came gushing from his chest, making him weak and sluggish. He had to get to Harry …

The Knight got there first. It struck at Harry, and Harry raised the sword to block the attack, his arm jerking back in surprise at the force of the blow. The Knight struck again, and the sword was knocked from Harry's hand and he himself was knocked off his feet with the force of it. Once again, the Knight raised his sword to deliver a fatal blow-

Ron yelled, and charged the Knight from behind, seizing it around the neck, and pulling it away from Harry. It struggled and flailed as it tried to get Ron to release it, but Ron held fast.

He let go with one hand and reached forwards to try and grab the Knight's sword-

This was all the Knight needed. He threw Ron off easily, and Ron sprawled across the ground winded.

A flash of silver caught Merlin's eye, and he saw Hermione had now lifted the sword against the Knight, her hands shaking, but looking determined.
It stomped towards her, its sword lifted high-

"OH NO YOU DON'T!"

Ron had leapt up from the ground and ran towards Hermione; his face panicked and threw himself in front of her.

The Knight kept coming, reached out and his sword went right through Ron. Hermione screamed.

Merlin looked on in shock. \textit{It couldn't be …}

But Ron made no sound, no cry of pain. He looked down at where the sword was protruding from his chest. There was no blood, no sign of a wound.

Ron looked back up in surprise as Harry ran over to him desperately. The Knight withdrew his sword from Ron and stepped back, re-sheathing it. Ron clutched at his chest, feeling for the wound, but there wasn't one.

Hermione, Harry and Merlin gaped at the scene before them. The Knight bowed his head before Ron and spoke again:

"Bravery is the strength of one's heart, and the courage to do what is right, without fear of death. You have demonstrated true bravery this night. You pass the test."

The Knight stood up straight again, and then began to dissolve before their very eyes, until all that remained was the Gryffindor shield. It glowed brightly and in its place, there was a heavy bound book. Harry picked it up gingerly, and grinned widely.

Merlin heaved a huge sigh of relief.

"WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING RONALD WEASLEY!"

Hermione screamed at Ron, shaking him by the front of his robes, furious tears in her eyes. "WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!"

Ron shrugged, looking more than a little frightened at her reaction. "Because I love you?"

Hermione stopped her shouting and stared at him, her mouth open slightly in surprise. Then she practically threw herself on him, wrapped her arms around his neck and began kissing him fiercely, which he responded to eagerly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Not again," he muttered.

"Um, guys?" Merlin called, but Hermione and Ron seemed to be glued together. "Oi! I'm bleeding here!"

They broke apart hurriedly, and the three of them rushed over to him, their faces pale as they took in his wound.

"Oh my goodness!" shrieked Hermione, as she saw the extent of the blood. "We need to get you to Madame Pomfrey!"

Merlin grimaced, but realised she was probably right.

Harry and Ron reached down and each of them grabbed one of his arms and put them around their necks, lifting him to his feet. Merlin swayed on the spot, light-headed and dizzy from blood loss. It had been a long time since he had felt like this.
They helped him back through the wall, which was far less unpleasant from this end, Harry and Ron supporting him, Hermione carrying the book in her arms.

"Why did it hurt you and not me?" Ron asked, still looking pale.

"Because you're the one that broke the spell," explained Merlin. "You're the one that showed true bravery."

Ron frowned. "But you're the one that fought it! It was incredible! I've never seen anything that cool! I could never have done that!"

"It's like that Disney film, Hercules," Hermione said. "Hercules didn't prove himself a true hero by becoming strong, but only by being willing to sacrifice himself for the one he loved." She blushed a little as she said these last words.

Harry looked like he was trying not to laugh. "You go to see Disney films?"

Hermione frowned. "Yes! I went last year with my mum and dad. It was just before I ... well, before they left for Australia. I wanted to have one last fun night with them before ..."

She broke off looking upset, and the amusement in Harry's face drained away.

"What's a film?" Ron asked.

Merlin started laughing, but immediately stopped as the pain in his chest overwhelmed him.

Hermione looked at him in alarm. "We need to get you there quickly! You're losing loads of blood."

They'd now emerged into the corridors and were heading towards the Hospital Wing.

"It's alright, Hermione," Merlin said, gritting his teeth against the pain. "This isn't my first sword wound, and definitely not my worst."

Ron frowned. "But you were great fighting just now!"

"I'm not so good," Merlin admitted. "I was always pretty awful actually. Ar- all my friends used to say so, and I haven't practised in a long time."

"And I suppose the sword difference didn't help much?" Hermione asked, looking as though she was prattling on just to take her mind off of the fact Merlin was now dripping blood onto the floor.

"Difference?" Merlin frowned.

"Well, yes," said Hermione. "Sword types have varied a lot over the years haven't they? The sword Godric Gryffindor would have used would be completely different to the kind you learned with, wouldn't it?"

"Oh right, yeah," said Merlin, wincing at his slip-up. "Yeah, it probably didn't. Heavier, you know."

"Looked pretty cool to me," muttered Harry.

"Yeah, until I got sliced open," Merlin said sarcastically, wincing as they went down the staircase. "At least we got the book."

"That was downright dangerous that was!" Hermione said indignantly. "What would have happened if Martin had been killed? None of the other ones were that dangerous!"
"That's Godric for you, Merlin thought wryly.

But Ron chuckled. "I'm not so sure Hermione. Slytherin was guarding his with a basilisk remember? If Harry hadn't killed it in second year we'd have had to do it last night!"

"Fair point," Hermione conceded. "I just hope Hufflepuff's isn't as bad."

"How dangerous can a Hufflepuff be?" Ron said, grunting as he shifted Merlin's weight.

Merlin lay awake hours later in the Hospital Wing, staring up at the ceiling, remembering the times he'd been here before for Quidditch injuries and the like. The nurses back then hadn't been nearly as strict as this one.

She'd just about collapsed in shock as the four of them had come in covered in Merlin's blood. Then she'd started her lectures.

They told her it had been a Severing Charm gone wrong- after all, who'd believe a sword wound?- but she didn't seem to buy it and guessed they'd been up to something dangerous. She'd sat and gone on and on about dangerous activities the whole time she was healing the wound, and Merlin had almost been relieved when she'd announced he'd have to stay in overnight to allow the tissue to heal properly and left him to 'rest'.

He hadn't taken the Sleeping Potion she'd left by his bed, and was instead thinking again about Helga and where she would have hidden her book.

He didn't think her protective enchantments would be as severe as Godric's, but then again, she had been a pretty formidable woman when in a bad mood.

He hoped all of this aggravation was worth it. Is this why all summer he'd had the strangest of feelings that he should return to Hogwarts? Was this the Old Religion telling him that he was meant to find these books? That he was supposed to be teaching Harry?

He sighed as he lay there. Morgana was out there, actually physically walking around and breathing, and he was in a school looking for a book. He was beginning to truly understand the frustration Harry had been feeling.

But still, this was the only course of action open to him at the moment.

Where would Helga hide her book? What was her favourite place in Hogwarts? What had she loved best?

Every time he thought about it, all he could think about was the castle itself. She had loved the institution she had built, knowing she was doing good in the world and helping others. That's why she'd arranged her House in a way that meant she'd accept anybody, because that was just the good and kind person that she was.

She believed strongly in tolerance and decency of spirit. She didn't care if you weren't smart or brave or cunning, as long as you were a good human being who cared for others, that was all that mattered. Her House had often been ridiculed for this over the centuries, seen as the 'weak' House, where no one possessed any particular talent- completely unjustified of course. She had been one of the finest women Merlin had ever known, and her House was a reflection of that. She was proud of her House. Proud that people could feel like they belonged, regardless of who they were.

Merlin suddenly sat bolt upright, wincing slightly as he did so; his chest was still tender from the
wound. Helga's proudest achievement was her House, did that mean … the common room?

Something clicked in Merlin's mind. This had to be it. This is what Helga would have done. It made sense! Why hadn't it come to him before?

He pulled the bed sheets from him and dressed hurriedly in the clean robes Madame Pomfrey had placed beside his bed, wincing again at the pain underneath his bandages.

He had to go right now; he wasn't really sure why. Harry had gotten a book, so had Hermione, and then Ron, this was his turn.

Besides, they wouldn't be able to get into the common room. It had more security measures than others. After several Gryffindor, Slytherin and Ravenclaw students had sneaked in to play tricks on the Hufflepuffs, Helga had installed extensive security measures - no non-Hufflepuff could enter it.

Would it still work for him, Merlin wondered, as he slipped out of the Hospital Wing and headed off down the staircase towards the basements. He had been a Hufflepuff, but at present he was a Gryffindor, so …

Well, only one way to find out.

He headed off towards the corridor that led to the kitchens listening carefully for anyone wandering the corridors. He approached a large stack of barrels in the nook in the right hand side. He reached out and tapped the lid of the barrel two from the bottom in the middle of the second row in the rhythm of 'Helga Hufflepuff' hoping desperately he'd gotten the right barrel - it doused you in vinegar if you got it wrong.

But he hadn't, and the barrels made way for the small rounded entrance to the common room. Merlin grinned, and ducked in, being as quiet as possible.

It looked much the same as it had last time he'd been here back in 1691, rather ironically, he'd been called Martin back then as well. Yellow hangings covered the walls, and the fat armchairs looked as comfy as ever. The entrances to the dormitories were underground tunnels, all with perfectly round doors like barrel tops. It was much like a large badger set, and it was homey and welcoming. Merlin grinned again; he'd always loved being a Hufflepuff.

He shook his head free of these reminiscences, and tried to concentrate. He needed to find this book. He searched around the room, shifting aside forgotten homework and abandoned Gobstones games, looking for the badger emblem anywhere.

It was dark and he was about to give up when he spotted a hanging on the wall with a badger emblazoned on it. It was fairly nondescript; there were several corresponding ones in other common rooms, but it seemed to be the only badger in the room, and Merlin moved over to it suspicious. Now that he came to think about it, this particular wall hanging had never moved from this spot, unlike several others which had shifted around over the years.

He pulled the hanging aside, to reveal the stone wall behind it. There, on the central stone, was a carved badger. Merlin grinned, and laid his hand on it hurriedly, in the way Harry had done earlier.

It glowed in a similar fashion and the stone slid away to reveal a shining mirror.

Merlin approached closer, but instead of seeing his own reflection, he saw that of Helga's herself. He blinked in surprise.

She smiled and began to speak in her sweet voice: "The knowledge you seek is dangerous in the
wrong hands. It will only be granted to a precious few. If you wish to continue further, you must prove yourself, and demonstrate your worth as a student of the Ancient Arts. Helga Hufflepuff asks this of you:

*Prove your worth.*

Merlin stood, waiting for more, but there was nothing else forthcoming.

"Prove my worth? But how? What do I have to do?" Merlin asked her, but she just smiled sweetly at him and said nothing.

He sighed, this was typical of Helga. She wouldn't ask for a big display of bravery or intelligence. She'd just want to know that you were a good person. That would be enough for her.

But how was he to prove this to her? Helga valued loyalty and hard work … kindness …

A thought struck him. He pulled out his wand, and placed it to his temple, and summoned every memory he could muster of his life in Camelot. The day he'd first met Arthur, and how he'd saved his life that first time and every time after that; all the times Merlin had sacrificed something for Arthur, the poisoned goblet, going to the Isle of the Blessed to make a deal with Nimueh, serving him loyally even after being put in the stocks, never leaving his side. He remembered all the times he'd lied and deceived Arthur in order to protect him; he remembered the mercy he'd shown Kilgharrah after he'd attacked Camelot; he remembered all the times he'd ridden out with Arthur in the face of certain death. Watching Arthur's coronation, sacrificing his life to save him, the sword in the stone, the day Arthur had married Guinevere, the day Arthur had discovered Merlin's magic, and the forgiveness that came with it, the way they'd become even closer. He remembered all the years in Camelot when he'd built up the city with the aim to protect others; he remembered all the times he'd risked everything for his friends. He remembered that final day when he'd been unable to protect Arthur. He remembered the friendships he had formed with the Founders, and the pain he'd felt when he had had to leave. He remembered when he'd come to help Harry in the battle, and the way he'd been protecting him all his life. He remembered the vows he'd made to protect the three of them and his promises to help them defeat Morgana and Voldemort. He remembered his own vows to never rest until his friends were safe.

He gathered all these memories to the forefront of his mind and withdrew his wand from his temple to reveal shimmering strands of memory. He touched his wand to the mirror, and there in front of them they were played out, as if in a Pensieve. He saw them all again, Arthur and the others, laughing as they joked around in the castle, the pranks they'd played, the vows to protect each other, finishing at last on Harry's face.

Helga reappeared in the mirror and smiled sweetly at him again. "You pass the test."

The mirror vanished, and a small alcove was revealed with Helga's book within it.

Merlin reached in and pulled it out. He looked at the badger on the cover, with both sadness and joy. Perhaps he was a true Hufflepuff after all.
How did you find it?” Ron asked, staring at the book in Martin's hands. They'd all popped in to the Hospital Wing early that morning to see Martin before classes started and he'd greeted them with the sight of the last of the Founder's books.

"Easy," grinned Martin. "It was in the Hufflepuff common room. All I had to do was show that I was a loyal person by showing some of my memories and I got it."

Harry was impressed. Martin seemed to be shrugging it off, but if he'd had a sword wound like that he probably wouldn't have been up for leaving any time soon.

"But I thought the Hufflepuff common room was protected so no outsider could get into it; that's what it says in Hogwarts: A History," Hermione frowned. "How did you know how to get in there?"

"The Fat Friar," answered Martin swiftly. "I knew him the last time I was at Hogwarts, and he owed me a favour."

He was lying again, but Harry wasn't too bothered this time. They'd gotten the final book now.

"So, will you start teaching me soon now?" Harry asked hopefully. He couldn't wait to get started.

"Not just yet, Harry," said Martin. "I have to read through them all and decide the best way to teach you it. Just be a little more patient."

Harry nodded, slightly disappointed. Now that Morgana was free there was a lot more at stake and he hated being so powerless.

"Will you be leaving soon?" Hermione asked.

Martin made a face. "She wants me to stay here most of today to 'keep an eye on me'. She really doesn't need to. It feels loads better already."

"Martin, you were attacked with a sword!" said Ron goggling at him. "If it was me I wouldn't be leaving this place for a week!"

Martin laughed. "I've had worse injuries. And a sword wound is nothing compared to a crossbow wound. That is painful- takes forever to heal."

"You've been attacked with a crossbow before?" Harry asked.

Martin nodded. "The eighteenth century was a dangerous time," he said quietly.

Harry stared at him. No matter how many times Martin mentioned his past it still freaked him out a little. He still had trouble comprehending the fact that Martin was over two hundred years old.

"How did you get injured by Muggle weapons?" asked Hermione. "I mean, you have really good reflexes and stuff because of the Old Religion, so how did it happen? And why were you being attacked in the first place?"

Martin said nothing for a moment. "The International Statute of Secrecy was still only about a century old at the time. Muggles still believed in magic, and we were attacked a lot of the time. I didn't use my magic as much back then. The witch burnings were just beginning to end and I didn't want to attract attention."
"You mean, back in your day people were still being killed for having magic?" Ron asked, looking slightly sick.

Martin nodded, looking very sad. "Yes. Children who couldn't help themselves, people who'd used their magic to protect a Muggle, Muggles who were falsely accused … it was everywhere. Until you've seen someone executed for being who they are, you can have no idea what it was like."

No one said anything for a while. Harry didn't know what to say. To think Martin had actually witnessed the executions of witches and wizards in the past just for being magical … it made his hair stand on end. It was no wonder he was always so secretive with all the bad memories and awful things he'd seen over the years.

"Were you ever suspected?" Hermione asked hesitatingly.

"I was," said Martin, remembering. "A couple of times. One time, someone found my magic book, another time I was accused by a visitor to the town I was living in. Another time I confessed when my friend was in danger, and another time I disguised myself as an old warlock to protect someone I cared about. But I was never actually in much danger. The accusations were either dropped, or I managed to escape. Though it was a close shave one time; I was actually being marched towards the pyre before I managed to get free."

They all stared at him in mild shock. "Well, it's a good thing you did, or we'd all be in trouble," Ron laughed, though he looked just as shocked at Harry and Hermione.

Harry got chills again. What would have happened if Martin hadn't gotten free? It was incredible to believe that Martin had come that close to execution of all things.

He looked at Martin closely; how many horrors had he witnessed over the years?

"Right, the lot of you, out!" Madame Pomfrey bustled over. "This boy needs rest and you need your education! Get to class!"

Hours later, Harry and Ron came back to the Gryffindor common room after Quidditch practise to find Hermione sitting by the fire reading Ravenclaw’s book.

"I thought you couldn't read that stuff?" Ron asked, sitting beside her and planting a quick kiss on her cheek, making her blush.

"I can read some of it," she said, turning another page. "Parts of it are written in Ancient Runes."

"Anything interesting?" Harry asked, sitting beside them, and trying not to stare at Ginny who'd come in through the portrait hole behind them and was looking over at them, her expression unreadable.

"It's all interesting," said Hermione. "The magic they used, it's incredible! And there's all these little details about how they founded the school and references to the other Founders, not just a record of them, but what they were like as people. Did you know Godric Gryffindor used to harness the Giant Squid to a boat and cross the lake that way?"

Ron laughed: "I always thought he was bonkers."

She smiled. "Well, I don't understand a lot of it. It's all really technical stuff that only Martin will be
able to understand, but it does make mention of some old relics of the Old Religion."

Harry sat up a little straighter. "Do you think any of them may be the thing the Death Eaters are looking for?"

"That's why I'm looking," said Hermione. "But none of these items seem to be very important. The only thing I can see that might be the object is ... well, I'm not really sure about the translation, but as near as I can make it out, it's the 'Holy Grail.'"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "The Holy Grail? You're not serious are you?"

Hermione sighed. "Like I said, the translation is very difficult, but it's the only way I can put it into words."

"But, it doesn't actually exist does it?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure," said Hermione. "All the Muggle Arthurian legends speak about the Holy Grail and the Knights that went on a quest looking for it. It was said to have the power to give immortality."

Ron's mouth dropped open. "But, wasn't that what You-Know-Who said during the battle; that he knew the-

"True path to immortality," finished Harry, feeling a rush of adrenaline. "You think Voldemort's after the Holy Grail?"

"Well, he was raised by Muggles," reasoned Hermione. "He would have heard of it before. And I don't just mean in the traditional 'Indiana Jones' sense, I mean Morgana might have mentioned it. Maybe King Arthur found it and Merlin used it or something and now Voldemort's after it."

"Who's Indiana-"

"Not important Ron," said Harry, interrupting. "It can't really be real can it? The Cup of Christ thingy? Isn't it all a myth? It can't really grant immortality!"

"You're thinking about it from a Muggle perspective, Harry" said Hermione. "I was too at first, just the way I was raised I suppose. But maybe the Muggles got it wrong? Maybe it did actually exist! I mean, the Philosopher's Stone makes you immortal doesn't it?"

"I suppose," said Harry. "But it all seems a bit unbelievable."

"Normally I'd agree with you, Harry," sighed Hermione. "But so many previously unbelievable things have happened recently, I'm almost willing to believe this, no matter how strange it sounds."

Harry was deep in thought. He was trying to think rationally about it, but it still all seemed a bit crazy- whenever he thought of the Holy Grail he thought of Monty Python and Indiana Jones. Could it have been an actual object? Was this what they were searching for?

"But why would Death Eaters be searching for it in a Muggle museum?" asked Harry. "If it was the, er- 'Holy Grail', wouldn't the Muggles have realised?"

"Not necessarily," said Hermione. "It'd probably just look like any other old cup. It probably only shows its magic when you drink from it. And why would they?"

It was possible, thought Harry, but he still had a hard time believing it. There were an awful lot of 'maybes'. 
"Why don't we go and ask Aithusa?" Ron suggested. "She would know wouldn't she? She was around at the time of King Arthur and Merlin, perhaps she saw the cup? She might at least be able to tell us whether it's real or not."

"Yeah," said Harry, standing up. "That's a good idea. We should probably go and see her anyway. Martin won't have had a chance to today."

"Right," said Ron, and he and Hermione stood up as well. Then he suddenly looked rather nervous. "Er, d'you think we'll be alright without Martin there?"

"Of course we will, Ron," snapped Hermione. "Aithusa isn't about to hurt us! She likes us!"

"Yeah, but it's kinda hard to tell with dragons," Ron retorted. "Maybe she's only nice to us because Martin's there?"

They'd left the common room now and were on their way down to the grounds.

"Come on, Ron," said Harry. "This was your idea remember? Aithusa will be fine. She wants to help."

Ron still looked a little unsure, but they followed him as he made his way to the grounds and in through the Forbidden Forest. The grounds were getting darker, and the trees more sinister looking, but Harry ploughed on regardless.

On approaching the clearing they heard murmured voices, and after emerging from the trees they witnessed Aithusa lying on the ground with Hagrid sitting next to her, an expression of pure contentment on his face.

"Oh! Hello you lot!" he called, upon seeing them, and struggled to his feet. "Aithusa and me were jus' havin' a little talk. She's awful intelligent she is. An' a beauty ter boot!"

Aithusa smiled lazily. "I like you, giant man. You know precisely how to flatter a dragon."

Hagrid chuckled. "A creature such as you deserves all the flattery! Yer scales are shinin' up nicely, a few more treatments with the potions and yeh'll be as beau'iful as yeh ever were!"

Aithusa bowed her head slightly. "Alas, I cannot see my own scales, beautiful or otherwise."

Hagrid frowned and looked upset. "Don't you worry yersel'! Martin said he'll fix yer eyes an' he will! He's a good 'un he is. He won' let you down!"

Aithusa smiled again. "I know. I have never known such a man as Emrys. He would willingly give his life for mine and I for him."

Hagrid nodded approvingly. "As it should be. Jus' you wait a few more weeks, yeh'll be flyin' aroun' in no time. You-Know-Who won' know wha' hit him!"

Aithusa laughed. "He will not. It does not do well to anger a dragon. He intends harm to my Dragonlord, my friend. He will not get that chance." She stretched her wings out slightly, Harry, Ron and Hermione jumping back as there was now limited space. "I itch to fly once more, to fly without fear or pain. It's infuriating to be grounded like a common lizard."

"Don' you go tryin' it," warned Hagrid. "Yeh're still weak, an' it'll do yeh more harm than good."

Aithusa scowled, though Harry was only guessing that's what the expression on her face was.
"I will listen to you this time, giant man. Emrys trusts you, and I have come to value your company. But I will not be so patient forever. I still want my revenge on the goblins."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said Harry. "You'll only get into a load of trouble."

"I cannot let this insult to my race go unpunished," said Aithusa, her voice angry.

"Kingsley's working on it," said Hermione. "He's going to make sure it never happens again. And Ron's brother Bill's going to try and get the goblins responsible for the cruelty punished."

"I appreciate your kindness," said Aithusa. "But it still seems a hollow victory if I cannot do it myself. Even Kilgharrah managed to do some damage to his captors before he was called off by a Dragonlord."

"Kilgharrah was captured by goblins?" Harry asked, interested.

Aithusa shook her head. "No, not by goblins. He took his revenge on Camelot."

Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at each other in confusion.

"Camelot?" asked Ron. "What did they do to him?"

Harry turned to Hagrid, who was still standing there listening in and gave him a pointed look. Hagrid frowned, and looked hurt, but he took the hint, confused as he was.

"Eh, I'll just head off then, I've got some Salamanders in the fire I should be watchin'."

He stumped off, and, feeling guilty, Harry turned back to Aithusa, who was looking in their direction with a frown over her unseeing eyes.

"Why did you wish the giant man to leave?"

Harry blinked in surprise; how did she know when she couldn't see anything?

"Er, we've got some questions to ask you, and I'd rather Hagrid not hear them. But first, what was it that happened to Kilgharrah?"

Aithusa looked angry again, and Ron took a wary step back. "Uther Pendragon. He ordered a Purge, after the death of his wife at the hands of magic. Hundreds were put to death. He had the great race of dragons destroyed, every one of them slaughtered, save one: Kilgharrah. He wanted him kept as an example. He had him locked up beneath Camelot for twenty years. Until one day, Merlin freed him. But Kilgharrah was angry, and despite Merlin's pleas, he attacked Camelot in revenge and killed many. Eventually Merlin called him off and sent him away."

"Merlin was a Dragonlord?" Ron asked in astonishment.

"Well, of course," said Hermione. "Martin is one, and we know he's Merlin's descendent. It's hereditary remember?"

"Uther Pendragon did all of that?" Harry asked, angry. "He killed all those people and the dragons because his wife died? Didn't Martin say months ago that it only happened because Uther had used magic to give his wife a son?"

Aithusa nodded. "Yes."

"But that's horrible!" said Ron indignantly. "He did all of that because of his own personal grudge?"
"I'm glad you realise this, young Weasley," said Aithusa. "Uther was a cruel man."

"What was Arthur like though?" Hermione asked. "If he had a father like that, and magic was punished all through his early life then how did he turn out? I thought he was the one that first began to welcome magic, and made magical people and Muggles live side-by-side?"

"He was," said Aithusa. "He was a good man, a little headstrong perhaps, but a good man. When he discovered Merlin's magic he was angry at his deceit, but his views on magic were not as strong as his father's. He came to see that magic could be a force for good, and repealed the laws against it. He was the saviour of magical people and creatures alike. I was sorely upset when he died. Everything he'd worked for died with him."

There was a great sadness in her voice as she spoke, and Harry almost felt as though it had been recent, so great was her grief.

"Discovered Merlin's magic?" asked Ron, frowning. "What do you mean? Didn't he always know Merlin was a wizard?"

"No," answered Aithusa. "Merlin was Arthur's manservant for many years before he became the Court Sorcerer."

Their mouths dropped open. "Manservant?" repeated Harry, bewildered. "He was a servant?"

Aithusa laughed at their reactions. "Yes. He used his magic to help Arthur, in secret of course. But it wasn't until many years after they met that Merlin's true nature was revealed."

"Merlin kept it a secret from him? But why?"

"Were you not listening?" Aithusa scolded them. "Magic was illegal. He was afraid."

Harry felt a chill go right through him. "Would King Arthur have had him executed for using magic?"

Aithusa was silent for a moment. "I am not sure, but I don't believe he would have. He and Merlin were very close; they were good friends, despite the differences in their social statuses. I don't believe he would have killed Merlin. But he was still angry when he found out, for the lying more than anything else, I believe. Like I said, two closer friends you'd be hard pushed to find anywhere."

"It must have hard on Merlin," said Hermione, looking upset. "To keep such a secret from his best friend because he was scared of being executed. It must have been awful."

"Yes, it was," said Aithusa. "He hated the lying and the deceit, but he was just always too afraid to tell the truth. He didn't want to lose Arthur's trust. But Merlin was the reason Arthur's views on magic were forever changed. Their relationship became closer than ever, and they did great things together. All he'd had to do was just take the risk."

Harry listened feeling almost sorry for Merlin. To live with such a secret … he'd felt it after he'd learned the contents of the prophecy. He was afraid to tell Ron and Hermione- afraid they'd react badly and think differently of him. And he'd only kept that secret a couple of months. Merlin had had far much more at stake. It reminded him of Martin a little, he was afraid to tell them the truth. Why couldn't he just be like Merlin and take the risk; it had worked for him hadn't it? Harry wouldn't think any less of Martin no matter what he found out.

Suddenly Aithusa frowned. "This reminds me, where is Emrys? I cannot sense him here."
"He was injured last night," said Harry, and launched into an explanation, surprised when Aithusa laughed.

"He always was hopeless with a sword. Just like Merlin back in Camelot. Arthur used to use him for target practise."

Hermione frowned indignantly. "He used his servant for target practise? That's cruel!"

Aithusa laughed again. "Merlin always got his own back, don't worry, wise one. Arthur wasn't cruel, underneath his buffoonish exterior he was a decent man."

Aithusa settled back and laid her head on the ground, and ruffled her wings slightly. "Enough of this, what were you going to ask me?"

Harry glanced at Hermione, and she stepped forwards nervously. "It's about the Holy Grail."

Aithusa snorted slightly, smoke coming out of her nostrils. "There is no such object. It is a Muggle myth."

"Yes, but, well, we were wondering," said Hermione, still nervous, "whether or not the legend may be based on fact. That something like it may have existed. Something to do with the Old Religion."

Aithusa raised her head, and turned it towards Hermione, who shrank back a little.

"Have you spoken about this with Emrys?" she asked.

Hermione frowned. "No, we thought we'd ask you first. Why, what does Martin know?"

Aithusa laid her head back on her front legs. "Nothing, of course. Though it was his ancestor who was last in charge of its protection."

"Merlin?" breathed Hermione. "So it was real? Merlin had it?"

Aithusa sighed. "Yes, it was real. It was called the Cup of Life."

They all inched a little closer, excited.

"So it really granted immortality?" Ron asked eagerly.

"Yes," said Aithusa. "But it did other things. It could save a man from dying, healing him of a mortal wound. It was even said the Cup could bring someone back from the dead … Merlin did do this once, though not with the Cup."

"But it's impossible to bring back the dead!" Hermione said sceptically.

Aithusa laughed. "Not with the Old Religion. Merlin's mentor was killed, so he killed Nimueh, his murderess, and used her death to bring back his mentor. This is the power of life and death, the very same power that saved you from death as a child, young Potter."

"Merlin could actually bring back the dead?" Ron repeated in awe.

"It is not a good idea to meddle with these powers," said Aithusa. "For a life, there must always be a death. But these sorts of powers were rarely used, even by Merlin."

"Then what sorts of things was the Cup used for then?" Harry asked.
"The Druids used it for healing," Aithusa answered. "And once it was used by Morgause, Morgana's sister, to create an immortal army to take over Camelot."

Ron's eyes went wide. "Did it work?"

"Yes," said Aithusa. "Each member of the army placed a drop of blood into the Cup, and was made immortal, or rather, they became creatures that were neither alive nor dead. In order to defeat them Merlin knocked over the Cup and spilled the blood within it. That destroyed the army."

Harry's mouth hung open. If it wasn't for the fact it was Aithusa telling them this, he wouldn't believe it. It was like something out of a fairy tale.

"So what happened to the Cup after the army was destroyed?" Hermione asked.

"I do not know, I was still in my egg when all of this was happening," said Aithusa. "I think Merlin gave it back to the Druids to protect, but after the decline of the Old Religion I do not know what happened to it."

"Why do you ask?" she added, looking suspicious.

They exchanged a glance. "We think Voldemort's trying to find it."

Aithusa growled, and made the very ground tremble. "That would be evil indeed. If Voldemort and Morgana were to find this artefact … it would bode very ill for us all."

"We guessed as much," said Harry, his heart sinking. Was Voldemort really after this Cup of Life? If so, how were they supposed to defeat him? He supposed he should have expected something like this; Voldemort was always after immortality, apparently Horcruxes weren't enough for him. But was this method even more fool proof?"

"Thank you, Aithusa," said Harry. "We'll leave you to rest now."

She nodded lazily and the three of them turned to leave.

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked the other two. "Think he's after the Cup of Life?"

"It makes sense," said Hermione. "We know Voldemort's always trying to make himself immortal. This would be the perfect way to do it."

"But the Cup's been missing for years," Ron said. "Even Aithusa doesn't know where it is."

"Yeah, but Ravenclaw's diadem was lost as well," pointed out Harry. "He managed to find that alright."

They fell into an uncomfortable silence.

"D'you think Martin will have left the Hospital Wing yet?" Hermione asked, as they left the forest.

"Probably," said Ron. "Though if you ask me, he should be there longer. I mean, did you see that wound? And he said he's had worse?"

"Well, life two hundred years ago was very different," said Hermione, matter-of-factly. "I suppose-oh no!"

"What?" Harry and Ron wheeled around with their wands outstretched.
She looked upset. "My Head Girl badge is gone! I must have dropped it!"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Is that all? You can look for it later."

"No! I have to look now!" she moaned, looking at the ground. "It can't wait. I definitely had it when I came here, I must have dropped it back there!"

"It's too dark to look, Hermione," said Harry, but Hermione was not to be fazed.

"I need to go now before I forget which way we came. You two go back up to the castle, I'll be there soon."

"Hermione, we're not going to just leave and-" Ron started to say, but Hermione had already darted off along the path they'd come along.

He rolled his eyes again at Harry, and started heading back to the castle. "Mental she is. Come on."

Merlin set off for the Forbidden Forest with a determined look in his eyes. Aithusa had contacted him mentally just a few moments ago to let him know Harry and the others were asking questions about him. He'd discharged himself from the Hospital Wing immediately, knowing that when Madame Pomfrey found him missing she'd be furious, but he'd left anyway. He had to see Aithusa face-to-face.

His chest was much better, only a little tender now; he really didn't have to be in the Hospital Wing. If it had been the old days he wouldn't have bothered with it- he'd suffered much worse and had to carry on regardless. He guessed he was getting soft in his old age.

He practically ran from the castle and in through the trees, weaving through them quickly on his way to Aithusa. According to her, they'd left several minutes previously. He had to know what she'd told them.

He walked into the clearing to see Aithusa lying there with her head across her front legs, and her eyes closed.

"Can I get no rest?" she asked wearily.

"I have to know what they were saying," Merlin said immediately. She raised her head and sighed.

"Of course you do," she said. "You must know which of your secrets I've revealed."

"Don't be like that, Aithusa," he said. "Please, just tell me. What were they asking about?"

She looked at him sternly. "The Cup of Life."

Merlin froze, his body went rigid. "What?" he gasped. "How did they know- … Why?"

"They believe your Lord Voldemort is trying to steal it," she said, looking at a point behind Merlin.

Merlin almost laughed, even as an icy feeling came across his whole body. Of course! Why hadn't he seen it before? *True path to immortality* … that's what Voldemort had said. Morgana must have told him …

He yelled in frustration and buried his head in his hands. "Of course!" he shouted. "What else could
Morgana want?"

He broke off, letting the anger subside. "We can't let them get hold of it."

"That is obvious," Aithusa said. "But where is it?"

Merlin frowned. "How should I know? The Druids took it; I don't know what happened to it after
that."

Aithusa scoffed. "Didn't you care what happened to an artefact as powerful as that?"

"Of course I did!" said Merlin indignantly. "The Druids promised me they'd keep it safe. It must
have been passed down in the Druidic families."

"Yes, but which one?" Aithusa asked. "Many modern wizards do not even know they have Druidic
ancestry. It could be in any one of the family vaults at Gringotts."

Merlin groaned. "You're right. Anyone could have it!"

He sat down on the ground feeling defeated. "We don't have a hope of finding it."

"Don't be so pessimistic," Aithusa sniffed. "You're beginning to sound like Kilgharrah. Use your
magic to locate it."

Merlin shook his head. "That won't work. Its magic is too subtle for me to sense."

He thought carefully; where could it be? Was it at Gringotts? Was it in a museum? He'd have to tell
the Order, they had to search for it immediately. Bill could talk to the goblins … oh what was he
saying? The goblins would never help the Order! Aside from their privacy clauses, they had hated
the Order ever since the break-in. How were they to find it? An immortal Voldemort and Morgana …
the thought was terrifying.

He sighed. He had a lot of work to do. "What else were they asking?"

Aithusa shuffled slightly. "They were asking about Camelot, and Merlin."

Merlin's head shot up. "And you didn't tell them anything right? Right?"

Aithusa tilted her head to one side and snorted. "I do not lie."

Merlin groaned. "Why do you have to be so difficult?! What did you say to them?"

"I told them about Kilgharrah, Uther, Arthur, the fact that the legendary Merlin was his manservant
and lied to him for years about his magic," Aithusa said casually. "They were very interested to hear
that part. They thought it strange that Merlin lied to his friend for so long about his powers. But they
also pitied him."

Merlin sighed in frustration. "I know what you're getting at."

"Do you?" asked Aithusa sternly, still looking at a point behind Merlin's head. "I don't think you do.
You do not need to lie to your friends; things are not as they were back then. They would accept
you, and the truth about you, just as Arthur did."

Merlin shook his head. "I can't tell them, not yet. They'd never look at me the same way again. I saw
their faces when they found out about my magic and how powerful it was. They were almost afraid
of me, they're more wary, more guarded. If they found out everything … it would change everything
forever."

"Perhaps there are things that need to be changed," Aithusa said, her voice deep with emotion. "They deserve the truth."

"I know," said Merlin frustrated, and he stood up and began pacing back and forth. "They deserve the truth about me. They don't deserve all these lies. But what can I do? To tell them now … they'd feel betrayed."

"Arthur didn-"

"I don't care what Arthur did!" shouted Merlin. "Things are different now!"

"You cannot keep lying to them," she argued back. "They will only resent you more when they find out. You have kept your secrets for so long you are afraid to let anyone know. It will eat you up inside, it already has. Release your burdens; you didn't deserve to carry them all this time. Or are you just a coward? What happened to the man who was willing to trade his life for that of his friend's? The man willing to sacrifice his life to save an entire kingdom? The man that was unfailingly loyal to his friends, that would follow them to death itself. The man who hatched me from my egg and risked his life to do so? What happened to him?"

Merlin sighed, and stopped his pacing. "He died a long time ago. I'm not that man anymore. And I don't want anyone thinking that I am. They'll expect so much of me … but I'm just as lost as they are. Maybe that man is still here deep down, but perhaps not. He died along with Arthur."

Aithusa leaned in closer, and spoke in a clear voice. "I do not believe that. You are that man still. You have only to search within yourself to find him. Arthur always had faith in you, and so do I. You must take the risk. You will not regret it. Become the man again that lives in the legends. You are, and always will be that man. You will always be Merlin."

Merlin looked up at Aithusa and smiled resignedly. "You're only saying that because you have to. But maybe you're right. I can be him again. I am Merlin."

A loud squeak came from behind and Merlin wheeled around to see Hermione standing there, something shiny clutched in her hand, her face white and her eyes about to pop out of her head. Merlin's heart stopped. How much had she heard?

She looked at him, her mouth open and her eyes wide, shaking. She glanced up at Aithusa and then took another look at Merlin, an almost frightened disbelieving look, and turned and ran through the trees.

Merlin turned sharply, to see Aithusa with a small smile on her face. "You knew she was there didn't you? You used your magic to hide her presence from me!" he demanded, his voice higher than normal, half furious, half terrified.

Aithusa nodded. "Yes."

Merlin's breathing became rapid and he felt weak all over. "Why didn't you tell me?!"

"She deserved to know."

Merlin's mouth opened and closed a few times in shock. "How much did she hear?" he asked, almost too afraid to learn the answer.
Aithusa bowed her head, and smiled again. "Everything."

Merlin literally felt weak at the knees. How … what was she thinking of him … what was he going
to do …

He turned and ran after Hermione, not looking at Aithusa again. Why did she do that? Why?

He tore through the trees, not really watching where he was stepping. He had to find her, he had
to.

What was he going to say to her?

Branches whipped him in the face, and snagged on his robes, but he didn't stop. His mind was in
frenzy, and his heart beat so fast he thought it would burst right out of his chest.

His hands were shaking. Not once, not once in thirteen hundred years, the ghosts notwithstanding,
had anyone found out about his identity. No one had ever known who he was. The Founders had
seemed to guess, to know the truth, though they did not voice their suspicions. He'd taken comfort in
that fact over the years, even though on the surface he'd hated the lying. He'd grown accustomed to
it; it had been familiar ground. He'd gone longer not being called Merlin than he'd went actually
being called Merlin! All of that had just been shattered completely.

He stopped for a second, his entire body trembling all over. Where was Hermione?

He heard heavy breathing coming from somewhere to his left, and he went towards the sound with
dread. Hermione was sitting on the ground, having apparently twisted her ankle, breathing heavily,
clutching at her heart, pure shock all over her features.

He approached her. She heard him coming, and drew back, looking almost frightened.

"Get back!" she said, trying to scramble away, despite her sore ankle.

"Hermione, please," he pleaded, his voice thick with emotion. "Please, let me explain-"

"Explain?" she shrieked, looking half-mad. "What is there to explain? You're Merlin! You're bloody
Merlin!"

Merlin winced. "Yes, I am."

The madness faded from her eyes a little as he said this, and she frowned slightly. "You're not even
going to deny it?"

Merlin shook his head. "How can I? You heard Aithusa. How could I possibly explain that away?
Besides, I don't want to. Not anymore."

She breathed out, still looking shocked. "But …it can't be true. It just can't be!"

Merlin laughed nervously. "It is true."

She said nothing for a long moment, just looking at him. She shook her head slightly. She scrambled
to her feet, and stood there swaying slightly, still staring at Merlin as though not quite believing he
was standing there.

"But … how?" she gasped.

Merlin looked down at the ground, trying to ignore the sound of the blood rushing through his ears.
"Does it matter? I didn't die thirteen hundred years ago, and I've been waiting ever since, waiting for
the return of the Old Religion. And now I'm here, trying to help you because you're the ones who can do that, and defeat Voldemort. I have to correct the mistakes I made all that time ago. Morgana … she's my responsibility."

Hermione stared. "Your mistakes …" she repeated faintly. "Morgana …"

Merlin nodded, and took a step towards her. "Yes. It's my fault that she's alive. My fault that she's been able to help Voldemort. I have to fix that."

Hermione still stared at him, looking rather faint.

Merlin ploughed on. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I truly am. I lied to you all. And I hate myself for that."

Hermione's expression changed from shock to anger. "Yes! You did! You lied to us! You never once thought to mention that you were the most powerful sorcerer ever to live? You could have helped us! You let us all believe you were something other than you were! You lied to us!"

And she reached out with her right hand and slapped him hard across the face. Merlin barely had time to register what had happened before she started leaping about on the spot, a look of horror on her face.

"Oh my God! I just slapped Merlin! Oh my God, oh my God …"

But Merlin started laughing, despite the sharp sting on his face. "I probably deserved it."

She stopped her fretting, and looked at him again, not in shock, or in anger, but in a serious way.

"Why did you do it?" she asked. "Why didn't you tell us from the start?"

Merlin laughed again, hollowly. "Would you have believed me? Besides, you heard what Aithusa was saying back there. That pretty much sums it up."

She frowned, looking confused. "You were afraid?"

Merlin nodded. "I was a coward. I was terrified that you'd be angry at me for lying to you, or at the very least you'd never treat me the same way again."

She blinked rapidly. "Why would you be afraid of that?"

He sighed. "Because it happened once before. Arthur … when he found out, he was angry beyond belief. That was probably one of the hardest times in my life. To have your best friend look at you in that way … pure hatred, the looks of betrayal. I thought he'd never forgive me, and that was the worst feeling in the world. I didn't want to go through that again."

She frowned, and took a step closer. "Aithusa is right. You didn't have to be afraid! He forgave you! He understood … and so do I."

Merlin looked up at her, hope in his eyes. "You do?"

She smiled, though her face was still pale. "Of course I do! Don't be such an idiot!"

Merlin laughed. "That's exactly what Arthur used to say about me."

She breathed in sharply. "He did? Well …" she broke off looking nervous. "Sorry, I'm just … are you really him? Are you really … Merlin?"
Merlin nodded. "Yes I am. I was born in the seventh century in a small country village to a woman named Hunith and a Dragonlord named Balinor. I went to Camelot as a young man and became a servant of the royal household and befriended the young Prince Arthur. We were friends, and we saved each other's lives almost every day. Together we brought magic back to Albion and peace to the Five Kingdoms. I am Merlin."

She nodded, still looking faint. "Oh my …"

She looked him all over, looking deeper. "You wanted to tell us didn't you?" she asked. "You were saying that to Aithusa."

Merlin nodded. "Yes. I've been keeping secrets my entire life; I'd almost forgotten what it was like to not have any. True, in Camelot, it was only because I was afraid of being burned at the stake, but that's not an excuse any more. I should have told you."

"It's alright," she said. "I understand why you didn't. I can't believe you've been keeping all this locked away for so long …"

Merlin laughed bitterly and turned away. "I've retreated so far into myself over the centuries I'd almost forgotten who I am. When Aithusa and Kilgharrah left I didn't even bother to call them back. I didn't want to be reminded of it all. It was too painful."

He broke off, feeling the emotion rising within him, and tears begin to prick at his eyes. He wiped them away hurriedly.

Hermione came over to him, only a little hesitantly, and placed a hand on his shoulder. Merlin jumped at the touch.

"Of course it would be," she said soothingly, her own eyes suspiciously wet. "I can't even imagine … But you're here now, and you don't need to keep it a secret anymore."

Merlin smiled at her, a warm feeling spreading through his chest, at her reassuring smile. She was still shocked, but she wasn't afraid of him, she didn't think any less of him, she was accepting him.

"You know who you remind me of," he murmured to her. "Gwen."

She frowned. "Who's Gwen?"

He laughed. "Perhaps you might know her as Guinevere?"

Her eyebrows shot right up. "Queen Guinevere? I remind you of her?" she asked, the wonder in her voice apparent.

He laughed again. "Yes, she was kind, and caring just like you are. When she found out about me, she didn't care. She accepted me for who I was."

Hermione looked awestruck, and watery-eyed. "Wait, you called her Gwen?"

Merlin smiled. "Yes. Only Arthur ever really called her Guinevere. The rest of us called her Gwen. We were friends right from the start. We were servants in Camelot together."

Hermione's eyebrows rose even higher. "A servant? But wasn't she a Queen?"

"Yes," he laughed. "Arthur fell in love with her. He didn't care that she was a servant. That's the sort of man that he was. He befriended me, he married Gwen, and he knighted her brother and other
commoners who served him loyally. He didn't care who you were or where you came from. He treated everyone equally."

He broke off, smiling as he remembered. Hermione smiled as well.

"He sounds like a great man," she said to him.

"He was," Merlin agreed. "And there isn't a day that goes by that I don't miss him. Or the others, Gwen, Gaius, Gwaine, Lancelot … any of them. They were the greatest people I have ever known."

She looked at him sadly. "You always will. And you shouldn't try to forget them. You don't have to be alone now. You have us … Merlin."

Merlin grinned, thrilled at hearing her use his real name. "Isn't it going to be weird for you to say that?" he smirked.

She laughed. "Yes. It will. You have no idea. But that's who you are, isn't it?"

Merlin nodded. "Yes, it is. I'd only forgotten." He looked at her again. "I was so afraid that when you found out you'd look at me differently. That you'd hear 'Merlin' and be afraid, or suddenly fawn all over me like I'm some sort of god to be worshipped. I didn't want you all to have these great preconceptions about who I was. That it'd be the name that would tell you everything you needed to know. I was scared you'd expect so much of me."

Hermione smiled sweetly, and took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "I admit. When I first heard, I was a little scared. I just couldn't believe that you … I'm sorry for that. But the more I think about it, the more it makes sense. Everything that's happened … it's all been you hasn't it? You were the one who taught the Founders about the Old Magic, and now you're going to teach Harry. You're determined to fight Morgana because you feel guilty about letting her live all that time ago. But it's always been you. You lied about some things, but you've never lied about your character. All of that was real. And that's why I trust you now. You're still the same man that we knew before … you're just a little … well, deeper than I thought before. I admit, it'll take a bit of getting used to, but I'll never think differently of you. You're a good man, and a good friend. The fact that you're a thirteen hundred year old world famous sorcerer with magic more powerful than anyone who's ever lived is just a little bonus."

Merlin laughed, relief pouring over him like a wave. "You have no idea how much this means to me, Hermione."

She looked hesitant for a moment, before leaping forwards and wrapping her arms around him, enveloping him in a tight hug.

"You don't need to be afraid Mart- Merlin. We'll all get through this together."

Merlin stiffened in surprise, before lifting his own arms and hugging her back, noting that this was the first time in almost one thousand years that he'd purposefully hugged someone, the first time since the Founders that he hadn't been afraid to get too close.

Hermione moved back slightly, blushing as she did. "Oh my God, I just hugged Merlin! This is some night …"

Merlin laughed, and raised an eyebrow. "I thought you weren't going to treat me any differently?"

She jumped in surprise and looked embarrassed. "Oh, I'm sorry! I just, well … it's a lot to get used to …" breaking off when she saw Merlin barely supressing a laugh. "Oh don't! Don't laugh!" she
whacked him on the arm, and then covered her mouth with her hands looking horrified.

"Oh no! Now I've just hit Merlin! What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing!" Merlin reassured her. "There is nothing wrong with you Hermione. You're the smartest, most intelligent and kind person I've ever known, and I knew Rowena Ravenclaw! You're taking this incredibly well, and you'll never know just how much that means to me."

She blushed furiously, obviously overwhelmed at the compliment. "Really? You think I'm more intelligent than Rowena Ravenclaw?"

"Most definitely," Merlin reassured her. "She could speak a dozen languages and read hundreds of books. But if she had one fault, it was her propensity to focus only on learning rather than her friends. She was too afraid to open up to others, too dismissive of the more important things in life, like love, kindness and generosity. You have all of that, and more."

Hermione flushed an even deeper red, and didn't say anything.

They stayed in silence for several minutes, neither one saying anything.

Then, Merlin sighed. "I suppose that you heard everything Aithusa was saying about Morgana?"

Hermione nodded. "She wants the Cup of Life."

Merlin nodded, and looked at the ground. "I should have seen it coming. She's used it before. I should have taken better care of it."

"It isn't your-"

"Yes, it was," said Merlin bitterly. "I knew what evil that Cup could be used for, but I didn't even bother to check what became of it, just like I didn't check on Aithusa and Kilgharrah. I was trying to avoid all reminders of my past. I've been a fool all these years. But no more, I'm going to finish what I started thirteen hundred years ago."

Hermione bit her lip. "By killing her? Is she really so bad?"

Merlin frowned, and looked into the darkness. "She wasn't always," he said quietly. "She used to be good, kind and caring. Gwen was her maidservant, and she'd do anything to protect Gwen, or anyone she cared about, Uther, Arthur, even me."

"What changed?"

Merlin sighed. "She discovered she had magic. And in Camelot, as the King's own ward, that was akin to a death sentence. She was afraid, and resented Uther for his persecution of magic. I abandoned her. I should have helped her, let her see magic was nothing to be afraid of. But I didn't, I did nothing; I was afraid of telling anyone of my abilities. And she turned to evil, twisted by hate and fear. Morgause didn't help, poisoning her mind against Camelot."

He closed his eyes. "I poisoned her," he almost whispered. "She was trying to bring down Camelot, and I poisoned her to stop her. And from that point on she hated me. She did everything she could to kill us all. She betrayed us. She turned against her family, her friends and her city. And it was at least partially my fault. No, it was," he added, seeing Hermione about to object. "I am responsible, and I accept that."

She frowned, looking distressed. "But what happened towards the end?" she asked. "Why didn't you
He remained silent for a long time. "She was the reason that Arthur died. I was furious. She'd committed the ultimate betrayal and killed her own brother. I wanted her to suffer. I blamed myself. She'd lured me away from the battle under false pretences, and I was so angry … I just wanted to cause her as much suffering as I could. So I locked her away in an eternal prison, never to be freed, to be forever watching the world, to remember everything she'd lost. But now she's free again, and she'll hate me even more. She won't let anything stand in her way to kill me."

Hermione squeezed his hand again. "And we'll fight her together."

Merlin smiled at her, touched deep within his soul. Why had he been afraid of this?

Then Hermione gasped. "Oh my goodness! All those times Ron says things like 'Merlin's pants' and 'Merlin's saggy left …' … I mean, that must really annoy you!"

He laughed a genuine laugh. "You have no idea!"

"Where in the name of Merlin's baggy Y-fronts are they?" Ron asked Harry, later that night as they sat by the common room fire. "I'm getting worried. Madame Pomfrey said Martin left hours ago, and I don't like the thought of Hermione being out in the forest herself."

"She'll be alright," said Harry. "Aithusa's out there. She's probably started talking away again and asking her a dozen questions as usual. Martin's probably out there as well."

But he was just trying to convince himself more than anything. He was moments away from suggesting they go out and look for them himself.

But it turned out he didn't need to, for at that moment the portrait hole opened and Hermione and Martin entered, their heads bent together, whispering with serious expressions on their faces.

"Oi!" yelled Ron, rising from his chair. "Where in Merlin's name have you two been?"

Martin and Hermione stopped dead and stared at him. Hermione's eyes widened slightly, and turned her head a fraction of an inch to Martin, looking apprehensive. Martin however looked as calm and collected as he always did.

"We were visiting Aithusa," he said, his face expressionless. Hermione bit her lip, turned her head fully to look at him and nodded slightly. Harry watched her closely; what was wrong with her? She looked almost worried about something.

"You know about this Cup of Life thingy then?" Harry asked, as they came and sat beside himself and Ron.

Martin nodded gravely. "Yes. I've already sent word to Professor McGonagall about it. She'll tell the entire Order and we can be better on the lookout for it."

"Any idea where it is?" Ron asked curiously. "I mean, no ancient Druid legends? Wasn't it Merlin that hid it in the first place?"

Hermione jumped, and her face looked apprehensive again. Martin seemed to ignore this.

"Yes, I think so. But it was such a long time ago. There's no telling where it is now. But at least we
know now what we're looking for."

Harry slumped back in his chair, unable to conceal his disappointment. He'd hoped there'd be \textit{something} at least.

"It must be in Gringotts," said Ron, thinking hard. "One of the old wizarding families must have it in their vault without realising what it is."

"Not necessarily," said Hermione, speaking for the first time. "It might be in someone's private collection, or in a museum, or-"

"I get it Hermione," said Harry, annoyed. He felt the frustration building up within himself. It was like searching for the Horcruxes all over again. "Why the \textit{hell} did Merlin give it to the Druids? If it was so dangerous why didn't he destroy it? Like Flamel and the Philosopher's Stone?"

Hermione looked at Martin, almost nervously. He replied to Harry, his face still stoic:

"It wasn't created for the purpose of granting immortality, not like Horcruxes or the Stone. Its purpose was to heal. It was a force for good that got corrupted. It saved many lives, King Arthur's among them."

"How do you know that?" Ron asked, frowning. "I thought that was before your time."

Martin blinked. "I have my sources."

"Then why didn't you tell us before?" Harry asked. "Why didn't you mention to us that the Cup existed?"

"Because it simply didn't occur to me," Martin sighed, resting his head in his hands, looking tired. "I'm getting forgetful in my old age."

Harry felt the familiar little chill that he got whenever Martin mentioned his age. He softened his tone slightly:

"If Merlin is your ancestor, are you sure it wasn't passed down in your family? Maybe your father had it?"

Martin shook his head. "No. My vault at Gringotts doesn't have anything like that."

"Maybe he gave it to Dumbledore?" asked Ron, getting excited. "They knew each other didn't they? Maybe he gave it to Dumbledore to keep it safe like Flamel did!"

"He didn't," Martin said flatly.

"But maybe he didn't tell you-"

"He didn't," said Martin more firmly. "I know that for a fact."

"How can you?" Harry asked. "How can you be \textit{absolutely} certain?"

"Just leave it, Harry," said Hermione. "If Martin says he didn't, then I believe him."

Harry and Ron stared at her. Harry frowned. Why was she acting like this? He would have thought she'd be the one questioning Martin, not defending him.

Martin smiled at her gratefully. Then he stood and stretched, wincing slightly at the pain in his chest.
"I'm getting tired," he said, obviously faking a yawn. "We should all get to bed."

He glanced at Hermione, as though exchanging something private with her, and turned to the staircase. Harry couldn't help calling after him:

"Aithusa told us about Merlin, and the secrets he had in Camelot. It must have been hard on him. I want you to know, that we'll understand whenever you tell us what it is that you're hiding. You don't have to be like him and keep a secret like that from your friends all those years. You can trust us."

Martin turned, and regarded Harry with the most searching look Harry had ever experienced, even more so than he'd ever received from Professor Dumbledore.

Martin nodded slowly. "Thank you, Harry," he said faintly, looking troubled. He glanced at Hermione for a moment, then looked back to Harry. "That means a lot. I'll keep that in mind."

He hesitated for a moment, then turned and headed back up the staircase to the dormitory. Harry waited until he heard the door close, and then turned to Ron and Hermione. Ron was casually picking threads out of the cushion in front of him, but Hermione was sitting still, her eyes fixed on the stairs Martin had just disappeared up.

Her face looked just as troubled as Martin's had.
Classes the next day passed in a blur for Merlin. No matter how often he tried to distract himself, all he could think about was Morgana and the Cup of Life. His work was suffering; he managed to melt his entire cauldron in Potions, and caused Slughorn to leap on to his desk in terror as his potion went spilling across the floor. He just couldn’t concentrate.

Harry kept glancing at him surreptitiously, and Merlin felt uneasy every time he caught Harry's eyes on him. He knew that Merlin knew more about the Cup than he was letting on.

He had to tell him, he kept thinking to himself. He'd made up his mind last night after leaving the common room, after his conversation with Aithusa in the Forbidden Forest. He couldn't keep him in the dark any longer.

But how? He couldn't just take him aside casually and say 'By the way, my real name is Merlin'. He'd have to find the right time, the right place. Should he do it individually, or tell the entire Order at the same time? Telling everyone at the same time would get it over and done with quickly, then again, he had to explain his reasons for the deceit to Harry privately- he deserved that at least.

He just couldn't put it off any longer.

His hands shook even at the very thought of it, but it was the right time. He'd realised that lying in bed the previous night. Aithusa had ensured that Hermione had heard their conversation, and Aithusa was of the Old Religion. That *must* be the sign he had been waiting for.

The more he thought about it, the more he came to realise he'd only been making excuses. It hadn't been the Old Religion holding him back recently, it was his own fear.

He had expected that the realisation of the perfect moment to tell Harry and the others would come to him as suddenly and as clearly as the moment knew he had to leave the Founders, or like during the Battle of Hogwarts when he'd realised it was time to come forward and stop being only a silent observer. But that hadn't happened. He'd underestimated the strength of his own aversion to revealing his secrets.

He had to tell them all, but he couldn't stop the rapid beating of his heart as he tried to figure out the best way to do it. How many times had he gone through these same emotions back in Camelot? How many times had he fretted and fussed over the best way to break it to Arthur? Despite being centuries older than he had been then, he found himself just as lost.

He found himself at the dinner table that night picking over his food, just thinking. How …

"Are you alright?" Neville asked, turning away from his conversation with Seamus at the table to look at Merlin. "Are you feeling okay?"

Merlin forced a smile. "Yeah, I am thanks. Just thinking."

Neville nodded gravely. He glanced around and leaned in closer. "Me too. McGonagall found us all at lunch and told us about the ... thing we're looking for. Sounds bad."

Merlin nodded, trying not to laugh at the severe understatement. "Yeah."

Neville grimaced, and turned back to his conversation with the other Gryffindor boys, leaving Merlin and Hermione by themselves. With the DA sessions, Auror training and Order duties, Harry and
Ron were off trying to squeeze in whatever Quidditch practise they could, even if it was at the expense of dinner, with even Ron miraculously agreeing. They’d needed the distraction.

Hermione sat beside Merlin, not having touched much of her food herself. She looked just as lost in thought as he did. Merlin couldn’t help but feel a little awkward with her. He didn’t really know how to try and talk to her now she knew everything.

Hermione spared him. She leaned in closer to him and whispered:

"So have you been thinking more about where it might be?"

Merlin couldn’t help but laugh bitterly. "It's all I've been doing all day. That and some other things."

"What?"

Merlin sighed, and looked at her seriously. "I've decided to come clean about everything, and I mean *everything.*"

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "You have? But that's great!"

Merlin winced. "Yeah, I suppose it is. It's just …"

"You're still afraid," Hermione said, knowledgably.

Merlin nodded. "I can't help it. Just instinct I suppose. I've had to lie all these years just to survive. I've never actually told anyone before."

Hermione nodded sympathetically. "It'll be okay. I promise. I'll be there to help you face it. It's for the best you know. Once you've done it, you won't regret it. It'll be a shock at first, but we'll all get through it together."

Merlin smiled, and felt a small part of his anxiety drain away. Why was he being so stupid? He'd faced far worse and far scarier things in his life than this before! Hermione was right.

"Why didn't you tell them last night?" Hermione asked him. "Wouldn't it have been the perfect time to do it?"

Merlin sighed again. "You're probably right. But I was just a bit overwhelmed with you finding out I suppose."

She nodded. "So when will you tell them?"

Merlin squeezed his eyes for a moment tightly, bracing himself. Once he committed, he couldn't back down.

"Saturday," he said finally. "At the Order meeting. I'll tell everyone together, get it over with. It'll be easier than having to face them all individually. Then I can answer everyone's questions in one go."

A heavy finality settled over them both, and Merlin immediately began to dread Saturday evening.

Hermione smiled, and squeezed his hand reassuringly. Merlin tried to smile back.

"Saturday?" Neville asked, turning to face them again. "What are you doing on Saturday?"

"Order meeting," Merlin answered promptly, wishing he’d remembered that conversations at Hogwarts were rarely private. "We were just talking about what we were going to discuss at the
Neville nodded. "You know there's a Hogsmeade visit that day?"

"Really?" Hermione frowned. "It's a bit early isn't it?"

Neville shrugged. "That's what I said to Ernie when he told me. Apparently it's because of all the awful stuff that's been happening the last couple of years. A lot of student's families will be coming up to the village to see their kids; they're opening it for first and second years as well. In times like these families want to spend as much time with each other as possible."

That makes sense, thought Merlin. Parents wouldn't want to be separated from their children for too long.

"I suppose we'll be talking about this new thing at the meeting?" Neville said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Like how we're going to find it?"

Merlin nodded, not feeling like elaborating.

"It must be hidden well," Neville continued. "Probably in Gringotts or something, deep down. But how are we supposed to search there? Who knows what vault it could be in? It'd take years to search! And that's even if the goblins will let us in in the first place which is unlikely at best! I mean, we can't just wander in whenever we like!"

Merlin nodded again, not feeling particularly reassured. Neville was just piling on the dead weight he was already carrying around.

Then a thought suddenly hit him.

"Maybe there is a way to search Gringotts!" he gasped, and then leapt up from the table and strode out of the hall briskly, almost running, leaving Neville dumbfounded at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione caught up with him in the Entrance Hall, panting. "Martin! What is it? What's your idea?"

Merlin just shook his head, gesturing to the many students milling around the hall, and motioned for her to follow him.

She did so without saying another word, and followed him up the marble staircase and waited until they were in a deserted corridor before speaking again.

"So, what is it?"

Merlin looked around, still moving forwards, searching.

"I need to find a ghost."

Hermione blinked in confusion. "A ghost? But why- oh no! You can't be serious?!"

"Why?"

"It's a crazy idea!"

Merlin smiled wryly. "I've had a lot of crazy ideas before. They were my specialty in Camelot. And they always worked out … more or less."

"But-"
"Sir Nicholas!"

The ghost in question turned around, drifting a few feet above the ground, and smiled.

"Ah! What can I do for you, Mr Emrys?"

"I need to talk to you," Merlin said urgently. "All of you."

Sir Nicholas frowned for a moment, glanced at Hermione uncertainly and spoke:

"Are you sure you want-"

"Yes," said Merlin. He pulled out his wand and sent three silvery dragon Patronuses whooshing off down the corridor. Despite the fact he hated using magic with his wand, he'd never come across a more useful spell as this for communicating quickly and efficiently. The Patronus was one of the few modern spells he liked.

He opened the door to the nearest classroom, and after inspecting it for signs of Peeves, he gestured for Sir Nicholas and Hermione to follow him in. They waited a few moments in silence, before three ghostly forms drifted in, looking confused.

They all stopped at the sight of Hermione, but Merlin didn't hesitate.

"I need your help," he said, launching right into it.

"Of course we shall help you," the Fat Friar smiled pleasantly. "But what could we possibly do for you?"

"Are you sure you want to discuss this here?" Helena asked, her eyes fixed on Hermione, who gulped at the intimidating sight of four ghosts staring straight at her.

"Hermione knows," Merlin explained. "She found out the truth last night."

They all murmured in surprise.

"Your secrets are finally out then?" the Bloody Baron smirked, looking gleeful.

"Not exactly," Merlin said, scowling as he always did in the presence of the Bloody Baron. "She's the only one that knows."

The Baron also scowled. "Why must you always insist on doing things on half-measures?"

Merlin ignored him.

Hermione looked around in confusion. "You all know who he is?"

The Baron rolled his eyes. "Of course we do, child. One can hardly fail to notice the same man appearing at the castle every other century for a thousand years."

Hermione's confused frown only deepened. "But … you mean Martin's come here more than twice?"

The Baron snorted. "I'd say the final count was more around the dozen mark."

Hermione's eyes widened. She looked at Merlin in a newfound shock.
"You've been coming to Hogwarts all these years?"

"Yes, I rather thought you'd be bored of it by now, Mortimer," Sir Nicholas smiled pleasantly.

"Mortimer?"

"It was one of my names," Merlin explained hurriedly. "I'm always changing them. Mortimer was the one I used when I was at Hogwarts with Sir Nicholas."

"You were at Hogwarts with-"

"It doesn't matter," said Merlin, but Hermione glowered at him.

"Don't you dare tell me it doesn't matter! Tell me!"

Merlin sighed, and resigned himself to her. "Yes, I was at Hogwarts with Sir Nicholas. He was a few years above me. That was when I was Sorted into Gryffindor."

Hermione's eyes widened again. "But I thought you were in Ravenclaw the last time you were at Hogwarts?"

"Certainly not!" objected Sir Nicholas. "Last time he was here, Matthew, he was at the time, he was in Gryffindor! The 1860s wasn't it?"

"I suppose," said Merlin, trying to shrug it off, but Hermione just looked even more fascinated.

"How many Houses have you been Sorted into?"

"All of them," explained Merlin. "The Sorting Hat refuses to Sort me, so I pick what House I go into. I like to vary it a little."

"You pick?" the Fat Friar asked gleefully. "You've been in Hufflepuff more times than any other House! You see, ours truly is the greatest House with such a great man returning again and again!"

"You forget, my dear Friar," Sir Nicholas began mildly. "Mortimer here has been in Gryffindor just as many times as Hufflepuff."

"That hardly counts. This time he's only in Gryffindor because Potter and his friends are!"

"Does this really matter?" Merlin asked in frustration.

"Not at all, Michael," said Helena sarcastically. "Only the fact that the greatest sorcerer who has ever lived chooses which House he enters and he's only chosen my noble House twice! After everything you went through with my mother, and the close bonds you have with my family! Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Of course it does, but-"

"Yes, Melville, you've only chosen Slytherin twice also! Why is that?"

"Look!" Merlin raised his voice, trying to ignore Hermione's confused, but amused look. "It doesn't matter which Houses I was in! There are more important things to discuss right now! And could you all stop calling me by different names? Just pick one and stick with it!"

They all stared at him, and then exchanged glances with each other.
"Very well … Merlin." The Fat Friar smiled at him. Merlin felt a chill run through him as he said this. It was going to feel very strange to go by that name again after so long.

"Thank you," he said, trying to recover. "Now, I need your help. You all know about Morgana?"

Their faces darkened. "Yes, we know," Helena said, her eyebrows contracted in a fierce expression.

"She's after the Cup of Life," Merlin said, just getting to the point. "Have any of you heard of it?"

"I have," the Baron said lazily. "Lord Salazar mentioned it once or twice. But hasn't it been lost for centuries?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "But we need to find it."

The Baron snorted. "Not asking for much are you?"

"I don't need your sarcastic comments," retorted Merlin. "What I need is for your help to find it before Morgana does."

"And how are we supposed to help you find this Cup," the Friar asked. "I've certainly never heard of it, much less know of its whereabouts."

"It doesn't matter," said Merlin. "I just need you to help eliminate areas. We think it might be in Gringotts, but we can't get in there to search; we're not exactly on best terms with the goblins, so …"

"Ah," the Baron exclaimed, looking smug. "You want us to be your spies! You expect us to sneak into the Gringotts vaults and search them for any signs of the Cup. Very Slytherin of you."

"Thanks," Merlin rolled his eyes. "We just need you to help us. We couldn't possibly search all of the vaults, even if we got permission. All you have to do is just drift in through the walls, invisible, and check whether it's there or not. You'd probably be able to sense it- didn't Sir Nicholas say that ghosts are more sensitive to the powers of life and death than living people? If you find it then Kingsley would probably be able to pull some strings to get it out. That way would save us a lot of time and effort."

"You want us to resort to sneaking around Gringotts Bank like common criminals?" the Friar asked dubiously. "I'm not sure how ethical."

"We don't have time to debate ethics!" Merlin said impatiently. "You know as well as I do how bad our situation is! We need to get to the Cup before Morgana does. The Baron can fill you in on what it is, believe me, you'll see what a bad thing it would be if she got hold of it. It doesn't even have to be you lot! Surely you've got contacts with other ghosts in London and all over the country that you can ask to help? And besides, it's harmless! It's not like you can actually steal anything!"

They all exchanged uncertain looks, before Sir Nicholas drifted forwards importantly and swept his plumed hat from his head and bowed deeply.

"It would be a great honour to be of service to you, Merlin, after all you did for the wizarding world. I shall help you in any way I can. We all will."

The others nodded, though the Fat Friar still looked slightly put-out. He smiled however, and spoke in a kindly voice:

"Leave it with us, Merlin."
Merlin smiled gratefully. "Thank you all."

"Should we tell Professor McGonagall?" Hermione spoke up. "Does the Order deserve to know?"

Merlin thought for a moment. "Yes," he finally decided. "We don't want them to go crazy trying to negotiate with the goblins when we're already having the vaults searched. It might be more awkward for Kingsley, what with him being Minister and all, but what choice do we have?"

Hermione nodded, looking relieved that Merlin wasn't trying to keep more secrets.

"I shall tell her," said Sir Nicholas. "I intend to be a part of this search personally, and I shall need to explain my absence to her in person."

"Alright," said Merlin. "But … er, don't tell her why you're really doing this. Just say that Martin Emrys asked for a favour."

Helena frowned. "She doesn't know?"

Merlin shook his head. "Not yet. But … I'm planning on letting them all know the truth soon."

"About time," smiled the Friar. "You've carried this burden for far too long."

Merlin nodded, avoiding their looks. Something was clawing away inside of him. Unfamiliarity swept over him. Never before had he had conversations such as this with anyone since Arthur's death. He'd been coming to the school and enjoying their company for so long, it was strange to think that they all now knew the truth, particularly with Helena, who he had taught to read as a small child and played games with out in the grounds. It was though an era had somehow ended. And it stuck him once again that this was likely to be his very last time at Hogwarts.

"Thank you," he said simply.

They all made a small bow in his direction, even the Baron, and drifted through the walls.

Hermione turned to him and smiled, then frowned at the expression on Merlin's face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing really," said Merlin. "It's just … strange, to have people do as I ask, to respect me. I haven't had that in such a long time. And to be actually called by my name, my real name, the one my mother gave me thirteen hundred years ago … it's been centuries, but it still seems as though it's happening all too soon."

Hermione nodded. "I suppose it must be. But, things are getting better … Merlin."

Merlin smiled down at her, and pulled her into a brief hug, relishing the fact that he didn't have to hide from her any longer.

She grinned, and moved to leave the room, checking that no one was coming.

She shot a smirk back at him. "You know, most people can't wait to leave school, and you keep coming back again and again. Don't you ever get tired of it?"

Merlin laughed. "You have no idea. Having to pretend to be a child, dealing with all the teenage angst, sitting exams, writing essays … I'm too old for all that rubbish. But I admit, it was nice to have something to focus on, to have a sense of normality in my life. I would have gone mad otherwise. Despite the pain I feel as everyone else ages and I stay the same, I suppose it comforts me to know
that the world is always moving on. Even if I can't move along with it."

They emerged out into the empty corridor. Hermione slipped her hand into his and gave it a brief squeeze.

"It must have been lonely. But you have us now. Even if you have to put up with Ron and his … well, you know."

Merlin laughed again. "That's true. And you've no idea how grateful I am."

"So, am I doing it right?" Harry asked after ten minutes of silence.

Martin scowled. "Not if you keep talking."

Harry sighed. "How much of this meditation stuff do I have to do? When can I learn some spells?"

Martin's scowl deepened. "That's precisely why you're not learning spells. You can have no concept of just how powerful and dangerous this magic is, Harry. You have to take it slowly."

Harry sighed again. "But it's taking forever! Voldemort and Morgana are out there right now!"

"I'm perfectly well aware of that," said Martin, flipping through one of the Founders books again. "But if you rush something this delicate you'll make mistakes, and mistakes with this sort of magic are far more serious than melting a cauldron or setting fire to your eyebrows. You could seriously hurt yourself or others. You weren't born with this magic, Harry; it'll take your body a while to adjust to being able to draw on it successfully. Take your time. It'll be worth it in the end. Once you've completely mastered the ability to call on the magic within you and sense its power, keeping it under control, you can learn some spells. Not before."

Harry scowled at him. "When will that be?"

Martin raised one eyebrow slowly. "After a lot more practise."

Harry huffed, and closed his eyes and tried to meditate again, but he couldn't stop himself thinking it was a waste of time. It was Thursday evening, just before the second DA meeting of the week and the four of them were sitting in the common room by the fire, Harry getting increasingly frustrated.

Sighing, he opened his eyes. "Martin, I can't keep doing this. I need to learn something!"

"You are learning something," Martin reprimanded him. "On your first day of Hogwarts did you start casting spells before you'd learnt how to hold your wand properly? No. You have to learn to walk before you can run, Harry. It'll make it a whole lot easier when it comes to the spells."

"I agree with Martin, mate," Ron said from the armchair closest to Harry. "This magic is freaky stuff. You want to be careful."

"Freaky?" Martin frowned. "Pointing polished sticks at each other in battle is freaky!"

"Harry, Martin is right," Hermione backed him up. "You can't just leap in there."

Harry grudgingly admitted she was probably right. It didn't frustrate him any less however.

"What does it feel like, Harry?" Martin asked him.
"Like there's a fire burning deep within me," Harry said, recalling. "It's in some sort of abyss inside of me, I can reach in and access it, and it sort of runs through me, until I can feel it throughout my entire body."

Martin nodded. "Good. You have to be able to draw on all that power, Harry."

"But, there's so much of it!" Harry protested. "If I was draw on it all it'd be too much for me to handle, I can barely control the small parts!"

"And that's exactly why you have to practise, Harry," admonished Martin. "You have to be able to confidently draw upon that magic and keep it controlled within you before you can start applying it to spells. If it's any consolation, Harry, you're doing really well. There aren't many people who could control even the small amounts that you're doing now. You just have to keep building on your self-control."

"I'm doing well?" Harry asked. "But I'm barely even doing anything! How do you know?"

"I can sense it," said Martin, still poring over the book in his lap. "It's like a fiery tempest underneath your skin threatening to burst out, but you're able to keep it reined back and keep it flowing smoothly throughout your body. Once you can do that easily without even thinking too much about it you'll be ready to start directing that magic through your wand."

Harry looked down at the phoenix wand in front of him. "Will that be more difficult?"

Martin shrugged. "It depends. You may find it easier to channel it through a core of the Old Religion, but then again, you may find it more difficult to force it down through such a small outlet. It says so here."

He cleared his throat and began reading from Hufflepuff's book.

'At first, using my wand with the magic was exceedingly difficult. The magic within me was so powerful I was fearful that I would not be able to control it and it would overwhelm me.'

He pushed that book aside and picked up Gryffindor's.

'Directly channelling the magic of the Old Religion through my meagre wand was something that severely tried my temper and patience. The magic I was wielding was so powerful that I ended up shattering several wands with the sheer might of it. The one time I managed to channel it successfully through the wand, I was so startled I failed to control the spell I was using and ended up blasting a hole in the wall of the dungeons.'

He picked up Ravenclaw's book.

'Unlike my dear friend, Helga, I found little difficulty in channelling the magic through my wand. It seemed to mould seamlessly with the magical core in my wand, like two friends greeting each other. The magic and the wand complemented each other well, and I did not find it difficult to control the magic.'

He put that one aside, and picked up Slytherin's.

'Unlike that buffoon, Godric, I never had to resort to destroying a half dozen wands to achieve the desired effect. Carefully measured control, with extensive training of taming the magic within me before even lifting my wand paid off, and I found it relatively easy to transfer the magic from within me to the wand.'
Martin finished reading, and looked up at Harry. "You see? You need to be in absolute control before you attempt the spells. Believe me, it'll help."

Harry slumped back, acknowledging the wisdom of what Martin was saying.

"What was it like for you?" Harry asked curiously. "Did you find it difficult?"

For some reason, this seemed to make Martin laugh.

"Yes," he said, an amused glint in his eye. "I learned the magic of the Old Religion long before I ever started using wands, and when I first attempted it I destroyed the wand and half of poor Mr Ollivander's ancestor's shop."

Ron roared with laughter, but Harry frowned. "I thought you got your wand from your father?"

"I did," answered Martin, quickly. "But only after he died. I had to use a different one when I was at Hogwarts."

"So how did you overcome it?" Harry asked, and Martin looked deep in thought.

"I didn't really. The magic I use with a wand is very restricting. If I was to use it to my full power the wand would be destroyed, despite the fact it has a core from the Old Religion. But you won't have to worry about that."

"But Gryffindor-"

"Gryffindor only destroyed those wands because he attempted to direct the magic through them before he'd successfully managed to control the flow," answered Martin swiftly. "If you do as I say and slowly build your way up, you'll be able to direct your magic through it to its fullest extent without worrying. Besides, no offence, but the magic of the Old Religion that you possess is nothing compared to mine."

Ron stared at him, his mouth slightly agape. "Blimey, just how powerful are you?"

But Martin just smiled at him, a smile Harry noticed looked very forced.

"Oh!" squealed Hermione, suddenly jumping up looking at her watch. "We'll be late for the DA meeting!"

Harry jumped up as well, cursing himself for getting distracted. He practically ran with the others to the Room of Requirement, arriving in time to find everyone already settled, and looking up expectantly.

Harry grinned, feeling at last that he had a purpose. He was actually doing something. This meeting, like the one earlier in the week, was focusing on a Boggart that he'd found lurking in the changing rooms at the Quidditch pitch.

"A Boggart?" Zacharias Smith asked sceptically. "How will learning to fight a Boggart help us defeat You-Know-Who?"

"It isn't about the Boggart," said Harry, pushing back the stabs of annoyance that had sprung up at Smith's words. "It's about being able to face your fear and conquer it. That's important in a battle. You have to forget about your fear and do what needs to be done."

He was glad he'd come up with the idea of the Boggart training. No matter how skilled with a wand
they were, it seemed fear was something many students had an issue with. There were quite a few
times when someone would approach the chest Harry had sequestered the Boggart in and simply run
back screaming when it came out. But Harry couldn't blame them.

This lesson was far different to the one Lupin had given his class in third year. Gone were the silly
childhood fears like mummies, severed hands and formidable professors. Now the forms the Boggart
took most often was one of a deceased family member, someone being tortured, the Dark Mark and
You-Know-Who himself.

It was a mark of the times, Harry thought to himself grimly. Eleven year old children's worst fear
shouldn't be the dead bodies of their younger brothers and sisters, it should be silly things like spiders
or bad marks in a test.

It was a thoroughly frightening lesson, even for Harry. Every time Voldemort appeared, he felt a
fresh thrill of horror and fear clutch at his heart. But to their credit, everyone, after running away the
first few times returned to face their fear and managed to conquer it. Even the first years, whose
wands shook uncontrollably, managed to turn the Dark Mark into the edible version offered by
Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, or someone being tortured into someone being tickled by a feather.

Then the 'leaders' stepped up. Neville's new fear was now the sight of his grandmother lying dead,
Luna's was her father being tortured by the Cruciatius Curse, Ron's was Hermione's dead body, and
Hermione's Ron's. It was almost too personal to watch. The agonised looks on their faces when they
first saw the Boggart's form were a fresh stab of pain in Harry's heart, but they didn't shrink down.
They stood their ground, and defeated their fear. Harry couldn't be prouder of them.

A trying moment came when Ginny stepped up, and the Boggart twisted and turned and became a
dead Harry. She hadn't even tried to defeat it. She just looked over at the real Harry, watched him for
a few moments, and walked away, leaving Neville to finish it off. She was trying to make a point.
Harry watched her go with a lump in his throat and a pain in his chest. He knew perfectly well what
form the Boggart would take for him, and he couldn't let it distract him. He couldn't let her into his
life, not now, not with everything that was going on. He couldn't bear it if anything happened to her.

He knew she resented him for avoiding her. Even at Quidditch practice he didn't speak to her any
more than was necessary. There was some unspoken agreement between them not to raise the
subject of 'them'. But he knew she was losing patience with him and his stupid nobility. With her
involvement in the Order, the DA and the Auror training, he knew it was only a matter of time
before he was no longer able to keep her safely away from harm. She wouldn't let him.

He looked down at the Boggart which had become a giant slab of chocolate on the floor. This
evening was becoming more than a little disturbing.

"Right, everyone!" Harry shouted, though he didn't really need to, the entire room was subdued
anyway. "That was great. I know this was hard for you all and I'm grateful that you all attempted it
anyway and fought back."

"But we didn't," said Smith. "He didn't try it." He pointed to Martin, who was watching Smith with a
guarded expression.

"Yeah, Martin, you try it!" Ron joked, though still pale from the sight of the Hermione-Boggart.

Martin blinked, and looked uncertain.

"What's the matter?" asked Harry. "Haven't you ever faced a Boggart before?"
"Actually, no," said Martin. "I've taken great care to avoid them."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Two hundred years old and he'd never come across a Boggart?

"Come on!" a bold first year called. "Neither had we and we still did it!"

Martin all but glared at the first year in question, but nodded briefly, and withdrew his wand from his pocket, raising it before him, looking nervous.

Hermione was biting her lip, looking just as nervous. "Martin you don't have to … You have no idea what form yours will take!"

"So?" argued Smith. "We didn't either. Let him face it! Let's see what scares the Druid!"

Harry scowled in his direction. Someone's deepest fear was no laughing matter.

Martin shook his head. "No, everyone else did it. So will I."

Harry nodded, and pointed his wand at the chest, which clicked open. There was a 'CRACK' and-

A man stepped out from the trunk. He was young, blonde and strongly built, like an athlete. He was wearing what looked like chain mail, with the emblem of a dragon over it. He stood there for a moment staring at Martin, who had frozen. He frowned and looked down at this chest, pulling his hands away to reveal blood unnoticeable against the scarlet of the tunic. He looked back at Martin and frowned again, looking confused.

"I'm dying," he said, his voice weak. "I've been hurt. You left me to die. You abandoned me. It's your fault, it's all your fault …"

Harry turned to look at Martin and was shocked to see genuine terror on his face. He gaped at the Boggart, his face pale, and his hands shaking. His wide eyes were fixed on the dying man, horrified, tears beginning to form there.

Who was this man that could affect Martin so badly? What could make him freeze like that? Harry stepped forward to take care of the Boggart; it looked like he needed the help.

But Martin beat him to it. He raised his wand shakily and managed to stutter out: "R-\nRidikkulus!" There was a 'CRACK' and the man disappeared, and was replaced with someone Harry recognised.

Morgana stood there in the centre of the room, dressed stunningly in an elegant black gown which spilled down to the floor and spread out around her feet like a pool of ink. She fixed her cold eyes on Martin, a smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"He's dead because of you," she said, in the voice that Harry remembered from his dream. "You abandoned him, Emrys, and he's dead. It's all your fault."

Martin stared at her with wide eyes. Harry could almost hear the hammering of his heart.

"No," he murmured, glaring at her. "No … I won't let you make me feel guilty."

He raised his wand again and uttered the incantation.

Another 'CRACK' and Morgana disappeared. Harry blinked in surprise as he recognised himself standing in her place.
Boggart-Harry glared at Martin, who took a step back.

"We trusted you!" Boggart-Harry yelled. "You've betrayed us! You've lied to us! How can we ever trust you again?"

Harry went cold to hear these words in his own voice being directed at Martin with so much malice.

Martin's face contorted in an agonised expression as he stared at the Boggart-Harry, looking both terrified and determined.

"NO!" he yelled, and his eyes burned gold, and the Boggart disappeared with a puff of smoke.

Martin breathed a sigh of relief, and sunk to his knees, panting as though he'd just run a hundred miles.

The room was silent. Harry stared at Martin, unsure of how to react.

"Well, that was-" Smith began, but was soon silenced in the form of an expertly cast Bat-Bogey Hex from Ginny's general direction.

The students laughed at Smith's predicament, and took this as a sign of dismissal and slowly began filing out through the doors. Harry barely even noticed them leave- his eyes were fixed on Martin, still on the floor, terror barely beginning to leave his face.

Neville and Ginny also went to the door, Ginny stopping for a moment to smile weakly at Harry, which he returned, grateful.

Luna didn't leave immediately. She crouched down in front of Martin, who was still breathing heavily. She reached out with her hands and placed them soothingly on Martin's shoulders, and smiled.

She leaned in and placed her lips close to his ear and whispered something that made Martin stiffen in surprise. He looked at her with wonder all over his face. She smiled again and skipped off through the door and back to her common room.

What was that about, Harry wondered. Come to think about it, what was the entire episode about?

He approached Martin cautiously. Who was that man? Why had he accused Martin of killing him? And why had Morgana made the same accusation? Why had she appeared in front of him?

And was Martin really so terrified that Harry would hate him for whatever secret it was he was carrying around?

Martin took a deep breath, and stood up, his face draining of emotion. He looked around at them all, as though only just realising they were there.

"I think I should get back to the dormitory, I'm rather tired," he said, his voice betraying nothing.

Harry nodded, and Ron didn't object or demand an explanation as he would normally have done. They were both too much in shock. Hermione looked close to tears.

Martin turned and left the room, leaving the three of them staring at each other, each wondering what on earth had just happened.
"Merlin?"

Merlin jumped, to see Hermione coming up on him from behind.

"Hermione? What are you doing?"

"Coming to see you," she said casually, and sat down on the ground beside him. They were in Aithusa's clearing. Aithusa was asleep, but Merlin had come here anyway, looking for something, anything to calm himself.

"I guessed you might be here," Hermione said to him.

Merlin smiled. "You're too smart for your own good, Hermione. But won't you get in trouble for coming down here? It's after-hours."

She gave him a smug smile. "I'm Head Girl. I have certain privileges."

Merlin laughed.

She sat beside him for several minutes, neither one saying anything, just content to sit and listen to Aithusa's steady breathing.

Eventually, she tentatively broke the silence.

"Who was the man?"

Merlin felt his chest tighten. "Arthur."

"The woman?"

"Morgana."

"I see."

They were silent again for several more minutes. Nothing more needed to be said.

Merlin sighed. "I'm sorry for reacting so badly."

Hermione frowned. "Why on earth are you apologising?"

"I was being silly."

"No, you weren't," Hermione said fiercely. "There's no shame in anything that happened. You wouldn't be human if that hadn't affected you like that."

Merlin laughed hollowly. "I'm not even sure if I am human. I'm a 'creature of the Old Religion' apparently, whatever that means."

"It doesn't mean that you don't have feelings."

"No, it means I let them rule me," Merlin said, burying his head in his hands.

"There's nothing wrong with that, Merlin!"

"Yes, there is. Kilgharrah said that to me once. He said that it was my willingness to see good in people that would be my downfall. And he was right."
Hermione frowned. "No, it means that you're a good person. That's a strength, Merlin!"

Merlin shook his head. "No. That's why it's my fault that Arthur died. Morgana tricked me. She led me to believe that she was sorry for everything she'd done. That she wanted to call a truce, to stop her vendetta against Camelot. And like a fool, I wanted to believe her. I went to meet with her, hoping against hope that she'd changed. But she hadn't. She tricked me, and she trapped me in that cave. I was forced to watch as Arthur rode out to meet Mordred on the battlefield and was killed. If I hadn't been so stupid I would have been there. I would have stopped it. It's my fault Arthur died, and my fault that Morgana is still alive. I betrayed Camelot."

He felt the tears spill down his cheeks, but made no move to hide them from Hermione. He was tired of keeping this all to himself. He was so tired.

Hermione inched herself closer to him and laid her hand on his arm reassuringly, and looked into his eyes with fierce determination.

"Merlin, listen to me. It wasn't your fault. It was hers, and only hers. You are not to blame! She killed him, not you!"

Merlin closed his eyes in sheer weariness. "But it was partly because of me that she became like that in the first place. Partly my fault that she became so afraid. She was afraid, because I was too scared to reveal my secret."

He shook his head firmly. "I won't make that mistake again, Hermione. I won't be afraid anymore. That's why I've always avoided Boggarts, I was afraid of what they'd show me. Two days from now, Harry will know everything. I won't relive the past. I'm not going to wallow away in self-pity. She's not worth it. She might have been good once, but I can't dwell on that. I have to let go of my guilt."

Hermione smiled sadly, and rubbed his arm soothingly. "You know, you remind me of Harry. He always tries to see the good in someone as well."

They sat in silence again for a long time.

Then Hermione broke it.

"What did Luna whisper to you?"

Merlin froze. "She- she said: 'Don't worry. They'll understand.'"

Hermione sat bolt upright. "Does that mean she knows the truth?"

Merlin sighed. "I don't know. It wouldn't surprise me to be honest. She always seems to know more than she's letting on."

Hermione laughed. "Yes, she does have that effect on people."

Merlin smiled. "I like her though."

"So do I," agreed Hermione with a small laugh.

At that point, Aithusa raised her head, and growled at them, releasing streams of smoke from her nostrils.

"If the two of you don't stop your blabbering and leave me to sleep in peace, I won't like either of
Harry sat in his classes on Friday trying to concentrate on his work, but failing miserably. Every so often he couldn't help but stare at Martin out of the corner of his eye. He looked tired, and worried about something, bags beginning to form beneath his ancient eyes. For the first time Harry truly appreciated just how old he was.

The sight of the Boggart the previous evening seemed burnt forever behind his eyelids. His mind raced with possibilities. What had caused Martin to react so badly?

The man had obviously been a friend of his, but … he'd looked old. Not physically, but though he was straight out of legend. Harry was no expert in history, but he was pretty sure people in the eighteenth century hadn't worn chain mail. Who was that man? Why had he said his death was Martin's fault?

And Morgana. How did Martin even know what she looked like? She looked nothing like the portraits of her in library books, the only reason Harry knew what she looked like was because of the dream he'd had. Why had she spoken to him like that? Almost as if she knew him?

The last Boggart however needed no explanation. Martin was terrified that Harry would hate him when he found out his secret. Was it really so bad?

That evening he Ron and Hermione were sitting in front of the fire in the common room while Martin had his weekly meeting with McGonagall. Harry was continuing with the methods Martin had been teaching him, but was finding it difficult to concentrate.

He finally gave up and stretched out in his seat, watching as Ron attempted to complete a particularly difficult Potions essay and Hermione sat reading, as usual.

"Anything interesting in Merlin's book?" he asked casually, recognising it eventually as the one Martin had shown them.

Hermione jumped, and her eyes went wide. "Don't- don't you mean Martin's book?"

Harry frowned. "Well, yeah. But it was Merlin's first wasn't it?"

Hermione's face relaxed. "Oh yes, of course."

"What's wrong, Hermione?" Ron asked, looking confused. "You've been acting all jumpy for the last couple of days."

"Nothing's wrong!" Hermione insisted, her voice higher than usual, and spots of pink colouring her cheeks.

Harry and Ron raised their eyebrows and exchanged glances. Now Hermione was acting secretive? What on earth was going on?

"So," said Harry slowly. "Is there anything interesting in the book?"

Hermione blinked rapidly to try and recover. "Well, yes. Of course there is! It's Merlin's spell book! There's loads of spells in here, some of them added by himself. Course, I can't read it all. Only the spells in Ancient Runes."
Ron stood up, and peered over Hermione's shoulder at the book. "That's actually Merlin's handwriting?" he asked, wonder in his voice. Then he screwed up his face and squinted at it. "It looks familiar somehow."

"Oh don't be ridiculous, Ron," said Hermione, immediately snapping the book shut.

Harry frowned at her sudden discomfort. "Hermione, what-"

"Martin!" called Ron, seeing him coming through the portrait hole. "How'd the meeting go?"

"Pretty boring to be honest," Martin answered, slumping down in a chair beside them, looking tired. "No information about the Cup then?"

Harry jumped to hear Ginny's voice sounding from behind him. She'd approached the four of them when Martin had come back without Harry noticing. She cast him half a glance, the tips of her ears flushing red, even as Harry felt himself blushing at the sight of her. She fixed her eyes pointedly on Martin:

"The ghosts haven't found it then?"

Martin shook his head. "Nope. They've been searching non-stop and they can't find a trace of it so far."

Ron scowled. "Just our luck isn't it? How'd you get them to agree to help anyway?"

Martin's expression became guarded. "They offered."

Harry frowned. There was definitely more to it than that.

Ginny stepped closer to him. "And how are you, Martin? You don't look so great." Harry could see why she was asking; Martin had looked steadily worse since that encounter with the Boggart the previous night.

Martin smiled weakly. "I'm alright. Or at least I will be after tomorrow."

"Why after tomorrow?" she asked, a small frown wrinkling her features.

Martin laughed. "It's a brand new day isn't it?"

Ginny didn't look any less confused, but she didn't pursue it. She stepped even closer to Martin and laid a hand on his shoulder, and squeezed it, causing a strange and ridiculous sensation of jealousy to course through Harry.

"It'll be alright, Martin," she said to him smiling. "We'll find it. And then we can end all of this. Then we can all get on with all our lives."

She looked at Harry as she said this, and Harry felt a pain in his chest as she stared at him. She walked away to re-join her other friends, and Harry continued to stare after her for the longest time.

"You don't have to push her away you know, Harry," murmured Martin.

Harry's head whipped around to look at him. Martin smiled.

"You might want to keep her out of danger, but she deserves a choice, Harry, and if that choice is to face danger at your side then you should let her. Believe me, I know what it's like to have people you
Martin stood up and strode off to the dormitory without waiting for a response. Harry watched him go, his mind racing.

Harry woke the next day to find Martin, Neville, Dean and Seamus had already left for breakfast, leaving him alone with a still snoring Ron. He lay there looking up at the roof of his four-poster bed. He couldn't continue like this. He'd tried being patient, but it wasn't working. Martin was no closer to telling them all his secret. If he wouldn't, then Harry would have to find out on his own.

He felt only a little bit guilty, betraying his trust like that. He just couldn't be in the dark like this. And besides, it was making Martin afraid, for whatever reason. Maybe if they found out his secret first and let him know that they didn't judge him it'd make him more at ease?

He sat up abruptly, and threw his pillow at the sleeping figure in the bed next to him.

Ron grunted, and jumped out of bed, cursing as he did so. He blinked blearily at Harry.

"What'd you want to go and do that for?"

"We have to find out the truth about Martin," Harry told him, wishing he'd look a little more alert.

Ron frowned. "Why? He said he was going to tell us eventually."

"Yes, but when?" said Harry. "You saw that Boggart, Ron! He's terrified of us knowing! We can't keep letting him suffer like that! If we find out first …"

Ron nodded slowly, sighing. "I suppose. Though I've no idea what the bloke's so scared of. What could possibly be that huge?"

Harry was at a loss.

"How are we supposed to find out though?" Ron asked, beginning to get dressed, now fully awake. "I don't want to go behind his back."

"What choice do we have?" said Harry, also getting dressed. "It'll be for his own good." He was just trying to convince himself otherwise. He wasn't entirely comfortable with it himself.

Ron finished getting dressed, and stood there in front of Harry looking distinctly uncomfortable. He looked away from him. "Do you think we should …"

Harry followed his eye line, to see Martin's school trunk sitting at the end of his bed. Would there be anything in there?

"No," decided Harry. "We can't go poking around his personal belongings. We'll have to try and find out another way."

"But how?" asked Ron, though looking relieved. "I mean, where else in this school would there be information about him?"

"McGonagall's office," said Harry quietly, a sudden thought striking him. "Remember? She found that old record of Martin at Hogwarts in 1781."
"But what use will that be?" asked Ron. "Why should we risk breaking into McGonagall's office for a record of his OWLS?"

"Because-" Harry began, his heart hammering rapidly. "I don't think that's the only record of him."

"What?"

"I think he's older than two hundred," said Harry, hardly believing what he was saying. "I think he's come here before, and that's why the ghosts and Peeves seemed to know him so well. I think he was the one that taught the Founders the Old Magic a thousand years ago."

Ron's mouth dropped open. "What makes you say that?"

"A lot of things," said Harry, pacing back and forth as he reasoned it all out in his head. "That picture in the book, the fact that his wand's eleven hundred years old, the mention Ravenclaw made of Emrys, everything he knows about fusing Old and New magic … plus loads and loads of other small little things. Like that Boggart. That bloke who came out first, did he look eighteenth century to you? And Morgana?"

Ron blinked in astonishment. "You- you think he knew Morgana?"

"I'm not sure what I think," Harry answered honestly. "But it all seems to add up. He seems to know an awful lot about the Old Religion in Camelot, about Morgana and Merlin and King Arthur, and the Cup of Life. Maybe he was from there? Maybe he was Merlin's student or something?"

Ron sat down on his bed and stared at Harry as though he'd just gone mad. "Y-you reckon?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "But we need to find out."

Ron looked bewildered for a few more moments, before nodding and standing up.

"You're right. But McGonagall will kill us if she catches us poking about her office."

Harry grinned, feeling like a kid again.

They made their way down to breakfast, and found Martin and Hermione sitting side-by-side, talking urgently. Harry frowned at the sight of them. Did Hermione know Martin's secret? They broke off at the sight of Harry and Ron approaching.

"Where have you two been?" Hermione admonished. "We'll be late."

"Late?" asked Ron, looking confused. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"There's a Hogsmeade visit today, Ron! Don't tell me you've forgotten!"

Harry winced inwardly. He had forgotten. He couldn't go to Hogsmeade today.

"You know, why don't the two of you head down and we'll join you later," he said, trying to sound casual. "Ron and I have some stuff we have to do first."

"What stuff?" Martin asked, looking suspicious.

Harry stared back at him evenly. Oh, nothing. Just uncovering your greatest secret.

"Harry's right," said Ron, interjecting. "We'll be ages yet. We'll meet up with you later."
Hermione looked between the two of them, a frown on her face. "Um, alright. I'll just go and get my cloak and then me and Martin will head down."

"Okay," said Harry offhandedly, trying to keep his face expressionless. Hermione stood and started to leave the Hall. Martin made to follow her, but he cast one final searching glance at the pair of them before leaving. Harry felt a twinge of guilt, but tried to push it away. \textit{We're doing this to help you, Martin. I hope you'll understand.}

He waited until they were both out of sight before nudging Ron and gesturing to the staff table.

"What?" asked Ron.

"McGonagall's having breakfast."

"Yeah, so? She does that every morning! What's special about it?"

"Hmm, perhaps the fact that it means she's not in her office?"

Ron gasped in comprehension and looked back at McGonagall. "What, you want to do it now?"

"Why not?"

"I haven't had any breakfast ye-."

"For goodness sake, Ron, come on!"

He stood up and pulled Ron to his feet with him, and they left the Great Hall trying not to look guilty. Harry was almost shaking in anticipation. He didn't particular relish the idea of breaking into McGonagall's office to dig up the dirt on their friend who trusted them.

Harry pulled out the Marauder's Map, using it for the first time in months. "The corridor in front of McGonagall's office is clear, come on."

They approached the stone gargoyle, and gave the password. It sprang aside, seeming to make even more noise than usual. They glanced at each other guiltily before ascending the revolving staircase.

They pushed open the door at the top of the staircase and entered the office, feeling like criminals. It was deathly silent. The usually whirring machines and devices on the spindly tables were dead where they stood, even the sleeping portraits of the past Headteachers of Hogwarts seemed to be holding one collective breath.

"Well? Where d'you reckon we look?" Ron whispered, not wanting to disturb the eerie silence.

Harry glanced down at the Map, reassuring himself that McGonagall was still seated at the staff table, before looking around.

"I suppose we should start with that place McGonagall got Martin's old record from."

Ron nodded, pulled out his wand, and strode across the office and tapped the correct brick on the wall, which slid away to reveal the small alcove once more. He looked back at Harry.

"Now what?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Look up Michael Emrys. That's the name he used last time wasn't it?"

Ron obliged, and brought the sheets of parchment over to Harry, who read through them quickly.
There didn't seem to be any more information of any use to him. But-

"Look," he murmured. "He told us his father had always gone by the name Balinor didn't he? Why's his parent's names here listed as being Leon and Gwen Emrys?"

Ron frowned. "Yeah, that's weird. But hardly a massive secret is it?"

Harry just kept staring at the names. "Why would he have hidden it though?" he wondered aloud. Unless …

"They're made up," Harry said. "It's all a big lie. He is as old as I think he is. Balinor wasn't killed by Death Eaters. Martin's been pretending all these years to have a family. But he's been lying; he's been trying to fit in."

"But why though?" asked Ron. "What's the point?"

Harry wasn't sure. "He probably didn't want us to know how old he really was. I wonder …"

He went over to the alcove himself and spoke in a clear voice: 'Emrys'.

Several sheets of parchment of varying ages were deposited there with a slight flump. Harry picked them up.

"He's been coming to Hogwarts for years," he said to Ron, his heart racing. "He's moved around, he's changed his name. But it's always been him."

"Blimey," Ron said, as Harry began reading though the parchment:

'Matthew Emrys, Gryffindor, year of entry 1861,
Melville Emrys, Slytherin, year of entry 1831,
Michael Emrys, Ravenclaw, year of entry, 1781,
Murray Emrys, Slytherin, year of entry, 1711
Martin Emrys, Hufflepuff, year of entry, 1691,
Mark Emrys, Hufflepuff, year of entry, 1521,
Mortimer Emrys, Gryffindor, year of entry, 1481,
Mitchell Emrys, Ravenclaw, year of entry, 1401
Malcolm Emrys, Hufflepuff, year of entry 1341,
Marcellus Emrys, Hufflepuff, year of entry, 1251,
Marshall Emrys, Gryffindor, year of entry, 1171,
Morris Emrys, teacher of Defence Against the Dark Arts, 1591-1611
Mansell Emrys, teacher of Ancient Runes, 1041-1061'

Harry looked at Ron, sure that the expression of shock on his face was mirrored on his own.
Ron opened and closed his mouth a dozen times, at a loss. Harry could hardly move himself for shock. He’d suspected it, but to have it conformed in black and white like this …

"Bloody hell," said Ron, his eyes wide. "He's ancient! And to think, we actually sit and do homework together!"

He took the sheets from Harry's hands and read through them himself.

"It's definitely him right? They're all names beginning with 'M'! Not exactly original is he? Look! They're all perfect students! It's him! It's actually him!"

"Yeah," murmured Harry. "It makes sense. It makes so much sense."

"But why couldn't he have told us this?" Ron asked. "I mean yeah, it would be a bit of a shock to find out that the two hundred year old man I share a dormitory with is actually closer to his first millennium than his first century, but it isn't so bad to have to hide it from us is it?"

Harry shook his head. "This isn't the whole of it. There's something more."

"What?" asked Ron.

"I don't know."

Ron sighed heavily. "I can't believe this. Why has he done all this? Why keep coming back again and again as a student? What's the point? How old is he?"

"At least eleven hundred," said Harry, hardly believing what he was saying. "He lied to us. He was around at the time of the Old Religion, he must have been! That's how he was able to teach the Founders!"

"Blimey," breathed Ron. "Martin taught the Founders of Hogwarts!"

He looked down at the sheets in his hands. "I don't get it though. Why has he been doing this for so long? Why has he been lying? Why not just tell us he was one of the original Druids from the beginning?"

"I have no idea," said Harry, his mind swimming. "He must have been around in … in Camelot. That's how he knows so much about Morgana, and the Cup and everything. Merlin was his grandfather, he must have taught him everything! That's why he's always so sad at the mention of Morgana. He remembers the downfall of the Old Religion. Maybe he thinks that it's his own fault? That Boggart man … maybe he was King Arthur?"

Ron's eyes went even wider. "Blimey" he said again, almost as if he'd forgotten how to say any other word.

For want of something better to do, Ron looked down at the sheets again. "So many different identities …" he said. "It's a wonder he's still sane after all this time. Wonder what his original name was?"

Harry shrugged. "We'll have to ask him."

"And what are we going to say to him? Oh, hi, Martin? Did you by any chance know Morgana and Merlin in person?"

"We have to let him know that we at least know a part of what's going on, we have to give him the
chance to explain the rest of it to us," Harry said firmly. He wasn't going to speculate any further. He'd let Martin tell them the rest.

Ron looked unconvinced for a few more moments, but eventually nodded. "You're right. We owe him that after all this sneaking around."

Harry nodded gratefully. This was going to be hard enough on Martin without adding to it.

"So, where is he?" asked Ron. "Is he in Hogsmeade yet, or is he still in the castle?"

Harry glanced down at the Map in his hand, trying to sift through the hundreds of dots milling around everywhere. Eventually he caught sight of the small dot labelled 'Hermione Granger'.

"I've got Hermione, she's in the grounds almost out of sight."

"Is Martin with her?"

"Yeah, he's …" but Harry had trailed off, pure shock and disbelief radiating out through his entire body. It couldn't be … It couldn't be …

His body seemed frozen on the spot, and he seemed to retreat into himself, as though he was watching all of this from very far away. This … this was impossible …

He shook his head slightly. He must have read it wrong ….

He felt literally weak at the knees, like he was about to collapse. The Map slid from his numb fingertips and drifted to the floor. It had to be a mistake … it had to.

But the Map never lies.

"Harry? What's wrong?" Ron asked in alarm, looking at Harry's horrified expression. But Harry couldn't bring himself to speak.

Ron leapt forwards looking scared and seized the Map and searched it frantically.

"Is it Hermione? Is she okay? Are there Death Eaters trying to …."

And he too drifted off as he caught sight of the dot that was walking alongside Hermione's.

The blood drained from his face and his face was masked by shock. His eyes were as round as saucers as he turned to gaze at Harry, blinking rapidly, trying to ascertain whether or not he had read it right

But he must have, what else could have prompted such a reaction? He'd seen exactly what Harry had seen. He'd seen the impossible.

Because next to Hermione's tiny labelled dot, was another one, keeping pace with her. The label was tiny, with only a small six letter word written on it. A six letter word that sent shockwaves through the two people who had just read it.

Right next to Hermione, was the unmistakeable label: 'Merlin.'
The Battle of Hogsmeade

It was early, and the dew was still lying on the grass lining the path that lead to Hogsmeade. The sky was clear, with only a few lazy clouds drifting over it as the sun shone weakly down on them. But Merlin had no appreciation for the beauty of the morning. He wasn't as calm as the world around him.

His stomach was clenched in a continual pain, his insides writhing like snakes, while his heart seemed determined to beat as fast as it could ceaselessly. He seemed to be walking in some kind of dream.

It was just a few short hours before the entire Order of the Phoenix would discover his identity. He literally felt quite sick.

Yet, there was some tiny, tiny part of him that was looking forward to it. Very tiny, but definitely there. Regardless of the outcome of tonight, he'd never again have to conceal his secret. There'd be no more lying, no more deceit- he'd be free of the iron bands that had been constricting him for the last thirteen centuries.

The world was silent as he walked.

Hermione looked up at him, a small frown on her face.

"Are you alright-" she glanced around the empty path-"Merlin?"

Merlin sighed, and shook his head. "No, I'm not. But I will be."

She nodded, understanding. She drew closer to him and linked her arm through his, shivering against the chilly September wind. He was glad she was there; she reminded him that at least if everything went badly tonight, he'd still have at least one person who understood.

They entered the village a few minutes later. As it was still early morning, there were only a few villagers there, and even less students milling around the usually bustling street. Merlin took a good look around the village. He hadn't been here for over a hundred and thirty years.

They wandered around the high street, peering in through shop windows, while Merlin observed the village. It hadn't changed much since the last time he was here. The shops and houses were largely the same, with only the shop displays showing how much time had passed. The only new thing he observed was the Shrieking Shack at the end of the street.

"What are you looking at?" Hermione asked, noticing Merlin's distracted expression. "Haven't you been here before?"

Merlin nodded. "Yes, many times. I remember back when the village was newly founded, back when the school was being built. People from all over flocked here. It was supposed to be a safe haven for witches and wizards who were being persecuted."

"Was it?" Hermione asked, interested. Merlin had to suppress a smile at her continued quest for knowledge.

"Yes, for the most part. But I never really liked it here."

"Why not?" Hermione asked.
"Because it was too symbolic of everything I had fought against in Camelot," Merlin said, sighing. "We'd fought so hard to make magic something that was universally accepted, something that no one had to fear. In Camelot, sorcerers and Muggles had lived side-by-side. They were neighbours, friends … there was harmony. And I'm not just exaggerating for the sake of nostalgia. Like the poets say; it truly was a Golden Age."

He shook his head sadly before continuing. "But after Arthur died, everything was different. Morgana and Mordred had just shown everyone again how evil magic could be, and they began to fear it again. Magic declined, and those who possessed it were regarded with suspicion. Then Christianity came to the Isles, and religious extremists denounced magic as something truly evil. Sorcerers and Muggles could no longer co-exist peacefully. They separated, and regarded each other as untrustworthy. They feared the unknown. Brothers turned against each other, neighbours killed each other … there was mass hysteria on both sides. Muggles were afraid of the powers of their friends, and sorcerers were disdainful of those without magic. It was a rift which was never quite sealed. The International Statute of Secrecy was signed because of this, and sorcerers swore off associating with Muggles, and gradually, Muggles forgot they had even existed."

"Wizards formed their own small communities, regarding Muggles as minor annoyances, seeing them as ignorant children, treating them with condescension, forgetting that their lives were just as worthwhile as their own. The world was divided, and these two separate communities are as different as possible. There's no interaction, no sense of shared kinship."

He sighed again. "It's like Camelot never even happened. If Arthur could see this now … He devoted his life to ensuring the prosperity of his people, all his people, Muggle and sorcerer alike. Back then, magic was as a part of life as breathing. No one feared it, no one was afraid of their own abilities. No one had to hide. Now all of that is gone."

He broke off, surprised at his own outburst. It was the first time he'd spoken his frustrations aloud. Hermione looked upset. "I've read hundreds of history books, Merlin, but I've never heard it told to me like that before. I never truly understood till now."

Merlin laughed bitterly. "I suppose you have to experience it to truly appreciate just how much wizardkind has lost by breaking their ties to the Muggle world, and how much the Muggles have lost in return."

She nodded. "I wish I could have seen Camelot," she admitted. "It sounds like an amazing place."

"It was," Merlin said, smiling. "Yeah, there were bad points as well. Plumbing systems have certainly improved for one thing! But I've never been in a place since that had so much acceptance and tolerance since. It was a long struggle; Camelot was once a place of magical suppression. But under Arthur … You would have liked him Hermione. Once you got over his arrogance that is."

She laughed lightly, and they started walking off down the street together again.

"Was he really so bad?"

Merlin laughed in remembrance. "Yes. I didn't like him at first. But it didn't take long for me to see the real him. He became less of an idiot towards the end."

"I bet you had something to do with that," Hermione teased, smiling.

Merlin didn't answer. He liked to think he'd had some part in changing Arthur from such a prat, to such a noble king. But then, Arthur had always had that deep within him. All Merlin had done was
They gradually drifted outside of the village, where the fields began to appear. They passed a point where a large house stood, and, like every other time he had come here, he stopped to look at it. Here, on this spot, long before this particular house had been built, there had once been another one, just as large and grand. It had belonged to dear friends of his, Hilda and Elred, and he had once lived with them. It was when he had first come to the village, looking for the Founders, and they had graciously taken him in and shown him such kindness as he hadn’t known for centuries. They had been good to him, and after Merlin had moved up to the castle they had adopted several Muggle-Born orphans, all of whom had eventually attended Hogwarts. Elred himself had been one of the first School Governors. He’d bid goodbye to them the same time as he had with the Founders, and Merlin had missed them immensely. Sometimes Mr and Mrs Weasley reminded him of them.

He looked around the street, and smiled to himself, lost in memory. Yes, he may hate the reason the village had been founded in the first place, but he couldn’t deny, there had been at least some happy memories in this place. He had had friends here, albeit friends who he couldn’t stay with for more than a few years before having to move on. At least now, after the meeting tonight, that would never happen again.

He said none of this however, and remained lost in his own thoughts until Hermione nudged him and pointed upwards.

"That's where Harry's godfather hid when he was on the run," she said, pointing to a small cave. "We used to visit him on Hogsmeade weekends. He wanted to be close to Harry."

"Sirius Black?" said Merlin. "I admit, I don't really know that much about him."

Hermione's expression turned sad. "He was a good man. A bit arrogant and reckless, but he'd have done anything to protect Harry and his friends."

A bit like Arthur then, Merlin thought to himself.

"Harry misses him, doesn't he?" mused Merlin.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. A lot more than he lets on I think. Sirius was the first one that was ever like a real father to him. I mean, Mr Weasley treated him like one of his own sons, but he had seven children of his own, whereas Sirius was his, if you know what I mean. He'd never experienced that before."

Merlin nodded. "I know what that's like," he said, still gazing upwards. "I never really knew my own father. I went to live with a man named Gaius in Camelot, and he became everything a father was for me. He taught me everything, loved me like his own. And putting up with me on its own was a daunting task. He was always there to turn to for guidance. He kept me out of trouble … for the most part."

Hermione turned to him, confused. "Balinor was your father wasn't he? Didn't you know him at all?"

Merlin shook his head. "He'd been banished from Camelot. Uther would have executed him if he'd remained. He was forced to abandon me and my mother before I was even born to protect us from Uther's wrath. It wasn't until many years later that we met. He hadn't even known that I existed."

Hermione looked sympathetic. "Then what happened?"

"He died," Merlin said quietly. "He was protecting me. I inherited his Dragonlord abilities when that happened. I barely even knew him, but I suppose, because of that, there's always a part of him with
me."

"So, who was it that taught you magic?" Hermione asked.

Merlin laughed. "No one really. I'd been using magic all my life. It was instinctive for me. I didn't need to be taught, and that was extremely unusual. But then Gaius gave me his old magic book, and I taught myself the basics, and built upon it for many years."

Hermione looked impressed, but didn't say anything more on the subject.

The sun was rising ever higher in the sky, making the sleepy village more cheerful looking, but something cold seemed to be clinging to Merlin's heart. Something was wrong.

He glanced around, suddenly wary. There was a sense of foreboding exuding from the village. He cast his eyes around frantically searching for the source of his discomfort but nothing was forthcoming.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, alert to his searching.

He shook his head, frowning. "I don't know. I can sense … something."

He couldn't see anything immediately the matter, but something seemed inherently wrong, something he couldn't quite place his finger on.

He tried to shake it off- perhaps he was just being paranoid. But he dismissed this immediately. His instincts had kept him going all these years, and he'd come to trust them. He'd never been wrong about a 'feeling' before.

He drew his wand, and moved forwards slowly, unconsciously placing Hermione behind him. They were on the very edge of the village. In the main street, students were becoming a more common sight. Was it one of these students that was making him uncomfortable?

Hermione pulled out her wand as well. "What is it that you can sense?" she whispered.

"I'm not sure," Merlin answered. "Danger. It's here, but I don't know where."

"Are you sure you're not imagining it?"

"No," he answered shortly. "I don't imagine things like this. There's something wrong."

It was the same feeling he'd often had in Camelot when out on a patrol with Arthur and the Knights, the one Arthur had always shrugged off. It was impending danger. And Merlin remembered what that feeling had often preceded …

"Martin!"

Merlin jumped about a foot in the air, and whirled around to see Kingsley coming up the lane towards him, accompanied by Remus Lupin and Arthur Weasley.

Kingsley frowned at the sight of the wands in their hands. "What is going on?"


"And what would this be?" Kingsley asked calmly, though he, Lupin and Mr Weasley immediately drew their own wands.
"I don't know," said Merlin, getting more and more frustrated. "I can sense it."

"The Old Religion?" asked Lupin, looking wary.

Merlin nodded, but didn't say anything. Seeing no immediate danger, they all lowered their wands slightly, but kept them at the ready.

"We were planning on meeting up with you in Hogsmeade," Kingsley explained. "We needed to talk with you about this Cup."

"Couldn't it have waited until tonight?" Hermione asked.

Lupin shook his head. "The ghosts have completed their search, and there's no sign of it in Gringotts."

"That was quick."

"When you have more than a hundred ghosts drifting around Gringotts every day and night for four days, not needing to stop for food or rest, you can get pretty far," Kingsley explained, his dark eyes still flitting around warily. They jerked back to Merlin. "I still can't quite believe how you managed to organise this. Ghosts generally do not involve themselves with mortal affairs, yet more than a hundred were willing to jump at the chance to help you, Martin, why?"

"The powers of life and death affect ghosts just as much as they do mortals," Merlin answered. "I only had to ask."

Kingsley frowned. "But still … they seemed to consider it an honour to assist you. They said so in person. Why would you command such respect in their eyes?"

Merlin blinked rapidly. "There's an explanation, I promise you. But not now, not here. Wait until tonight."

"Why?" asked Mr Weasley, frowning. "What's so special about tonight?"

"I-I-" Merlin stumbled, feeling suddenly very hot. "There's something I need to tell you all tonight, something very important. But I can't do it here."

They exchanged glances. "Well, I'm afraid it can't wait," Kingsley said, his voice commanding. "We need to call the meeting early. Now that we know the Cup's definitely not in Gringotts we can't afford to wait even a few hours. We need a plan of action. We were hoping to find all of you here today to bring you all to Grimmauld Place immediately."

Merlin's heart went even colder. Now? He tried not to panic; he'd been preparing for this all week. But still, he thought he'd have a few hours to relax in Hogsmeade before he had to tell them all.

"Professor McGonagall's found Ginny, Neville and Luna," said Lupin, gesturing down the almost deserted street, where the mentioned people were waiting. "But we thought Harry and Ron would be with you two."

"They said they were going to be late," said Hermione, seeing Merlin still looking slightly panicked at the prospect of the meeting. "They're still up in the castle."

"No, we're not."

Merlin spun around to see Harry and Ron coming down the street towards them, even as
McGonagall, Neville, Ginny and Luna approached from another direction. Merlin tried to stay calm. This was a good thing, he told himself; soon it would be all over.

But something about Harry and Ron's expressions made him freeze. They were staring at him with such a strange look on their faces, Merlin didn't quite know how to interpret it. They were eyeing him warily, looking … awed? Angry? They were looking at him as though they couldn't quite believe that he was standing there.

Merlin frowned in confusion. What was going on?

"What's wrong with you two?" he asked, trying to joke.

Ron's eyes seemed to widen, and his mouth hung open in stunned disbelief, blinking rapidly. Harry looked at Merlin with a searching look, his eyes boring deep into Merlin's as though trying to perform Legilimancy. His eyes looked Merlin all over, a tiny frown of disbelief on his face. He looked at Merlin questionably, as though trying to figure something out. There was no emotion, just numb silence.

Then, Harry turned to face Lupin.

"Remus," he said calmly, voice emotionless. "You created the Marauder's Map, didn't you? Does it ever lie?"

Lupin frowned with confusion. "Not that I'm aware of," he said slowly. "It always shows someone's true identity."

Merlin went cold, and his heart clenched.

No …

Harry turned back to Merlin, an almost accusatory look in his eyes.

"Your name was Michael when you were at Hogwarts in 1781," he said slowly. "But it's Martin now. What would your name on the Marauder's Map be?"

Merlin took a step back, his face flooded with shock. No, no … it couldn't be happening. Not like this …

Hermione gasped, and clasped a hand over her mouth.

"Oh no," she whispered. "I didn't even think …"

Ron finally made a move and rounded on her, anger in his eyes.

"You knew?" he asked, shaking. "You knew he was lying to us? You knew he was …"

He trailed off, and looked back at Merlin, still in shock, looking as though he couldn't quite believe what he'd been about to finish that sentence with. He shook his head, and took a step back.

"This is a joke," he said, his eyes still wide. "This just can't be real. This is some sick joke …"

Merlin's throat seemed to close in on itself. This could not be happening! He'd never intended it to be like this! Pain spread from his heart into every inch of his body. Their faces …

"Listen," he croaked, his throat dry. "We need to talk about this … but not here."

"Not here?" shouted Harry, his expressionless mask dropping immediately. "Not here? When? When the hell were you planning on telling us this? Are you just going to try and avoid it again?"
"This can't be happening," Harry said, his voice quiet. "Of all the things I thought you were hiding … I could never … never have guessed … this."

Merlin felt his icy fear evaporate away. He felt a determination sear through his veins like a raging fire. He had to explain, he had to make them see …

"I know you must be feeling …" he trailed off, his voice shaking, not even beginning to comprehend what they must be feeling. "But … I promise you, I'll explain everything. Let's go back to Grimmauld Place and discuss it right now."

Harry just continued to stare at him, looking almost like a lost child as he looked at Merlin with unbelieving eyes.

"What's going on?" Professor McGonagall intervened, having arrived with Ginny, Neville and Luna during this exchange. "Mr Potter, explain yourself!"

Harry's head jerked around to look at her, and everyone else, who Merlin only just noticed were crowded around, their faces a mixture of confusion, wariness, fear and anxiety.

Harry seemed to take a deep breath as though preparing himself. "Ask Martin," he said, his voice thicker than usual.

They all turned to look at him and Merlin felt their eyes crawling over him like a hoard of spiders. He froze, his mouth went dry and his mind blank. It wasn't supposed to happen like this …

"I-" he trailed off, unable to articulate just how sorry he was, just how ashamed he was at his deceit. He couldn't do this, not here, not like this …

The entire sky seemed to darken and Merlin felt cold all over. The feeling he'd had earlier seemed to increase ten-fold; there was danger here. He frowned, surely they wouldn't attack him! Had he underestimated their anger?

"Will someone please explain what the hell is going on?" Ginny asked impatiently, looking from Harry to Merlin with barely concealed fear. "Harry!"

He turned to look at her, his face a tempest of emotion. He didn't have the words.

Hermione looked distressed, and tearful, but she stepped forwards and grabbed on to Merlin's hand determined.

"I know what you must be thinking," she pleaded with Harry and Ron. "I was the same when I found out. But you have to give him a chance … please."

Ron stared at her, an undeniable expression of hurt on his face.

"And when did you find out?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell us? How could you have kept this from us?"

"It was on Monday night," she said, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I only found out by accident. He was going to tell you all tonight, he asked me not to say anything till then."
But Harry and Ron were still staring at her in betrayal. Merlin felt like such a fool. Why hadn't he thought of this? He hadn't wanted to include Hermione in this as well! She shouldn't have to have these questions directed at her too! He shouldn't have kept Harry and Ron in the dark whilst Hermione knew everything. He should have told Harry and Ron the same night Hermione had found out. He hadn't wanted to create any sort of rift between them.

The sense of danger increased so much it was making it hard for Merlin to breathe.

"What did you find out?" Kingsley asked, his deep voice powerful, his eyes glinting. "What have you been keeping from us, Martin?"

Merlin stared at him, his mouth opening and closing a few times, lost for words. This was it.

He took a shaky breath. He fixed his eyes on Kingsley's.

He stood up straight, letting himself assume the noble bearing he'd been trying so hard to conceal from everyone. His face drained of fear and distress. He wouldn't be frightened anymore. He wouldn't. He was Merlin Emrys, Dragonlord, Court Sorcerer of Camelot and friend of King Arthur Pendragon, the Once and Future King. This was his destiny. This was what he'd been waiting for, for thirteen hundred years.

"I'm not who I seem to be," he said, in a clear and calm voice, laced with the power he possessed just beneath the surface. "My name is not Martin Emrys, nor even Michael Emrys."

They all stated slightly at the tone of his voice, and Merlin looked at them all with confidence.

"My name," he said. "My name is Merlin Emrys."

The words rang with such finality that everyone stood in silence for a few moments, the power of the statement he had just made hanging in the air. No one could doubt the truth.

The faces in front of him were shocked, there was no other word for it. They all froze and stared, their eyes wide, mouths hanging open. Blood drained from their faces. Even Kingsley, so normally stoic, looked astonished.

No one moved.

Merlin forced himself to remain calm. He wouldn't let his fear overrun him. He was better than that. He could conquer this. He had to. He was Merlin. He was the man in the legends, just like Aithusa had said. He could reclaim his former glory. He was no longer content to hide in the shadows like a frightened child, hiding himself from the world.

Then, Neville fainted.

The crowd in front of him suddenly came to life. McGonagall gasped loudly, and clutched at her heart. Lupin started to shake, his face pale. Ginny shook her head repeatedly blinking furiously. Kingsley's eyes popped and his mouth dropped open and hung there looking ungainly. Mr Weasley actually pinched himself and looked at him incredulously even as his glasses began to steam up with his rapid breathing. And Harry … he just looked at him, a look of finality on his face, as though he hadn't quite believed it until now.

Neville groaned and sat up, and, realising it wasn't a dream, squeaked and leapt to his feet, actually grabbing onto Professor McGonagall in alarm, regarding Merlin with … fear.

Merlin felt as though an icy dagger had been stabbed through his heart. That hadn't been what he
Luna, who Merlin hadn't even been looking at before now, suddenly broke the monotony, and took a few steps towards him, smiling dreamily. Merlin felt a small part of his pain drain away.

She stopped in front of him and her smile widened, her eyes suddenly becoming more focused.

"I knew it," she said, in as serious a voice as Merlin had ever heard from her.

She grinned and threw her arms around him. Merlin was too shocked to react, and before he knew it, she had pulled away and walked off to stand beside Neville, and laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He blinked, and turned to her in surprise. She smiled, and the fear left Neville's face. He turned back to Merlin, now looking only awed and curious.

Kingsley seemed to regain some composure. His eyes returned to their normal size, and his mouth closed. He took a shaky step towards Merlin, his face never losing its sense of wonder.

He looked Merlin up and down once or twice. Then he reached out his hand to Merlin.

Surprised, Merlin took it. Kingsley clasped on to it tightly.

"Is this really true?" he all but whispered, his face close to Merlin's.

Merlin nodded. "It is."

Kingsley's face broke into a broad grin, and he shook Merlin's hand enthusiastically. He looked down at their joined hands in awe.

He looked back up at Merlin, and Merlin was surprised to see tears forming there.

"Thank you …. thank you," he said, thick with emotion.

Merlin shook his head, shocked to find tears springing to his own eyes. "No, don't thank me. I haven't done anything except lie to you …"

But Kingsley cut him off with a wave of his hands. "Haven't done anything? The Merlin hasn't done anything? Where do I even begin to contradict that statement?"

But Merlin shook his head again, distressed. "No, you don't understand. I don't want this. I don't want you to react this way. It's still me."

Kingsley smiled. "I know. Even as Martin Emrys you were invaluable to us, and many of us owe our lives to you. I know the legends do not lie. You are truly as great as they say."

Merlin blinked rapidly, his throat constricting with emotion.

"I- I –" Mr Weasley began, his face still in shock. "Perhaps we should …"

"Yes," said Lupin, his wide eyes fixed on Martin, his voice fainter than usual. "We … we mustn't discuss this here."

Merlin nodded, his head swimming a little with the reality of the situation, but he forced himself to remain calm.

"We should get to Grimmauld Place," he said. "We have to have a meeting at once."
"Of course!" Mr Weasley nodded frantically. "Yes, we'll do that right away!"

Merlin frowned at his sudden eagerness to please. This was what he'd feared.

"Please, don't," he said, holding his hands up to sway Mr Weasley. "It's alright."

"No, it's not," Harry murmured, the shock finally gone from his face to be replaced with some other unreadable emotion. "You're- you're Merlin."

Merlin turned to him with pleading in his eyes. "Yes, but please, Harry, wait until I can explain. Please …"

Harry fixed him with the longest stare yet, his emerald eyes penetrating right to Merlin's core. Then, he nodded.

"I promised that I wouldn't judge you," Harry said quietly. "And while this isn't exactly the way I thought things would turn out … I'll listen to what you have to say."

He shook his head briefly, looking as though he couldn't believe who he was talking to.

Merlin exhaled in relief, not even bothering to try and hide the stupid grin on his face. Things were finally starting to turn around.

"Thank you," he said to Harry, his voice shaking again. "Now, we should-"

But he broke off, horrified. That sensation of danger was back and it was more powerful than ever.

"Merlin? What is it?" Hermione demanded, whipping out her wand.

After jumping at hearing Hermione call him 'Merlin' everyone else raised their wands, alert, even as their faces were still lined with shock.

Merlin looked around, reaching out with his magic in every direction. Something was evil here; it was hatred, pure hatred, death …

A scream rang out through the village, and Merlin leapt into action.

Several loud popping noises sounded, and soon the main street of Hogsmeade was filled with hooded and masked figures. Jets of green lights were soon issuing from their wands, even as the residents of Hogsmeade and students from the school started screaming and running for cover.

Merlin ran forwards, barely even noticing he was being joined by everyone else.

He ran down the street, and, not even bothering with his wand, attacked.

His eyes burned a fierce gold and several Death Eaters went flying, slamming into buildings with so much force the bricks began to crack. He didn't stop to check if they were dead or not.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry yelled from behind him, and a jet of red light slammed into a Death Eater, and caused his wand to go flying, even as he was about to attack a frightened third year student.

"Anweald!" Merlin yelled, raising his hand in front of him, and blasting the Death Eater off his feet before he could recover his wand.

Then-
"Hyrdre!" Merlin yelled, creating a powerful shield around himself and anyone else in the vicinity. The curse he'd sensed coming from behind bounced off harmlessly, and instead rushed back to impact on its caster. He fell, and didn't rise.

The shield faded from view, and Merlin whirled around to see the Order members fighting fiercely with the Death Eaters.

*What on earth are they doing here?* Merlin wondered frantically, but gave no more thought to it. He didn't have time.

The streets were now empty of other people, having fled at the fighting, but the Death Eaters remained, at least a dozen of them. Hermione brought two down with a Reducto Curse and Kingsley and Lupin were duelling one particularly aggressive Death Eater, whilst everyone else was lashing out with every spell they could think of.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Ginny shouted frantically, as she found a Death Eater bearing down on her. The Death Eater was levitated several feet into the air, and Ginny used his momentary surprise to catch him unawares and struck him with an expertly cast Stunner. Merlin briefly gave thanks to Tonks and her Auror training.

He saw then, about ten frightened first year students cowering behind a large upturned bin, many of them in tears, lying flat against the ground. Merlin ran towards them.

"Come on!" he yelled, grabbing them and forcing them to their feet.

"Acwellan!" he shouted, killing instantly a Death Eater who'd crept up from behind.

He summoned a powerful shield and placed it around the frightened students. "Run!" he urged them. "Run straight up to the castle and don't stop!"

They obeyed without question, their faces torn with fear, and ran off down the street. Some Death Eaters cast some spells after them, but Merlin's shield protected them. Once he was sure they were safe and the Death Eaters were leaving them alone, Merlin turned back to the battle.

Neville was duelling a Death Eater almost twice his size. He was holding his own, but Merlin could see the strain on his face. He was limping slightly, and the Death Eater slowly began to gain the upper-hand.

"Avada Kedavra!" the Death Eater screamed, and Neville was too slow to leap out of the way.

"Hyrden!" Merlin yelled, jumping in front of Neville. The Killing Curse slammed into the Shield, and rippled across it, reverberating like a gong.

The shield disappeared, and Merlin struck out at the Death Eater before he could raise his wand again.

Neville gaped at him. "But- but- I thought the Killing Curse was unblockable?" he stammered, his face pale.

"Not for me. No time to explain!" Merlin told him, pulling him down to the ground as another Killing Curse soared towards them. "You need to focus now, Neville!"

Neville nodded, and looked horrified with himself for being distracted and leapt up and re-joined the fight, duelling with renewed vigour.
"Folde źěèatan!" Merlin screamed, aiming at the ground in front of several Death Eaters, which split under the force of the spell and opened up to envelop the surprised Death Eaters. This gave the Order the split-second advantage they'd needed.

Merlin glanced around, noticing the fewer masked figures. They were winning.

"Anweald!" he yelled again, his arm outstretched, feeling the power from within him course though it and rush towards the Death Eater in front of him.

But, to his horror, the spell didn't make contact. As soon as it got near the Death Eater it seemed to bounce off, striking an invisible shield. The Death Eater cackled in response and directed a Killing Curse at him which Merlin easily blocked, despite his shock.

How could he have shielded against that? There was no modern-day form of magic powerful enough to resist the magic of the Old Religion!

"Martin!" Ginny yelled at him desperately.

Merlin turned to find all of the others congregated in the same area, having been forced back by advancing Death Eaters. Their spells were also not making any contact with the Death Eaters. But the Death Eaters weren't using Shield Charms. Someone else was shielding them.

A thrill of horror gripped at Merlin's heart. No …

He sprinted forwards to help the others, casting spell after spell at the advancing Death Eaters. They were among the most powerful spells he knew, but each and every one bounced off harmlessly. The ground beneath them all began to crack and split open with the strength of the magic Merlin was unleashing. But to no avail.

There was only one thing that could be causing this …

He reached the others and raised his hand, determined to break through these shields, regretting the fact he'd had little to no opportunity to practise over the centuries.

But before he could utter a word-

"Aweorpan!"

Merlin and all the others were thrown backwards with a force so great Merlin was left winded. He impacted the ground, hard. He felt something crack in his left shoulder as he fell. Pain lanced up his arm, and all he could think about briefly was the agony.

But he pushed that aside. Pain was only a distraction.

Coughing severely, he pushed himself up from the ground, ignoring the stinging pain in his shoulder. The others were also pulling themselves to their feet, some looking dazed after hitting their heads against the ground.

Merlin felt sick. That spell … that power … it could only be …

He stood up, the pain gone, his face blank, allowing the sheer power and ferocity of his magic to fill his body so that the ground trembled beneath him and the tips of his fingers seemed to glow.

Dust from the battle cleared, and Merlin saw a figure walking down the street towards him, calmly, authority in every step.
Merlin's eyes didn't move from the figure once. He gazed at it, not allowing himself to cry out in despair or even to allow fear to enter his mind. He relished this.

The figure approached, and stopped just a few feet away from Merlin and the others, who were looking on in fear.

The figure smiled briefly, before removing its hood, and exposing the entire face.

"Hello, Merlin," she said, her voice exactly the way he remembered it, deceptively alluring, with only a hint of anger behind it.

"Hello, Morgana" he responded, his eyes fixed on her with a seething hatred boiling underneath the surface.

Harry stared in horror at the woman now standing in the middle of Hogsmeade. She was just like the woman in his dream, the woman who was Martin's Boggart. Beautifully dangerous, she stood there with a small smirk on her face, her eyes simmering with hate.

**Morgana.**

Martin- no, **Merlin**, approached her, his face calm, staring straight into her eyes.

"Attacking a defenceless village with a bunch of mindless killing machines for your own pleasure?" Merlin said to her, his voice low. "I thought you'd have grown out of that by now."

Her eyes flashed.

"Pretending to be someone you're not and lying to those you profess to love? I thought you'd have grown out of that by now!"

Merlin laughed, actually laughed, whilst Morgana looked on, her body almost glowing with magical energy.

"Old age doesn't suit you, Morgana," he said, his tone teasing, while his eyes glinted in anger. "It's made you even more bitter."

She scoffed, and her face contorted in fury. "And why should I not be? Thirteen hundred years in a Crystal Cave watching the world pass me by? You remained free only to torment me. I will make you pay for that!"

Merlin shook his head. "I'd hoped it'd be humbling, Morgana," he said, his voice steadily rising in anger. "Letting you realise the world doesn't revolve around you and your pathetic attempts to claim what is not rightfully yours. Obviously, I was wrong."

She sneered at him. "Obviously. And it wouldn't be the first time the great Merlin has been wrong!"

She took a few steps back and assumed a defensive position. "The world has been sadly deluded about you, Merlin. All you ever were was a glorified serving boy who was lucky in his friends and opportunities in life. You're pathetic! Your precious Arthur is dead, and it was all my doing!"

Merlin's eyes flashed in anger but he said nothing. His hands began to tremble.

Morgana ranted on:
"All this century does is profess your name with adoration and ill-deserved respect. I intend to show them all just how weak you are!"

Merlin's face darkened. "You announce yourself as the murderess of your own brother and expect respect? You're the one who's deluded, Morgana. You're the weak one."

She grinned, her eyes manic. "We shall see!"

"Heofonfyr!" she screamed, and a blazing ball of energy zoomed towards Merlin, cracking with magic and light so bright it seemed to come from the sun itself.

Harry and the others cried out as it enveloped Martin in a fiery inferno, burning fiercely on the spot, hiding him from view.

But the flames soon retreated, and Merlin reappeared once more, still standing in the same position, untouched by the flames, seemingly unconcerned with the scorch marks on the ground around them, and the smoke that stung at Harry's eyes.

He laughed lightly. "So predictable, Morgana," he teased. "You'd think being stuck in a cave all these years would have given you some time to think of new tactics."

She screamed in fury, and launched another fireball at him. This time, he reacted.

"Forstanden!" he commanded, raising his right arm in front of him. The fireball struck the shield he'd summoned in front of him, and hung in the air, burning so brightly, Harry felt it sear into his eyeballs.

The fireball faded, and Morgana's face was riven with hate as she saw that Merlin was again untouched. He didn't even look ruffled.

Harry felt as though his heart was about to leap out of his chest. He was actually witnessing a duel between Merlin and Morgana, the two most powerful magic users ever to live. He was frozen to the spot, unblinking, unable to tear his eyes away even to see the reactions of the others around him.

Morgana screamed again, looking thoroughly deranged. "Fight back!" she yelled. "You coward! Have the centuries made you soft? Fight back!"

For an instant, Harry thought Merlin wouldn't. He stared at Morgana, hatred now all over his face, regarding her with disgust, but he made no move to attack. Then-

"Sēcan sār!" he roared, and a stream of magic issued forth from his outstretched hand, pure energy, fire and light. It roared through the air as though in slow motion, and Harry felt the magic within him spike and rise in turn, boiling inside him. The spell sailed towards Morgana, whose eyes widened briefly in fear before raising a shield around herself, only just in time.

Merlin's eyes were hard as the magic continued to issue from his hand, never ceasing. The hairs on Harry's neck rose as he looked on Merlin's face. The Merlin from the legends … the power …

Then from behind the shield, another identical stream of magic issued from Morgana, and slammed into the magic from Merlin with a sound like the clap of thunder. Merlin winced at the force of it, but he kept going, his face determined.

The spot where the two spells met glowed with energy, sparks and jets of light spiralling away from it, shattering windows, smashing holes in the side of houses. It was like a giant ball of searing energy in the centre, with one trying to force it towards the other, without much success. It reminded Harry wildly of the time his and Voldemort's wands had connected in the graveyard.
The ground began to shatter beneath their feet, the air grew hot and burned Harry's face, but still they battled on.

He looked at their faces, and found it difficult to see which one showed the most hatred.

Then suddenly Morgana's spell changed. It became icy cold and brutal. Merlin's eyes burned golden to combat it, but he was a split second too late.

It forced him back several steps, and he cried out in pain, his left arm hanging limply, the force of the spell causing him unimaginable pain to his already wounded shoulder.

He was about to be overcome-

His eyes burned again, and a great surge of energy surged from him, short, and furious, and cruel. It rushed towards Morgana. She raised a shield to block it just in time, but the force of the spell against her hastily constructed shield was too much for her.

Even as Merlin sunk involuntarily to his knees in pain, his spell broke through Morgana's shield. Weakened as it was passing through the shield, it still threw her off her feet and she landed several feet away, gasping in pain. The left hand side of her body was burned, angry red all over her pale skin.

She struggled to her feet even as Merlin did the same, but she was quicker.

"This isn't the end, Emrys!" she spat, clutching at her burned skin which seemed to be peeling away. "You'll rue the day you ever set foot in Camelot!"

Merlin raised his hand to send another spell in her direction, but again, she was faster.

"Brūcan ās þanon heonan," she screamed, and furious whirlwinds soared around her, hiding her from view.

"No!" shouted Merlin, sending another powerful spell at her location, but by the time the spell reached the spot, she'd already vanished from view.

"NO!" Merlin screamed again, his voice agonised and desperate. "NO!"

His eyes flashed golden and as Merlin threw his arms down in frustration, fire erupted from his palms. It burned over his hands and up his forearms. It struck the ground with a sound of a bomb, and two craters were left in the street, as the fire continued to burn all over his hands.

Merlin screwed up his face in anger and frustration. The fire disappeared, leaving the skin beneath untouched.

He was breathing heavily, and clutched at his head, his hands shaking.

"No …" he moaned, staring at the spot Morgana had just been standing.

Harry watched him with something akin to fear. He'd never seen this side of Martin, of Merlin before, and it frightened him. He didn't know what to do. His entire body was flooded with adrenaline and he shook uncontrollably.

Merlin suddenly began to laugh, sounding almost mad. He shook his head.

"Typical," he said to himself. "Thirteen hundred years to prepare, and you've let her get away again."
He fell to his knees shaking, clutching at his shoulder in pain, not looking at anybody.

Harry turned his head to his right, and saw everyone else in varying states of battle weariness. All the Death Eaters had gone. Ron was staring at Martin boggle eyed. Neville was shaking. Hermione's eyes looked ready to pop out of her head. McGonagall looked faint. Lupin and Mr Weasley were frozen. Even Luna looked shocked.

Kingsley seemed the only one able to keep a clear head. He took a few hesitant steps forwards and, ignoring Merlin on the ground, continued walking down the street.

"Madame Rosmerta!" he called, his voice calm, back in control.

Madame Rosmerta peeked out from behind a door, visibly shaking.

"Oh, Minister!" she gushed, her eyes filled with tears. "Thank Merlin you're here!"

Kingsley blinked, and even Martin looked up at her choice of words.

"Rosmerta," Kingsley said soothingly. "I understand you must be shaken up, but I need you to be strong now. There are still Hogwarts students in the village, and many injured. I need you to get them all up to the castle. Evacuate the entire village, get them all inside the safety of the castle's wards. I'll send some Aurors to help. Can you do this for me?"

She nodded. "Of course. But what happened? Why were they attacking? Who was that woman with them?"

"Don't dwell on that for now, Rosmerta," said Kingsley firmly. "Just concentrate on what I've asked you to do for now."

She nodded, and scurried off, slamming on doors along the street, pulling out the terrified residents and barking orders at them.

Kingsley then turned back to the others, who seemed incapable of moving.

"I need hardly tell you all what we must do now. I'm summoning an emergency meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. I need to attend to a few things at the Ministry first but I'm relying on you Remus to gather everyone together for the meeting. The meeting shall begin in one hour in Grimmauld Place."

"No," Martin- Merlin, said from the ground.

Kingsley turned to him, frowning, yet still a little wary and obviously more than a little afraid.

"You object?" he asked cautiously.

Merlin looked up at him, heavy resignation in his eyes. "We can't meet there. I need somewhere with open space."

Kingsley looked simply baffled.

"If you want," put in Mr Weasley, more than a little hesitant, "you can meet at the Burrow. It's my home. It's fairly secluded and there's a lot of open space."

Merlin nodded. "That would be perfect, thank you."

"Why do you want open space?" Neville asked, looking worried.
"You'll see," Merlin said.

Kingsley looked a little confused, but nodded his consent, and then Apparated with a slight 'pop'.

The rest of them stood there in silence. No one really seemed to know what to do.

Then, Hermione walked forward confidently and crouched beside Merlin, placing her hand on his arm.

"Come on," she murmured to him.

Merlin looked at her, and smiled weakly. He took her offered hand and straightened up, wincing as he did so.

"You're hurt?" Remus asked in alarm, rushing forwards.

Merlin nodded. "My shoulder …"

"Come with us," Mr Weasley took command, though still pale. "Molly will be able to help."

Merlin smiled in gratitude. "Thank you." He paused for a moment, looking uncertain. "If you don't mind, I'd rather you not say anything about … well, you know … until the meeting begins. I'd rather explain it all in one go."

They all nodded their assent.

"Blimey, mate," said Ron, still goggling. "I wouldn't what to say!"

Merlin and Hermione came over to them all, Merlin still wincing in pain.

"Will you be alright to Apparate?" Remus asked, concern in every line in his face.

Merlin nodded. "It isn't so bad," he said, looking distracted.

"Well, then," Mr Weasley said bracingly, or what he thought was bracingly. "We'd best be off. Luna, Ginny, can you Apparate? You'd best hold on to someone. Right, here we go!"

Harry turned on the spot, and found himself in the familiar crushing darkness. When he emerged from it, he was greeted with the familiar sight of the Burrow.

Merlin gasped in pain, and staggered, and Harry reached out automatically to steady him. Merlin turned his face to Harry's and smiled in gratitude.

"Thanks," he said. "Guess I'd forgotten what Apparition was like. Transporting is much more comfortable."

Harry just nodded, numb. He had no idea how to respond.

Five minutes later, they were all inside the house, Mrs Weasley shrieking at the sight of them and their injuries. Neville had a twisted ankle and Luna a slight concussion, but Merlin seemed to be the only one with any serious injury. His left shoulder blade had been completely shattered by the force of Morgana's spell.

"What on earth were you doing?" Mrs Weasley whimpered, applying copious amounts of Madame Sirona's Soothing Salve to his shoulder. "How did this happen? You'll need to see a Healer, Martin dear. I can help with the swelling and the pain, but I can't repair it. You should go without delay-"
"No," said Merlin, interrupting her. "This meeting's important."

"But-"

"Molly, dear," said Mr Weasley with his best appeasing voice. "This is very important. Leave … Martin … be until after the meeting."

She looked indignant, but didn't argue any further, pointing her wand at Merlin's shoulder, bandages wrapping themselves around his torso, fuming.

The next forty five minutes or so passed largely in silence. Every so often an Order member would pop in looking either confused as to why the meeting was several hours early, or afraid, having heard about the attack in Hogsmeade.

Tonks turned up with Teddy in tow, flinging herself on Remus. "Oh! I heard what happened! Are you alright?"

Remus pulled her closely to him for a brief moment. "I'm fine, Dora."

She handed Teddy gratefully to Mrs Weasley who'd come forwards to claim him while Tonks and Remus talked. "But I heard there was a woman Death Eater there! With Bellatrix dead … that must have been Morgana herself!"

Mrs Weasley shrieked and almost dropped Teddy, who gurgled happily. "Morgana was there?" she said in a deadly whisper, looking faint.

Even Fred and George, who'd just appeared in the kitchen doorway looked afraid. The Order members who hadn't been there looked at the ones who had in shock.

"How on earth-" Hestia Jones asked, pale.

Remus held up his hands. "That's a story best saved for when Kingsley arrived. Heaven knows, I can hardly believe what's happened myself." He cast a glance at Merlin here, wonder in his eyes. "I can't quite do it justice."

The kitchen gradually filled up, and Mr Weasley decided they'd have to hold the meeting outside in the garden. A couple of tables were set up in the garden and everyone crowded around them, whispering frantically. Harry sat there between Ron and Hermione staring straight ahead. He couldn't quite believe all of this was happening.

Kingsley showed up at that point looking grave.

He looked around and frowned. "Where's …" he began, and trailed off. He had to mean Merlin, thought Harry. He couldn't quite bring himself to say the name 'Merlin', yet to call him 'Martin' would be even stranger. And besides, he was the only one who was missing.

"I'm here," Merlin said, approaching the table from the other side of the garden.

"What were you doing?" Ginny asked, looking curious, not taking her eyes away from his face,

"Calling someone, or a couple of someones," Merlin answered, sitting down heavily at the table.

Charlie Weasley's eyes brightened. "The dragons?" he asked, delighted. "We'll get to meet both of them?"

Merlin nodded.
"I think it's about time that I brought Kilgharrah back to Britain. We'll need his help."

"Because of Morgana?" Bill Weasley asked, pale underneath his scars. "What happened? Did she attack Hogsmeade? How did you all manage to get away?"

The ones who had been there exchanged awkward glances. How were they even to begin?

"I …" began Kingsley, looking unusually uncertain. "I think Mr Emrys would be the best one to explain that."

Everyone turned to face him. Merlin closed his eyes as though mentally preparing himself, looking completely exhausted, before opening them again. His face was determined, and the power seemed to radiate from him. Everyone seemed to draw back involuntarily.

"I fought her," he said, his voice calm. "I didn't manage to kill her, unfortunately, but she was injured and forced to retreat. I was taken unawares, and I'm a bit out of practise of duelling with someone whose magic rivals my own. But we'll meet again and she won't be so lucky."

Harry shuddered. He didn't doubt him in the slightest.

Mrs Weasley gasped. "You fought her?" she demanded, her hand over her chest. "I know you're … well, older than you look, but that was very irresponsible!"

"Yeah! And how did you manage to injure her?" Fred asked. "I thought you didn't know much of this Old Magic? How were you able to hold your own against someone that powerful?"

Merlin stared straight at him without saying anything for a couple of moments. The entire Order seemed to hold a collective breath.

"Because," he began. "I've fought her before."

The table gasped. "What?" demanded Percy Weasley, his normal composure gone. "But-

"I've lied to you all," Merlin continued, looking sincerely regretful. "Even more so than you think."

He paused for a moment as if summoning his courage.

"I … I am Merlin."

Hearing it again didn't make Harry any less shocked. His heart seemed to skip a beat.

Then Mrs Weasley screamed and dropped the dishes she had been carrying which shattered into a million pieces. Neville started to shake again, still looking disbelieving. Tonks fell right off her chair. Hagrid fell right through his chair. Dedalus Diggle fainted clear away. Everyone couldn't help but stare at him, varying states of shock, disbelief, wonder and fear in their faces.

Fred and George's eyes went as round as saucers: "You're joking!"

Merlin shook his head and gave them a feeble smile. "Nope."

His eyes moved from Bill and Fleur who were sitting side-by-side, their expressions mirrored in each other's faces, past Charlie whose mouth was lolling open, to fix them on Harry.

"I'm sorry," he said, almost whispering. "I'm so sorry for lying to you."

Harry felt the blood rush to his head. Merlin, *Merlin*, was apologising to him!
Harry laughed because he didn't know quite else what to do. "Yeah …" he said. "That was some lie …"

Merlin looked pained. "I never wanted you to find out this way. I was planning on telling you all at the meeting tonight."

"He was," piped up Hermione, who was sitting beside him. "He's been planning it all week."

"You knew?" Fred goggled at her.

"Yes," she said, blushing slightly. "I found out a few days ago."

"Blimey!" said George. "You've known for days that Martin was … was … you know and you kept it to yourself?"

"Don't blame her," Merlin interjected quickly. "I asked her not to say anything. I … I guess I just needed time to prepare."

"Yeah, a thousand years isn't much time," said Charlie sarcastically, shaking his head looking dazed.

"One thousand three hundred actually," Merlin said automatically and then winced at their expressions. "This … this was really hard for me. I want you to know that."

"Hard?" repeated Mrs Weasley, looking as though she were about to faint. "Why on earth would it be hard?"

"Yeah!" said Bill. "You're Merlin! You're like, the greatest wizard ever to live!"

"Yes," Merlin said. "But that doesn't mean it was easy." He sighed, and ran his hand over his face. "I'm old … so old I wonder that I'm still able to function properly. I've survived all these years for some greater purpose that I'm not even sure I understand properly. And I've lied all these years. Lied to others, and lied to myself. It was easier."

He shook his head, and looked down at his hands looking upset. "You've no idea … all these years on my own … I couldn't get too close to anyone because in just a few short decades they'd be dead. It was too painful. And I had to deny who I was for so long I'd almost forgotten who I really was."

He looked up at them all, tears forming in his eyes. "I could never be myself. I could never tell anyone who I was, because if I did they'd all be staring at me like you are now. They'd fear me, they'd treat me like some sort of god … and I didn't want that. I haven't truly been myself for so, so long …"

They all stared at him in silence, some of them looking tearful themselves. Ron looked distinctly uncomfortable. Harry couldn't tear his eyes away from him. This was the secret he'd been searching for, for what seemed like years. And now he was finally hearing it … it was more upsetting than gratifying.

"Well, now you can be," said Luna cheerfully, smiling at him. "You don't have to pretend anymore."

Merlin laughed. "Yes, I suppose."

"Wait," said Tonks, her shocking pink hair standing on end. "Is this really … I mean, are you … but this can't be! How … this must be some big misunderstanding! It has to be!"

"It isn't, Dora," Remus said to her, holding on to her hand tightly, his own face beginning to relax.
somewhat. "Morgana herself said so."

"What exactly happened today?" Tonks asked, gaping.

Kingsley launched into an explanation of everything that had happened, the revelation, the attack, Morgana's appearance, giving as much detail as possible, even including Merlin and Morgana's conversation. By the end there wasn't any one at the table who looked composed.

"Bloody hell," said Fred, his face pale. "You … you really are him aren't you?"

Merlin nodded silently.

Kingsley settled further into his seat, and looked at Merlin calmly.

"I really don't know how to begin with you … Merlin," he began, his eyes roaming freely all over his face.

"Please," Merlin all but begged. "Please don't treat me any differently. I'm still the same person that I was before."

There were a few nervous laughs. Kingsley smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid that's quite impossible, Merlin," he said. "You have just revealed yourself to be the most powerful sorcerer ever to have existed. You must try and appreciate how we must be feeling at the moment."

Merlin nodded. "I understand. But … please appreciate how hard this is for me as well. I've never told anyone this before."

Mrs Weasley rushed over to him, and, hesitating slightly, placed her hand on his uninjured shoulder. "Oh, you poor dear," she said, all shock gone from her face to be replaced with motherly concern. "Imagine holding all of that in all these years."

Harry blinked. How had he coped with keeping a secret like that for thirteen hundred years?

Merlin smiled up at her gratefully.

"Will you be able to help us?" Charlie blurted out, still looked awed. "I mean, you're so … powerful. Surely you can defeat Voldemort?"

Merlin frowned, and then looked at Harry, his eyes pained. "I can't," he said, his voice heavy. "That is Harry's task, and Harry's alone. He was chosen by the Old Religion to complete this task, only he can accomplish it."

Harry nodded slightly. "I understand," he said, surprising even himself. "I can feel it. Like it's what I'm supposed to do. Is that the Old Religion inside of me telling me that?"

Merlin nodded. "Yes."

"Old Religion?" asked Charlie, looking confused. "What has that got to do with Harry?"

"Mer- Merlin's been teaching it to him," said Ron, still looking shaken.

Everyone gasped and turned to face Harry.

"You-you mean you can actually use it?" asked George, his eyes wide.
"No," he said, shaking his head. "Not yet at least. M-Merlin says I have the ability to use it, and he's agreed to teach me."

Eyes swivelled back around to Merlin.

"Blimey," said Fred under his breath. "Imagine having Merlin teach you."

"Don't treat him like that," said Hermione, looking upset. "He is still the same person. His personality, everything's still the same!"

"Yeah, except for the fact that he's the most powerful wizard in the world …"

"I think," interrupted Kingsley. "I think we should reserve judgement until we have heard the whole story. Will you tell us it, Merlin?"

Merlin frowned. "The whole story? Where do you want me to start?"

"How about from the beginning?"

Merlin scoffed. "That would take a hundred years to tell."

"Well, I'm sure none of us would object to hearing the full account of the life of the great Merlin first-hand," Kingsley smiled at him.

As if on cue, the table leaned in to listen, looking like eager school children. Merlin looked at them all and sighed.

"Well, I suppose …"

He took a deep breath. "Well, to start at the very beginning … I'm sure you've all heard of Uther Pendragon?"

They all nodded, impatient for him to go on. Harry felt his heart thumping rapidly.

"Uther Pendragon was …" began Merlin looking uncertain. "Well, I'm not sure exactly just how evil he was. He did many awful, awful things, but at the same time … He was the King of Camelot, and he was desperate for an heir for his throne. He made an arrangement with the sorceress Nimueh to give his barren wife the ability to conceive. She did, and she gave birth to a son, Arthur. But, what Nimueh had neglected to mention, was that for a life to be given, a life must be taken. Queen Ygraine died in childbirth. And Uther was driven almost mad by her loss. He began the Great Purge, determined to wipe magic from the face of the earth."

Merlin's face became sad. "Hundreds of people were put to death during the Purge, many of them mere children. He was … ruthless."

No one spoke, too caught up in the moment to do anything other than stare.

"He destroyed the dragons," Merlin said, and both Hagrid and Charlie gasped. "He destroyed all of them, except one."

"Aithusa?" asked Kingsley.

Merlin shook his head. "No, she hadn't hatched yet. It was Kilgharrah. Uther wanted him kept as an example. He tricked the last remaining Dragonlord, Balinor, into believing he only wanted to call a truce with the Great Dragon, but then locked him away under the castle. He sentenced Balinor to death. Fortunately, Gaius, the Court Physician managed to help Balinor escape, and sent him to live
with his friend, a woman named Hunith in Ealdor, a small village outside of Camelot's borders. She looked after him. Eventually they fell in love. They were happy."

"Uther wasn't. He sent his men after Balinor, and he was forced to flee to protect the woman. He never saw her again. That woman was my mother."

Mrs Weasley sank down in a chair, looking teary-eyed. Merlin continued on, looking as though he was almost relieved to finally get all of this off his chest.

"I never saw my father as a child," Merlin said, his eyes still sad. "But my mother was as good and kind a woman as I've ever known. You remind me of her sometimes," he said, smiling at Mrs Weasley. "I suppose my childhood was happy. We were poor, very poor; we lived in a one-roomed shack that we shared with the animals in the winter. It was cold, and we often went hungry. I had to begin working in the fields when I was four years old just to get enough to eat. But I never complained; I never knew any better."

Ron's mouth hung open, and he looked troubled, probably regretting the amount of times he'd complained of being poor.

"According to my mother," Merlin went on. "I began using magic the very day that I was born. I never learned how to use it. It was instinctive. I had very little control over it. My mother was afraid for me. Our village was very small, and she was terrified that someone would find out."

"Someone did find out. My friend Will. But he was the only one. No one could know. I had to keep my gifts secret. It was forced on me for as far back as I can remember. My mother was furious when she discovered that Will knew; she was so afraid something would happen to me."

Something seemed to resonate within Harry. He thought he'd had it bad with the Dursley's. They'd forced him to keep his magic and abnormalities secret because of what the neighbours would think, Merlin's mother had done it to keep him alive.

"Eventually, my mother sent me to her friend Gaius in Camelot," Merlin continued. "He'd been a magic user in his youth, and she hoped he'd help me find some meaning in my gifts. Help me to control them."

"Wait," interrupted Charlie, looking confused. "Your mother was afraid you'd be persecuted for your magic, so she sent you to a city where magic was punishable by death?"

Merlin laughed. "Yeah, I suppose it's a bit strange. Maybe she thought the threat of death might keep me out of trouble. She was wrong of course." His eyes glinted with some amused memory.

"Anyway, almost immediately, Gaius discovered my magic. He promised to help me, but he admitted he had no idea why I was like that. How I had been born with the magic."

"But we're all born with magic!" Bill said frowning. "What's so unusual?"

"Magic back then was very different, it was much more powerful than anything you have today," Merlin explained. "Users of the magic of the Old Religion were born with the magic, but very, very few were ever able to use it without being taught. My magic manifested itself naturally. Magic normally needed to be studied and honed for years. Mine didn't."

The astonished gazes of everyone around the table seemed only to increase. Merlin kept going as though he hadn't noticed.

"I met Arthur my second day in Camelot," he said, smiling. "He was just the Prince back then. The
greatest swordsman in the city."

"Really?" Mr Weasley asked eagerly. "I was named after him you know! What was he like?"

Merlin snorted. "A complete idiot."

He laughed at their faces. "Oh, I admit. He was a great man, everything the legends say and more. But he was an arrogant prat. At least when I first knew him."

"He was a bit of a bully and I stood up to him. He threw me in the dungeons for my cheek, and then the stocks. That's where I met Guinevere."

"You met a Queen when you were having rotten fruit being thrown at you?" Fred asked, looking amused.

Merlin laughed. "She wasn't a Queen back then, or even noble. She was a servant."

"A servant?!" several voices cried out at once.

Merlin laughed again. "Yep. Lady Morgana's maidservant."

"Lady Morgana's-"

"Can I get on with the story?" Merlin asked sounding annoyed. They all immediately shut up. Merlin smirked. "I think I could get used to this …"

"Anyway, Arthur and I didn't exactly hit it off. I called him an ass to his face. He didn't like me much for that."

Merlin frowned. "Then I met Kilgharrah. He told me of my 'destiny'. He said that Arthur was the Once and Future King, and it was my duty to protect him, and to ensure he became a great king, because he was the one destined to unite the kingdoms of Albion and restore peace to the land."

"And so that's how you became friends?" Neville asked, wonder in his voice.

"No," scoffed Merlin. "I still thought he was an ass. Kilgharrah wasn't exactly reassuring. So frustratingly cryptic … I didn't believe that Arthur was the 'one'."

"Then what changed?" Ron asked.

Merlin thought back. "I saved his life," he said simply. "There was a banquet where a witch was trying to kill him. I saved him. I'm not sure why. It just felt right. Uther rewarded me by making me the Prince's personal manservant."

"That was a reward?" Ron asked, disgust on his face. "No gold or jewels?"

"Merlin was a servant?"

"You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not," Merlin said looked amused. "It was considered a great honour in those days. I didn't think so though. Arthur and I still hated each other."

"But things gradually began to change," he said smiling. "I helped him to stop being such a prat, and he showed me his true side. He was brave and noble and daring … you know, all that Gryffindor stuff. It wasn't long before we became friends."
"But you didn't tell him about your magic?" Harry asked, though it wasn't really a question.

Merlin shook his head. "I was afraid," he admitted. "I was so scared that he'd hate me, that he'd feel betrayed. It wasn't the inevitable execution that frightened me, it was how Arthur would see me. I couldn't bear it."

Tears began streaming down Hermione's face, and Mrs Weasley's face crumpled, blinking furiously.

"He wouldn't really have killed you though?" Ron asked warily. "I mean, Aithusa said you were really close and …"

Merlin sighed. "To be honest, I'm not sure what he would have done in those early days. I practised my magic in secret. I used it to protect him whenever I could. But if he had found out …"

He sighed again. "My magic became stronger, and Arthur gradually became a better man. By the time he was eventually crowned King, I was certain beyond doubt he would become the man in the prophecies."

"I won't bore you all with the details, but suffice it to say, we were close. We saved each other's lives all the time, and although he mostly thought of me as his clumsy servant who couldn't wield a sword to save himself, I think he respected me. I advised him in any way I could, and we became more than master and servant."

"I hated to lie to him. I hated pretending. But I could see no other option. He was a good and kind man. He married Gwen, even though she was just a servant, and he created the Knights of the Round Table where everyone was equal, nobleman and servant alike."

"Eventually of course, he did find out. It was worse than I could have imagined. He was angry, and hurt. But … he forgave me. I couldn't quite believe it. I'd lied to him every day for years and years. I was everything he'd been taught to hate … and he forgave me."

Hagrid's black eyes filled with tears, and even Harry felt himself moved. He'd heard most of this from Aithusa already, but to hear it directly from Merlin himself …

Merlin laughed suddenly. "The rest as they say is history. We created a Golden Age in Camelot. Magic was welcomed. Muggles and sorcerers lived side-by-side in harmony. It was as perfect as they say."

He looked sad again. "But it didn't last of course. Arthur died, and the Old Religion went into decline. Magic was once again feared and hated. I lingered on, forced to watch as everything I'd worked for crumbled. I knew I had to wait, wait for something. I wasn't even sure what, only that something would happen to restore the Old Religion to its rightful place."

"I more or less avoided wizarding society. It was too painful to get involved. But then I met the Hogwarts Founders. They possessed a strange hybrid of magic, a combination of the Old and the New. So I taught them, helped them with the school. They became the closest friends I'd had in three hundred years. I was there when Rowena came up with the name of the school. I was present when the school motto was formed. I saw Godric gave Helga the little golden cup that would eventually become a Horcrux. I attended the very first Sorting Ceremony … In essence, I was the fifth Founder."

McGonagall's eyes looked ready to pop out of her skull.

Merlin kept going: "I found ways to amuse myself over the centuries. I always had to move around and change my name. I couldn't confide in anyone. Only the ghosts really seemed to understand
what it was like to linger on all these years. I went to Hogwarts about a dozen times, Sorting myself into various Houses, just trying to kill time until I was needed."

"You went to Hogwarts a dozen times?" Fred and George asked incredulously. "Wasn't once torture enough?"

Merlin laughed. "It may have been torture for you, but I enjoyed it. The work was incredibly easy, and I liked to feel a part of something. I'd helped the school in its early years. I liked seeing how it developed."

"What did you mean, 'until you were needed'?" Remus asked, frowning.

Merlin looked as though he was trying to find the words. "I'm not sure exactly," he admitted. "I knew that I had to listen to the powers of the Old Religion, that it was my duty to restore it. I was waiting for the chance to do that."

"How would you know when that was?"

Merlin shook his head. "You've no idea how many times I've asked myself the very same thing," he murmured. "There were times when I hated the Old Religion. I hated being always at its mercy, being forced to watch so much death and destruction over the centuries without being able to do anything to interfere. But I waited."

"Things began to change only a few decades ago," he said. "I felt it when Voldemort created his Horcruxes, and I could sense that it was coming closer. But it wasn't until Hallowe'en in 1981 that I was certain."

Everyone turned to Harry, who squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. Merlin didn't stop:

"I could sense what was happening. Lily Potter invoked the ancient powers of the Old Religion when she sacrificed herself for her son. That's what protected him. That's why he has that magic within him even now. I knew then that Harry was the one I'd been waiting for. I knew I had to protect him at all costs."

Harry felt his face begin to burn. This was him that Merlin was talking about. He couldn't believe it. Yet at the same time, he was inwardly cursing himself. This was Martin, he was still the same person. He knew him! Why was everything so different now?

Merlin continued. "I watched over him for years, trying to keep him as safe as possible, without interfering too much in his life. Then the incident with the graveyard …"

Merlin scowled, and the effect was genuinely frightening, or was that only because Harry now knew just how much power he possessed?

"Those powers that brought Voldemort back were evil," he spat. "It was the Old Religion, but cruelly subverted. There needed to be a death for a life, but Voldemort got around that by using Harry's blood. He didn't know that if he had used another wizard's blood he wouldn't have succeeded. It was the power of the Old Religion in Harry that brought him back. He took that power into himself that night."

Harry felt himself go cold all over. It was magic within him that had resurrected Voldemort?

Merlin sighed. "I took that as a sign. I went to Dumbledore, and offered him my help."

"Dumbledore knew?" McGonagall gasped, her eyebrows still permanently raised in a shocked
expression.

"No," said Merlin. "At least, I don't think so. I never told him my identity, but he could sense my power, and he knew there was more I was letting on. I think perhaps he knew more than I thought at the time. Fawkes made him suspicious, I think. He's the same phoenix that had been Godric's centuries before. Fawkes trusted me, and phoenixes don't just trust anybody."

"I agreed to help him protect Harry. I tried to get him to reveal the prophecy to him, I tried to help him with the Horcruxes, I did everything I could, but always at a distance. It was Harry's destiny; I was only there to guide."

Merlin looked to Harry here, and Harry stared back, for the first time, not afraid, not awed.

"I was there when you were searching for the Horcruxes," he said softly. "I was there every step of the way, helping where I could. You've no idea how many Dementors I fought off who'd come across your tent in the middle of the night, unaffected by your wards. I wanted so much to reveal myself. But I had to wait; it just wasn't the right time."

He sighed in frustration. "It was so hard, but I had to have faith in the Old Religion. It had kept me alive until now, and I had to trust it. Then all of a sudden, I just knew. I knew it was the right time. It was the middle of the battle, and I just knew it was time for me to come back."

He paused for a moment. "I wanted to tell you everything there and then. But the Old Religion told me it wasn't the right time. And I hated it, hated it so much. But I listened. I was there to help you, Harry, not to fulfil your destiny for you."

He broke off, and breathed out a huge sigh. "And the rest, you all know."

Silence prevailed for the longest of moments.

Then Mrs Weasley shrieked, scrambled out of her chair and practically threw herself on Merlin, who was too shocked to react. She held him in a tight hug, barely even avoiding his injury, weeping openly.

"Thank you, thank you," she snivelled. "Thank you for everything you've done for us! We can't even begin to repay you!"

"I haven't-"

"Don't you dare say you haven't done anything," Mrs Weasley suddenly looked stern. "If it wasn't for you I doubt any of us would even be here! You've suffered so much all of these years and sacrificed everything and you're still the sweetest and bravest person I've ever known. My children owe their lives to you! And it isn't because of what your name is … it's because of who you are!"

Merlin stared at her, his face suddenly looking young and emotional. He was lost for words.

Everyone began nodding in agreement, after the shock had worn off, the Weasley children in particular looking dumbfounded at the sight of the great Merlin getting a telling off from their mother.

Merlin looked around at them all, his eyes suspiciously wet. "You don't hate me then?" he asked almost hesitatingly, looking at Harry in particular.

Harry didn't say anything for a moment. "Of course we don't hate you … Merlin," he said, trying to get used to saying the name. "It's a shock … and I'm still a bit overwhelmed to tell you the truth, but I'll never hate you."
Merlin grinned.

"I just hope you understand," said Fred Weasley, sounding teasing, the astonishment in his face finally gone, "that you'll never hear the end of it from us."

"Yeah," cackled George. "Just think of all the things we can pull on an old man like you!"

Merlin laughed, looking relieved. "I wouldn't if I were you," he teased back. "I lived in Camelot with Sir Gwaine. I've seen *everything.*"

"One thing's confusing me," said Neville, looking only slightly nervous at speaking up. "Why does everyone think of you as an old man?"

To their surprise Merlin laughed. "That's quite a story," he said, amused. "I never aged, you know. Even when Arthur and Gwen were getting old and grey I still looked the same. They weren't best pleased with that." He smiled again. "It was before Arthur and Gwen were married, back before they knew about my magic. Uther accused Gwen of using enchantments to make Arthur fall in love with her, you know, because he couldn't comprehend the fact that the Crown Prince could fall in love with a serving girl. She was sentenced to death, so I decided to take the blame. I made an Ageing Potion and called myself 'Dragoon the Great' and got myself 'caught'. Gwen got let off the hook, and I used Dragoon whenever I needed to use magic without Arthur realising it was me. He was pretty annoyed when he found out it was me all along. Every time an illustrator came to the castle to record the Royal Court he made them paint me like an old man. It was revenge he said. I guess that's where the stereotype came from."

Fred and George chuckled appreciatively. "He sounds like our type of man."

"Didn't he use to use you as target practise?" Ron asked, thinking back to their conversation with Aithusa.

Merlin laughed, but everyone around the table looked indignant. "Yes, that was just how we worked together. Continually antagonistic. He made me dress in ridiculous Court regalia, and I caused his trousers to fall down in public at inopportune moments … it was all good-hearted of course. Most of the time."

They all chuckled, still a little awed at the news they were receiving.

But Kingsley suddenly looked serious. "There is one thing you have neglected to mention," he said gravely. "Morgana."

The atmosphere tensed, and Merlin's face hardened.

"Yes, I suppose you'll want to know all about her," he said. He sighed, and began. "We used to be friends you know. She was Uther's ward; she and Arthur grew up together. They were very close. She was kind to me; she risked her life to help protect me and my family when my village was attacked by raiders. She opposed Uther's methods against magic, and she cared deeply about the people of Camelot, Gwen, Arthur … even me."

"But then she discovered her own magic, and she was afraid. I tried to help her, but I was a coward, and didn't do enough, I wasn't brave enough to tell her of my own magic. She suffered in silence. Terrified that Uther would kill her."

"Her sister Morgause came to Court and twisted her mind against Camelot. I was forced to try and kill her to stop her destroying the city. From that moment on, she hated me. She began to work against Camelot from within, betraying everyone she had once cared about. She discovered she was
actually Uther's illegitimate daughter, and resented him even more, and began to covet the throne."

He sighed before continuing. "Her magic was weak at first, but she slowly got better and better, even as she tried to bring down Camelot. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't accuse her publicly; I was a mere servant. Then she got a hold of the Cup of Life."

Everyone perked up at this, and leaned in closer.

"Morgause manipulated a neighbouring King and turned his army immortal with the Cup," Merlin said, frowning as he remembered. "They took the city, and we were forced to flee as Morgana crowned herself Queen. But we fought back, and we took back the city. I destroyed the army by emptying the Cup of the blood it contained."

Here, he ran his hand over his face looking tired. "I gave the Cup to the Druids, trusting that they would protect it. I should have been more careful with it. I should have realised the evil it could do in the wrong hands. I shouldn't have been so complacent."

He sighed again before continuing. "Morgana was in exile, but that didn't stop her trying to take the city—she was completely deranged. She almost succeeded a fair few times as well. But gradually she became less of a threat. Arthur found out about my magic, Camelot became stronger than ever, and we began to believe we'd seen the last of her."

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Merlin shook his head. "She'd been conspiring with Mordred, a Druid boy. Arthur and I had saved his life once, even though Kilgharrah had advised against it. I knew he was the one destined to kill Arthur, but I didn't believe I could leave him to die on the basis of a prophecy made centuries before we were even born."

"Mordred raised an army against Camelot. I don't why, even now. Camelot had become a magical haven, a place of acceptance, no longer the place of fear it had been. But I suppose he and his followers had long memories. We had no idea they were working together."

"Morgana was the one who first 'warned' us of the threat. She seemed genuinely regretful of everything that had happened. The years hadn't been kind to her, and Arthur was willing to offer her a second chance for the sake of the bond they'd once shared. He sent me to negotiate with her. I hoped against hope that she'd changed. I was such a fool. I was desperate to find the friend that I'd once known as a young man, hoping we could start again, hoping that the fighting would finally end."

His jaw stiffened, and he began to breathe heavily. "It was a trick," he said heavily. "She lured me into the Crystal Cave and trapped me there. The cave was filled with seeing crystals; they offer glimpses of the past, the present and the future all at once. I was forced to watch as Arthur rode out to face Mordred on the battlefield without me there to protect him. He killed Mordred, but not before he'd been mortally wounded himself."

Tears filled his eyes again. "Morgana came back to the cave. She wanted to gloat. I didn't give her the chance. I fought her. She'd underestimated just how powerful I was. I trapped her there instead, determined to leave her there for all eternity to suffer."

"I should have killed her," he said in a hollow tone. "If I had, none of this would have been possible."

No one had anything to say to that. Harry shivered. He couldn't even imagine what it would have been like to watch your best friend to be killed like that …
All the anger he'd felt had completely evaporated and replaced with a deep, burning understanding. He didn't resent him for keeping these secrets. He couldn't. Not when he'd often kept the most painful aspects of his own life to himself.

He no longer saw the great Merlin sitting there in front of him, rather, the brave and funny man he'd come to know as Martin Emrys. He lived up to the legends, he was powerful, ancient, wise, but he was still a human being with human emotions. He couldn't just see Merlin the legend, he had to see Merlin the man.

How many times had he himself resented the fact that people made assumptions about him based on his famous name? How many times had he wished people wouldn't hear the name 'Harry Potter' and expect great things from him?

It was the exact same situation here.

He wanted to say something to Merlin, something reassuring, letting him know just how much he understood. But he couldn't articulate everything he was feeling. How could he?

But it turned out, he was denied the chance anyway.

Merlin suddenly perked up, and smiled. "Here they come," he murmured.

He jumped to his feet and strode confidently over to the field adjoining the Weasley's garden, everyone immediately leaping up to follow him.

Merlin stood in the field, waiting, while the others held their breath.

Then-

A great roar and rushing of wings sounded above them, and Aithusa landed heavily in front of Merlin. She was panting slightly, but looked far more confident in the air than when Harry had first seen her.

Everyone who hadn't met Aithusa jumped back in alarm, crying out in fear, but Hagrid ran forwards, looking upset.

"Oh Aithusa!" he moaned. "Yeh shouldn' be flyin'! Yeh're not well enough yet!"

"I'm well enough for this, giant man," she said, drawing herself up to her full height.

"Bloody hell," one of the Weasley twins uttered as they looked at her.

"Noble Aithusa," said Kingsley, stepping forwards. "It is an honour to make your acquaintance again."

She sniffed. "Thank you." She turned her sightless eyes to Merlin, who stood completely still.

"They know?" she asked simply.

Merlin nodded slowly. "Yes."

She roared with delight. "About time! I was beginning to think you'd be forever hiding in the shadows like a frightened dog!"

Merlin smiled. "So did I at one point."
Merlin went forwards to her, and stroked her scales soothingly, making introductions as he did so. The members of the Order he introduced just squeaked a 'hello'. They were simply in awe of the magnificent creature in front of them.

"Where is Kilgharrah?" Aithusa asked, laying her head heavily on the ground in front of her, causing several people to jump back in alarm.

"He's coming," answered Merlin. "He's got further to come than you."

Ron jumped, and stared up at the clear sky, searching, his eyes terrified. Many of the others were doing the same. Harry felt a thrill of anticipation. Kilgharrah by all accounts was far older and wiser than even Merlin. He had to admit, he also was a little afraid.

"Is this such a great idea?" Tonks asked, her wide eyes fixed on Aithusa, hugging Teddy to her closely. "I mean, do we want some massive big dragon flying over Muggle Britain causing panic?"

Aithusa snorted. "Dragons can avoid being seen if they wish. Thus why it took you so long for you to discover me. Kilgharrah is no hatchling; he can get here."

Merlin frowned suddenly. "Why was it the two of you separated again?"

Aithusa sighed. "He called me 'an immature hatchling with more vanity than sense'. He said I had to go away for a few centuries to gain some wisdom before he'd put up with me." She snorted derisively. "I'm not even that young! I'm almost the same age as Merlin!"

"Yeah, but he was always condescending with me as well," Merlin shrugged.

"Yes, but the future of the dragon-race does not depend on whether or not the two of you get on!"

"Someone was condescending with you?" Charlie asked, incredulous.

Merlin nodded. "Kilgharrah ... well, he's an acquired taste. Sooo infuriatingly cryptic, not really helpful … treats me like a child. Plus he can get very angry."

This wasn't making Harry feel any better.

"Do you know what happened this morning?" Merlin asked Aithusa.

She nodded. "Yes," she said, sounding grave. "I tried to come to your assistance as soon as I sensed Morgana's presence, but I was too late."

"Why would she have attacked Hogsmeade?" Hermione asked, biting her lip. "I mean, the Cup of Life couldn't possibly be there!"

"No," said Merlin, his eyes distant. "But I was. She was after me."

They exchanged awkward glances. Mrs Weasley stepped forward, somewhat wary of Aithusa.

"Martin my dear … Merlin. You can't possibly know that."

Merlin shook his head. "She knew I was there. She must have sensed it as soon as I stepped outside of the castle wards. She's probably been waiting for this moment since she returned. She's already told Voldemort about me. He knows."

It was like an iron fist clenching around Harry's heart.
"He knows?" asked Bill sounding disappointed. Harry could see why; having the Merlin on their side would have been the perfect surprise tactic to use against them both.

Aithusa raised her head suddenly. She stayed still for a moment, then shook her head briefly. "Kilgharrah approaches," she said, as she settled her head on the ground again. "I've relayed everything to him with my mind."

"Everything?" Remus asked, looking interested.

"Yes, everything, like I said. I've filled him in on exactly what this idiot's been up to for the last few centuries."

"Oi!" Merlin said, but Aithusa rolled her eyes.

"You are an idiot, Merlin, do not deny it. It surprises me that so many people have forgotten just how idiotic you were."

Merlin scowled, and Harry barely had time to register his astonishment at Merlin being called an idiot, when he heard a flapping of great wings.

Winds buffeted them from all sides, causing them all to stagger with the sheer force of it. He looked up, and his heart stopped.

Hovering above them was the largest creature he had ever seen. A gigantic golden dragon with golden eyes; so large Harry wouldn't be surprised if he could have filled three times the space as the Great Hall at Hogwarts. His wings flapped loudly, like waves crashing against the beach. He landed on the ground so heavily it shook, and threw many people to the ground. Those who remained standing yelped and jumped back with a cry of fear as he swung his giant head around to look at them.

He turned his giant eyes back to Merlin who had a tiny smile fixed on his face. The Great Dragon stepped forwards, each step shaking the ground like a mini-earthquake. He stopped a few feet from Merlin, who betrayed no sign of fear.

Then the dragon seemed to bow down before him. He raised his magnificent head, and spoke, his voice deep and as ancient as the world itself.

"Greetings, Merlin, it has been many years."

Harry got a shiver down his spine at the sound of the voice. The power in his words … the way he'd said Merlin.

Merlin grinned, and looked up at him. "Hello, Kilgharrah."

"Bloody hell," someone moaned from behind Harry, and Kilgharrah turned his head to face them.

"I see your destiny has finally approached, Merlin," the dragon observed. His eyes fixed on Harry, and he felt himself freeze.

Kilgharrah blinked his massive eyes. "Yes, the Potter boy. You have great things ahead of you, young one. Tasks only you can complete."

Harry cleared his throat nervously, trying not to look at the massive teeth protruding over his jaw.

"I'm not sure I can complete them," he admitted.
Kilgharrah chuckled, and the very earth shook. "That is precisely why you will. I can think of one other who once said the same thing," he said, and he turned back to Merlin, who was smiling.

"Have you been in hiding all these years, young warlock?"

"Yes," said Merlin frowning. "And you can stop with that 'young warlock' stuff. That got old centuries ago. I'm not exactly young anymore!"

"You are young in my eyes, Merlin," the dragon said. "You are still child-like in some respects. That is why these friendships you forge will be more important than ever. You have hidden yourself away, mourning for your past. Now the moment has come in which the fate of the Old Religion and the wizarding world rests on your shoulders."

Merlin scowled. "Still bloody cryptic then?"

Kilgharrah laughed again. "I am a dragon," he said simply. Then he caught sight of Aithusa.

"Ah, the hatchling," he said, his tone amused.

Aithusa scowled. "I am no hatchling!"

"I watched you hatch, young one, you are a mere infant."

Aithusa struggled to her feet, and growled deep down in her throat.

Kilgharrah regarded her calmly. "No dragon of maturity would allow themselves to be captured and abused thus by goblins."

"You were captured by Muggles" Aithusa countered. "Which is the greater shame?"

Kilgharrah growled. "I was led there by a Balinor, a Dragonlord. I had no choice! But I regained my freedom and took my revenge on the city."

"I got free too!" Aithusa objected. "Harry and his friends released me, just like Merlin released you! And I'd take my revenge if only Merlin would let me!"

"No," said Merlin firmly. "More mindless killing will accomplish nothing."

Kilgharrah regarded him carefully. "Still so wise …" he mused. "Such a change from the clueless, skinny serving boy I first met all those years ago."

Merlin looked uncomfortable, and Kilgharrah turned away. He looked affectionately down at Aithusa.

"I am sorry, young one," he said. "I should not have abandoned you. Dragonkind should stick together."

He bent his head, and opened his massive maw and breathed over Aithusa's face, magic seeming to shimmer in the air.

Her face glowed, and slowly, the scars she had sustained from the goblin's swords disappeared, and the scales beneath were restored to their former glory. Her eyes grew brighter, losing their milky quality.

Aithusa blinked, and she looked up at Kilgharrah who was smiling down at her. Her eyes were completely healed.
She made a noise of contentment, and nuzzled her head against his for a brief moment of affection. She turned her head this way and that, looking at everyone for the first time. Hagrid had tears of joy in his eyes.

She turned to face Merlin, and she smiled.

"Well, I'm glad fashions have changed," she murmured, amused. "Seventeenth century wigs really didn't suit you."

Merlin laughed out loud, and leapt forward and threw himself on her leg, the only part of her she could reach, not even minding his injured shoulder. She smiled again.

Merlin withdrew, his eyes glowing with happiness, looking young and carefree.

Harry felt strange to watch them. He'd never seen Martin so happy, so relaxed. He was back with the people he belonged. His burdens were gone. He was finally free to be himself.

And Harry was in awe. Not at the fact the legendary Merlin was standing before him. But that the legendary Merlin was just a man.

A man who no longer had to hide.
"So he was really a servant?" Fred asked Kilgharrah for the hundredth time that day.

Kilgharrah rolled his eyes. "Yes. He was."

"So, like, he scrubbed floors and stuff?" George asked, again for the hundredth time.

"Yes, he scrubbed floors," said Kilgharrah impatiently. "As far as I'm aware his duties in Camelot consisted of scrubbing floors, keeping Arthur's bed chambers clean, dressing him, serving him at table, cleaning his armour, mucking out the stables and accompanying him wherever he went."

The twin's eyes went huge. "Whoa," George said. "To think that Merlin did all of that! And we think we're hard done by when we're asked to de-Gnome the garden!"

Harry had to chuckle at their faces. They'd been told all of this a dozen times already, but it didn't seem to make it any less awesome to them.

"Why does Aithusa always call him an idiot?" Fred asked.

Kilgharrah laughed, and they all jumped back a little at the sudden noise. "Because, as a young man, Merlin was clumsy, slightly scatter-brained and generally naïve and silly. Things he's mostly grown out of."

They all grinned. They couldn't quite believe all the information about Merlin's youth they were managing to get.

It was early evening, and Harry, Ron, Hermione, the Weasley children, Neville and Luna were all sitting in the field outside the Burrow with the two dragons. The sight of them was only just beginning to feel less surreal.

The meetings earlier had gone on for hours as they all debated further where the Cup of Life could be. Merlin couldn't come up with any ideas, and everyone seemed stumped. They'd thought and thought and thought but they'd gotten no further. Eventually, Merlin had almost collapsed at the table as the pain relief had worn off and his shoulder ached, and Kingsley had had the meeting adjourned. He'd returned to the Ministry to deal with the crisis left after the Hogsmeade battle and organise searches for the Cup. McGonagall and Hagrid had gone to Hogwarts to deal with the students caught up in the battle (miraculously there had been no loss of life) and Merlin had been taken to St Mungo's to deal with his fractured shoulder (not wanting to bother Madame Pomfrey who had enough injuries on her plate), accompanied by Mr and Mrs Weasley and Remus Lupin. The others had drifted off home, or to the Ministry or Hogwarts to lend assistance as soon as they had realised Merlin (who they'd been continually staring at) wasn't remaining at the Burrow. Harry and the others had come down to the field to quiz Kilgharrah and Aithusa on Merlin's early life. So far, everything was fascinating.

Harry was still more than a little wary of Kilgharrah. He was so large it was hard not to be. He remembered all too well the story Aithusa had told them about how Kilgharrah had attacked Camelot and killed people in revenge. He was ancient, and everything about him, his appearance, his voice, his wisdom just served to emphasise that. Plus, Kilgharrah tended to stare at him, as though knowing something Harry didn't.

The Weasley twins had taken to him immediately however, asking him question after question. Harry would have thought Kilgharrah would have gotten annoyed with it by now, but he tolerated
them quite amiably and seemed happy to answer their questions. Charlie was just sitting staring at him in awe, while Aithusa was examining her reflection in a nearby puddle, admiring her newly healed eyes.

"So," said Bill, looking confused. "He really didn't have any magical training? None at all?"

Kilgharrah shook his massive head. "None. He used his magic all his life. It came as naturally to him as breathing. Gaius gave him a book of spells, and guided him somewhat, but Merlin taught himself everything."

"But how could he possibly …" Ginny trailed off, a tiny frown above her eyes.

"He is exceptional," said Kilgharrah. "And he had little choice. One could hardly advertise for a magic instructor in those days."

Bill whistled loudly. "Just when I thought Merlin couldn't be any more powerful …"

No one spoke for a while; Harry could tell they were replaying the day's events over and over again in their minds- it was all he could do himself.

Every time he closed his eyes, all he saw was that fireball from Morgana engulfing Merlin. The way he had laughed, the anger in his eyes. The way he had fought back, the very air crackling with magical energy.

It made his heart beat faster to think about it. Martin, the boy he'd known just that morning was Merlin.

He understood finally why he'd been so afraid. He understood entirely. He hadn't wanted the attention. He hadn't wanted them all to hear the name and the name only. Much like Harry didn't.

He wasn't angry. How could he be? He saw how much he'd suffered keeping this secret. He couldn't imagine keeping all of that locked away for thirteen hundred years, to have to pretend just to survive … he pitied him more than hated him.

He could never hate him. Could he fault someone for being afraid? Merlin's account of his life had forced Harry to see the reality of the situation. Who wouldn't be afraid in such circumstances? Naturally someone would shy away from revealing the deepest secret of their lives, the secret that had defined their life. He didn't even resent him any longer. He'd seen the fear in Merlin's eyes during the DA lesson with the Boggart.

The shock had worn off now, and Harry was just fully beginning to appreciate everything that had happened. In a way, it seemed right to him.

Everything seemed to be settling into place. Of course Martin was Merlin! There were so many hints, so many subtle allusions … it made sense! After the initial shock, he was slowly beginning to realise, that it wasn't so unbelievable really. Something seemed to click deep inside him. Lingering doubt and suspicion leaked away and was replaced with a deep satisfaction. Maybe it was the Old Religion inside of him, but Harry seemed to be accepting this strangely well.

Above all, he was glad for Merlin. He no longer had to hide away and lie. He was among friends now, admittedly very awed friends, but friends all the same. It must have been so hard for him …

He kept thinking back to Merlin's narrative. His mentions of Morgana weren't exactly reassuring. He seemed to paint an almost sympathetic picture of Morgana as a kind woman who had been twisted and manipulated by fear and hate. Harry couldn't quite see it; the woman he'd seen in Hogsmeade
certainly hadn't looked like a good but misguided woman, she had looked pure evil. He couldn't believe that she and Merlin had once been close friends.

Harry understood now the immense guilt that Merlin must be feeling. He blamed himself for King Arthur's death, and for Morgana's downfall. It was ridiculous, he wasn't to blame! He was being silly, he couldn't be at fault for someone else's own decisions or their actions!

It resonated deep within him. Merlin had wanted to give Morgana a second chance; he hadn't wanted to believe a friend could betray him like that. Harry could certainly sympathise.

But it wasn't his fault! It was Morgana and Morgana alone who was to blame. She may have suffered in Camelot, she might have been alone and afraid, but surely no more so than Merlin! It had been her own choice; she had chosen to betray her family. Just like how Merlin had chosen not to.

The whole situation was too similar to Peter Pettigrew for his liking.

One thing disturbed him more than anything however. Prophecy. It had come back to haunt him.

The way Merlin had been talking seemed to imply that Harry was somehow the one who was to bring back the Old Religion. As if he needed more pressure.

The way Merlin had looked at him, the way he'd looked so certain that Harry would succeed made Harry feel like running as far as he could in the opposite direction.

He wanted to cry out in frustration. Would his life always be dominated by prophecy? Was his life always going to be predestined? Merlin had said he hadn't killed the young Mordred because he hadn't believed prophecy should determine someone's life, and prophecy had ended up coming true. Was that his life now?

It had been a long day, Harry thought, feeling exhausted. Who would have guessed when he woke up that morning that he'd discover Martin was actually the Merlin? It had just become too normal all too soon. He kept half-expecting it to be a dream.

"So," said Ginny, looking at Kilgharrah not in the least frightened to her credit, "do you think we have a chance against Morgana? I mean, you know her and Merlin the best out of all of us."

Kilgharrah regarded her with one massive amber eye. "You're a brave one, I see," he observed. "That is always a good virtue to have, young one."

She frowned. "Yeah, but you didn't answer the question!"

Kilgharrah smiled. "Told you he was cryptic!" called Aithusa from the puddle. "Never answers a straight question."

Kilgharrah frowned. "I do when it is relevant, oh-still-so-very-young-one," he said sternly. "I cannot answer this for I do not know. We dragons cannot see everything. Morgana is powerful, and Merlin is powerful. The battle between them is yet to come, and I for one do not know how it shall be decided. Though I certainly hope for Merlin to win," he added.

Ron's face contorted in confusion. "You're still not answering the question! Could Merlin beat Morgana?"

Kilgharrah sighed. "Yes," he said finally. "In terms of power, Merlin certainly has more of it. None can surpass his magical ability, even Morgana. His greatest weakness is within himself."
"What do you mean?" Harry asked, though he already thought he knew the answer.

"Merlin's greatest weakness is that he rarely has confidence in his own decisions," said Kilgharrah. "Rather ridiculous considering everything he has done over the years. He'll constantly question his own judgement and regret his actions for years afterwards. He finds it difficult to forgive his own past transgressions. Until he can do that, then I believe Morgana has the upper hand."

"I don't get what he has to be guilty about," said Neville nervously. "I mean, it was Morgana who did all that evil stuff."

"Yes," said Kilgharrah wisely. "But they were once friends, and Merlin finds it hard to realise the fact that he may have been responsible for her downfall. He always tried to bring her back into the light. There was one time, after she had already begun to try and bring down Camelot that Morgana was dying, and Merlin begged me for the spell to cure her. He couldn't bring himself to abandon her. He also ignored my warnings that Mordred was the one destined to kill Arthur- he refused to leave a child to die. At the time he seemed to reconcile himself with the fact that he couldn't dwell on these trying times and he had to move on and deal with life. But he's had thirteen hundred years to dwell on it now, with no friends to help him through it. All of that has just resurfaced. He's always had a terrible penchant for misconstrued guilt."

"A bit like Harry then," murmured Ginny, and Harry blushed and avoided her pointed look.

Bill shook his head. "He shouldn't have had to dwell on this all these years."

"No, he should not," agreed Kilgharrah.

"Then why did you leave?" Fred asked. "Couldn't he have used your help?"

"Yes," he replied, eyes sad. "But I couldn't remain in this land. There was too little room with the urbanisation of the land by the Muggles. I thought many times of coming back, but I hoped that he would call me when the time was right. I hoped he'd find someone he could confide in, and he evidently has."

They all smiled.

Luna turned her dreamy eyes on Kilgharrah. "I'm glad you're back. He's missed you, I can tell."

Kilgharrah bowed his massive head. "As I have missed him."

"You must have been close."

Kilgharrah chuckled. "I suppose, though our relationship has always been trying. But I swear that I will do everything within my power to help him defeat the sorceress Morgana."

"What about Voldemort?" asked Hermione. "Do you know anything that could help us in defeating him?"

Kilgharrah shook his head. "I wish I did. I sensed the evil he brought into this world, but I know of no way to defeat him. That task lies elsewhere."

Harry felt uncomfortable again as everyone glanced in his direction.

"Come on you lot!" Tonks called from the house, Teddy bouncing on her hip. "Dinner! I cooked!"

The Weasley twins grimaced. "That's not good."
They all bade a reluctant farewell to Kilgharrah and Aithusa and went towards the house. Harry went to follow them, but he was stopped by Kilgharrah.

"Your burdens are great, young one," he said, leaning down to get a better look at him. "But I sense all is not lost."

"Then why does it feel like it is?" asked Harry, frustrated. "Merlin's trying to teach me this Old Magic, but what can I really do? I saw Morgana this morning! I could never compete with that!"

"You will not need to," said Kilgharrah dismissively. "Morgana is Merlin's responsibility. You have your own task,"

"But Voldemort's searching for the Cup, and knowing our luck he'll probably find it! How can I fight against that! How am I supposed to accomplish my task?"

"By working together," Kilgharrah said earnestly. "Your greatest strength lies in the people you surround yourself with. Do not dismiss them. Strength and unity are ubiquitous."

Harry just shook his head. "Am I really the one supposed to bring back the Old Religion? I don't know how! I can't even use it! Has my life been predestined for me? Am I supposed to be ruled by destiny? Is everything I do inevitable? What if I don't know how to follow my destiny?"

To his surprise, Kilgharrah began to laugh. "You take me back many years, young one," he said, laughing. "You sound like Merlin did, the first time I ever met him. He didn't want to accept his destiny either, he was sceptical, he was afraid. He was just as unsure as you. Yet, he simply had faith. He took joy in the company of his friends and from them drew the strength he needed to fulfil his destiny. He accomplished everything he had to in Camelot, and now the two of you must work together to finally complete what began all those years ago. Together, you can accomplish this."

Harry had nothing to say to this. Was he following the path of destiny, or was he turning away from it? How would he know?

He nodded to Kilgharrah and turned away to the house, walking slowly, at odds with the fast whirring of his mind.

Merlin winced in pain as the Healer prodded at his shoulder with her wand none too gently. He heard a cracking sound, and the pain dulled somewhat. She sniffed dismissively.

"There. That wasn't hard was it?" she said sternly.

Merlin meekly shook his head. "Nope."

"Then why on earth did it take you so long to come to get it fixed?" she asked with a beady glint in her eye. "It could have become far worse! You should have come straight here as soon as it happened! And you shouldn't have let him stay away!" She directed this statement at Mrs Weasley, who looked indignant.

"Don't blame her," Merlin intervened quickly. "She tried to get me here. I was too stubborn."

The Healer frowned down at him. "Apparently. How on earth did you manage to do such damage to your shoulder anyway? Now, I'll have to bandage it up. The bone is repaired but your shoulder will be sensitive for a few days more. You are not to move it under any circumstances, is that clear?
Merlin knows it's been hurt enough."

Merlin smiled wryly. "Yes, Merlin does know," he said softly, so only the Weasleys and Lupin could hear him. They looked torn between laughter and continued astonishment.

He remained quiet while the stern Healer bandaged him up. Were all Healers like this? Madame Pomfrey, Gaius … it seemed like the profession required a basic level of strictness.

She finished the bandaging with a flourish of her wand. "Done," she announced. "Now, Mr Emrys … you're free to go."

"Thanks," Merlin grinned, jumping down from the bed he'd been sitting on, but the Healer stopped him.

"Just a moment," she said, holding up a hand. "I'll need to fetch you some remedial potions for the pain and to help with the healing process. Now, we have very little in the way of medical records for you …"

Merlin nodded. "I don't come here much," he said honestly. The last time he'd been at St Mungo's it had been a small single ward located in an old manor house outside of London in goodness knows what century.

"Yes," she said, looking suspicious. "No records whatsoever, apart from a couple of minor incidents at school. No record of your birth, no childhood illnesses … not even a record of your parents."

Merlin blinked. "We did all our own Healing," he said, which was more or less true. If he'd been ill in Ealdor, his mother had gone to the village wise woman for a herbal remedy, and there had always been Gaius in Camelot.

She nodded. "Well, we'll need to ask you a few questions."

Merlin nodded, starting to get nervous. This was exactly why he'd stayed away from institutions like this, they asked too many questions. With Hogwarts, all it had taken was a few forged letters from his 'parents' and a fake address. But hospitals wanted your medical history.

The Healer conjured a clipboard out of mid-air and began to write.

"Now, what is your full name?"

"Martin Emrys," he answered, noticing Lupin looking amused at this.

"Your date of birth?"

"Um …" Crap! What age was he pretending to be again?

"Um … fifteenth of October … 1975?" he hoped desperately.

Lupin was barely suppressing his laughter at this point.

"Any major illnesses in the past?"

"Um … no?"

"Any existing medical conditions?"

"Um … no?"
"Any allergies to medical potions or remedies?"

"... no?"

She looked sternly over the top of her clipboard at him. "You don't seem very certain."

"I am," he said hurriedly. "Very."

"Hmmm..." she said, looking disbelieving. "Now, we'll have to contact you to have to come in and have the bandages removed. Where do you live?"

"Hogwarts," Merlin answered automatically, noting she raised an eyebrow as he said this.

"You live at a school?"

"Well, during term-time," he said, feeling foolish. "That's where I'll be if you want to contact me."

"Oh no you won't," she said. "That arm needs rest. You'll be recuperating for at least a few days. I don't want you at school with all those distractions. Now, where will you be living?"

Merlin bit his lip. Why couldn't he just go back to Hogwarts? He could rest in the dormitory! He didn't have anywhere to live. He'd given up the musty little flat in Diagon Alley he'd been occupying for the last few years when he went to Grimmauld Place over the summer.

"He'll be living with us," said Mrs Weasley, coming to his rescue. "The Burrow, just outside Ottery St. Catchpole. Is that all?"

The Healer nodded, still looking suspicious, finished her writing, and excused herself from the small room, heading to get him his potions.

Merlin breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you sure you'll be alright with me staying?" he asked Mrs Weasley.

She laughed. "Of course! Where else would you go! You're perfectly welcome with us!"

Mr Weasley nodded excitedly. "It'd be an honour!"

Merlin was grateful, but couldn't help but wince at the same time. He'd shared a house with Mr and Mrs Weasley during last summer at Grimmauld Place without issue, but now it was an 'honour'. He supposed he'd just have to get used to it, it'd take them all a while to adjust.

Lupin looked more relaxed. "Don't you have a house of your own? I mean, thirteen centuries and you don't have anywhere to live?"

Merlin grimaced. "I've moved around a lot. I don't really get settled anywhere. What I said to her was right: Hogwarts is my current address."

Lupin nodded. "Well, the houses of everyone in the Order are now at your disposal," he said, his eyes glinting in amusement. "I'm sure they'd all give up their beds if you asked!"

Merlin tried to laugh, but couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. Lupin seemed to notice and said nothing more about it. He changed the subject.

"She was rather formidable wasn't she?" he jerked his head in the direction of the door the Healer had just passed through. "She seemed to be more than a match for you!"
Merlin did laugh this time. "Yes, Healers always have that effect on me," he admitted. "I suppose it's because I lived for so long with the Court Physician of Camelot. Now he was strict. I think he scarred me for life!"

"Perhaps, but I did always keep you alive!" a voice sounded from behind Merlin.

He jumped a foot from the ground and whirled around, jerking his painful shoulder as he did so, unwilling to believe he had just heard that voice …

He had.

A painting was hanging on the opposite wall, ancient and dusty. Its frame was golden and ornate. But its occupant was what caught Merlin's attention.

Sitting there in the painting, looking the same as he did the last time Merlin saw him, was Gaius.

Merlin was frozen to the spot. He was genuinely stunned.

Gaius raised an eyebrow, but a tiny smile crept into his ancient face.

Merlin didn't know what to do or what to say. Gaius.

Gaius laughed. "Thirteen hundred years to grow up and you still manage to look like a startled deer."

Merlin spluttered, still in shock.

"Gaius!" he cried, blinking rapidly. "You're here!"

"Nothing escapes your notice does it, Merlin?"

Merlin laughed, too overcome to do anything else. Gaius was here, he was actually here. It was him, the same face, the same eyes, the same voice, almost as if he had never died.

"But, how …" Merlin trailed off, too emotional to continue. His eyes drifted down to the plaque beneath the painting:

Gaius, Medieval Healer, Precise dates unknown

Gaius was the Court Physician of Camelot, said to be the tutor to the legendary Merlin. His advancements in both Muggle and magical medicines have given him a lasting legacy as a learned scholar and pioneer of modern healing techniques.

Merlin laughed. "You've become pretty special," he said, gesturing. "Surprised you don't have a Chocolate Frog card."

"A what?"

"Never mind," Merlin laughed again, giddy with happiness. "How long have you been here?"

Gaius shrugged. "Goodness knows, long enough. I kept hoping to see you here, Merlin; I thought someone as clumsy as you would have found his way here long before now."

Merlin laughed. "I'm not quite as clumsy as I used to be, Gaius."

"Really?" he raised an eyebrow. "Well, now I know miracles exist."
He looked at him seriously now, pride reflected in those familiar eyes. "I knew you'd go far, Merlin," he said softly. "Didn't I tell you?"

Merlin nodded, his throat suddenly closing up. He felt tears beginning to prick at his eyes.

Mr and Mrs Weasley and Lupin seemed to take the unsaid hint.

"We'll go and see where the Healer is, dear," said Mrs Weasley kindly, looking rather emotional herself. The others nodded their assent. "We'll just be outside," Lupin added, smiling.

Merlin was incredibly grateful to them. He didn't fancy ending up crying in front of them; he was supposed to powerful and wise, not some emotional child.

Gaius waited until the door had closed, before speaking again. "They seem nice," he observed. "I'm glad you have some friends, Merlin. I was afraid that all these years would have made you lonely."

Merlin nodded. "I was. It's only recently I've realised that I've got to stop hiding away. They've accepted me for who I am."

Gaius smiled, but Merlin frowned. "Wait, how do you know that I've been around all these years? You died long before Arthur did!"

Gaius just smiled. "I knew you had a greater purpose, Merlin. And besides, when you're a portrait, you hear things."

Merlin shook his head in mild confusion. How could he have … then an idea struck him. The portraits at Hogwarts … they knew how long he'd been around. Could one of them have told Gaius? Didn't one of the portraits in the Headmaster's office have one in St Mungo's as well? All it would have taken was the mention of Emrys …

He couldn't even be bothered trying to figure it out, he was just too overjoyed to see Gaius again.

He grinned, and couldn't stop for a very long time, as the two of them just looked at each other. Nothing needed to be said.

But an overwhelming sadness crept over him. Gaius wasn't really here, he was just a shadow of the man Merlin had known all those years ago. He could never truly have him back. Why hadn't he ever come here before? Why had he shied away all these years? He could have had some time with him, shadow that he was.

Gaius noticed his change of mood. "Merlin, what's wrong?"

Merlin shook his head, his heart suddenly heavy.

"I- I've missed you, Gaius," he admitted. "Every day."

Gaius tilted his head in sympathy. "Now now, we mustn't have any of that," he murmured, though he also looked sad. "Don't mourn an old man, Merlin."

"It isn't just you, Gaius," he said. "It's everything. It's Camelot, Arthur, Gwaine … sometimes I just can't help but wish …"

Gaius looked at him sternly. "Don't live in the past, Merlin, you won't be able to see the present and the future will be lost. You've more important things to worry about now."

"What do you know about that?" asked Merlin, confused.
"Why, absolutely nothing," Gaius said, smiling. "But you didn't sustain an injury like that by falling down the stairs. You've been up to something dangerous, and if I know you, it's important."

Merlin nodded, smiling at how well Gaius knew him. "Yes. There is something."

Gaius nodded knowledgeably. "I thought so. Tell me everything."

Merlin glanced at the door to make sure the Healer hadn't returned. "I can't tell you everything, it'd take too long," he said hurriedly. "But ... it's Morgana."

Gaius closed his eyes in weariness. "That incessant woman. Will the world never be rid of her? What's she up to this time?"

Merlin sighed. "She's allied with Voldemort- you know who he is don't you? - and she's been teaching him Old Magic. Now they're searching for the Cup of Life, and I've no idea how to stop them."

To his great surprise, Gaius laughed. "Of course you have no idea!" he said, still laughing. "You never have any idea, Merlin, and it's never stopped you before! You'll get through this, Merlin, I know it."

"But -"

"Don't argue with me, Merlin," he said, frowning. "Contrary to most people in the country at the moment, I'm older than you, and wiser. Listen to me, Merlin, and don't ignore me like you usually do. You can do this. You've never failed yet. I have every confidence in you."

Merlin felt the tears coming again. He wished Gaius were real, flesh and blood, just so he could ... he didn't really know what. All he knew is that once again, even after death, Gaius had provided him with just the right advice. As usual, Gaius was always right.

Merlin didn't know what to say, what could he say? Fortunately he was spared, as Lupin knocked on the door gently, and popped his head around.

"I have your potions," he said, rattling them as he said so. "We'd best be going."

Merlin nodded, and turned back to Gaius. He wanted to say goodbye, he wanted to say thank you, he wanted to say so many things, but he didn't need to. Gaius smiled at him, in that fatherly way he always had, and Merlin knew that he understood. Gaius was one of the few people who ever had understood him.

"Goodbye, Gaius," he said, putting all the emotion he felt into this simple statement.

"Goodbye, Merlin," Gaius replied, just as emotively.

Merlin nodded briefly, and, with great effort, turned on his heel and followed Lupin out of the door and down the sparkling corridor.

Lupin was as silent as Merlin, probably trying to respect his privacy, but Merlin could tell he was bursting with curiosity.

"He was my mentor," Merlin explained heavily. "He taught me a lot. Treated me as his own son. I miss him."

Lupin nodded briefly. "I suppose ... yes, it must be ... hard for you. To have everyone you've ever
"Dead?" Merlin finished, somewhat bluntly. "Yes. But now I just have to focus on keeping everyone I know now from being dead. That's my priority."

Lupin turned to face Merlin, his face unreadable.

"You've sacrificed so much ..." he trailed off, his face intense. "The legends don't do you enough credit."

Merlin tried to ignore this last statement. He didn't deserve such praise. Everyone was relying on him so much ...

He'd let her get away. Again. He'd had her in his grasp, but she'd escaped alive, and relatively unhurt. He should have killed her. He shouldn't have been off his guard like that.

But he wasn't going to dwell on it. Not this time. He was just going to make sure it didn't happen again.

They were silent for a while again, until Lupin tentatively broke the silence.

"There's ... there's something I've been wanting to ask you ..." he began, almost stammering with a sudden nervousness.

"Anything," said Merlin, intrigued.

Lupin looked extremely uncomfortable. "Well ... I was wondering ... that man, he was your tutor? A physician? It makes me wonder ... medicine, and magical medicine must have been very different in ... in your day. A lot of it must have been lost. Well ... I was just wondering whether ... whether ..."

He broke off looking flustered, and Merlin suddenly understood, and his heart became even heavier.

"I'm sorry," he said soothingly, his voice pained. "But, even in my day there was no known cure for Lycanthropy."

Lupin nodded, and his shoulders slumped a little. "I thought as much," he said bitterly. "It was a foolish hope."

"No," Merlin shook his head, and placed the hand on his good arm on Lupin's. "It wasn't foolish. I understand completely."

"Do you?" asked Lupin, still sounding bitter, and annoyed at his own hope. "How can you?"

Merlin sighed, and felt an old wound reopen.

"I knew a woman once ..." he began, feeling the old pain again. "She wasn't a werewolf ... but I suppose the situations are similar. She was cursed by a vengeful sorceress, and every night at midnight she turned into a vicious uncontrollable beast. I tried to help her ... I wanted to break the curse ... but ... things didn't turn out the way I wished. She died."

Lupin turned to him in surprise. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice sad. "I had no idea."

"Yeah," said Merlin, feeling wretched. "The legends rarely record the true heroes, the ones who really deserve it. She was so brave. Even though she had this awful curse, she was the sweetest, kindest, unselfish woman I've ever ..."
He broke off, and Lupin finally understood.

"You were in love with her," he said, looking pained at the look on Merlin's face.

Merlin didn't say anything. Neither did Lupin. They didn't need to; some unspoken understanding had just passed between them.

"Oh, there you are!" Mrs Weasley rushed towards them down the corridor looking flustered, her husband trailing in her wake. "We'd best get back."

Merlin nodded. He had to get away from all the sad memories this hospital was dredging up, rather ironically a building he'd never even entered before.

"He shouldn't be Apparating!" the Healer stormed over. "Not on his own at least!"

Merlin sighed, but Mrs Weasley nodded vehemently. "Of course, we can't let you get any worse can we?" she smiled down at him, and Merlin smiled back. She was just as protective of him as she'd always been, despite the fact he was centuries older than her and the famous warlock she'd probably heard stories about as a child. She wasn't treating him any differently. "Arthur, you'd best take him by Side-Along- Apparition."

Mr Weasley nodded eagerly and rushed forwards to offer his arm to Merlin. He felt a stab of annoyance at this over enthusiasm, but he told himself just to grin and bear it. He had to let them all get used to his 'new' identity. It wasn't their fault.

He still felt a little strange though having all this extra attention. He gripped on to Mr Weasley's arm. He'd forgotten that Mr Weasley's first name had been Arthur. With that and the Weasley boy, Percy—no doubt short for Percival—there were too many painful memories making themselves known to him. But he couldn't blame them for their names, nor for their reactions. It was only natural. He had to give them time.

He felt the familiar crushing darkness envelop him as he was pulled towards the Burrow. It was going to be hard, but he could manage it.

He'd faced worse. It was time to live up to his name.
"Take it!"

"No, Ron, I can't!"

"Why not?!"

Merlin sighed. He couldn't quite believe he was having this argument. It was just bizarre.

"Ron, I can't possibly ask you to give up your bed for me!" Merlin tried to reason back. He, Ron, Harry, Neville and Bill were sequestered in Ron's room that night, rather crowded, but with little choice; much of the Order had decided to stay at the Burrow that evening after their meetings about Morgana and the Hogsmeade attack.

Ron goggled at him. "But you're Merlin! I can't ask you to sleep on the floor!"

Merlin shook his head, feeling a heavy weight in his heart. Why couldn't Ron see that this wasn't a courtesy but a complication?

"Ron, I'm not about to take advantage of you because of my name," Merlin said firmly.

"But it's not taking advantage if I offer-"

"If you don't want it, Martin, can I have it?" Bill asked from across the room from beside his sleeping bag, where he and the others were watching the argument in mild amusement.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Just become a world famous powerful warlock, then you can sleep in it all you want!"

Merlin sighed. This was not what he wanted.

"Ron, this is your house. I can't disadvantage you!"

"It's not a disadvantage! It'd be an hon-"

"Don't you dare say 'honour'," Merlin all but snarled at him. "I don't want it to be an honour."

There was a brief silence at Merlin's words, which he realised all too late had sounded quite harsh.

"Blimey, Ron, I thought you were bad when Viktor Krum came to Hogwarts," Harry said from beside his own small bed.

Merlin sighed inwardly. He wasn't some celebrity.

Ron threw a blanket at him, and his face was set. "You're injured! Sleep in the bloody bed!"

Merlin threw the blanket back. "My shoulder is fine. I'll be perfectly happy on a camp bed!"

"You are not sleeping in a camp bed," Mrs Weasley said sternly, bustling into the bedroom carrying some extra blankets. "I won't let you aggravate that injury any further. You're sleeping in the bed."

Merlin opened his mouth to protest, but bit it back at the look in her eyes. He knew it was no use to argue. He nodded meekly instead, and tried to ignore the smirks from the others.
He climbed into the bed, and Mrs Weasley fussed over the blankets and adjusted the sheets, all but tucking him in. He felt a little awkward at this; it had been a long time since anyone had mothered him like this. He was grateful too however; he could tell she was acting this way not because of who he was, but because that's just the kind of woman that she was. It was rather amusing to think Mrs Weasley was essentially tucking an old man into bed as if he was one of her own children.

She adjusted his bandages. "There now, you try and get some rest," she said, smiling sweetly down at him. Then she whirled around on the others and her tone became harder."The rest of you, get to sleep. You'll be up early in the morning. Kingsley wants you to help in Hogsmeade. There's repairs to be done and people to get back into their homes."

"I could help," Merlin volunteered. "My protective enchantments would be much more powerful."

But Mrs Weasley wouldn't hear of it. "You're not leaving this house until that arm's fully healed."

"But it's-"

"Goodnight."

Merlin slumped back on the pillows as Mrs Weasley left the room and stared up at the Chudley Cannon posters on the ceiling. Even his own mother hadn't been this bad.

He waited until her footsteps had faded away. "Ron, you can have your bed back now." he murmured into the darkness.

"Not likely," said Ron from the foot of the bed. "If mum comes in here in the morning and sees you lying on the floor with your injured shoulder I'll look no better than the ghoul in the attic when she's done with me."

Merlin sighed. "My shoulder's fine. Just a little tender. I've had far worse."

There was no answer, and slowly the room began to fill with the slow and steady breathing of people sleeping. But Merlin couldn't sleep, lying there several inches higher than everyone else. He was far too preoccupied.

He stared up at the figures racing in and out of the Quidditch posters trying to come to terms with everything that had happened that day. He was relieved beyond belief that Harry, or anyone else for that matter, hadn't reacted with anger. He was amazed at how well they'd accepted it to be honest. They were awed, which was only to be expected. And if tonight's argument was anything to go by they were far from being casual about it. But he hadn't expected anything else.

But would they trust him again? Would Harry be put off confiding in him because of his name? Was the friendship they'd had completely gone now they knew the truth?

He sighed, and sat up, wincing as he jerked his sore shoulder. He got quietly out of bed, and picked his way carefully through the sleeping figures to the door and slipped through it. He padded through the silent house, careful to make no noise, and emerged into the back garden, breathing a massive sigh of relief.

He stood and breathed in the cold night air for a few moments, trying to dispel the sense of exhaustion, mental rather than physical, that he'd experienced in the house. He knew this was going to be a long battle.

He sat down on the garden wall, and looked out into the adjoining field, where Kilgharrah and Aithusa slept. It was a good thing no Muggles lived close by- it was rather an alarming sight.
He prepared to lose himself in his thoughts, but was interrupted.

"Merlin?"

Merlin turned to see Harry coming out of the house, coming closer almost hesitatingly. He smiled at him. "Care to join me?"

Harry said nothing, but came and sat next to him on the garden wall, and they were both silent. Merlin looked up at the stars, remembering when Gaius had taught him their names, and waited. Harry had followed him out here for a reason, and Merlin wasn't going to push him.

"I'm sorry," Harry blurted out. Merlin started in surprise. This was the last thing he'd expected.

"What for?" he asked dumbfounded.

Harry looked down at his hands and twisted them nervously in his lap.

"In Hogsmeade. I – I was angry with you."

Merlin smiled. "You had every right to be."

"No, I didn't," Harry shook his head. "I was so preoccupied with finding out what it was that you were hiding I didn't stop to think about why you were hiding it. It must have been so hard for you to keep it secret, and all I could do was be angry with you. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to forgive, Harry," said Merlin softly. "I should have told you. I was just making excuses really. I was a coward. No, I was," he said, interrupting Harry who'd been about to protest. "I should have taken the risk. It's a bad habit of mine I've fallen back on. I've been hiding so long it was almost as if I didn't want to be found. But I'm not afraid any more, Harry, thanks to you."

Harry just looked awkward, and they sat in silence for a few moments longer. Then Merlin broke it.

"I don't want to be treated any differently," he said quietly. "I know people have these great expectations of me, and for good reason- I am powerful. But I'm also just as confused as the rest of you. I don't want you to think I can just make everything all right again just like that because of what my name is. I miss the days when I could say 'I'm Merlin' and not have everyone faint or start fawning all over me. I just finally want to be myself again."

Harry nodded slowly. "I can relate to that," he said, looking into the distance, his eyes glazed over.

Then suddenly, he hopped off the wall. "I'd best get back, Mrs Weasley's going to have us up at dawn." He hesitated and said: "Since we're starting over ..."

Then he held out his hand. Surprised, Merlin took it.

"I'm Harry Potter," he said, smiling.

Merlin grinned back. "Pleasure to meet you. I'm Merlin," he said, shaking his hand.

They laughed for a long time, though nothing was particularly funny. Merlin felt an entire weight lift off his chest.

Harry headed back to the house. "Aren't you coming?" he called back.

Merlin shook his head. "Nah. I need some time on my own."
Harry nodded, and disappeared back through the front door.

At that moment, Kilgharrah's head rose above the garden wall, and he peered at Merlin, having apparently been feigning sleep.

"The future is bright I think," he said in his deep voice. "You and the Potter boy will go far together."

Merlin sighed. "I just hope I can protect him. He's got such a destiny to fulfil, and he's under so much pressure."

Kilgharrah chuckled. "Protecting a headstrong youth with a great destiny ahead of him? Where have I heard that one before?"

Merlin laughed, but secretly a worry was building in his heart. He remembered all too well what had happened to the last person he'd tried to protect.

As though reading his mind, Kilgharrah leant his head closer to Merlin's.

"Do not let your heart be heavy, young warlock. You have both now accepted the fact that the paths of the Boy-Who-Lived and the great Emrys are intertwined, and this unity shall make you strong. I do not think you are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past."

Merlin grinned. He was glad Kilgharrah was here. He was glad Harry had accepted him for who he was. For the first time in years, there were no more secrets, no more lies. It was just like those golden years in Camelot.

There he had been happy. Here, he could be happy again.

"What do you mean there was another attack?" Mrs Weasley asked fiercely, pausing in the act of lifting her fork to her mouth.

Lupin quickly held up his hand to calm her. "Don't worry, Molly, there were no deaths."

"But what happened?"

The table leaned in closer to listen. It was lunchtime, and Harry and the others had just returned from the clean-up operation in Hogsmeade. They were once again sitting outside in the garden, the kitchen in the Burrow not being large enough to accommodate the entire Order.

Lupin sighed. "It was … an unusual attack."

"What's that supposed to mean?" George asked frowning.

Lupin took a drink of the tea Mrs Weasley had deposited in front of him before answering.

"The attack wasn't … violent. No one was even injured."

"Where did they attack?"

Lupin bit his lip, and looked uncertainly at Merlin, whose face was stoic.

"Well … it was in many different places. In public parks, art galleries, libraries … they destroyed
Harry frowned. "What was the point in that?"

Lupin sighed. "They were spreading fear. Most of the artefacts that were destroyed were Muggle. Thousands of Muggles saw them; the Ministry is going crazy trying to Modify all their memories before word spreads to the Muggle media. Memory Modifying on this scale has never been attempted before."


Again, Lupin looked at Merlin, who looked resigned.

"What did all these artefacts have in common?" Merlin asked, though he looked as though he already knew the answer.

Lupin sighed. "They … they were all to do with you."

Merlin nodded, and closed his eyes briefly.

"What?" said Ron. "They were destroying Muggle statues of Merlin? Muggle books about Merlin? What's the point?"

"The … the attacks were led by Morgana and Voldemort themselves," Lupin said heavily.

Harry felt a chill rush all over him. Voldemort was always a burden on his mind, but he usually stayed in the shadows. The thought of him out there causing harm …

Merlin opened his eyes. "Of course they were …"

Ginny was frowning. "But I still don't get it. They didn't even kill anyone! Of which I'm glad," she added hastily, seeing the incredulous looks she was getting. "If they wanted to cause fear, then why do it this way?"

"To get to me," said Merlin, and his voice suddenly sounded old. "This is Morgana's doing. She's always had a flair for symbolism. She was angry that I got away, and she wanted to show me that she would destroy me. She learned long ago that killing people mercilessly was no way to get what she wants. Creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty is much more effective." He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "She wants me to give in. She's trying to get me to give myself up to protect others. If I'd been a few centuries younger I would've fallen for it. But I'm wiser now. I can't let her get the upper-hand."

"But does that mean she'll start killing Muggles?" asked Hermione, looking shaken.

Merlin grimaced. "I don't plan on letting it get that far. But she's mistaken if she thinks destroying a few statues is going to bring me to her. She's done me a favour actually! All those ridiculous books about me and Arthur; I mean have you read that book *The Sword in the Stone*? It's appalling!"

He was trying to make light of the situation but Harry could see the consternation in his eyes- he was worried.

At that moment, Kingsley Apparated on the outskirts of the Burrow's protective boundaries, with a smaller figure at his side, and came strolling purposefully towards them. Harry didn't see who was accompanying him until he drew closer.
"What's he doing here?" demanded Ron, drawing his wand and pointing it directly at Malfoy, who scowled.

Kingsley frowned. "I could hardly leave him at Headquarters unsupervised could I? Besides, he may be able to help."

"I thought he was out of useful information?" George muttered darkly, his eyes fixed on Malfoy, who was resolutely refusing to look at any of them.

Kingsley did not look amused, but sat down at the table without another word, Malfoy followed suit. Harry noticed he looked oddly flushed, and not at all well. He frowned at this. Surely if he was away from the Death Eaters and the fear of Voldemort he should be looking better and not worse?

Kingsley looked around at them all very seriously. "I need hardly tell you about what happened this morning, I can see in your faces that you already know."

"It still doesn't make sense to me," said Bill, frowning. "This is completely different to anything we've seen so far."

"I agree," said Kingsley, looking severe. "This is most unlike Voldemort, who prefers to remain in the shadows. The fact that he helped lead these attacks, attacks where there weren't even any fatalities is very interesting indeed."

"We may have to consider the fact that Voldemort may be being influenced by Morgana." said Lupin.

"Voldemort doesn't strike me as the sort of person who would let himself be led by anyone, regardless of their power." Kingsley answered.

"He may not have a choice," said Merlin. As he spoke, Malfoy jumped about a foot out of his chair and flushed even deeper. He'd obviously been informed of Martin's true identity. He rubbed his left arm unconsciously.

"Why is that?" Kingsley asked, looking interested.

"Morgana is manipulative," said Merlin, his face hard. "She's always been like that. She managed to convince Arthur's own uncle into betraying him. She'll do anything to get what she wants. Voldemort probably only summoned her because he wanted to add her prestige to his own. He's trying to use her as his own pet ancient sorceress. But it won't work. She's using Voldemort. She needed him to free her from the cave, but now she's probably only sticking with him because it suits her. She's not interested in helping someone whose only aim is world domination. She'll dump him without a second thought if she gets a better offer elsewhere."

"No honour amongst evil gits then," Fred muttered to his twin.

Lupin looked intrigued. "If she's not interested in world domination, then what is her plan?"

Merlin shrugged his shoulders, wincing when he moved his bandaged left one. "I'm honestly not sure. In Camelot, her aim was always to take back the throne because she saw it as rightfully her own. But now Camelot is gone … I'm not sure what she'll do. She might try and take over the Muggles, but her aims are definitely not the same as Voldemort's. She's not the least interested in blood purity. That sort of thing wasn't an issue in our day; you were either magical, or you weren't. End of. I mean, most of her old supporters and allies were Muggles, and she's a Muggle-Born herself."
At this, Malfoy jumped again and looked incredulous, but Kingsley wasn't looking at him. "This is all very interesting," he mused, looking thoughtful. "You think there could be a rift between them?"

"I think it's possible," answered Merlin. "From what I know of Voldemort, he isn't one to do as he's told. But I know Morgana wouldn't either. Their alliance could be short-lived."

"If we just tell him Morgana's a Muggle-Born maybe he'll send her back to the cave," Fred said, but again, Kingsley ignored him.

"Anything like this could be inordinately valuable," he said, his eyes glinting. "If we could drive a wedge between them ..."

"What and have the two of them after us on separate campaigns?" George asked incredulously. "At least together we know where they are!"

Merlin looked grave. "She's after me," he said sadly. "She'll stick with Voldemort until she gets a chance to kill me, and then she'll kill him."

"Well, I don't think we're ready to offer you up for sacrifice just yet, mate," Fred laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. Merlin did not smile.

"She's after revenge for what I did to her all those years ago," he said. "She wants me dead. And to think," he said, laughing humourlessly, "there was once a time when she would have died to save my life."

He shook his head sadly. "But now she'll stop at nothing to kill me."

"We won't give her the chance!" declared Ginny fiercely. "And don't you dare even think about giving yourself up. We've had enough of that."

Harry shifted uncomfortably, but Ginny didn't even look at him.

Kingsley seemed not to notice. "Nevertheless, this is valuable information. It may come in useful. Now, for the other matter," he eyed them all. "The Cup of Life."

Harry heard everyone groan. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as well. In the excitement of the battle yesterday he had completely forgotten that they still had no idea of where the Cup was.

"Have you no other clues to give us?" Kingsley asked Merlin. "Anything you didn't tell us before because you were trying to hide your identity?"

Merlin shook his head. "I wish there was. But that's really all I know. I gave it to a Druid Elder after Morgana's coup of Camelot, and I never saw it again. I should have checked on it but I didn't. The only use I could possibly be to you now is if we ever find it. Aside from Morgana, I'm the only one alive who knows what it looks like."

Kingsley nodded, but looked disappointed. "Can you remember the name of the Druid? Could he have passed it on down his family? Have the Druids sacred buildings they might have concealed it in?"

Again, Merlin shook his head. "I can't even remember what the Druid looked like. And the sacred spaces used by the Druids were usually in caves and clearings. They were a nomadic people. They didn't have substantial buildings of any kind, at least after the Great Purge. They remained nomadic
after that, even after Arthur granted them amnesty. But you're right, the Druid probably passed it
down through his family, they would have been charged with protecting it. But that hardly helps us."

"Perhaps some genealogy records?" Bill suggested. "Try and see who has Druid ancestry?"

"We've already searched Gringotts though," pointed out Hermione. "Even if some old family did
have Druid ancestry without knowing it and had the Cup, it isn't in their vault. It was probably sold,
or lost or something, as soon as the knowledge of what it was faded away."

"It is a pretty plain cup," said Merlin. "Even the gold it's made of hasn't much value. It could be in a
Muggle junk shop for all we know."

A gloomy silence followed his words.

"Have you any idea where it could be?" Kingsley asked Malfoy, turning sharply to his left. Malfoy
jumped at being asked and cast his eyes nervously around the table, blushing. His eyes stopped when
they came to Merlin, and his eyes widened and the blood drained from his face.

"Is it true?" he breathed, his face rigid. "Is it really true?"

Merlin nodded, but said nothing.

Malfoy's eyes went even wider.

"And you're the one who ..." he trailed away, gripping his left arm tightly.

Merlin responded with another half nod.

"Do you have any idea where it is?" Merlin prompted him, but not unkindly.

Malfoy gulped, and looked away from Merlin as though afraid to burn his eyes if he stared too long.

"I- I'm not sure," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I ... I know the Dark Lord was
obsessed with the Department of Mysteries. He had dozens of Unspeakables search it when he was
in power. I don't know what he was looking for ... but I assumed it was information about the Old
Religion."

"But Morgana was teaching him that," Charlie said. "He didn't need to look for information if
Morgana was already contacting him."

"Where was he searching, Mr Malfoy?" Lupin asked.

Malfoy blushed again. "The Room of Records I think."

"That's the room they broke into during the summer," said Tonks. "They can't have found what they
needed when You-Know-Who had control of the Ministry."

"But it can't have been spell books they were looking for," said Bill.

"Maybe it was," said Charlie. "He was having trouble freeing Morgana, maybe he thought he could
find the answer there?"

"But he could have been looking for the Cup," pointed out Fred. "Or at least looking for a record of
it."

"He can't have found it then," said Ron. "If he had he wouldn't be attacking Muggle museums."
"Unless the record mentioned that it was in a Muggle museum," said Bill. "Maybe he does know where it is."

"But why would it mention such an important thing was in the possession of Muggles?" asked George looking incredulous. "If it was important enough they would have taken it to the Ministry. You-Know-Who's probably just getting desperate."

"Unless the Cup's at the Ministry itself," said Ron, his eyes suddenly glinting with a fervour. "No, think about it. There's all sort of freaky stuff there! Maybe it's locked up somewhere there! Maybe You-Know-Who knows it's there and all this museum stuff is just a decoy?"

Kingsley looked at Merlin. "What do you think?"

Merlin thought for a long moment. "It's possible," he said finally. "Holding the Cup, I always felt the power of its magic. I think even a modern wizard could feel it as well; it may have been taken to the Department for study centuries ago, but I doubt they would have understood it. I never sensed its presence when I was last at the Ministry, but there's so many other things of the Old Religion down there it may have masked it from me. It's worth having a look."

Kingsley nodded, but looked tired. "We searched the Department for months looking for information about Old Magic. We never found anything."

"Yes, but we didn't know what we were looking for then," Lupin pointed out. "It could have been staring us in the face the whole time."

"I suppose," sighed Kingsley. "I just don't fancy telling them all they've to start the search again. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep all of this a secret. With Morgana strolling around in broad daylight it's only a matter of time before the public find out about her. And I'm still not sure whether this will put people on their guard, or just cause mass panic."

No one had anything to say to this. Harry was undecided. Should people know about Morgana? It didn't seem right to keep it from them that there was someone even more dangerous than Voldemort out there, then again, it'd only cause even more mass fear and panic. And then they'd have to tell everyone about Merlin. And that might be more of a hindrance than a help.

Kingsley ran his hands over his face and stood up abruptly. "I must get back to the Ministry. I suddenly appreciate the difficulty old Fudge had doing this job. Tell the public the truth, or cause mass panic? I'm not sure yet."

He swigged back the remnants of his tea and motioned to Malfoy.

"Come, Mr Malfoy. I'll drop you off at Headquarters on my way back to the Ministry. Mr Diggle will be there now to watch over you."

"Joy," muttered Malfoy, but he stood up anyway.

Kingsley looked back at Harry and the others. "I don't want you all to worry about this. Until we have some idea of where the Cup is we can do no more. I want you all to head back to school and concentrate on your studies, especially the training Tonks will be giving you. Although," he added, suddenly smiling. "I wouldn't be too annoyed if you displayed some of that same initiative that led you to the discovery of the Founder's books. The three of you have a knack for discovering things you shouldn't. It makes more and more sense to me that the Cup would be hidden in a magical building- perhaps it's at Hogwarts? If it is, I know you lot will find it."

Harry and the others smirked at each other. That was true. If the Cup was at Hogwarts, Harry
wouldn't rest until he found it, not if he had to search every inch of the place.

Merlin nodded. "We'll be heading back tonight. We'll get started right away."

"No, you will not!" said Mrs Weasley sternly. "You'll be staying here another day at least to make sure that arm's properly healed!"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "My arm is fine! Back in Camelot I could be sliced open with a sword and I'd still get back on my horse without complaining! Well, not much ..."

Mrs Weasley raised an eyebrow. "This isn't the Dark Ages, Mart- Merlin. You'll get checked out by St. Mungo's again before I let you go back to school. Even with magical remedies these wounds can take a while to heal. You're staying here."

Merlin looked like he wanted to argue, but he sighed in frustration instead. "Fine," he muttered.

Mrs Weasley trotted off to the kitchen looking victorious.

Bill started laughing. "Imagine, the great Merlin scared of my mother!"

Merlin laughed along with everyone else. "Yeah, she even beats my own mother in that respect."

"Really?" Neville asked from further down the table. "I thought your mother would have been worse, what with trying to keep you alive all the time!"

Merlin smiled in nostalgia. "Oh, don't get me wrong, she was strict. She only let me use magic with all the drapes hung at the windows and the door locked tight, long after everyone else in the village had gone to sleep, just in case anyone saw me. But she didn't want me to waste my gifts either. That's why she sent me to Camelot. She wanted me to find a purpose for them. She couldn't help me herself, she was a Muggle."

"Your mother was a Muggle?" Malfoy asked, his eyebrows having shot up into his white-blond hair. "The great Merlin is a half-blood?"

"Yes, is there a problem?" Merlin asked pleasantly, but Harry could see the danger behind his eyes. Harry felt a little shocked himself, though he wasn't sure why. It of course made absolutely no difference to him, but he'd always imagined the 'great and powerful' Merlin would come from one of those ancient pure-blooded families. Ridiculous now that he thought about it.

Malfoy looked flustered as he saw everyone at the table shoot him a hostile glare. "Of course not," he stammered. "I'm just surprised."

He gripped his left forearm again as he looked at Merlin, and something seemed to pass between them. Malfoy gulped and turned away from Merlin, looking … almost ashamed. Merlin for his part betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

Kingsley led Malfoy by the arm and they went to the edge of the boundaries and soon Apparated away. Merlin watched that spot for a long time.

"Why did he keep holding his left arm like that?" Hermione asked Merlin almost immediately. "That's where his Dark Mark is isn't it?"

"Where it used to be," murmured Merlin quietly, still watching the spot where they'd disappeared.

"What do you mean 'where it used to be'?" Lupin asked sharply, his eyes fixed on Merlin intensely.
Merlin ceased staring after Malfoy and looked around at everyone else. "The last time I was at Grimmauld Place, I removed it."

A stunned silence met this remark.

"What?" gasped Percy. "But that's extremely powerful stuff! How could you possibly counteract that sort of Dark Magic? It's amongst some of the most complex that exists!"

"Have you forgotten who you're talking to? And how do you know so much about it anyway?" Fred asked in mock suspicion.

Merlin ignored this. "Even the most powerful modern day magic is no match for mine. That's why I can do things like block the Killing Curse. My magic functions differently. It wasn't too difficult."

Everyone stared at him, and Harry felt an increasing sense of awe. He tried to push this away however; he knew it would only make Merlin uncomfortable.

Ron however frowned. "But why did you do it?"

Merlin turned his gaze on Ron. "Because he's no longer one of them."

Ron didn't look impressed. "How do you know that? He's probably only trying to save his own skin!"

Merlin shook his head. "No, he's changed. I can sense it within him. He wants to do the right thing."

Ron rolled his eyes. "But just look at him and his family! For centuries the whole lot of them have been involved in the Dark Arts! How can you trust him! I mean, just look at the way he reacted when he found out your mother was a Muggle!"

"It's only inevitable after a lifetime of indoctrination," said Merlin, his tone hard. "People do not change their views overnight. But it is possible. I've seen it done. Did you know Godric Gryffindor used to hate Muggles? Anyone would after what he'd suffered at their hands! But he came to see that not all Muggles were like the ones that tortured his family, and he became one of the greatest proponents for Muggle rights that there's ever been! And Arthur! He hated magic, and look how he turned out! But just because Malfoy is unpleasant now and still parroting those things he was taught does not mean he'll never change. He wants to help, but he doesn't know how. He's been thrust into this situation against his will and he doesn't know what to do. We should have some faith."

"But how can you be certain?" pressed Ron. "How can you be sure that he's changed?"

"I can't," said Merlin, his voice suddenly rather harsh, and his eyes glinting. "But I can't live my life never trusting anyone ever again. Morgana may have betrayed the faith I was willing to place in her but I can't allow that one bad decision to rule me for all eternity. I refuse to let her have that effect on me. Perhaps Malfoy can be redeemed, perhaps not. But what I know is that if we never treat him like one of us, he'll never be one of us. He should at least be offered a second chance. Whether he chooses to take it will be up to him, but I think that he will. He suffered at their hands as well. That's why I removed the Dark Mark. I wanted it to be a reminder of what he gave up, that he can make amends."

Ron was still shaking his head. "But-"

"Arthur changed," said Merlin, his voice growing louder. "Arthur gave up his entire way of thinking. It wasn't easy, but he did it. But Morgana refused to accept that. She couldn't give him a second chance. Is that who you want to be like, Ron?"
Another stunned silence fell over them all, and Ron looked flushed, as did, oddly, Merlin.

He stood up suddenly. "Maybe it's too late for Malfoy, but I don't believe so. I refuse to believe it. He has to be offered the chance. I'd urge you not to let a school-boy grudge colour your opinions on the matter. Believe me when I say I've seen lots of things over the centuries, and nothing causes more trouble than when grudges are kept to the exclusion of all else, including common sense and mercy. He may have fouled you in Quidditch, or grassed on you to a teacher, or tried to get you expelled. But we're at war, and some things are more important. He's only eighteen years old. I refuse to believe that he's lost forever because of bad decisions he made as a teenager in a wild attempt to make his parents proud. Nothing has made me sadder over the centuries than seeing feuds last so long no one remembers what caused them. I once heard Albus Dumbledore say: 'It matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be,' and I believe that. Malfoy may have been born into a prejudiced pure-blood family, and that may have been the way he was raised, but doesn't he deserve the chance to grow into something better?"

Then he turned and head back off to the house, leaving several sombre people in his wake. Ron looked thoroughly reprimanded, and embarrassed. Kilgharrah raised his head as Merlin passed, but said nothing.

Harry was lost in his own thoughts. His immediate thought was not to trust Malfoy; it had been part of his life for so very long now it was hard to think otherwise. But he remembered the fear in Malfoy's eyes the night Dumbledore died, the way he didn't hand them over to Bellatrix at Malfoy Manor, the way Malfoy had looked at Grimmauld Place when he looked over the Black Family Tapestry. He thought too of his cousin, who'd made amends before he left with Dedalus and Hestia, and the letter he'd sent him on his birthday.

Perhaps he could take a leaf out of Merlin's book.

As hard as that may be.

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You think I'm a fool? Merlin asked Kilgharrah with his mind as he passed the field he was still lying in with Aithusa.

I think some things do not change, young warlock, he answered, his mental voice resonating in Merlin's mind like a note from some musical instrument.

Always so cryptic, Merlin sighed. Do you mean 'My desire to see good in others will be my downfall' again?

Did I say those words? Kilgharrah asked, amused. You must admit, Merlin. That advice would have saved you many a time had you listened.

You mean with Morgana and Mordred, Merlin asked, wincing.

Yes, but that advice has also served you in good stead, perhaps more so than it has hurt you.


Kilgharrah chuckled. We do not always see eye-to-eye, Merlin. In fact, on many occasions your reckless decisions have vexed me to no end, and I despaired at you ever fulfilling your destiny. But, often you have proved me wrong. I do not forget, Merlin, that you once showed me mercy. You gave me a second chance when you could have taken your revenge for the wrong I did to your city. Your
propensity to see good in others is no weakness, Merlin, it's your greatest strength.

Merlin couldn't help but smile. You've changed your tune over the centuries. I like this new you. If only you would agree with me on everything.

That, Merlin, would be akin to complete anarchy.

Merlin laughed.
"Have some more bacon, dear," Mrs Weasley said fondly, trying to pile more of the stuff onto Merlin's plate.

"No, Mrs Weasley, really, I'm full," Merlin said, and he meant it. Even after years of feasting in Camelot and Hogwarts, Mrs Weasley's cooking was severely testing him. He soon feared he'd lose the skinny frame he'd had all his life. If only Arthur could see him now- he'd laugh himself silly.

She frowned a little. "I do wish you'd eat more, dear. You're far too thin."

Merlin barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. Gwen, his mother, and even Gaius had all said the same thing at one time or another.

"Really," he said firmly. He leaned back in his chair at the Weasley's breakfast table. He could get far too used to this.

"What are you planning on doing today then?" Mrs Weasley asked, starting to clear away the table.

"Going back to Hogwarts," Merlin answered immediately. Harry and the others had gone back last night and he was anxious to join them.

Mrs Weasley sniffed. "I wish you'd rest that arm more. It was a really bad injury!"

Merlin stopped himself from sighing. "Yes, but you read the letter from St. Mungo's," he said, waving said letter; a dishevelled Errol had delivered it that morning and promptly dropped it into his pumpkin juice. "They said I have to go in to have the bandages removed and I should be free to go back to school."

She didn't look convinced. "How do they know? They haven't even examined it yet!"

Merlin smiled. "Even if they said no, I'd still go back. I can't stay away from Harry."

She nodded but looked a little sad. She turned away to the sink and stood there like a statue.

"I wish you didn't have to," she said softly, still not looking at him.

"I've had much worse injuries than this, Mrs Weasley," he said, trying to reassure her. "You don't have to worry."

"But I do!" she said, and Merlin was shocked to hear her voice rather emotional. "I worry all the time! It's all I can do!"

She took a few deep breaths. "I worry all the time …" she said, her voice trailing away to a whisper.

Merlin watched her back. "You care," he said, softly. "The people you love are in danger. You'd be a monster if you didn't worry."

She shook her head. "I'm so afraid. I don't want them all to be in the Order. I can't bear the thought of them all being in danger. But I know I can't stop them. Goodness knows they all have a right to fight against him. But … when I thought Harry was dead during the battle … I can't go through that again! I couldn't lose him. I couldn't lose any of my children! Not like I lost my brothers!"

Merlin felt an aching feeling in his heart. She suffered so much. That was the curse of the people
who loved without restraint.

He stood up and moved behind her slowly.

"You won't," he said, his voice soft but firm. "You asked me once, when I was still just Martin Emrys, if I would protect them, and I promised you I would. I hold to that. I will protect them with my life."

She shook her head, and turned around to face him, her eyes suspiciously wet. "That's just the thing," she said. "I worry about you. I haven't known you long … but I still feel responsible for you, and I don't want to lose you either! I'm being ridiculous I know," she said, laughing slightly. "You're perfectly capable of protecting yourself, I know that. You're far older and more powerful than even Dumbledore was. But I just can't help it!"

Merlin was frozen in surprise for a moment. A strange feeling was spreading through him. She was worried about him, actually worried. He hadn't experienced someone worrying about him in … he couldn't remember when. In Camelot, everyone had known how powerful he was, even if Arthur did occasionally did worry about him and his general carelessness, and in the years since, he'd never allowed himself to get close enough to anyone to let them be worried for his safety. It was slightly absurd thinking that a woman a mere fraction of his age was worried about him, but it also felt … nice.

"I'm touched," he said sincerely, feeling oddly emotional himself. "But I assure you, I can look after myself."

She shook her head sadly. "That's what they all say. Until they're dead."

Merlin put his good arm over hers, and looked directly into her eyes. "It isn't my destiny to die here," he said seriously. "Nor is it Harry's. I have faith in that. There is a greater purpose for the both of us. I have to kill Morgana, and Harry has to kill Voldemort. That's just the way things are. But we're never given anything we can't handle. The Old Religion runs through the both of us. It will protect us."

"The Old Religion runs through them too," Mrs Weasley said. "Why should it protect you and not them?"

Merlin grinned, letting the worry on his face drain away. "Because, it likes me better."

Mrs Weasley looked at the grin on his face in confusion for a moment, before smiling herself. "That makes no sense to me whatsoever."

Merlin shrugged. "Me neither," he admitted. "But life often doesn't make sense. But we have to trust in it anyway."

She shook her head and turned around to resume clearing up. "What is it with powerful old men?" she wondered aloud. "First Dumbledore, now you. You're all insane."

Merlin laughed. "It's just part of the job."

Harry seemed to drift through the day at Hogwarts in some sort of crazy dream. He sat in his classes, he did his work, he walked around the corridors just like normal, but nothing felt real. Not after what had happened at the weekend. He'd just discovered one of his friends was the legendary Merlin. It
was a bit too much.

It felt oddly strange not to have Martin beside him in classes. Every time he'd look over at his empty seat, he'd remember, and the sense that this was all a crazy dream returned. Had it actually happened? Could he have imagined it all?

But the other students didn't continue letting him think this for long. They stood in small groups whispering furiously about the attack and the mysterious new female Death Eater. Their eyes followed Harry and his friends even more than usual; they all knew they'd been in Hogsmeade.

Harry sat at dinner that night and stared at his full plate, not in the least hungry. He glanced up at the staff table to see McGonagall, Hagrid, Flitwick and Sprout deep in discussion, not even as much as glancing at their food. Harry wondered if they were talking about Hogsmeade, Morgana, the Cup or Merlin. Perhaps it was all of them.

He sighed and looked around the Hall. It was slightly emptier than usual. Many parents had immediately withdrawn their children from the school after the attack. McGonagall had implemented new security measures- all Hogsmeade visits were suspended until the powerful wards that surrounded the castle could be extended right along the path to Hogsmeade and around the village itself. But that would take time, and parents didn't want to risk it.

Hermione was looking around as well. "Don't they realise how much safer it is here?" she said, noting a rather large gap at the Hufflepuff table.

"Is it though?" Ron asked through his food. "Their kids were attacked on a school trip."

"Yes, but with all the new security-"

"Security isn't fool proof. You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters managed to get in here in May."

Hermione frowned. "Yes, but the wards weren't as powerful then," she argued. "Merlin's magic is much more-"

"Yeah, but how would you explain that to the parents?" Ron pointed out. "'Oh it's okay, your kids are safe. We've got Merlin protecting the castle'?"

"Shh," hissed Harry, all too aware that conversations in Hogwarts were easily overheard and Hermione and Ron's arguments tended to get rather loud.

"Fine," said Ron huffily. "We can't tell them about … Martin … so it's essentially useless for reassuring parents. And besides, who says his protection is that powerful? Morg- his friend -can use that magic as well! We might be safe from You-Know-Who, but maybe not from her."

"But Kilgharrah said Martin's magic is more powerful than hers!"

"Yeah," said Ron sombrely. "But she's overpowered him before. And You-Know-Who managed to find a loophole in Martin's spell so he could free her. Who says he can't do the same thing again?"

Harry had nothing to say to this. He trusted Merlin, of course he did. He knew how powerful and wise he was. But he had been compromised in the past. Even Dumbledore had been occasionally outwitted. And Merlin had a grudge against Morgana; a hated so powerful Harry knew he could never understand. He might be being careless in his determination to kill her.

Harry tried to shake these defeatist thoughts out of his head. He was Merlin, and above all, he was Martin, their friend. He had to have faith in him.
"You lot look pretty miserable," said Seamus, leaning over from the opposite side of the table. "Where's Martin?"

"He got injured in the attack," Hermione said, when she noticed Harry and Ron were making no attempt to answer. "He'll be back tonight."

Seamus' eyes widened. "I'd heard he was involved. There's some crazy rumour going around that he fought her and drove her off."

They were silent, and Seamus' eyes went even wider, and Dean, who'd been listening in leaned in closer as well.

"He didn't did he?" Dean asked. "Whoa! Did he use that Druid magic stuff?"

Harry didn't know what to say. How much should they disclose?

"Who was that woman anyway?" Seamus asked. "She was powerful wasn't she? I saw the mess she made of the High Street."

Harry breathed in and glanced around. "We can't tell you, at least not here," he said. "The Order knows, and we're dealing with it. Kingsley doesn't want it made public just yet."

They both frowned.

"What, you don't trust us?" Dean asked, looking slightly hurt. "We're a part of the DA, aren't we? We fought with you in the battle, didn't we?"

"Yes, but-" Harry began, but broke off at the looks on their faces. He sighed and looked around at Ron and Hermione, who looked uncertain. "What do you think?" he asked them.

Hermione bit her lip. "They deserve to know," she said. "We're all fighting together, aren't we? But … I think Martin should decide."

Ron nodded, and Harry agreed with them. This was Merlin's decision. He turned back to Dean and Seamus.

"Wait until Martin gets back," he said. "Then we'll see whether to tell the DA or not."

"Why him?" asked Seamus, frowning. "Why him especially?"

Harry almost laughed. "You'll find out eventually … probably. This is his secret to tell."

They nodded, and turned back to their meals, looking slightly more satisfied - they respected Harry's decision, even if they were impatient for the truth.

Harry motioned for Ron and Hermione to come closer. "Do you think this is a good idea? Can the DA be trusted?"

"Smith can't," Ron said, casting a dirty glance over to the Hufflepuff table.

"He didn't grass on the DA last time around," Harry pointed out. "It's the first-years I'm worried about. Finding out one of the most famous sorcerers ever to live is in the room with them, centuries after he was supposed to have died? Think they'd manage to keep it secret?"

Hermione bit her lip again. "Maybe Martin knows a spell to keep the secret?"
"Like an Unbreakable Vow?"

"Yes, but not so drastic a punishment as death if they break it," said Hermione. "More like the Fidelius Charm, only modified to hide a secret and not a building."

"In any case, we'll have to wait for Martin to come back," said Harry. "If we're going to be fighting all together, I don't think we have a right to keep his identity from them. We couldn't anyway—Voldemort knows who Martin is. It'll only be a matter of time. Hopefully Martin will see that. I just hope he isn't afraid to tell them."

Hermione smiled. "I don't think he will be this time. He's glad he can be himself again. He's sick of the lies."

Harry nodded. "Good. We'll talk to him as soon as he gets back then."

He turned back to his still untouched meal. Beside it was lying an edition of the *Evening Prophet*, with the headline: **Mysteries still remain. Who was Hogsmeade attacker? And what were her motives for the Muggle attacks?** Underneath the words was a picture of a Muggle museum, with running and screaming figures. Just in the background was a blurred image of a dark-haired woman. Harry recognised Morgana without hesitation.

Just how long was this going to go on?

"Can you help us Mer-Martin?" Kingsley asked, walking into the Atrium of the Ministry.

Merlin sighed and flexed his shoulder, now free of its bandages. "Perhaps. Usually I would be able to sense the Cup's presence, but there's other artefacts of the Old Religion being studied down there in the Department of Mysteries. They might mask its presence. It might be a better idea to keep searching the archives. But, I'll certainly try."

Kingsley nodded. "That's all I'm asking."

They approached the golden gates at the end of the hall, and Kingsley escorted him to the side where a surly and badly-shaven wizard was sitting at a desk reading a newspaper, looking thoroughly bored.

Kingsley cleared his throat and the wizard looked up, and jumped to his feet, obviously not expecting the Minister for Magic himself to be looking down at him.

"Minister!" he yelled, and hurriedly threw away his newspaper and swept some Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans wrappers off his desk. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I'm escorting a visitor," said Kingsley, gesturing to Merlin, who was wearing a ridiculous badge saying 'Martin Emrys, Advisor to the Minister'.

The wizard peered at Merlin and frowned at the badge on his chest. "Bit young, ain't he? An advisor?"

Kingsley said nothing, and only smiled pointedly. The wizard took the hint.

"Right, well I'd best … um," he faffed about, scrambling to get the Probity Probe. He waved it in front of Merlin, front and back. It hummed slightly louder than usual and the wizard frowned. It was
detecting Merlin's more powerful magic, but didn't know how to process it. Merlin held his breath, but the wizard shook his head and seemed to dismiss it.

"Can I have your wand please, sir?" he asked. Merlin handed it over, noting that the wizards he'd usually been examined by the few times he came here had been much ruder. He must be trying to impress the Minister.

The wizard took the wand and dropped it onto a brass instrument that looked like a set of scales with only one dish. It began to vibrate and a small strip of parchment came out of the base. The wizard took it with a flourish and read aloud:

"Eleven and a half inches, dragon scale core, been in use …" The wizard's eyes widened as the read the last part of the note.

"It's an antique," Merlin said, trying not to laugh at the man's expression, and holding out his hand for his wand. The wizard gave it to him and went back to his desk, still gaping at the note.

Merlin and Kingsley continued on through the Ministry towards the lifts, and Kingsley laughed. "That was interesting. Sorry about the security, but I want everything to appear normal. For all intents and purposes I'm taking you to my office to question you about the attack in Hogsmeade."

Merlin nodded. "It's alright. And I understand your desire for secrecy. But how long do you think it'll last? Or for that matter, how long should it last?"

Kingsley grimaced as the entered the lift. "That is still something I'm still considering. I'd rather wait until we had the Cup so the people know we have a way to defeat her, but then again, they deserve the right to protect themselves, we don't know how long it'll take us to find the Cup."

The lift descended deep within the Ministry. They emerged onto Level 9. "Department of Mysteries" the voice in the lift said, and Merlin got a chill through his spine as he once again felt the presence of Old Magic.

"Is it here?" Kingsley asked eagerly, seeing Merlin's changed expression.

Merlin shook his head. "I don't know yet. There's so much magic down here. Much of what you're studying here is Old Magic, you just didn't know it before now. The magic of the Old Religion is present in all things, love, death, time … that's why this place is like walking into the past for me. So much power …"

He shook himself. "Well, I'd better be going."

Kingsley escorted him down many corridors, not in the slightest bothered by the labyrinth passages. They came into some stone corridors, roughly-hewn, and the air became colder. Merlin looked around in interest.

"This was the original headquarters of the Wizard's Council, the predecessor to the Ministry," he said to Kingsley. "There were many wizards high up politically that infiltrated the British nobility, but when they met they preferred to do it in secret, deep underground so no one would discover them. They moved here sometime during the Roman invasions."

Kingsley looked around, his eyes interested. "So you remember when these passages were built?"

Merlin snorted indignantly. "How old do you think I am? The Romans had been gone at least two centuries before I was born! I do remember the Viking invasions though …"
Kingsley nodded, and tried to look nonchalant, but Merlin could see the wonder in his eyes. He smiled in response.

"I didn't know this place existed when I was young," he explained. "Arthur's kingdom was far away from London. It was the Roman wizards who moved here. They were the ones who really started the whole 'wand craze', Ollivander's family came over about the same time. They weren't very important in my day, but when the Old Religion began to decline more people turned to wand magic."

"So wand-users existed in your day?" Kingsley asked.

Merlin nodded. "Yes, but like I said, they weren't very important. It was a foreign idea, and it was only very slowly that the people of Britain were converted to using wands. After the Romans left, people went back to the Old Religion, but shifted back again when it declined. And now barely anyone remembers a time before wands."

“I came here once before, with Salazar Slytherin,” Merlin said, still looking around and realising what direction they were heading. “The Wizards’ Council weren’t too happy with the ideas for the school, particularly about admitting Muggle-Borns, so we came here to speak with them.”

“Slytherin convinced the Council to admit Muggle-Borns?”

“Yes,” said Merlin softly. “He wasn’t all bad, you know. We didn’t have a great beginning, but we became friends eventually. We were united in our hatred of the Wizards’ Council, I think. They were the very worst of Pure-Blood fanatics. The place we’re heading to now used to be the Atrium of the old Headquarters.”

Kingsley looked fascinated, but they were prevented from talking from more. They emerged into a cavernous room, with ceilings so high Merlin had to strain to see the top, filled with piles and piles of parchment and ancient books. Merlin was impressed. Even Geoffrey's library in Camelot didn't match this. It was certainly different from the last time he had come here, when it had been filled with Pure-Blooded and bigoted noblemen, creating laws to benefit themselves and ignoring the rest of the wizarding population. It made Merlin glad to see the room was now being put to good use.

A small mousy looking wizard came rushing up. "Minister, I'm glad you're here! We've been searching and searching but we just can't find anything! There's no references anywhere to what you mentioned! I'm at my wits end-"

"Thank you, Eric," said Kingsley, smiling. "Why don't you and your colleagues take a small break? Myself and my associate have some things we need to discuss. He may have a solution to our problem."

Eric looked at Merlin, bewildered, possibly wondering what possible help he could be. But he nodded, and motioned to several other witches and wizards who were hiding behind the shelves. They all traipsed out of the room and Merlin saw each one of them looked exhausted.

"Poor souls," said Kingsley, watching as they left. "This is the second time in only a few months I've asked them to search this entire room."

"I can see why they're tired," said Merlin looking around. "It would take years to search this place properly."

"And it doesn't help that no one bothered to organise it properly either over the years," agreed Kingsley. "Ancient wizards just kept piling their books one on top of the other. It's a storage room, rather than a library. Utterly useless for searching for a particular book."
Merlin nodded and grew quiet, thinking. He felt like a young man again, trying desperately to find some magical solution to his problems in Camelot in Gaius' library.

"What do you think?" Kingsley asked.

Merlin frowned. "It's possible there's something in here, but it'd take too long to search properly. Unless …"

He strode purposefully over to the nearest table and grabbed a thick book.

"Gecyðan mec hwā ic cunnian," he said, and he felt his eyes turn golden. He heard Kingsley's gasp and couldn't help but smile. It'd been so long since he'd been able to use his magic out in the open like this.

The book in his hand flipped open and the pages flashed by quicker than the blink of an eye, a small gust of wind being generated by the rapid passage of the pages. Eventually, it stopped.

Merlin read what was written there quickly.

"Nothing useful," he shrugged. "The legendary Holy Grail is thought to be nothing more than a Muggle myth, and no evidence has ever been put forward for it once existing as a magical artefact. This book's no use."

He got the next book and performed the same action. "Again, nothing useful. "The Holy Grail is a myth and wizards who go on Quests to locate it are just fooling themselves."

He deposited it back on the table, and searched through the ten other books on that table. None of them even contained a mention of the Cup.

He sighed and turned back to Kingsley, who was watching him open-mouthed. "What?"

Kingsley just shook his head looking amazed. "Searching through those dozen books would have taken my people more than a day, allowing for time to translate them. You just accomplished it in a few minutes."

Merlin shrugged modestly. "I don't need to translate anything," he said. "I've encountered pretty much every language there is over the centuries. Even my own language has changed; English has gone through many mutations over the centuries until it's become almost unrecognisable. If Arthur were here he wouldn't understand a word I'm saying to you."

Kingsley just blinked, still looking awed. Then he laughed. "I should have expected this. I must try and get over the fact that I'm watching Merlin himself using magic."

Merlin smiled weakly. Then he looked around. "I'm afraid this method won't help the Unspeakables much," he said slowly. "I can't stay, I need to protect, Harry. But perhaps …"

He searched the desk in front of him. He found a large paperweight- a glass globe, looking almost like one of the prophecies in the Department. He held it flat in his hand.

"Gecyðan se scinnlēca ēber wælcyrie hwā hīe cunnian."

The paperweight glowed an intense blue for an instant and grew very hot. Merlin placed it down on the desk and held his hand over it.

"Gewyrcañ fēla māra." And where there had been one paperweight, there were now a dozen.
He tossed one to Kingsley who caught it expertly in one hand. "Give these to the Unspeakables."

Kingsley frowned. "What will they do?"

Merlin tossed a book at him. "Place the paperweight on the cover of the book and think about what you want to find."

Kingsley obliged, and the paperweight and the book glowed. Then the book flipped through its pages and opened on the page Merlin had read from a few moments previously.

Kingsley's face broke out into a broad grin. "This is magnificent! If only we'd had these a few months ago! Incredible magic!"

Merlin smiled. "I made one for Gaius many years ago. He found it hard to find the instructions for his remedies and potions in all his books as his memory and eyesight failed him. I wasn't sure if it would work this time- Gaius had known exactly what he was searching for, and could picture it precisely. But apparently it works for more general matters as well."

Kingsley closed the book and beamed at Merlin. "Very innovative," he nodded approvingly. "These will solve many of our problems."

Merlin nodded. "Good. So now there's one other matter to attend to."

He closed his eyes, and let his magic flow through his entire body and outside it, spreading out in every direction. He let it expand throughout the room, sending out tendrils of energy, searching. He felt the magic in his veins ignite like fire, filling him with a rush of power. He smiled even as the magic kept spreading out and filling his mind with what lay outside the room.

After an age, he opened his eyes. Kingsley was watching him strangely.

"I still can't be sure whether it's here or not," explained Merlin, feeling exhilarated from his intense use of magic; it wasn't often he got to do that. "There are definitely traces of the Old Religion here, but I can't isolate it. Our best bet is still searching through these records. In the meantime I'd best get back to Hogwarts."

Kingsley nodded, still looking at him strangely. "Very well. I expect you'll wish to search the castle as well?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "Rowena made reference to the 'Holy Grail' in her book, and considering the fact I never even knew she or the others had even heard about the Cup, there's a pretty good chance they may have hidden it in the castle."

He doubted it however.

Kingsley sighed. "I detest this uncertainty," he said bitterly. "I want to protect the people, but how can I when I'm going around in circles looking for an ancient Cup like a child on a treasure hunt? And if we fail to find it … our worst enemies will be immortal."

He looked thoroughly miserable, and Merlin frowned. "Don't be like that," he said bracingly. "Voldemort will also be vulnerable. Like a Horcrux. If you spill the blood from the Cup, he'll die."

"But it'll be more heavily guarded than anything we've ever encountered before."

"The last time I tried to get to the Cup," said Merlin smiling. "It was guarded by two evil sorceresses and an entire immortal army. Lancelot and I managed to get through them more or less on our own,
"About time!" Ron called, as Merlin emerged into the Common Room that night. He and Harry had just returned from a Quidditch practise which had been thoroughly disastrous; Harry, Ron and Ginny were all too busy worrying about Merlin and the Cup.

"Yeah, sorry," said Merlin, sliding into a chair beside Hermione in front of the fire. "Kingsley asked me to go to Ministry with him to see if I could find the Cup."

"Did you?" Ron asked eagerly. Merlin raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Ron, I did. That's why I'm jumping up and down in excitement."

Ron frowned and ignored Harry's chuckling. "Did you find anything?"

Merlin sighed. "Nope. But I did a couple of spells that'll hopefully make it easier for them to search through those archives. In the meantime I'll have to begin the search here. I'm not optimistic though; if the Cup is here, then either myself or the ghosts would have sensed it at some point over the years."

Harry tried to hide his disappointment.

"We'll get started right away," said Hermione, who was also flicking through some of the Founder's books. "I can't find anything in here, but then again, I can't read half of it."

"Give me Salazar's," said Merlin, holding out a hand, and Hermione deposited it in his palm. "He was always fascinated with ancient relics and the like. If any of them found it, I'd bet it was him."

"Yeah, slimy gits usually find all the treasure," said Ron, looking at the book in disgust.

Merlin scowled. "Don't speak ill of a man you never met."

Ron looked incredulous. "You're defending Slytherin? That Pure-Blood maniac?"

Merlin shook his head, looking sad. "He wasn't as bad as the legends say. Much of who he really was has been lost or subverted over time. He wasn't evil … just misguided."

Ron was still gaping at him. "So the Basilisk was just supposed to be the school pet?"

"The Basilisk was an attempt to warn Muggle-Borns of what would happen if they betrayed the school," Merlin explained. "He didn't trust them, and often for good reason. Many Muggle-Borns often betrayed other wizards because their parents told them to, because they thought if they did then 'the Devil' would be exorcised from them. The world was very different back then. The Basilisk was never intended to kill an innocent student."

By now Harry, Ron and Hermione were staring open-mouthed at Merlin, hardly believing what they were hearing. Harry felt his head spinning.

"So," he said, trying to puzzle it all out. "Slytherin was a good guy?"
Merlin laughed. "Depends on what you mean by that. He certainly wasn't an entirely pleasant man, and he did have some extreme views. But he wasn't the ruthless killer history paints him as. Of course, I didn't know all of this at the time. Helena told me afterwards the exact circumstances of him leaving the school. The Founders tried to hush it all up, and that's why the legends got so distorted."

There was a momentary silence. "I still find it strange," said Hermione, shaking her head. "You actually knew the Founders."

"Yeah, what was Gryffindor like?" Ron asked, looking interested.

"He was about as arrogant as Arthur and just as stupid," said Merlin, nonchalantly turning a page. "But for all that, he was just as brave and courageous, and determined to do the right thing."

"What about Hufflepuff?"

Merlin smiled. "One of the sweetest and kindest women I've ever known. Ferocious though, you wouldn't want to cross her on a dark night."

"And Ravenclaw?"

At this, Merlin blushed furiously. "Uh, yeah, she was nice too."

He buried his nose in Slytherin's book even as Harry and Ron's faces split into broad grins. Hermione wasn't prepared to tease him though.

"Is there anything about the Cup in that book?" she asked, looking at one of the pages, which was covered in a pattern of words and letters Harry couldn't even recognise as being part of the normal alphabet.

"Probably not," said Merlin, sighing and closing the book. "I'll examine them all closely later."

Merlin started gazing into the fire, his eyes looking as though they were far away, a small frown on his brow. He seemed to be talking to himself, thinking furiously, his lips moving silently.

"Um, Martin?" Harry asked conscious of the several other people in the room.

Merlin jumped, and looked around. "Sorry, just thinking."

"What about?" Hermione asked.

He frowned again. "Something Kingsley said. He reminded me of when Morgana first had the Cup."

"What, is there something you remember?" asked Harry, leaning in excitedly. "A way to find it?"

But Merlin shook his head. "No … it's just …" He sighed, and glanced around quickly. "When Morgana and her sister Morgause first had the Cup," he began explaining. "They made King Cenred's army immortal and used it to take Camelot from King Uther. Myself, Arthur, Gwen and a few Knights attempted to take it back. That's when the Round Table idea first started."

At this Hermione's eyes lit up and she looked as though she wanted to ask a question but Ron silenced her with a look. Harry was glad; Merlin looked like he had just stumbled upon a solution.

He continued:

"Arthur wanted us to take out the Warning Bell, so he and the others could get in and deal with Morgana," he said. "But we didn't. The other Knight knew about my magic, and we thought we'd have a better chance of getting to the Cup and emptying it, thus destroying the army."
"Two of you against an entire immortal army?" Ron asked, eyes wide.

Merlin nodded. "I had my magic, and Lancelot was an excellent fighter. We had to try."

"Lancelot?" Hermione squeaked, looking surprised. "But wasn't he the Knight who-"

"No," Merlin said, so vehemently it made Hermione flinch. "Lancelot never did anything to betray Arthur or Camelot. It was a foul plot of Morgana's that led to that disgusting story. Lancelot would never have done anything like that. Regardless of how he felt."

Hermione looked cowed. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. Ron was glaring at Merlin.

Merlin sighed and seemed to regret his outburst. "Me too. It's just always made me so angry that Lancelot, who was one of the greatest men I've ever known, has gotten such a reputation. He doesn't deserve it." He smiled weakly. "I can see that after all this is over and done with we'll all have to have a discussion about the true story of Camelot, and sort out the legends from fact."

Hermione nodded. "I'd like that. I want to know the truth. And to hear it from Merlin himself … well, I'd like it very much."

Merlin smiled. "Anyway," he said, continuing. "We managed to fight our way through the army and empty the Cup."

"You've already told us this," said Harry, getting impatient. "What's the point?"

"Patience, Harry," said Merlin. "If you want to learn Old Magic that's the first thing you'll have to learn. Goodness knows, it took me forever. I was getting to the point."

He took in a deep breath. "No mortal weapon would kill one of Morgana's men. So we used an alternate weapon. A blade forged in the breath of a dragon. The only thing able to kill something that is already dead."

Harry frowned. "I don't understand. A sword helped you?"

Merlin nodded. "It's the only thing that will work."

"So, if we find a sword forged in the breath of a dragon, we could use it against Voldemort?" Ron asked, looking slightly sceptical.

Merlin bit his lip. "Well, it isn't exactly fool-proof, I mean, how would we even get close enough to use it? But, if we don't find the Cup in time, it's the only weapon we could use to kill Voldemort. He'd be guarding the Cup- we wouldn't be able to get to it. This would be our back-up if you like."

Harry thought hard. It would be a useful thing to have; even if Voldemort and Morgana made themselves immortal they'd have a way of killing them, two ways in fact. It was certainly a better position to be in at the moment, when the Cup was still at large, to have a weapon that could help them.

"Good," said Harry. "Then we need to get one of these things. Can Kilgharrah or Aithusa help us?"

Merlin pulled a face. "No, I've already asked. Forging one of these things is apparently a pretty big deal and not something they can do easily. Kilgharrah forged one for me years ago because it was the 'right time', but he says he can't do it now, because 'the Old Religion will not permit him to.'" He scowled. "Bloody useless over-grown lizard. We'll have to use the original one that I used."
Ron groaned. "So now we've got another ancient artefact to find? Why can't we just use Gryffindor's sword? If it can destroy Horcruxes why couldn't it destroy some immortal person?"

"Because," said Merlin annoyed. "The original sword is linked specifically with the power of life and death, something intrinsic to the Old Religion. It's the only way."

Ron didn't look happy, but then suddenly perked up. "Maybe it is Gryffindor's sword. It's old isn't it? Maybe it's the same one you used?"

Merlin laughed. "No, I'm certain it's not. For one thing, it isn't old enough. Another, I remember its history exactly, and the goblin that forged it. It had been a present for Godric on his coming-of-age. The sword I used wasn't goblin-made. It was made by Tom the blacksmith, Gwen's father."

"We're going to use a sword forged by a Muggle named Tom on You-Know-Who?" Ron asked. "Oh, the irony."

Merlin ignored him.

Harry was frustrated. "I can't believe this," he said sighing. "We've got a way of killing Voldemort, and it's been lost for centuries as well! We're in no better a position than we were this morning!"

But Merlin was smiling. "Did I say it had been lost for centuries?"

They all froze and looked at him, hardly daring to believe it. "You mean, you know where it is?"

Hermione asked breathlessly.

Merlin nodded.

Harry began to get excited. "Well, where is it?"

"Avalon," said Merlin.

Harry was blank, and Ron looked confused, but Hermione raised an eyebrow sceptically. "The land of the dead? That's helpful."

Ron spluttered. "The land of the dead? What's it doing there? Does it even exist?"

"Yes," Merlin said simply.

"How do you know?" Ron demanded.

"Because I'm the one that took it there," Merlin stated.

There was silence once more as they all looked at him in shock. "What do you mean?" Harry asked, beyond confused now. "I thought you never actually died, that you just never aged?"

"I never died," said Merlin. "But I do have a contact in Avalon."

"A contact?" Ron repeated faintly. "And how exactly did that come about?"

Merlin didn't answer for the longest time, just looked into the fire. "The guardian to Avalon," he began. "Is the Lady of the Lake, the departed soul of a young woman who died in tragic circumstances. I knew her when she was alive. She helped me couple of times. The sword passed between us. I gave it to her."

Harry felt a chill run through him with all this talk of the dead and departed souls. It was all getting a
little too supernatural for his liking.

"Why did you give the sword to her?" Ron asked. "What use was it there?"

Merlin again took his time about answering. "Because, it belonged with its owner."

"Who was that? The woman?" Harry asked.


"You mean to tell me," said Hermione slowly, her eyes growing wider. "That this sword, the one you want us to use is ... Excalibur?"

Merlin just nodded.

Harry felt a little light-headed. Excalibur? The past few days were just becoming more and more like one of the fantasy books he'd read as a child.

Harry blinked rapidly. "Alright, I'm a little confused. I thought Excalibur came from a stone, not made by a blacksmith, forged in the breath of a dragon, and wielded by Merlin to destroy an immortal army."

Merlin smiled. "Perhaps I'd better explain its history."

And for a few minutes he talked about the sword, about Wraiths, about Uther, throwing the sword in a lake, an arm coming from the lake to give it back, Merlin placing it in a stone, Arthur pulling it out and a bunch of other stuff that made Harry's head spin as all his childhood imaginings went wild.

"You put it in the stone?" Hermione asked incredulous.

"Yes," said Merlin. "I thought it was a safe place for it. And it was a way of proving to Arthur that he truly was the rightful king. But he was seriously annoyed when he found out the truth."

"What happened to it after that?" Harry asked. "Why did you take it back to Avalon?"

"When Arthur died, he was laid to rest on the Lake of Avalon," Merlin said, his tone oddly hushed. "Usually, for a warrior dying in battle, their weapons are laid out with him. But ... for some reason, I didn't do that. Something told me not to. So instead of laying it with Arthur, I gave it personally to Fr- the Lady of the Lake. I had a sort of feeling that it would be needed again in the future. But I never thought about it till now. If this isn't what it's intended for, then I have no idea what is."

Hermione looked as though she understood which was more than Harry could say.

"So, you think you can get it back?" she asked. "Is the lake still there?"

Merlin nodded. "I haven't been there in a few centuries, and the landscape's changed a lot, but I could find it again."

"And would this Lady of the Lake give it to you?" Harry asked, noting that for some reason Merlin looked strange at the mention of her.

"I think so," Merlin said softly. "She understood at the time that I'd return for it."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Ron asked. "Let's go and get it!"

Merlin shook his head. "It's not as simple as that. Avalon, and the Lady will be harder to access now."
The Old Religion has declined, and Avalon has retreated further into the spirit world. By my reckoning there's only one time of the year when I think I'd be able to access it, and speak to the Lady in person. The time when the Veil between the world is at its thinnest- Samhain."

Ron looked confused, but Hermione nodded knowledgeably. "Hallowe'en."

Merlin nodded, but Harry wasn't happy.

"But that's weeks away!" he said frustrated. "What are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

Merlin smiled. "I believe you have some lessons to attend to Harry."

Harry scowled. "I couldn't care less about Potions or Transfiguration or-"

"That wasn't what I was referring to," said Merlin, his smile widening.

Harry broke off his rambling, and blinked. "You mean …"

Merlin nodded. "We've wasted too much time already. I think it's about time I taught you everything I know."

Ron looked awed, Hermione jealous, but Harry grinned. 

Finally.

"Well class ... um, well, I suppose we'd- we'd, um, best be getting on with ... with ... um, what we were doing on Friday! Yes, that's it. Um, the- the ... Protean Charm! Get on with that will you? Um, on you go! Of course Mr ... Mr Emrys ... if you find it too easy ... well ... um ... perhaps help the others? Or do it if you want! It's perfectly alright either way! Well, um ... well on we go! The Protean Charm! Have fun!"

Professor Flitwick gave another loud squeak and jumped out from behind his desk, leaving a rather bewildered class. Merlin was barely suppressing a grin. From the moment he'd walked into his Charms lesson that morning Flitwick had been like an overexcited but nervous schoolboy. He couldn't take his eyes off Merlin. McGonagall had obviously told him who he was.

Beside him, Harry and Ron were shaking with silent laughter, while Hermione looked disapproving. 

"He'll give you away!" she hissed, frowning.

"Relax, Hermione," said Ron. "Old Flitwick's always been a bit loopy."

She wasn't impressed. "We have to be careful. Voldemort knows who he is, but can't let anyone else know! Not yet, not until Kingsley decides about what to do." She glanced around quickly, to check the class were absorbed in their lesson (Professor Flitwick was staring in their direction, peeking out from behind a pile of books). "Speaking of which, have you given any thought about tonight ... Martin?"

Merlin nodded, and tried to get rid of the clenching feeling in his gut. "I think you're right, the DA should know the truth. They deserve to know exactly what they're fighting against."

Hermione nodded. "Good. I've already sent a general message around. Everyone will be there tonight, instead of being split over two sessions. Some of them are annoyed about missing Quidditch..."
practise but, well, I'm sure they'll forgive you when you ... you know.”

"Tell them I'm the legendary Merlin?" Merlin asked with a heavy heart. "Yeah I expect so. Not looking forward to it though."

His heart was beating faster than normal at the thought of it, but not nearly to the extreme as it had with the others. He was slightly calmer this time round, now he wasn't alone.

"Any thoughts about keeping them quiet?" Ron asked, flourishing his wand uselessly to appear as if he was working- Flitwick was still watching them. "I reckon most of them would keep take the secret to their grave, but this is pretty big. They might get a bit over-excited."

"Yeah," said Merlin. "I know one. It's an old spell. Arthur used it occasionally when conducting affairs in the kingdom. That way, no one could torture secrets out of Knights."

Hermione looked sick. "Was there a lot of torture in your day?"

Merlin smiled grimly. "Put it this way. The Cruciatus Curse hadn't been invented, but thumbscrews were still easily available."

Harry winced. "But this spell will definitely work?"

Merlin nodded. "They physically won't be able to tell the secret. It won't harm them in any way."

"Good," Hermione said, suddenly business-like. "We have to get on. I don't think we'll get much teaching done tonight. It'll be all we can do to convince them you are who you say you are."

Merlin agreed. It was going to be unpleasant.

"Now class!" Flitwick called from the front, his head barely poking above his desk, looking flushed. "I think now it's time for a demonstration of the correct way to perform the spell! Mr ... Mr Emrys ... I don't suppose you'd- you'd be willing to oblige?"

Merlin looked at his eager face and sighed. "Of course, professor."

He then performed a perfect Protean Charm, and Flitwick squeaked in excitement, his eyes aglow with admiration, tears of joy clustered in the corners of his wrinkled face.

"Oh well done, well done!" he cried, clapping his hands together. "Excellent! Perfect! Magnificent! Wonderful! Amazing!"

He leapt off his pile of books and raced towards Merlin, a broad grin on his face and seized both of his hands and wrung them with his own enthusiastically.

"Well done! I never thought I'd get a chance to see that! I'm so happy!" he continued to squeak, looking joyful.

Merlin struggled to keep a straight face. "Thank you."

He looked over Flitwick's excited face and saw Dean and Seamus, and the rest of the class staring open-mouthed, looks of absolute confusion on their faces. Neville had stuffed his fist in his mouth to prevent himself from laughing, and Dean Thomas looked like he'd been hit over the head with a saucepan. 'What's going on?' his eyes seemed to say.

Merlin grinned nervously at them. You'll soon find out.
"Well, um, hi," said Harry, that evening. It wasn't until he was up here he realised just how large the DA had grown this year. Already he was questioning the wisdom of telling so many Martin's true identity. But he couldn't afford to back down now. They had to be told.

He glanced over at Merlin, who looked even paler than usual. His jaw was clenched, and Harry felt a fluttering of pity. But he really didn't need to worry. There were six people already in this room who would support him no matter what.

He took a deep breath. "I'm glad so many of you turned up tonight, especially those of you who usually go to the Thursday meeting. But I've a very important announcement to make tonight that couldn't wait."

"It'd better be bloody important," grumbled Zacharias Smith. "I'm missing Quidditch practise for this."

"Yeah, Smith," smirked Ron. "Your team needs as much practise as it can get."

Smith opened his mouth angrily to argue, but he was cut across by everyone else in the room.

"Is it about what happened in Hogsmeade?"

"Do you know who the woman is?"

"Is it true that it's Bellatrix Lestrange in a new body?"

"How powerful is she?"

"Did Martin really fight her?"

A flow of questions sprang up at him and Harry had to make a loud noise with his wand to get them to desist. Dozens of expectantly curious eyes gazed up at him, waiting for the announcement, but Harry felt himself freeze. How on earth was he supposed to tell them this? How could he make them understand? Suddenly he had a newfound appreciation for how Merlin felt before he'd told them.

Luckily, Hermione saved the day.

"We have something both very serious and very important to tell you all," she said calmly. "It will be pretty overwhelming, and it may frighten you. But we decided that we can't not tell you, not when you're all prepared to fight to protect this school and your families. You deserve to know what you're up against."

"If it's so important, why hasn't the Minister for Magic said anything?" Ernie asked, a frown on his face. "Is he trying to do what Fudge did and keep the truth from us? I thought you lot were pretty tight with him?"

"We are," said Ron. "And he's got a really good reason for not saying anything so far. You'll understand when you know what it is."

"So he's keeping things from us?" Ernie asked again, looking outraged.

Hermione tried to assuage him. "He's not decided yet. It's a … fairly recent development. We haven't asked him about revealing this to you, but I'm sure he'd be okay with it. He's always supported the DA. Kingsley- I mean, Minister Shacklebolt's doing what he thinks is best."
Ernie still looked ready to protest, but Ginny cut across him.

"Look," she said fiercely. "You have no idea what this about. So trust us. You'll understand."

Ernie still looked uncertain, but nodded. Ginny beckoned to Harry, who was immensely grateful. He had been having doubts himself.

"Right," said Harry. "This is extremely delicate. We're going to have to … um, swear you to secrecy."

"What?" Dean asked, "Don't you trust us?"

"It isn't that," said Harry. "But we really can't let any of this get out. We don't think any of you would betray us or anything, but this … information you're getting might be a bit much."

"Blimey," said Terry Boot. "What is this information?"

Harry looked over at Merlin again, who was standing there rigid. "Martin's got a spell to perform to make sure you don't say anything."

"Spell?" Smith asked, leaping to his feet. "What kind of spell? If it's any of that freaky Druid stuff I'm not interested!

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "If you want to know the secret you'll have to be. And besides, technically I'm not a Druid."

Smith didn't back down. "A descendant of one then."

Merlin smiled. "Nope, not one of those either."

Smith frowned. "But how can you use that Old Magic then?"

Merlin looked at Harry. "If you consent be party to this spell, you'll find out."

Smith looked as though he wanted to argue, but, miraculously, he didn't.

Merlin took in a deep breath as though preparing himself.

"Alright," he said taking command. He withdrew a small bowl from his robes. He looked at it doubtfully for a moment. "What I'm going to ask you to do right now, is a bit macabre. You might find it a bit disturbing and unsettling."

"What, is it some sort of blood ritual?" joked Seamus, but his grin faded as he looked at Merlin's face. "You're kidding?" he gasped. "That's – that's-

"I know," agreed Merlin. "And that's why you have to realise just how important this is. If none of you are prepared to do this, I suggest you leave now."

No one left, though many people looked slightly sick. Merlin didn't waste any time.

"I won't lie to you," he said evenly. "This is unpleasant, but not as bad as I'm sure you're all thinking. I need one drop of blood from each of you. Just one. Then I'll cast a spell which will ensure you cannot speak of this to anyone."

"And what will happen to us if we do?" asked Anthony Goldstein nervously. "I don't want to end up like Marietta Edgecombe."
"Well, don't tell anyone then," said Ron flatly.

"Nothing will happen to you," said Merlin. "Because it will be physically impossible to do so."

People were exchanging nervous glances now, but Merlin didn't seem to take any notice.

He held out the bowl, and there was not a flicker of trepidation on his face, though Harry could tell he must be full of it. "So," Merlin said. "Who'll go first?"

There was some uneasy muttering. No one seemed to want to step forward, and Harry could not blame them. It seemed sickening to him. Hadn't they just been discussing the evil blood magic associated with the Cup of Life?

"Are you sure this isn't some sort of Dark Magic?" Parvati Patil asked, voicing Harry's thoughts. "Don't they use blood a lot?"

Merlin frowned. "Yes, but Old Magic, good and bad, used it too. Please, you have to trust me. It isn't some sort of sick control thing. In fact, I technically don't even need blood. All I need is some form of … what do the Muggles call it … DNA. But blood usually works best. Trust me."

There was some more scattered muttering. Then:

"I'll do it," said Susan Bones, stepping forward, her face free of fear.

Merlin grinned. "Trust a Hufflepuff …"

He withdrew a small pin from his pocket, and pressed its point to Susan's proffered finger. She flinched a little as a small bead of blood appeared there. Merlin held her hand over the bowl until it dropped inside. Then he smiled, his eyes glowed golden, and Susan's finger was healed.

"That's it?" she asked, examining her finger. Merlin just nodded.

"Whoa!" said Dean. "How did you do that glowing thing with your eyes?"

Merlin smiled at him. "You'll find out soon."

Dean looked at him for a moment, shrugged and stepped forward.

"If Harry trusts you, so do I," he said, as Merlin performed the same process.

Gradually, more and more people stepped forward, had their finger pricked, their blood collected, and their finger healed, Smith most grudgingly. Soon the small bowl was filled with blood, and Harry felt his stomach recoil at the sight of it. He hoped Merlin knew what he was doing.

He laughed quietly to himself. He never thought he'd ever think that.

When the last of the blood had been collected, Merlin held the bowl in front of his body and closed his eyes. Then he began speaking in a harsh language:

"Bindan se feorh of eal be þās læfel. Lǣtan nān mǣnan hwā sculan bēon cyðan."

Many in the room jumped as Merlin's eyes, which opened upon his recitation of the last word, opened and burned like a fierce fire. The bowl glowed with a golden hue, and before Harry's eyes, the blood collected inside of it seemed to evaporate, absorbed into the bowl itself. Finally, the bowl was empty. Everyone in the room then shuddered.
"Oooh!" squealed Lavender Brown. "That felt strange."

"Yeah, sorry," said Merlin, stowing the bowl away inside his robes again. "But that's it, I swear."

Dean shuddered once more. "Now, what is so important we had to do that?"

Here, Merlin's courage seemed to falter for a moment. He seemed to take a moment to collect himself.

"You are about to find out something that will change everything," he said, his face blank. "There is a new enemy that must be fought. An enemy like no one has seen before."

"That new woman?" Hannah asked, looking nervous. "I heard she's a reincarnation of Lestrange."

Merlin shook his head. "No, she's far worse."

Many people looked terrified at the very thought.

"What do you mean?" Terry asked, looking pale. "Who is she?"

Merlin took a deep breath, glanced at the others for a moment, and then answered.

"Her name," he said slowly, "is Morgana Pendragon."

No one spoke or even breathed for a moment.

"That's not funny," said Ernie, his eyes wide. He was a Pure-Blood, Harry remembered. He would have grown up with stories about Morgana. "Don't joke about her. We're already facing one evil, don't try and resurrect another."

A muscle twitched in Merlin's neck. "I'm not joking," he said. "I would never joke about this. She is who I say she is. Morgana, sister of Arthur Pendragon, King of Camelot, mortal enemy of Merlin, the most dangerously powerful sorceress ever to live."

"But how is that possible?" Michael Corner gasped. "She died centuries ago!"

Merlin shook his head. "She didn't," he said, and for the first time since Harry had heard Merlin talk about Morgana, he didn't sound sad, just resigned. "Merlin trapped her in the Crystal Cave, a place that existed outside of time, and she's been communicating with Voldemort. She taught him a weaker version of the magic of the Old Religion, and he freed her from her prison. And now they're searching for a relic from Camelot's time- the Cup of Life, an artefact that gives immortality. We have to defeat both of them, get to the Cup first and prevent this from happening."

Well, he was blunt, thought Harry, watching as the entire room just gaped at Merlin. He supposed there'd be no point in trying to do it gently.

Seamus was blinking rapidly, the colour draining from his face. "But it's impossible!"

"Yeah!"

"This is ridiculous!"

"It is not!" Merlin said, and by some strange magic, everyone fell silent and the room seemed to grow darker. "I assure you, Morgana is alive."

"How do you know all this?" Smith asked, sneering, trying to conceal his own alarm. "Why do you
know that she didn't die all those years ago? How do you know this happened?"

Merlin hesitated only for the briefest moment.

"Because I was there," he said, and the room erupted.

"What! You expected us to believe you're thousands of years old?"

"That's impossible!"

"I was," Merlin said in the same commanding tone. "I am a follower of the Old Religion, and a practitioner of its magic. I endured all these centuries for this very purpose. Check the school records; there are at least a dozen different Emrys' there, all of them me. I know this is hard to believe, but it is true. I can use the Old Magic; some of you have seen it already."

"Yeah," said Dean, frowning in remembrance. He stepped closer to Merlin and looked at him intensely. "No offence, mate, but I'm not actually finding it hard to believe. You've always … I dunno, seemed old, like you're wise or something. There's always been something about you that I couldn't quite put my finger on."

Merlin laughed. "I've been told that before," he said, almost to himself.

"Okay," said Terry. "Say we believe you, and you're really a centuries old sorcerer of the Old Religion; why have you never come forward before?"

"Because it wasn't the right time," said Merlin. "I've been waiting all these years. I knew the time would come when the Old Religion would return to the land. And I believe that time is now, and that Harry is the one who can do it."

Everyone turned to look at Harry, and he felt distinctly uncomfortable. Prophecy again … he didn't want involved in it in any way whatsoever.

"And how do you know that?" asked Smith. "Did 'Merlin' tell you? I suppose the two of you were great pals?"

Merlin laughed. "I wouldn't say we were pals exactly."

"You knew him?" Hannah Abbot squealed, her eyes as round as saucers.

Merlin closed his eyes for a second. "Not exactly no." He took in another deep breath and opened his eyes. "I am Merlin."

The way he said it, the power, magical or otherwise that he put into those three words left no one in the room in doubt of their truth. No one breathed.

Then, Smith laughed.

Merlin raised his eyebrows; that had obviously not been what he expected.

Smith was almost in hysterics. "Yeah," he said, gasping for air. "You almost fooled me! The whole blood ritual and the secrecy and all! Very funny!"

"And why is that?" Merlin asked, a wry smile on his face.

Smith stopped his laughing and looked at Merlin smugly. "As if you could be Merlin!" he said, looking him up and down. "Yeah, you've got the whole mysterious act down, but please, don't be
ridiculous. Why would _Merlin_ of all people want to be stuck inside a school?"

"Maybe because he's defending the innocent and the weak?" Neville retorted fiercely, his hand on his wand.

Smith sneered. "You believe him, Longbottom? You're even more foolish than I thought!"

Merlin stepped closer to Smith, and everyone in the room held their breath.

"Don't you dare say that to him," he said quietly, but Harry could hear the danger behind the words. "I am telling you the truth."

Smith raised an eyebrow. "Alright then … _Merlin_," he said. "Where's your beard?"

Merlin grinned. "I've been waiting for you to ask me that."

Then with a fierce glow of his eyes, Merlin changed. His back hunched over, his skin became wrinkled, his hair lengthened and became snowy white, a magnificent beard rivalling even Dumbledore's sprouted from his chin, and his wand grew into an elaborate staff which glowed with a shining gem at its top. Despite his diminished stature, he seemed to be larger than life, the room darkened and closed in on them all, and the power and magic seemed to emanate from him, so powerful that Harry felt the magic inside of him rise and boil within his veins. He took a step back, once again, awed by what he saw. Here he was, this _truly_ was Merlin.

The room shrieked as one, and Smith fell to his knees in shock.

"But-but-" he spluttered, looking up in genuine terror at the man in front of him. "You're really him aren't you?" he gasped, shaking.

"Believe me now?" Merlin croaked, his new moustache twitching in amusement.

Smith looked up at him, blinked a few times, and keeled over, and lay sprawled on the floor.

Merlin sighed. "Great, another fainter."

He chuckled. His eyes flashed again, and a few moments later, he was himself again, rubbing his neck and his arms.

"I hate doing that," he admitted, wincing. "I might be getting on for my fourteenth century but at least I don't look it. Even an eighty year old body isn't much fun."

He turned to face the DA, and smiled weakly.

"Sorry about that," he said, looking wary.

No one said anything. What could they say? Now Harry had gotten over the shock of seeing Merlin transform like that, he was quite enjoying this. The looks on people's faces were priceless.

Merlin started to look uncomfortable and his eyes flicked here and there, looking nervous. As if on cue, Hermione, Luna, Neville and Ginny walked over to him and stood by his side.

"He's telling the truth," said Ginny. "We saw him fight Morgana in Hogsmeade, we heard what she said to him. Merlin here is our only hope to defeat Morgana, and I trust him. He can help us."

"But you have to trust us," said Hermione. "That's how we'll win this fight. Combining Old magic and New, working together. He is who he says he is. And with Merlin on our side, how can we
lose? He's the same man you all knew just a few minutes ago, and he'll fight to the death to protect us all. We can win this."

"Yeah," said Neville, but then seemed to run out of steam, or perhaps he just couldn't find anything to add. But he stared around at everyone defiantly anyway.

"He's our friend," said Luna dreamily, and she smiled at Merlin, who smiled back.

"They're right," said Harry, ridiculously proud of his friends. "Merlin, Martin, whatever you want to call him, he's our friend, and he's with us in this fight. This will be a shock for you all, but you have to trust us."

Still, no one in the room could even move. All of them were standing stock-still, staring at Merlin, their eyes popping and their mouths hanging open. Harry waited, a tension building in his body, probably nothing compared to what Merlin was feeling, but still nerve-wracking. Had he made a mistake in doing this?

Then, almost timidly, Ernie took a step forward, his eyes still fixed on Merlin. He walked towards him, almost dragging his feet, like walking in a dream. He stopped about a foot in front of Merlin, and seemed to examine his face with his eyes, searching for the truth. He seemed to find it.

He nodded, his pudgy face still slack in awe. Then, he smiled, and held out his hand. Merlin took it.

"Glad to finally meet the real you," Ernie said, sincerely. "You are most welcome to Dumbledore's Army. I'd be honoured to fight alongside you."

Merlin looked down at their joined hands and looked oddly emotional. He looked back up at Ernie.

"Thank you," he said, and his face split into a broad grin, the most sincere one Harry had seen yet.

Things were finally settling into place.

Merlin smiled to himself as he lay in bed later that night. The Order knew, the DA knew, Harry, Ron and Hermione knew … the burdens he'd been carrying around all these years were finally beginning to lessen.

The DA, after the initial shock had been pretty … well, accepting. They'd spent hours going over Merlin's past, Morgana's plans and the Cup of Life. All of them had agreed to keep an eye-out for any possible locations for the Cup of Life. They'd plagued him for demonstrations of Old Magic, stories about Camelot, more questions like 'Are you really him?' but on the whole, Merlin had enjoyed it. He felt at ease in a way he never thought he would again.

After the meeting, after they had had to literally eject people from the room, such was their enthusiasm at speaking to the Merlin, he and Harry had had their own little meeting.

Merlin had decided he had better get on with teaching Harry Old Magic as it became more and more apparent Voldemort was gaining more and more proficiency in it. They'd sat there in the Room long after everyone had left going over the techniques Merlin had taught him to control the flow of the magic until Merlin was entirely satisfied that Harry had complete control over it. He learned fast, and Merlin had gotten Harry to use his wand and use the incantation 'Forbearnan' to light ten candles, one after the other, keep them burning for three minutes, and then extinguish them in the same order as he'd lit them. It was a basic exercise in control, one which Merlin had used when teaching the
Founders, and Harry had excelled after his initial attempts in which he'd set fire to Merlin's robes. At least he hadn't blown up a wand and reduced a table to matchsticks like Godric had on his first attempt.

Merlin was thrilled with Harry's progress. He'd taught students in Camelot who after many weeks of training still found controlling several flames at once almost impossible. But they'd never had the same motivation for success that Harry did.

Merlin looked over at the bed where Harry had collapsed after their lesson. He was exhausted, and rightly so. Old Magic was draining on someone not accustomed to using it, even more so for someone who'd used wand magic all their life; the Founders had suffered in the same way, and according to their books, this would soon subside.

But for the moment, Harry was dead to the world. Merlin smiled. He remembered all too well the way magic could exhaust someone. His students had experienced it, and he had too, when he was much, much younger, his work for Arthur and studies together making him close to collapse at the end of every day.

He sighed, and looked over at the other beds. He noticed that Dean and Seamus had finally gone to sleep. They'd sat up for hours, peeking out at him from between their curtains, still unable to believe that they were sharing a dormitory with Merlin.

Merlin tried not to let it bother him. They'd get over it eventually. He just had to be patient.

He lay himself down, and tried to let sleep come to him, but found that too many thoughts were racing around in his head to let himself drift off. Despite his general good mood, a sinking feeling existed deep in his gut. He couldn't explain why, but he felt on edge. Like something dangerous was coming.

Merlin shook this off. He snuggled deep under his covers. He closed his eyes and fell immediately into a deep sleep.

_He was in Camelot, standing in the old courtyard. It was bustling with life and laughter. Knights moved here and there, swiping at each other playfully, mounting their horses, racing each other, shooting teasing remarks at each other._

_Faces leaped out at him, faces he hadn't seen in thirteen hundred years but recognised like it was only yesterday. They smiled at him, laughed, clapped him on the back, welcomed him home._

_Merlin looked down at himself, and saw he was wearing his old servant clothes, ragged, itchy, but familiar. He felt young, invigorated._

_He looked up, and saw a figure coming down the steps of the palace towards him. A very familiar figure._

_The sun shone off his golden hair, and illuminated his youthful face, which seemed to be laughing in some profound joy. The crimson of his cloak jumped out at him, the dragon carefully embroidered upon it almost seem to be alive, protecting its wearer._

_Arthur clapped a hand on his shoulder._

"We thought you'd never get here, Merlin!" he laughed. "What took you so long you idiot?"
Merlin laughed too. "I don't know, Sire. But I'm glad to be back."

Arthur grinned again, but then stopped in his tracks and looked down at his chest. There was a great rend in the chainmail, and underneath it, the flesh oozed with scarlet blood.

Arthur looked back up at Merlin who was frozen in horror.

"Why did you do this to me, Merlin?" he asked, clutching at his chest. "I thought we were friends! You betrayed me!"

"No," said Merlin, backing off, fear clutching at his heart. "It wasn't my fault …"

Arthur fell to the ground, and a scarlet river began flowing over the flagstones of the courtyard.

"Merlin! Help me!" Arthur cried in agony, and suddenly, the courtyard was gone, and they were on a battlefield, surrounded by the dead and the dying. Gone were Arthur's youthful features, he was older now, his features wise with the experience of several decades. Beside him lay Excalibur, red with the blood of Mordred, who lay a few feet away, already having succumbed to his wounds.

"Please!" Arthur begged. "Don't let me die here! You were supposed to help me! You were supposed to be here! Why did you let me ride to Camlan on my own? You should have foreseen this!"

Merlin backed away, the bile rising in his throat. "It wasn't my fault … it wasn't my fault …"

Then, Arthur and the field at Camlan disappeared, and Merlin found himself in a cave, where crystals seemed to grow out of the very walls. The Crystal Cave.

There was a new figure approaching him.

Morgana smiled as she looked over him.

"Still feeling the guilt, Merlin?" she asked, sneering. "And so you should; it is your fault Arthur is dead."

"No, Morgana," Merlin said back, his voice fierce. "You and you alone are to blame. I won't let you make me feel this way. I am stronger than you!"

"That's what you think," Morgana smirked. "But I have seen much during the imprisonment you were so gracious to bless me with. I am more powerful than even you, Emrys. The Dark Lord and I shall rule over all."

"Bit of a change, Morgana," Merlin observed. "Sharing credit? That's not like you. Have you learnt loyalty after all?"

Morgana laughed, and the sound echoed around the cave. "Only so long as it suits me, dear Merlin, you know me too well to doubt that."

"I won't let you succeed," Merlin vowed. "I will accomplish what I failed to do thirteen hundred years ago."

Morgana smiled. "And once again, you shall fail. I will kill you, Merlin. But before I do, I will make you watch as the Potter boy is destroyed. Another one of your charges will writhe and die in agony because of your failures. And I shall cherish the look of pain in your eyes as you realise once again that you are the one who is responsible. And then, I shall kill you, Merlin."
Merlin shook his head. "I will die before I let you lay a finger on Harry."

For some reason, this made Morgana look joyfully happy. "Who said I'd even need to touch him?" she laughed.

She looked to her left, and Merlin followed her gaze. Standing there in the cave, looking terrified, was Harry.

"NO!" Merlin yelled, but he was too late.

"Angrislic bānwærc," Morgana screeched.

Harry fell to the ground and began writhing around in agony, screaming at the top of his lungs. His limbs flailed here and there as his bones turned to fire.

"No!" Merlin yelled again, a cry of agony wrenched from his own throat. He turned to Morgana and tried to cast a spell that would strike her down and kill her, but no magic would come to him.

Morgana laughed. "I'm not really here, Merlin. You cannot kill your own mind's eye."

Harry continued to scream.

"NO!" Merlin screamed, jerking straight upright in bed, drenched in a cold sweat, his breath coming in great heaving gasps. He was shaking all over.

At the same moment, Harry jerked awake in his own bed, yelling like a madman, in a similar state to Merlin.

"Blimey!" Ron screamed, leaping out of bed, dishevelled. "Harry? Merlin? You all right?"

Dean, Seamus and Neville leapt out of their own beds and gathered around, looking afraid.

"You alright Marti- Merlin?" Dean asked, a worried frown on his face.

Merlin kept breathing heavily, his entire body covered in a sweat. He felt sick.

He looked over at Harry, who was rubbing his arms and legs as though plagued by the memory of a ghostly pain. He met Merlin's eyes.

And in that look, they knew.

That had been no ordinary dream.

Morgana was trying to manipulate them. She was getting inside their very heads.

Merlin yelled in frustration, and buried his face in his hands.

He felt anger surging through every inch of him.

He didn't care what it took, or how long it would take.

He would be the one to kill Morgana.
"I can't do it!" Harry yelled, throwing down his wand in frustration.

"Harry," said Merlin. "You've been doing this for a week. Give it some time."

Harry scowled. "We don't have any time. Morgana and Voldemort could be inches away from finding the Cup of Life and I can't even do an Old Religion Shield Charm!"

Merlin sighed, and tried to be patient. "You're making excellent progress, Harry, especially for someone who only a few months ago hadn't even heard of this magic. Even I couldn't manage a spell like that right away!"

Harry slumped down on the floor in the Room of Requirement and caught his breath. The magic seemed to leave him physically exhausted.

"Why does this happen?" Harry asked, looking at Merlin. "You don't get tired when you use magic!"

Merlin sat down carefully beside him. "Your body's just not used to this type of magic yet, Harry. Forget everything you've ever learned about magic. This kind is of a completely different kind to what you've previously learned, the same rules don't apply. Listen."

He broke off, while he summoned one of the Founder's books to him from across the room, where they'd taken to keeping them.

He began to recite. "Magic of the Old Religion leaves one feeling drained and unable to think clearly. From what I understand the way magic is used differs completely to what we previously have learned. Thus, I found it prudent to forget all else, and act as though starting completely from scratch. It was difficult, and at times I felt like giving up, but I did not. I endured the weariness and did not deviate from my path. With practice it became easier, and there soon came a time when Old Magic left me no more exhausted than New magic."

Merlin snapped the book shut and looked around at Harry. "You see? Just stick it out."

Harry didn't look reassured. "How long will it take?" he asked desperately.

"You have to be patient," Merlin said. "This magic can be dangerous to you if you don't learn to properly control it; why do you think I made you practice that meditation? Stay calm and be patient and everything will fall into place."

"Not fast enough!" Harry said, and leapt to his feet to pace about the room. He had bags under his eyes and looked bedraggled. Merlin knew he hadn't been sleeping.

Morgana had plagued their dreams almost every night, and although Merlin had cast a spell over the two of them to prevent her from physically gaining access to their minds, she still managed to manipulate them. She wasn't there physically, like during the first dream, but twisted them in such a way that left the two of them getting only a few hours rest every night. It was like living with your own personal Dementor; Merlin relived the day Arthur found out about his magic and his anger, the day Arthur was killed, the day he'd left Hogwarts and the Founders, the Witch Hunts he'd been forced to watch …

Merlin knew Harry was suffering just as much.
Merlin stood up. He knew there would be no point in arguing with Harry at present.

"Come on," he said, moving towards the door. "We've got our training session with Tonks."

Harry gave him a look as though to say he didn't give a damn about Tonks' training session, but he said nothing, and followed Merlin out of the door. Merlin was just relieved that Harry wasn't being difficult; according to Ron and Hermione he could be impossible at times.

He couldn't blame him. In addition to the nightly attacks from Morgana, there were other attacks of a different nature going on. Morgana, and Voldemort, were attacking Muggle settlements and public buildings. There were never any deaths, or any injuries, but that was what made everyone even more afraid as they wondered what was really going on. It was all Morgana, Merlin couldn't help but think. This was exactly her style; create so much fear and panic people begin to doubt themselves and their own leaders.

And it was working. The *Daily Prophet* for the fast few days had been filled with nothing except articles on how inept the Ministry was in dealing with these attacks. People blamed Kingsley; they knew he was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and this made them afraid. They wondered where his true loyalties lay, and whether or not he was hiding the truth from them because the Order had an ulterior motive.

It was times like these that Merlin hated the media. All it ever caused was trouble. When Fudge was bungling affairs left, right and centre or when Scrimgeour was concealing everything and looking for poster boys they said nothing. But now they had a Minister who actually had a chance at beating this and weeding out the corruption and ineptitude at the Ministry and all they could do was criticise him! It almost made Merlin yearn for the days before newspapers.

It was still a blurry issue whether or not Kingsley should tell the wizarding population the truth. Merlin didn't want people to panic, but he also felt that the longer they concealed it from everyone the angrier everyone would be. There had also been strange whispers going about, whispers that were too close to the truth for Merlin's liking. At the battle Voldemort had announced he had the powers of the ancient sorcerers, and mentioned both Merlin and Morgana by name. The mysterious appearance of this beautiful woman with strange powers in alliance with Voldemort was making some people put two and two together. Of course, so far, these people had been dismissed as lunatic conspiracy theorists; no one could ever imagine something like this *could* ever happen. It helped as well that Xenophilius Lovegood had printed an article in the *Quibbler* testifying his certainty that the new female Death Eater was indeed the legendary Morgana. But then again, the Quibbler had been the only source of the truth for many people last year and some people were beginning to wonder whether or not it was true.

It was all getting very close now. Perhaps it was time for everyone to know.

Harry was silent as they walked. Merlin glanced at him, and saw a look in his eyes that no one as young as that should have. It reminded Merlin of himself in Camelot so many years ago, when he was determined to do whatever it took to protect Arthur.

Eventually, they came to the Dueling Chamber, and Merlin took a deep breath before walking in. As he predicted, everyone was there as usual, and they were all staring at the door, and fell into hushed silence as soon as he walked in.

Merlin smiled awkwardly and went over towards them. He nodded to Tonks, who smiled back, with only a tiny little hint of awe in her eyes.

"Wotcher, Mar … *Merlin,*" she said grinning. "I'm *never* going to get used to that."
Merlin laughed. "Same here. It's been so long since I've used that name it feels quite strange."

"Why though?" Dean Thomas asked, frowning. "It's something I've been wondering all week. Why didn't you ever come forward? Why did you hide away? We could've used you the last time You-Know-Who was in power!"

"Yeah, I was wondering that myself," said Anthony Goldstein.

Merlin tried to stay calm though this was the hundredth time he'd been asked this by the DA this week.

"Because it wasn't time for me to come forward yet," he said, but they only frowned at him. "You can't understand. The Old Religion … compels me to do things."

"Is it going to do that with Harry?" Parvati asked, looking between them.

"No," answered Merlin, at the same time Harry answered 'Yes."

Merlin frowned. "I thought it would only affect me. I'm a product of the Old Religion itself."

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. But I get these sort of … feelings. Like instincts but really strong. I can't explain them. Like when I first met you, Merlin. My mind told me not to trust you because you made no sense and I knew you were lying to us, but something deeper told me to just trust you."

Merlin blinked, surprised. "Really? I had no idea the Old Religion was so strong in you …"

He shook himself out of his pondering. "No matter. Now, are we going to get started?"

Tonks smirked. "Do I really need to teach you anything? You should be teaching them! You've fought in more battles, magical and Muggle than anyone else alive!"

"Except Morgana," Ron whispered to Hermione.

Merlin smiled at Tonks. "I'm not an expert at this sort of magic. You're far more qualified to teach it than I am."

This wasn't exactly true. Merlin was extremely proficient in this form of magic, even if he didn't like to use it. But he felt it was important that Tonks take control. She was perfectly capable and Merlin knew she'd do a good job. He didn't want to try and force himself into every aspect of their lives. Just because he was the Merlin didn't mean he was all-knowing.

Tonks grinned at him, and began directing the others into their weekly training session, looking only slightly nervous. The others kept staring at Merlin, as though hoping he'd teach them, but Merlin purposefully kept his distance.

Tonks taught them all a few Auror techniques about dueling and Merlin watched from the sidelines. He already knew most of this. A century or so ago he'd even trained as an Auror, 'for a laugh' as he'd told himself at the time. His career had been relatively pretty short-lived however, only lasting about twenty years. Changing his appearance every day to give the impression of ageing was just too tiring. He could manage it for the years when he went to Hogwarts, but more than about ten years of doing the same thing every day just left him completely exhausted.

He observed them all. They weren't as good as the last time he'd seen them, though he thought this was mainly due to the fact that they were all too aware of Merlin watching them. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna were just as good as ever, but Merlin reckoned this was due to
the fact they'd had longer to get used to the fact that he was Merlin, and they'd been closer friends before the reveal anyway and were less uncomfortable with him now.

Ernie MacMillan seemed determined to impress Merlin, and was dueling with lightning quick speed, his face screwed up in concentration. He was doing well, but it would have been far more effective if he hadn't unknowingly been hit by a stray curse of Dean's and grown a pair of antlers.

Merlin tried to put his face into a neutral expression as he watched, but it was proving difficult. It took a while for them all to stop gaping at him or forgetting their training as he watched, but eventually they all overcame it and became more relaxed. Merlin was becoming more and more impressed. It seemed that his presence, after the initial wobbly stages, was giving them the drive to perform better.

Harry in particular was excelling. His reaction time was superbly fast, and Merlin wondered whether or not this may have something to do with the fact that he was now becoming more and more in tune with the magic of the Old Religion inside of him. Like it had with Merlin, it almost seemed as though it was letting him see things a split second before they happened. Merlin couldn't help but grin.

"Well now!" Tonks said cheerfully after an hour or two of dueling, ignoring the groans in the ground as everyone lay there in pain and exhaustion, with everyone except Harry and Ginny having been struck with some sort of curse during the dueling. "That was excellent! Morgana doesn't stand a chance!"

Merlin tried not to feel a clenching feeling in the pit of his stomach as she said this, and his smile became fixed. He knew full well that Morgana could kill them all in an instant.

Most of the students knew this as well, but no one tried to contradict her. Tonks beamed, seemingly endlessly happy. She turned to Merlin, and her eyes flashed with an idea.

"You haven't put much work in tonight, Martin," she said, smirking. "Why don't you have a go?"

Merlin raised an eyebrow, suddenly feeling nervous. "What do you have in mind?"

She grinned, with a sneaky glint in her eye. She moved to a fair distance away from him and raised her wand into a dueling position. "What about it then?" she asked challengingly, still smiling.

Lavender Brown gasped. "Don't! Are you crazy?"

"Yeah! He'll flatten her!" Terry Boot whispered to Michael Corner.

Everyone was looking from Merlin and Tonks with expressions of incredulity, but with a slightly eager edge to it.

Merlin shrugged and stepped forward. Why not?

Reluctantly, he withdrew his wand from his pocket; it would only be fair to Tonks to duel against her with the same magic she would be using.

He raised it in a dueling position and waited expectantly. He looked straight into her eyes, not moving them away, not blinking. He'd bide his time, unnerve her, wait until she struck first-

"Stupefy!" she yelled, and caught Merlin slightly off-guard. He hadn't expected such a sudden attack.

He raised a shield easily and sent it spiraling back towards her, which she dodged easily and sent another rapid series of spells at him.
Merlin repelled these ones as well, and tried to appraise the situation. She was fast, and quick-thinking. He wasn't about to catch her unawares. He was going to have to confuse her.

"Gemino maxima!" he shouted, and a few moments later, there were twenty of him in a circle around Tonks. He was glad to see her become noticeably surprised and hesitated as she looked around the circle at the identical Merlins.

"Stupefy!" he cast, and each of his doubles cast a Stunner as well, but not a corporeal one, just a ghost spell, enough to confuse her.

She raised a shield just in time, and repelled his Stunner and all the other ghost ones. She cast about, searching for a sign to tell her which was the real one.

"Reducto!" She cried, sending her spell towards one of the doubles which evaporated in a cloud of smoke. She hadn't expected this, and Merlin took her confusion as an opportunity to send another spell at her.

"Incendio!" The spell went rushing towards her, and she raised a shield, but not fast enough, and a small flame brushed against her left arm. She let out a small cry of pain, but Merlin tried not to hear this. That was just one of the risks of dueling.

She clutched at her arm, and seemed to be panicking. Then an idea seemed to hit her.

"Debritus avolare!" she screamed. One of the flagstones beneath her split down the middle and crumbled into dozens of small but sharp shards of rock. They rose up into the air and quicker than the blink of an eye rushed out in a circle, moving lethally through the air. The pieces passed harmlessly through the doubles and smashed against the walls of the chamber, but some of them came flying towards Merlin. He shielded himself hastily, but one shard got through and grazed his cheek, drawing blood. He gasped at the contact and the sharp pain, and suddenly, Tonks knew which was the real one.

She then unleashed a barrage of her most powerful spells against his shield, completely non-verbally, hammering the spells so fast she room was filled with so many multi-coloured sparks and energy that Merlin was finding it difficult to see Tonks herself.

He feigned exhaustion, and began stepped backwards, pretending to be forced back by the ferocity of her attack. He expected her to cease her onslaught, thinking she was winning, but she was too intelligent for that. She continued her attack with equal power and wouldn't stop.

She wasn't easily fooled.

Merlin decided to change tactic. He attacked back, sending dozens of powerful spells back towards her. He didn't even cease firing for one second, and neither did she, both of their attacks continuing at equal speed, often their spells colliding in mid-air and shooting off and hitting the roof or walls of the chamber, sparks flying. The room became unbearably hot and the ground began to crack, like it had done when Mrs Weasley and Bellatrix fought during the Battle of Hogwarts. Each spell that hit another spell or a shield crashed like a thundercloud, and Merlin felt it reverberate through him.

He was winning, he noticed. He was driving her back. She wasn't feinting like he had; he could see the defeat in her eyes and desperation to think of a way out. He continued bombarding her shield; no matter how powerful her shield was or how skilled she was, Merlin outmatched her in every way. His wand had a core of the Old Religion and enhanced the magic he used; she physically would never be able to overpower him on strength alone.
Her shield began to flicker in mid-air as it failed, and Merlin felt a gleam of triumph. Then, her shield failed completely, and she gasped and fell backwards. Merlin prepared for a final incapacitating spell-

"Mutatio avis!" she cried finally, pointing her wand at her foot, and Merlin froze in shock, as she Transfigured herself into a bird. He blinked; people hardly ever performed Human Transfiguration during duels- it was far too dangerous!

She flew up and over his head, and Merlin shot a spell at her but missed as she ducked and dived out of range.

"Tenus!" he cried, and a net flew out of his wand and went soaring towards her in the air, but again, she avoided it.

"Immoblus prorsus!" he shouted in an attempt to stop her in her tracks. But he didn't succeed.

She dived at him and he made the stupid mistake of flinching. Before he knew what had happened, she had Transfigured back and stood just inches from him, her wand directly over his chest.

He froze in shock. She grinned in triumph. She was panting heavily, her arm was bleeding, and she looked slightly disoriented from her transformation, but she had an expression of absolute joy on her face.

She laughed. "Not bad for an old man."

Merlin just stared at her for a moment or two, still trying to understand what had just happened. He blinked a few times. He cleared his throat.

"Yeah …" was all he could bring himself to say, such was his shock.

She raised her eyebrows, and looked so smug, that Merlin just had to forget his embarrassment. He laughed.

He shook his head, and buried his face in his palms before looking back at her. "Maybe I can't keep up with you, young ones." He laughed. "Well done."

Tonks grinned again, and lowered her wand, and moved away from him. Merlin turned around to find everyone standing there with their mouths hanging open, their eyes almost popping out of their heads. He laughed lightly.

"Well, this is embarrassing."

"How the hell-" Ron asked, goggling at Tonks. "He's the most powerful sorcerer ever to live! And you just- you just-"

Tonks smirked at Merlin again. "Well, I'm not saying it was easy. If he was using his own magic I probably wouldn't have stood a chance," she said, still breathing heavily. "But it emphasises what I've been telling you all along. The side with the more power isn't always the one that will win, there's always some advantage that you can exploit."

"What," Dean asked, his mouth still hanging open. "If You-Know-Who attacks us we turn ourselves into eagles?"

Tonks laughed. "Perhaps not. But you get the idea; often your intelligence and cunning is more important than brute strength. And besides, I wasn't an eagle," she shot a smirk at Merlin. "I was a
Merlin groaned, and closed his eyes. "I thought I recognised it," he muttered. "Imagine being defeated by my own namesake."

There were a few nervous titters about the room, but people were still looking a bit shocked, both at the magic they'd witnessed and the fact Tonks had beaten Merlin.

Tonks took control again. She got healing potions for herself and Merlin while she dismissed everyone else, who left reluctantly. Merlin was getting ready to follow them when Tonks called him back.

"No hard feelings right?" she asked, barely suppressing her triumphant grin.

Merlin shook his head. "Course not," he laughed. "If anything I'm glad that we have someone as powerful and resourceful as you on our side."

She looked thrilled at his praise.

He put his hand on the door handle to leave, but turned his head over his shoulder and shot one last remark back at her.

"I just hope you know, next time, I won't hold back!"

She flashed him another grin. "Good. Neither will I."

"Can you believe that she beat him like that?" Ron asked for the fiftieth time. "I mean, it was amazing!"

They'd only just arrived back in the common room after the meeting and Ron had talked of nothing else since.

"To be fair, Merlin did put up a bit of a fight. And anyway, he wasn't even using his own magic!" Hermione pointed out. "That's even more impressive!"

"Yeah, but he's had centuries to practice hasn't he?" Ron said, still looking overwhelmed. "Whoa! I never knew Tonks was that powerful!"

Harry could only smile at Ron's enthusiasm. He'd been as shocked as everyone else when Merlin was defeated by Tonks, but he wasn't bothered by it. Merlin had laughed about it and Harry had to as well. It was nice, he thought, that after seeing all that power the two of them had used in the duel to see Merlin emerge the defeated one. It was just reminding him of the fact that Merlin was just like one of them. It was humanising him- maybe now people wouldn't place him on such a high pedestal.

"How did she even do it?" Ron asked, looking thoughtful. "How does Human Transfiguration work? How could she turn herself back without a wand?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "I wondered that. Professor Slughorn turned back from a couch into himself when me and Dumbledore went to get him to come back to Hogwarts. I don't know how he did it."

"Don't you listen to Professor Tayne?" Hermione asked frustrated. "He told us all this just last week!"
Ron struggled to remember. "Uh … no?"

She sighed. "Honestly. The spell used to Transfigure yourself has a proviso for that. The moment you think about Transfiguring back, you do. That's why this sort of Transfiguration is so dangerous. If you don't properly perform it, you can't get back. It's really impressive that Tonks could do it successfully when backed into a corner like that."

A few minutes later, Merlin himself walked in, and Harry was glad to see the cut on his cheek had been healed. Ron smirked.

"Getting old are we? Reaction time down?"

Merlin made a face at him and slumped into a chair. "I haven't practiced dueling to that skill level for a very long time; I usually stay out of dangerous situations."

"Excuses, excuses."

Merlin mock scowled at him. "I'd like to see you do better! She caught me off-guard, very skilfully I might add. I hope you all remember that, a technique like that could save all your lives one day."

"So … you're saying you lost deliberately to teach us a lesson?"

Merlin sighed. "No, Ron, stop trying to goad me. I lost because she outwitted me. Sometimes I underestimate wand-wielders; I forget how powerful and fast they can be."

Ron sat back looking triumphant. "I'll never forget the look on your face. It was classic!"

Merlin said nothing, but Ron kept grinning.

"I mean, it must have been humiliating! Here we all are saying how powerful you are and you got beat! It was so funny—"

Suddenly, there was a flash of gold from Merlin's eyes, and Ron was thrown up into the air and was now glued to the ceiling.

The few people in the common room burst into laughter at the sight of Ron hanging there, an expression of complete shock. Harry could barely breathe for laughing at the look on his face, and even Hermione was having trouble keeping a straight face.

Merlin, who was still sitting down, looked up at him almost casually. "Humiliating like that you mean?" he asked innocently.

"Get me down!" Ron hissed, his eyes wide, beginning to look a little green.

"Certainly," Merlin smiled, and then Ron was back in his chair, looking distinctly ruffled. "Now, if you think it's so funny, why don't you and I have a duel?"

Ron's eyes went wide and he paled. "Uh … no thanks."

Merlin smiled pleasantly again, and then his composure broke and he burst out laughing. "Don't take me so seriously, Ron!" he gasped. "We all needed a laugh!"

They all joined in his laughter, even Ron after his embarrassment faded away. They sat by the fire for a while and talked of the lesson, laughing at Ernie's antlers and the various ways everyone had been defeated in the duels, with Ron re-enacting some of the more spectacular episodes, including the one where Susan Bones had been so thrilled at defeating Michael she hadn't noticed the fact
Seamus had somehow managed to set her skirt on fire.

When the time came for bed later in the evening Harry was in a thoroughly good mood, despite his apprehensions earlier in the day about the slow progress of his Old Magic powers. But then he remembered that his dreams were about to become much worse.

He sighed as he sat down on the edge of his bed. He was exhausted. After a spell Merlin had performed earlier in the week on a small charm Harry kept under his pillow, Morgana couldn't enter his dreams and cause him pain like that first night, but she still manipulated them. They were terrifying, confused and painful, with some of his worst memories resurfacing, and he was unable to escape them.

Merlin must have noticed his misgivings, because he came over and sat down on a chair beside Harry's bed.

"Don't worry about it," he said, though Harry could tell he too was dreading sleep. He looked just as tired as Harry felt; his dreams had been plagued with bad memories as well, though he didn't mention them.

He thought for a moment, and then placed his hand over Harry's forehead, almost as though feeling for a temperature.

"Swēte swfn," he said, and Harry felt a warm feeling run through him, and his eyes begin to droop.

"I'm sorry I can't stop the dreams," said Merlin regretfully. "But this'll help a little."

Harry nodded gratefully, and fell back onto his bed, and felt himself begin to drift off. The last thing he saw before he succumbed to sleep was Merlin standing staring at his own bed, his face creased in thought.

It looked like that spell only worked on other people.

Merlin sat on the edge of his bed hours after every one else was asleep, listening to the usual snores that filled the room. He knew there was no point in trying to sleep; why put himself through it? He muttered a quick rejuvenation spell and felt better, though he knew it was only temporary, and was no substitute for proper sleep.

He sighed. If he wasn't going to sleep, he might as well do something useful. He stood up and sneaked out of the dormitory, careful not to wake anyone. He slipped through the common room and out through the portrait hole and strode off down the dark corridor. He wasn't in the least worried about wandering around the castle at night; after all, he'd had centuries of practice.

He came to the doors that led out into the grounds. A Prefect was standing guard there, but with a few flashes of his eyes, Merlin had slipped past, the Prefect now chasing some slamming door down a deserted corridor. It reminded him forcibly of the times he used to sneak out of Camelot, but Merlin forced down the usual feeling of melancholy he got every time he thought of those days.

It also unnerved him slightly. If he could so easily sneak out of Hogwarts, could Morgana slip in? He tried to shake this thought away quickly though. There was no point in being paranoid. She couldn't get through the wards, regardless of her power.
Before long, he was back in the familiar clearing in the Forbidden Forest and was looking at Kilgharrah who'd landed a few seconds previously.

The Great Dragon bent forward slightly in a respectful bow. "To what do I owe this pleasure, young warlock?"

Merlin sighed. "I can't sleep."

Kilgharrah sniffed. "You summoned me from hundreds of miles away because you can't sleep? What do you expect me to do, read you a bedtime story?"

Merlin scowled. "No need to be sarky. I wanted to talk to you,"

Kilgharrah sat back on his hind legs. "What is on your mind?"

"What isn't on my mind these days" Merlin asked bitterly. "How's Aithusa by the way?"

Kilgharrah rolled his eyes. "I think perhaps I was too hasty in restoring her eyesight, she mostly looks at her reflection and preens herself constantly. I have never known such a vain dragon."

Merlin chuckled. "She was trapped underground for two centuries and blind. She deserves a bit of relaxation."

Kilgharrah did not smile. "There are more important things to be dealing with."

"I agree," said Merlin. "So, have the Order discovered anything more about the Cup of Life?"

"They would have informed you if they had," said Kilgharrah. "They would not tell me I fear. Most of them are still too frightened to approach me."

Merlin laughed. "You are formidable."

Kilgharrah rolled his eyes again. "Perhaps. But I do not place much faith in their finding anything."

"Why not?"

Kilgharrah looked directly at Merlin. "I sense perhaps that the Old Religion will reveal it to us when it is time."

Merlin sighed. "I can't wait for that."

"Perhaps you already know the location, Merlin?" Kilgharrah said. "You have just to discover it within yourself."

Merlin shook his head. "I've barely stopped thinking about it. I can't think of anywhere."

Kilgharrah nodded slowly. "Hmm … "

Merlin looked at him suspiciously. "What do you know?"

"Why, nothing," said Kilgharrah.

"Come on!" said Merlin. "Do you know where it is and you're just speaking in riddles again? This is important!"

"I agree," said Kilgharrah. "But I honestly do not know where the Cup is. But I do know that you
are missing something very obvious, Merlin. You have the capacity to find the Cup, you just need to have faith in yourself."

Merlin shook his head. "You're infuriating."

Kilgharrah chuckled. "I am relieved to know I have not lost my touch." He stood up again and spread his wings, ready to depart. He looked back at Merlin. "Perhaps you just need help to see, Merlin."

And he flew off, leaving Merlin bewildered.

Merlin turned around and headed back to the castle, thinking furiously. Help to see? What on earth did that mean?

He hated that dragon!

He came out from through the trees and stopped at he took in the sight of Hogwarts in the moonlight. He sighed as he remembered that it wasn't so far from this very spot that he'd first seen the castle, half-completed. It'd changed a lot over the years. It was bigger for one thing, with many new parts and towers being added. The Quidditch pitch and the greenhouses hadn't been there, instead, there had been stables, and stocks for detentions. Merlin had campaigned against those; he'd had too many bad experiences in those in Camelot, but Godric had laughed at him and said there was no harm in them, and they discouraged rule-breaking. He didn't know that they were more than often than not used by kids playing pranks on their friends by locking them in them when teachers weren't looking.

One thousand years had passed, and yet the school still managed to take his breath away by its majesty, and its power. He remembered all the trouble the Founders had gone to in those few hectic weeks before the school opened, trying to get the tallest towers completed, competing with Peeves who was determined to sabotage everything, creating the roof in the Great Hall, frantically rushing to get classes sorted, uniforms made, teachers interviewed … all the while struggling to learn Old Magic in their spare time.

He sighed as he thought of those times. So long ago …

The moonlight glinted off the many windows and illuminated the many towers and turrets of the castle. It shone off the lake, which was gleaming with what looked like many crystals in the darkness.

Then, he grew cold as a sudden thought struck him. Crystals.

He started pacing up and down, wondering if he was mad to even consider this. He couldn't go back there could he?

He started breathing heavily. The Crystal Cave …

He wasn't sure where it was. When Morgana had been trapped inside of it, it didn't have a physical location, and Merlin wasn't sure which modern day county it was in now. But that would hardly be a problem …

He started shaking, could he really go back there?

What would the crystals show him? He never had any control over what he saw, would they help? Or would it be infuriating riddles as usual?

He bit his lip as he thought about it. There was no guarantee it would help, and it would certainly be
filled with painful memories.

He resigned himself to that fact. He couldn't shy away from this. He had to at least try.

Five minutes later, Merlin found himself standing in some forest he didn't recognise. He frowned as he looked around. There was a cycle path here, and signs about the 'Woodland Code' on some foreign imported trees, but nothing familiar. He wondered for a moment if he was in the right place, if the spell had worked properly.

He was being stupid. Of course the place would look different! He hadn't been here in thirteen hundred years!

He sighed and mentally prepared himself for what he was about to do. He cast out with his magic in every direction, until he felt a small trail of magic coming from a northerly direction. He set off towards it, feeling more and more sick the more he walked. Did he really want to go there?

All too soon, he was looking at a familiar entrance to a cave. He moved forwards as though in a dream and stood directly before it. He couldn't see anything; it was still the middle of the night, but he cast a small globe of light and sent it inside the cave, where it glinted innocently.

Merlin swallowed, and tried to still his shaking hands. He stepped inside, and was immediately plunged into the past.

The power of the Old Religion was all around him, stronger than he'd felt in so many years. It rushed through his entire body and left his limbs shaking and tingling. His heart raced and his palms were sweaty. So many memories …

He tried not to think of the last time he'd been here, when Morgana had trapped him here and the crystals had forced him to watch as Arthur was struck down on the field of battle. Then how she came back, joy in her eyes, and how he'd turned the tables on her. How he'd left the cave with her trapped here, screaming after him that he'd never be rid of her …

She was right, Merlin thought heavily, trying to keep himself calm. Thirteen hundred years later and she was still causing him pain …

He felt a creeping sensation on the back of his neck as though someone was watching him. This had been Morgana's prison for thirteen centuries, was there still something of her left here?

He came to a stop in the middle of the cave and tried to banish these unpleasant thoughts. He wasn't here to relive the past, he was here to try and see what he could do to help the present.

Then he froze. Was this such a good idea? Would what he saw help him in any way? The first time he'd ever come to this cave he'd seen images of the future, and despite trying to prevent them from coming true, he'd actually done the opposite. Was this wise, or foolish?

It was too late now.

He took a deep breath and looked intensely into the nearest crystal. He waited patiently, but the crystal was resolutely silent. He started getting restless, rather feeling like he was in some pointless Divination lesson.

Just when he was about to give up-

Harry's face suddenly appeared in the crystal, and Merlin leapt forward and knelt before it, desperate for some help. Please, help me …
But Harry's face just melted seamlessly into Ron's, then Hermione's, then the entire of the Order of the Phoenix. Merlin felt his heart beating faster and faster. Please, show me something useful …

Then there were many quick flashes … the Room of Records in the Ministry of Magic … Draco Malfoy … Morgana … Excalibur …

Merlin gasped and leaned forwards when he saw this, as though trying to leap inside the crystal itself.

But the image of Excalibur didn't last for long and soon was replaced by an image of Harry again. His eyes were golden.

So he does learn Old Magic …

But then … Harry was screaming in pain, Morgana was there, she was hurting him …

Merlin gasped. No …

Then Voldemort appeared in the crystal, his red eyes glinting evilly. He was laughing.

Merlin was finding it difficult to breathe now. He shouldn't have come.

Then … there was Camelot.

Merlin's eyes were unblinking as he stared at the city that was once his home.

Then he saw a Druid; an older man with the triple spiral tattooed on his neck. He looked determined and ancient. Merlin's heart stopped as he recognised him as the Druid who he'd given the Cup to.

Now … where did he take the Cup …

But his image faded out, to be replaced with another one of apparently the same man in a bed, dying. He leaned over and whispered something into the ear of a younger man who was sitting beside the bed, holding the man's hand. He nodded.

Then there was an image of the young man carrying a chest across a dreary moor, stumbling and his face screwed up against the rain.

Where did he hide it?

But to Merlin's fury, the image faded away, to show the same young man, now old, in his own death bed, whispering something to his own son.

He saw several more images of various old men dying, and using their last moments to whisper something to the person with them. Merlin sat on tenterhooks; his theory had been right- the knowledge of the Cup's location had been passed down in this Druid's family.

Good, now who's this man's descendant? Who knows where it is now?

But then, there was an image of a young man, wounded in battle. As he leaned in to whisper something to his comrade, a stray arrow came and pierced him in the neck. He fell down dead before he'd even opened his mouth.

"NO!" Merlin screamed, slamming his fists into the ground. Not now! It couldn't end like this!

The image faded out again, and was replaced by one of the Cup itself. Merlin looked at it and felt
nothing but anger. It was sitting there, on a small table in a darkened room, but there was nothing to
tell him which room and where. He'd learned nothing.

He screamed in frustration as the last image completely faded away and the crystal went blank. *Was*
*that it?*

The cave echoed with the cries of his frustration. He was still no closer to discovering where the Cup
was.

"Where do you think he is?" Ron whispered to Harry during their first class the next day.

Harry could only shrug. He suspected Merlin hadn't gone to sleep at all last night and had instead
gone off somewhere else.

"I hope he doesn't get into trouble," said Hermione biting her lip.

Ron rolled his eyes at her. "I doubt McGonagall's going to put him in detention, Hermione. It's not as
if he needs the education!"

Harry was just silent, and didn't try and engage in the conversation. Merlin had a good reason for
missing classes, and he knew he had to trust him. He only wish he'd thought about taking Harry with
him; hadn't they finished with the secrets?

It wasn't until after their classes had finished for the day that they saw him at all. He was strolling
down a corridor, completely lost in thought.

"OI!" shouted Ron, startling Merlin out of his day dreaming. "Where've you been?"

"That's precisely what I would like to know as well," McGonagall said, suddenly looming up out of
nowhere. She looked at Merlin, her lips thin. "Well?"

Merlin looked straight back at her, and Harry noted his eyes were tired and had a sort of haunted
look. What on earth had happened?

"I had something to do," he said tonelessly. "Then I had to do some thinking."

McGonagall frowned. "You cannot just walk out of the school at your own whim!"

"Why not?" retorted Merlin. "I helped to found the bloody school! This is my twelfth time here and
we've got two raving mad and powerful sorcerers on the loose. I think I've got more right than most."

Hermione gasped at Merlin's blatant rudeness, and even Harry was surprised. McGonagall looked
visibly shocked. Merlin seemed to regret his words.

"Sorry," he sighed. "I haven't had the best of nights and I'm a little short-tempered this morning."

She blinked a couple of times. "That's- that's quite all right. I do appreciate you have the right to do
what you see fit to help the Order, but really, this will not do. We're trying to keep your identity a
secret! What can I say to the other professors if I just let you have free reign? You have to at least
give the *impression* that you're a normal student."

Merlin nodded. "You're right, I'm sorry." He glanced around the corridor. "Truth is, I had an
unpleasant experience last night. I … I went to the Crystal Cave."

"You did what?" Ron gasped.
"I had to try and see if I could find out anything that could help us," Merlin sighed.

"How would that cave help you?" Harry asked.

Merlin glanced at him. "The cave is filled with seeing crystals which grant the ability to see many things, the past, the present, the future …"

"Prophecy?" McGonagall sniffed. "Divination is a very imprecise."

"I know," Merlin interrupted. "I hate it too. It causes more trouble than it's worth. But please, don't dismiss it. It is real, and I really can see the future … occasionally. It's just the things that I see usually aren't pleasant. Morgana is the true Seer."

"Did you find anything out?" Hermione asked, looking a little surprised that Merlin could see the future.

Merlin shook his head. "Nothing useful. Just that the line of Druids guarding the Cup died out centuries ago, as did the secret of where it was hidden. We're in exactly the same position we were in yesterday."

Harry tried to hide his disappointment, but he saw Merlin read it easily in his expression.

"I need to go to the Ministry," Merlin said to McGonagall. "I have to help with the search."

McGonagall nodded. "Of course," she said, looking a little worried. "But please attend all your classes in future. We have a façade to maintain."

Merlin nodded, and without another word walked off down the corridor. Harry started to follow him, but Hermione held him back.

"Let him go on his own."

"Why?" Ron asked, who'd also been attempting to follow him.

"He'll be upset and want to be on his own."

"Why?"

"You insensitive wart, Ron! Don't you know how difficult it was for him to go back there?"

Harry frowned. "Yeah, we didn't find out anything useful but we're hardly in a worse position are we?"

Hermione sighed and shook her head, looking at the two of them like they were silly children. "Just think of the painful memories that place holds for him. It's where he saw his best friend being murdered, one of the most traumatic experiences in his life. How would you like to go back to the Little Hangleton graveyard, Harry, or the Veil Room at the Ministry?"

Harry immediately felt like an idiot. He stared after Merlin, and though he didn't like doing so, he stopped trying to follow him.

McGonagall looked down at the three of them and raised an eyebrow. "Thank goodness for you, Miss Granger. I doubt those two would last three seconds without you."
Merlin went directly to the Department of Mysteries, not even bothering to go through security, just appearing in the corridor. He walked off down the Room of Records.

The visit to the cave had filled him with urgency, a desire to do something. He'd stay here all night if he had to; he just had to find something!

He burst into the room without stopping. There was no one else there that he could see, which made him annoyed. Why weren't they searching?

He grabbed several books and immediately began scanning them with the spells he'd shown Kingsley exactly one week ago. He finished one after another and found nothing. He summoned some of the older scrolls down from the tallest shelves and performed the same process. Still nothing.

He threw the scrolls down on the floor with a cry of frustration. That damn Druid! What idiot only gives such crucial information to one person? Didn't they ever consider the possibility that they might die before they could pass it on?

He tried to calm down the raging emotions he'd been feeling ever since the cave. He'd been brusque with McGonagall and the others and he was sorry. But he was so tired of this endless stalemate!

He collapsed in a chair and didn't even bother picking up another book. Perhaps it would be easier to let Morgana kill herself finding the Cup and then steal it from her afterwards …

"Um, hello?"

Merlin jumped, having thought he was alone. He turned and saw someone sitting in a corner of the room holding one of the enchanted paperweights in his hand. It was Draco Malfoy.

Merlin blinked. He'd seen Malfoy in the crystals, perhaps he had a larger role to play than he'd originally given him credit for?

He looked nervous, extremely nervous, and wouldn't look Merlin in the eye.

"What are you doing here?" Merlin asked, not unkindly.

Malfoy bit his lip. "Um … Minister Shacklebolt said I could … I mean, I wanted to do something to help other than just wandering around that house all day … well … "

He trailed off, and Merlin felt a small feeling of pride inside him. Malfoy wanting to help? Ron and the others had severely underestimated him.

Merlin glanced around. "Are you here yourself?"

Malfoy nodded. "Yes. I mean, there's a spell on the room that means I can't leave until one of the Order comes back for me but …"

Merlin frowned, and Malfoy looked bitter. "They don't trust me …" he muttered. "They think I'll run back to him."

"Will you?" Merlin asked, wanting to see his reaction.

Malfoy looked outraged and forgot his nerves for a moment. "I'd never! He's- he's a monster! I want him dead!"

"You once believed in the same things he did," Merlin said slowly, trying to gauge Malfoy's opinions on the matter.
Malfoy looked awkward. "Yeah …" he mumbled. "But … well, things are different now …"

"You mean now that the 'Mudbloods' and 'Half-breeds' are in control you have to like them?" Merlin asked, being deliberately provocative.

Malfoy scowled. "It's not like that! I don't want anything to do with that old way of thinking! All it ever got me was into trouble. I want to help the Order do this; they don't have to worry about me running away. I don't want to … I don't think … I mean, maybe I was wrong before …"

He broke off, and he looked flushed. Merlin took this as a sign to stop his interrogation. He'd just as good as admitted what he wanted to hear: Malfoy had changed.

"Good," he said cheerfully, and drew up a seat beside Malfoy, who shrank back looking startled. "There's loads to be done." He smiled reassuringly at Malfoy. But he only looked confused.

"You mean, you believe me?"

"Yes." Merlin said simply.

"But why?"

"Why, didn't you tell me the truth?" Merlin asked him.

"Yes!" Malfoy said hurriedly.

"Well then, what's the problem?" Merlin said, and smiled again. Malfoy still looked confused however. He must be unused to kindness.

"Have you found anything?" Merlin asked him, and Malfoy shook his head.

"No. I'm using this … thing, but whenever it stops somewhere it takes me ages to translate it."

Merlin looked at the book he was using. "You read Ancient Runes?"

Malfoy coloured slightly. "I was doing a NEWT in it," he admitted. "But I wasn't really that good. Not much use now anyway …"

Merlin didn't say anything to this. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Merlin got through twenty books by the time Malfoy was finished his first, but that was partly because Malfoy took every opportunity he could to stare at him. Merlin tried not to let it bother him, but it was puzzling. From what he'd observed over the years, and from what Harry and the others had told him, this was very unlike Malfoy. He was pale and tired looking; the past few months had obviously had a greater effect on him than the others had realised.

Malfoy looked distinctly annoyed after Merlin tossed aside yet another book.

"How are you doing it so fast?" he asked. "How are you translating it all so easily?"

Merlin smiled. "This is the language my mother taught me, the one I grew up with. It's natural to me."

Malfoy blinked. He went back to reading, a frown on his face. He looked nervous again.

"I'm sorry," he said so softly Merlin wasn't quite sure he'd heard him correctly.

"Sorry for what?" Merlin asked, and Malfoy blushed.
"For- for at Weasley's house … when I was … you know, when I was surprised that you were a … a …"

"Half-blood?" Merlin asked calmly. Malfoy looked resolutely down at his hands and refused to meet Merlin's eye, but nodded slightly.

"Are you sure you're apologising for the right reasons?" Merlin asked, flicking through another book. "Would you be willing to apologise to Hermione for the amount of times you've insulted her family?"

Malfoy squirmed in his seat. "She'd never listen."

"Why don't you try?" Merlin asked, genuinely curious at Malfoy's behaviour. He wanted to know what was going on with him.

Malfoy just kept looking through the book, still trying to look anywhere but at Merlin.

"They'd never forgive me," Malfoy mumbled eventually. "I probably don't deserve it anyway."

"I think you do," Merlin said. "It's not too late for you."

Malfoy looked even more baffled. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Because, I believe in second chances," Merlin said. "I have faith that people can change."

Malfoy opened and closed his mouth a couple of times still looking confused. Merlin spoke to him again.

"If you don't believe you can be forgiven, then why are you helping? What's the point?"

Malfoy looked directly at him. "Because … I don't want to end up like … I don't know … I just, want to prove I can do something right."

Merlin smiled and picked up another book. It looked like he was finally getting through to the young Malfoy.

Malfoy was looking at him curiously. "You aren't anything like I imagined."

Merlin laughed. "My lack of beard you mean?"

"No," said Malfoy, not even cracking a smile. "I mean, I expected someone as powerful as you to be more … intimidating. You're just so normal."

Merlin laughed again. "Maybe we've both been the subject of misconceptions."

Malfoy managed a weak smile and turned back to his book, now noticeably more at ease.

They worked in silence as they moved through the endless books and ancient scrolls, Merlin getting through about fifty to every one of Malfoy's. The happiness he'd experienced at getting through to Malfoy was rapidly deteriorating as he once again felt the frustrations of finding nothing build up.

Malfoy sighed and threw a book aside. "This is hopeless! There's nothing here!"

Merlin was beginning to agree with him. He looked at Malfoy and saw the heavy bags beneath his eyes.
"Are you alright?"
Malfoy frowned. "Yeah, why?"

"You look tired."

"I've- I've not been sleeping well."
Merlin sighed. "I know the feeling. Morgana's driving me crazy."

"She's giving you nightmares?" Malfoy asked. His face seemed to pale. "What does she look like?"
Merlin frowned at the question, but didn't ask anything. He held out his palm.

"Onstellen onlicity." A small ghostly image of Morgana rose from his palm. Merlin averted his eyes; he had no desire to even look at her.

Malfoy froze and shook all over. "Are- are you sure?" he asked, his eyes wide.

"Pretty sure," said Merlin slowly. "She's pretty much my mortal enemy."

He saw Malfoy shake even harder, and he grew curious. "Have you seen her before?"

Malfoy blinked furiously. "She- she's been in my dreams as well."

Merlin leaned in towards him urgently. "What has she said to you?" He felt like a fool. He remembered now that Malfoy was a Druid descendant and had a higher than normal perception of Old Magic.

"She spoke to me in dreams before," he said, still shaking. "Back when the Dark Lord tried to use me to try and summon her, but I never saw her face before, and her voice was ... I dunno, different. But she's in my dreams all the time. She says I can be important again, that if I helped her she'd make sure I was rewarded, and that I didn't need to be at the mercy of the Order."

Merlin sighed. Was no one safe from her influence?

"Why didn't you listen to her?" Merlin asked, genuinely interested.

Malfoy scowled. "I'm not stupid. I could sense that she was lying. I've been using Occlumency against her."

Merlin smiled weakly. "No offence, but your Occlumency is no match for her mental abilities." He ran a hand over his face and sighed. "I'll give you a charm like I did with Harry. It should stop her entering your mind, though the dreams still won't be pleasant."

"This is happening to Potter as well?" Malfoy asked.

Merlin just nodded and went back to his books. Malfoy seized one as well.

"This is bloody useless," he grumbled, the paper weight landing him on a page half-way through the book. He began attempting the translation. "We should be out doing something instead of sitting around in a dusty library all day."

"Why, how Gryffindor of you," Merlin observed wryly. Malfoy made a face, and Merlin laughed, and Malfoy eventually joined in.
"Was Minister Shacklebolt right?" Malfoy asked him. "Have you really been at Hogwarts a dozen times?"

"Yes."

"Were you ever in Slytherin?"

Merlin smiled. "Yes, a few times. I liked it."

Malfoy's eyes widened. "Really? I would've thought someone like you …"

Merlin looked him right in the eye. "There is good and bad in every House. I enjoyed being in Slytherin just as much as every other House. I made many friends, I even shared a dormitory with one of your ancestors! If anyone has a sense of toleration, it's me."

Malfoy smiled appreciatively. He cast his eyes back down to the book he was translating, and then he frowned.

"Hey ... uh, Merlin. Is this important? My translation's not too good."

Merlin looked over Malfoy's shoulder at the passage he indicated, and read it easily. 'Druids guard their relics with utmost care and consideration, but firmly believe that a precious object is better lost forever than fall into the wrong hands. Only one person at a time may know the location of such an object to keep the secret as tight as possible. This obviously leads to locations being lost for life through early death. One such noticeable example is that of the so-called 'Cup of Life', said to grant the power of immortality. Its location was entrusted to one Druid by Merlin, and he continued it through his family, until the secret was lost. There have been many attempts to trace the lost Cup, but all have been unsuccessful. It was said however that Druids used to congregate on the same spot year after year to offer their thanks for the safe concealment of the Cup. The spot they used to congregate was known as the Druid's Sorrow, for they wept at the loss of their artefact, and the circumstances under which it was lost.'

Merlin sighed, and leaned back. "I know that place. It's just outside where Camelot used to be. That's why they met there."

Malfoy looked disappointed. "Would have been handy if it had been there."

"It's in a building," Merlin said. "In my vision, it was in a building, in a dark room. And there's nothing left of Camelot anymore."

Malfoy looked a little surprised at the mention of a vision, but said nothing. Merlin resigned himself to another long and weary search.

"What about this reference?" Malfoy asked about half an hour later, pointing at a book. Merlin read it quickly and slumped in disappointment. It was a fifteenth century Muggle manuscript; he really had no idea why it was in the Ministry.

'Seek ye at Camulodunum, and there the Holy Grail shall ye find.' Merlin recited. "That's useless. Camulodunum is modern-day Colchester and where many Muggles think Camelot used to be. This is a Muggle's view; he obviously followed the myths that the Holy Grail was brought back from the Holy Land by the Knights and taken to Camelot, when of course nothing of the sort happened."

He sighed again. "This is hopeless!"

He was supremely tired of this now. He wished he could go back in time and throttle that Druid for
letting the secret die out. Or even better, throttle Morgana.

He sat back down. "Well, we'd better keep searching."

---

Harry was back in the graveyard ... he was running ... Voldemort was behind him ... He threw a spell behind him, but Voldemort laughed ... 'You can't hide from me forever, Potter!'

...

He was back in the Department of Mysteries ... Sirius was falling through the Veil ...

...

He was in the Battle of Hogwarts ... people were dying left, right and centre ...

...

Then the dream changed. No longer was he surrounded by painful memories. He heard a sharp cry of delight and a woman's laugh ...

---

He woke up.

Harry sat there panting, covered in sweat. What on earth had just happened?

"Harry?"

Harry jumped. He twitched open the curtains of his bed and saw Merlin in his own bed in a similar state. Harry hadn't even heard him come in.

"Did you feel that?" Merlin asked, looking pale.

Harry nodded. "She was happy. She was extremely happy."

Merlin was shaking his head, looking panicked. "No, she can't have figured it out ... she can't ..."

Harry felt cold all over. No ...

But what else would have made her so happy?

"How?" gasped Harry. "How could she have gotten any information?"

Merlin just shook his head. "Maybe ... maybe we're overreacting." But Harry could see that he didn't believe that any more than Harry did.

At that moment, four silvery cat Patronuses glided into the dormitory and sat on the edge of Harry, Merlin, Ron and Neville's beds. The last two woke with a start when the Patronus began speaking in McGonagall's voice.

"Urgent meeting in my office. Come at once."

Harry and Merlin stared at each other in horror. She can't have ...
"Whassup?" Ron asked sleepily. "Can't we wait till morning?"

"No," said Harry firmly, and he got out of bed and pulled a cloak over his night things. He headed out of the dormitory as fast as possible, followed by Merlin who hadn't even bothered to undress the previous night, and a still sleepy Ron and Neville. They were met in the common room by Hermione and Ginny who looked worried.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked fearfully as she saw the expressions on Harry and Merlin's faces. But neither of them said anything, and just stormed out of the portrait hole and headed off to McGonagall's office immediately. They ran into Luna on the way, but still they said nothing. Harry didn't trust himself to open his mouth; he felt physically sick.

Before long they were knocking on McGonagall's door, and she jerked it open immediately, in her tartan dressing gown and hairnet. She looked grim.

They all filed into the office to find Kingsley, most of the Weasleys and Remus and Tonks, all in various states of undress. All of them were bleary eyed, except Kingsley, who looked unusually pale.

"What's going on?" Ginny asked, her voice trembling. "Who's dead?"

"No one," said Kingsley. He must have thought he sounded reassuring, but he sounded more like he was in shock. "But …"

"Morgana's found the Cup," Merlin said, his voice was flat and emotionless, his eyes staring into nothingness.

Everyone gasped, and the last vestiges of tiredness evaporated. "How can you know?" Mrs Weasley asked, clutching at her husband.

"In our dream," Harry said, as Merlin looked too shocked to continue. "She was suddenly really happy. She figured something out."

"I think I know why," said Kingsley, and turned to his left, where Harry suddenly noticed, Malfoy was, his sleek hair messed from his sleep. Malfoy jumped, and looked terrified.

"I didn't mean it …" he whispered, breathing heavily. "I didn't mean …"

"You told her!" Ron roared, his face flushing with anger. "After all that talk about trusting you, you went around and told her! You filthy, stinking-"

"I didn't!" Malfoy protested, his voice just as loud. "I didn't tell her anything! I don't even know where it is!"

"Then how does she know?"

Malfoy looked around nervously to see many hostile expressions. "I don't know," he said, honestly. "She was in my dreams, she was there tormenting me. She used Legilimancy on me! I couldn't stop her! I wasn't powerful enough to stop her! She looked through my memories of today and suddenly she was all happy and left my mind, and she said … she said 'At last, I have it.' But I didn't tell her anything! I couldn't help it! Then I went and told the Minister!"

Ron was still glaring at Malfoy, but Harry couldn't find it in himself to blame him. He knew himself how difficult Occlumency was. Then again, maybe the reality of the situation hadn't yet sunk in and he'd soon be at blows with Malfoy as well.
"But where is it?" Remus asked urgently. "What memories did she look at? What tipped her off?"

Malfoy was shaking. "I'm not sure," he blurted out. "It was the memories of me and Merlin today at the Ministry looking through the records. She must have seen something there or understood something that we didn't."

Merlin was looking bewildered. "But we didn't find it! We didn't find any reference to it other than some crap about some Muggle thinking it was in Camelot and ... Druids meeting there and ..."

Merlin trailed off and his face looked even more horrified.

"It's in Camelot," he whispered so quietly Harry almost couldn't hear him. "How could I have been so stupid? It was in the bloody vision! It showed me Camelot! How could I not have seen it? The Druid hid it in the ruins of Camelot."

A tense silence followed for what felt like an hour. Harry felt numb all over.

"But I thought you said there was nothing left of Camelot?" Malfoy asked desperately. "That the vision showed the Cup in a dark room?"

Merlin was breathing heavily now. "A dark room ..." he said, his voice weak. "Underground ... there's nothing left of the palace ... but the dungeons ..."

Merlin's hand went to his chest and he clutched at it, it was probably beating as painfully as Harry's was.

"We need to go there!" Bill announced, his cry rending the dramatic silence. "Where is it?"

Merlin shook his head. "Too complicated to explain to you. No time. I'll go myself."

And he started chanting fast in that strange language he'd been attempting to teach Harry all of the last week, and a whirlwind began to appear around Merlin, causing sheets of parchments to fly around the room like ghosts.

He started to disappear, but Harry was too fast for him. He reached forward desperately and grabbed at Merlin's arm; the hell was he going on his own.

Merlin finally disappeared, but Harry had a tight grip and was pulled along with him into a blank nothingness almost like Apparating.

They landed, and Harry fell to the ground, a marshy sort of grass. He took a deep breath, and noticed he hadn't been the only one to grab onto Merlin.

Ron and Hermione were struggling to their feet trying to regain their breath. Harry looked around quickly. They were on a damp hillside on what looked like the middle of nowhere. There was a small forest a few miles away, and he could see a motorway in the distance with tiny lights of cars betraying its presence. They were standing in a large field, with a few cows here and there looking bemused at their sudden appearance. A farm sat at the bottom of the hill and Harry could hear the distant noise of pigs.

Overall, not somewhere he'd expect to find the legendary city of Camelot.

Merlin wasted no time. He raced up the hill at such a fast pace, Harry and the others found it difficult to keep up. Merlin leapt over small fences and across fields, racing towards the top of the hill. Harry wondered if he knew where he was going; it was still dark, and everything looked the same to him. It
wasn't until they began passing large lumps of stone left higgledy-piggledy in the corner of fields and the occasional sight of flagstones peeking out from under the grass in these fields that Harry suddenly appreciated where he was.

He was literally in Camelot.

Merlin continued to race onwards, until he reached the top of the hill and looked around frantically.

"This is where the palace was," he muttered, almost to himself, his eyes wide in desperation. "The dungeons used to be somewhere under here. But there's no door …"

Hermione gasped and pointed. "Merlin!"

Merlin wheeled around to see a small hole in the ground, previously unnoticeable in the dark. There was a giant boulder next to it. It must have hidden the entrance to the dungeons for centuries.

Merlin ran towards it but-

"Acwellan!"

Merlin and the others were thrown backwards onto the ground, Merlin not as far since he'd hastily erected a shield. Harry's mind was swimming with the force with which he'd hit the ground, soft as it was.

He sat up and saw what he feared most.

Morgana was emerging from the dark hole, a triumphant gleam in her eye.

She looked at Merlin and smirked. Merlin immediately threw some powerful non-verbal spell at her, but Morgana blocked it.

"Gone downhill since our day hasn't it, Merlin?" she said casually, looking around at the bare hilltop. "But I've got what I came for."

And from the folds of her cloak, she withdrew a shining golden cup, with seemed to glint with the light of the moon and held Harry hypnotised for a moment.

He recovered his wits. "Expelliarmus!" he cried, hoping to catch her off-guard and get the Cup away from her.

But she repelled it easily, and turned her smirk on Harry instead.

"Hello, young Potter," she said, her grin growing wider. "The Lord Voldemort is very much looking forward to meeting you again."

Harry felt an unaccountable anger surge through his veins and he leapt to his feet.

"Forbearan!" he cried, using one of the Old Religion spells Merlin had taught him in pure desperation.

Flames spurted from the end of his wand and rushed towards Morgana who only just managed to raise a shield.

Her eyes were wide in surprise.

"Well, now, this is interesting."
Merlin rushed towards her, issuing another spell at her, his eyes blazing with angry fire. But Morgana raised another shield, though it was too weak for Merlin's onslaught and she staggered, wounded. Before Merlin could issue the death blow however-

She began disappearing in a whirlwind like the one Merlin had used to conjure them here. She smirked, and clutched her arm that had sustained an injury in Merlin's attack, but a split second later, she was gone, and the Cup went with her.

Merlin cried out in frustration and unleashed a torrent of magic on the hill that burned brightly for miles around. Harry felt Merlin's cry reverberate within his very soul, it voiced the anguish he too was feeling.

Ron and Hermione appeared on either side of him and drew closer in the cold night air. They were all silent.

What on earth could they do now?
Lessons

Merlin sat on the damp grass staring at his hands. He was shivering, and wet, but he barely noticed.

*Morgana had the Cup.*

It was like the bottom had fallen out of his stomach, like his whole world was revolving so rapidly he couldn't keep up.

*Morgana had the Cup.*

It was now early morning and it was strangely calm. The dew drops were still shimmering in the weak sun and mist drifted here and there lazily around the hill he was sitting on. The distant sounds of sheep and other farm animals filled the air. It was surreal. How could the rest of the world continue on like this when the most awful thing that could have happened just had?

Merlin wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there. He had to think of a plan. *He had to.* Morgana now had the upper-hand.

Distant footsteps caused him to look up. Kingsley was coming towards him across the field, moving slowly through the slick grass and glancing here and there, searching. He spied Merlin sitting there and came closer.

Harry, Ron and Hermione who, Merlin just realised, had been sitting on the grass around him stood up.

Kingsley came closer and looked down at Merlin, his expression grim.

"By the look on your face, I need hardly ask what happened here," he said gravely. No one answered him.

Kingsley sighed, and schooled his expression into one of determined acceptance, but Merlin could see the brief flash of fear in his eyes.

"How did you find us?" Hermione asked timidly, breaking the silence they'd endured all night.

Kingsley looked at Merlin. "The farmer at the bottom of the hill reported seeing bright lights and fires here last night to the Muggle authorities. We got wind of it and guessed you must all have come here," He looked around again and looked almost nervous. "Uh, is … is this, you know …"

"Camelot?" Merlin asked, his own voice sounding strange to him after such a long silence. "Yes. At least, what's left of it."

"It's … uh … it's nice," offered Ron, looking around at the broken down fences, the mud, and the curious sheep in the corner of the field who were staring at them, their mouths hanging open as they ripped up tufts of grass and chewed it noisily.

"No, it's not," said Merlin, and he stood up and began pacing. "It isn't nice. It's awful. To think that a city as great as Camelot has been reduced to this?" he gestured to the gormless looking sheep.

"Where we're sitting now used to be a magnificent courtyard of stone, a beautiful palace with statues and exquisite carvings. Over there was where I first met Arthur; over there was where Arthur once faced off against a Griffin; over there was where we'd all ride in after a successful quest; that's where the kitchens were; the training ground; Arthur's chambers; the dungeons; and over there is where I
used to live! This was my home! And look at it!" he kicked a large rock lying in the field, probably once a part of the palace and watched it fly away, almost welcoming the pain in his foot which matched the pain in his heart.

He spun around, shaking. "This was my home," he repeated. "And Morgana destroyed it. Now she thinks she can destroy my new home, the only real home I've had in thirteen hundred years where people know and accept me. Well, she's wrong. I won't let her. Not again."

His voice was getting louder and louder but he barely noticed. "I was such a coward," he said. "If I hadn't been so afraid to come back here and see what had become of the city I would have sensed the Cup hidden here. Well, I won't be any more." He clenched his fists, and felt his eyes burn golden and his hands began to glow. "She won't beat me. I'm more powerful than her. I always have been. She won't win. I've forgotten how powerful I am over the years. I haven't used my magic to its full potential in so long. But now, I will."

He didn't have to see the awed and shocked expressions on the other's faces to know something had changed. He felt something snap deep within him. He'd been telling himself for ages that he wasn't afraid to be himself anymore, that he was finally back to the way he had been. But he wasn't. Not till this moment. He didn't feel his age anymore, he didn't feel the weight of the world on his shoulders. He was once again that young man who had stuck down Nimueh with a single blow with barely any training, the young man who had defeated Sigan, the young man who had trapped Morgana, the young man who had done so much to protect who he loved. He'd been in a sort of trance all these years, waiting for the right moment, not really believing it would come. Well, now it had.

And Merlin Emrys was ready for it.

"D'you reckon he's alright?" Ron whispered to Harry. Harry glanced across the kitchen at Grimmauld Place where Merlin was standing staring into the fire, a look of deep concentration on his face.

"Of course not, Ron," hissed Hermione, also looking towards Merlin. "Think about how you're feeling about Morgana getting the Cup then compare it to someone who actually knew Morgana and thinks he could have done something to prevent this. That's not to mention what he must have been feeling going back to Camelot and seeing it in ruins."

Harry felt something icy fall into his stomach as he remembered. They'd sat there on the ground, surrounded by giant blocks of debris while Merlin had paced around looking at his former home, pain in his eyes. It reminded Harry forcibly of the time he and Hermione had visited his old house in Godric's Hollow. He hadn't even had any memory of that place, how much worse would it have been for Merlin?

Seeing Camelot in ruins was somewhat surreal for Harry. It had really brought home the fact that this all was real. He had actually been in the legendary city of Camelot. He tried to compare it to the portrait of the city he'd seen in Hogwarts, but couldn't. It made him deeply sad, more than he thought he'd be. He began to fully appreciate what had been lost all that time ago.

The Order were milling about the kitchen waiting for Kingsley to arrive back from the Ministry for another emergency meeting. There was not a face without a trace of fear on it. Mrs Weasley moved here and there in her pink dressing gown offering cups of tea and hot chocolate, her own face pale. Harry, Ron and Hermione, and several others were also still in their night clothes, it being still quite early in the morning. The sight of an Order meeting of people clad in striped pajamas, fluffy slippers
and tatty dressing gowns would otherwise have been strangely comical, but all Harry could think of was the sinking feeling in his stomach as he thought of Morgana. She had looked directly at him, she had been holding the Cup and Harry had felt it, the magic of the Old Religion that it exuded. He remembered the hate and evil in her eyes and shuddered.

But oddly enough, he wasn't nearly as afraid as he might have been. He remembered Merlin's outburst straight after Morgana had taken the Cup, the power he'd shown, and then what he'd said afterwards. Merlin would defeat her; oddly, he had no doubt about that. Was it the Old Religion that was making him so confident? He was scared of course, but he knew Merlin could handle it. It was like what Kilgharrah had said: Merlin had the power to defeat her, but he just lacked the confidence. He'd allowed himself to become complacent over the years, he hadn't truly been living, and he blamed himself for everything that had happened. But Harry now knew that was no longer the case. Merlin would defeat Morgana, he knew that. But it would be a long and hard fight, and he didn't know what could happen. And he was far less confident about his own ultimate showdown.

Kingsley entered the room and immediately the whispered conversations ended. Kingsley looked around at them all and motioned for them all to take a seat. They complied.

Kingsley looked exhausted, but nothing betrayed that in his voice, as strong and confident as ever.

"You all know what has happened," he said slowly. "There's no point in discussing that now. But what will our next move be?"

No one knew what to say. Almost everyone's eyes flicked to Merlin desperately, but Merlin didn't look around. He continued staring into the fire intently; Harry wondered whether he was even listening.

"How did she even find it?" Tonks whispered, her eyes wide. "How could she so suddenly know where it was?"

"Ask him," said Ron, pointing to Malfoy, who was lurking in a darkened corner.

Malfoy flushed and his face contorted with anger. "I didn't do anything, Weasley," he insisted. "It was hardly my fault. I couldn't stop her!"

"Yeah, any excuse!" Ron retorted. "You could have stopped her if you tried!"

"No, he couldn't."

Everyone jumped in surprise as two people spoke the same words in unison. Merlin had turned around and blinked in surprise at Harry who'd also spoken. Everyone was staring at him.

Merlin was watching Harry curiously, but nodded, and seemed to indicate that he should continue. Harry flushed slightly as everyone's eyes were fixed on him.

"Well, what I mean is," he said, wishing desperately that he hadn't spoken. "We shouldn't blame anyone. Especially like this. I know what it's like to have Legilimancy used on you on your sleep," he said, wincing as he thought of Sirius. "It's no one's fault."

Malfoy was frowning at Harry, as though not quite believing what was happening. "I don't need you to defend me, Potter," he said, though his voice lacked the usual malice, and sounded only confused. He was staring at Harry as though seeing him for the first time. Harry himself felt a little strange sticking up for Malfoy like this, but if Merlin was right, and he usually was, maybe Malfoy deserved a second chance; Harry'd certainly witnessed enough to believe Malfoy hadn't truly been one of them.
"Maybe you should welcome his defence instead of dismissing it," Merlin said softly, and immediately he captured the room's attention. "I believe you when you say you could do nothing. Morgana's mental abilities are far more powerful than I suspect Voldemort's are. She doesn't use Legilimancy, it's something completely different. Even I struggle sometimes fighting her mental attacks. It's the one thing she really excels in. No one is going to blame you, Mr Malfoy."

Malfoy blushed again, and everyone at the table nodded, not daring to contradict Merlin. Ron didn't look happy, but he grudgingly nodded at Malfoy, who gave a curt nod back. Harry was watching Malfoy closely.

"Merlin is right," said Kingsley. "I do not blame anyone at this table, and I expect no one else to either. It doesn't matter anymore. All that matters is what we decide to do now."

He looked around at them all. "Any suggestions?"

No one spoke for a moment. "Well, we'll need to find their base …" Neville ventured hesitatingly. McGonagall rolled her eyes. "That, is obvious, Longbottom. However it is easier said than done."

"I've sent Kilgharrah and Aithusa searching for it," said Merlin. "They're flying around and trying to sense its location. But knowing Morgana she'll have found some way of shielding it."

"Is it wise to have two fully-grown ancient dragons flying around the countryside? Over Muggle countryside?" Arthur Weasley asked.

Merlin didn't hesitate. "They're perfectly capable of hiding themselves. But honestly, I don't care now if they're seen, or if a Muggle catches a glimpse. Muggles are being affected by this as well; there are plenty who witnessed Morgana's attacks and evaded the Ministry's Memory-Modifiers. No one would believe them anyway, or anyone who sees a dragon. Muggles are remarkably good at finding ways of explaining away things they don't understand."


"I don't give a damn about the International Statue of Secrecy," said Merlin. "I hate it. I've hated it ever since the day it was signed. I'm perfectly capable of doing things in secret- I've had plenty of practice- but I always worked to my best in Camelot when I wasn't afraid of being discovered. This is the way I work, and if you want Morgana defeated I suggest you let me get on with it."

Everyone seemed taken aback. Harry felt a sudden thrill down his spine. Sometimes he forgot that Merlin really was, well, Merlin. It was at times like these that he caught a glimpse of the man from legend.

"Can't you do something?" Fred Weasley asked. "I mean, do something to stop them using the Cup? Like neutralising it with a spell or something from here?"

"No," said Merlin. "I don't have the power."

"'Don't have the power?'" Ron repeated incredulously. "You don't have the power? How's that possible? You're the most powerful sorcerer who's ever lived!"

"True," said Merlin, looking at Ron. "But I'm not more powerful than the Old Religion itself. It grants me my power. It is the all-powerful force in this world. I am merely its servant. I can't circumvent its own magic like this."

Harry wasn't disappointed; he'd expected such an answer. But he noticed interestingly that Merlin
didn't sound bitter. Every time he spoke about being a servant of the Old Religion and subject to its will, he'd sounded resentful and frustrated, but now … he almost seemed to be embracing it. Like he was now at peace with it.

Ron slumped. "The whole situation is bloody hopeless."

"Didn't …" began Neville, looking nervous. "I mean, from what Merlin said, didn't Morgana and uh … her sister … can't remember her name … didn't they make an entire army immortal with the Cup?"

"Yeah!" shouted George, his face now horror-struck. "Are they going to make all the Death Eaters immortal?"

Harry went cold at the very thought. But his mind rejected the idea.

"No," he said. "That's not Voldemort's plan."

"How do you know?" Remus asked.

"Because I know him," said Harry. "At least, I think I do. He's wanted to be immortal since he was sixteen years old and made his first Horcrux. It's all he's thought about all these years. He wouldn't want to share that gift with his followers, he doesn't care about them."

"Yeah," said Malfoy suddenly, avoiding Harry's eye, as though agreeing with him was a sudden admission of unwanted friendliness between them. "He- he treated us like scum. If he had a chance like that he wouldn't give it to anyone else. He-he'd want to be more powerful than all of them. He'd want to be invincible. Just him."

"But it isn't just him is it?" Bill mused. "Morgana's there with him."

"Morgana's never displayed any will of being immortal," said Merlin. "When she had the Cup in Camelot, neither she nor Morgause used it for themselves. It was for the army, so they could take over the city. But," he said, grimacing. "Perhaps she's changed over the years. Getting Voldemort the Cup may have been a way of getting him to trust her, a peace offering, but she may have plans for it herself. She wants me dead. That's her aim. She wants revenge for what I did to her. Maybe she thinks that by becoming immortal she could accomplish that. After all, I'm immortal myself."

Harry shuddered as he thought about that. Though he knew all of Merlin's story, it was still strange to think of him as immortal. Then a sudden thought struck him, if Merlin was immortal, did that mean that if Voldemort and Morgana were defeated, that he'd continue to be immortal? Would he linger on as always? Would he have to suffer the deaths of Harry and the others in the future and go back to hiding in the shadows? It was an uncomfortable and disturbing thought.

"So, we don't know if Morgana wants to be immortal or if it's just You-Know-Who," summed up Charlie. "Either way it isn't good for us. How are we supposed to fight them now? I suppose a Killing Curse would be useless?"

"Yeah," said Merlin, and Harry noticed a small smile on his face. "But there is something. A weapon that can kill something that is already dead."

"That makes no sense," Fred whispered to his twin

"What is this weapon?" Kingsley asked, intrigued.

"Excalibur," said Harry, and quickly launched into an explanation of the sword and the fact it was
the only thing able to kill them, watching as everyone looked more and more awed.

"Why didn't you mention this to us before?" Kingsley asked, turning from Harry to Merlin. "Why wait until now to tell us this vital piece of information?" Harry could detect a slight tone of hurt underneath a distinct anger.

"Because we can't get to it just now," explained Merlin. "Avalon is far harder to reach than it used to be. The only time I'd be able to make contact with the Lady of the Lake is at Samhain-- I mean, Hallowe'en."

Kingsley sighed. "That is still a few weeks away."

Merlin nodded. "I know. And that is why I suggest we all keep searching for their base. The sword will be useless if we don't know where to use it. That is what the Order should focus on. Look for strange occurrences up and down the country, any anomalous spell readings anywhere that could denote a secret base. They will no longer be at Malfoy Manor, and the other large houses of his remaining Death Eaters have been seized so I doubt he has anywhere obvious to go. He must be holed up somewhere else, or somewhere Morgana used to frequent. I'll check these places myself; no one will come with me, it may be too dangerous. They won't be attacking Muggle museums looking for the Cup any more so the Aurors assigned to guard these places can be removed. I also doubt she'll lead any more attacks to try to get to me-- what she did last night will keep her happy for a while. All available Aurors should be set to searching for them, and Ministry workers who aren't should start casting enchantments around all Muggle and Wizarding settlements to protect them from Death Eater attacks."

"Do you how many settlements there are in--"

"Yes," said Merlin. "I watched most of them being founded. These enchantments may stand no chance against Voldemort and Morgana's magic, but they'll at least slow them down and allow for reinforcements to arrive. I'll also add enchantments to some of the more prominent ones, the ones most likely to be attacked. In addition to this, I'll continue with Harry's training in Old Magic. Morgana saw him using Old Magic in Camelot," he looked to Harry here, who flinched, remembering his recklessness and weak attempts at the magic. "She knows now that he has the same ability to use it as Voldemort so she'll probably step up her training of Voldemort. I hope to increase Harry's ability in this magic until it's at least as equal as his."

The room stared. "Could he do that?" Neville gasped. "Become as powerful as You-Know-Who?"

"In Old Magic, yes," said Merlin. "In New magic, Harry hasn't a hope of overpowering him. But Old Magic is more powerful, and I believe Harry has the ability to become very proficient at it."

Everyone started staring at Harry who flushed furiously. "But I'm no good!" he protested. "You saw what I tried to do to Morgana! My magic was pathetic!"

Merlin laughed. "Of course it was, Harry. It was Morgana, and you've barely been training a week! But against Voldemort ... I believe you will stand a good chance. Morgana has rushed his training, and she's not exactly the best or most patient teacher around. In a few weeks, with hard work, I believe you could become his equal, if not his superior in this magic."

Harry froze. "I-I couldn't--"

"Yes, you could," Merlin said fiercely, turning to face him fully. "You were granted this magic for a reason, Harry-- it's no mere coincidence that you have it. You were meant to use it. I have every confidence in you, Harry. Forget everything you know about Voldemort. You're both new at this
magic, but he only has his because he got it from you by force. His magic isn't as powerful as yours, but he's just able to use it better at the moment. But that will change, Harry. Just have confidence in yourself."

Harry blinked in surprise for a few moments. Could he really become more powerful than Voldemort? He'd never really considered that; he'd always expected he'd have to outwit him somehow to defeat him, like Tonks was trying to teach them all to do. To be more powerful than him … was that what he wanted?

Yes, he told himself. Voldemort had to be defeated. And this was the only way. He wasn't about to fail Merlin now.

Merlin turned away from Harry. "There is another thing," he said, and for the first time, Harry heard his voice waver a little. He looked at Kingsley. "I think you should tell people the truth about Morgana, and about me."

Everyone gasped. Kingsley bowed his head and looked deep in thought.

"I've been debating this in my mind for what seems like forever," he admitted. "But is it really a good idea?"

"They already believe Voldemort's more or less immortal," said Merlin. "What harm could there be in telling people the truth? They're panicking anyway, and making up their own ridiculous rumours that are just as harmful."

"But telling them about Morgana?"

"Tell them about me," Merlin said. "They might not be so afraid if they believe I'm here as well. Most of them would probably believe only Merlin could defeat Morgana anyway. These people deserve to be prepared."

"And what about you?" Kingsley asked with a small smile. "Are you prepared for this?"

Merlin nodded stiffly. "It is time," he said calmly. "I know that now."

Kingsley nodded slowly. "I see your point, but I'd rather wait until we have … Excalibur. At least then I know we have a good chance, and I can honestly tell the people that we are capable of defeating them. And you'd need to be there when I tell them; I doubt the Daily Prophet would believe me if I said Morgana and Merlin have returned from the dead."

"Very well," said Merlin. "Tell them when you want. But it has to be soon. Hopefully we can find out where they're hiding before we get the sword and all of this will be over soon. Will you do everything I said?"

Kingsley nodded. "Your suggestions are sensible, and I have no qualms about implementing any of them." He smiled. "You're more or less leading us all, Merlin, telling us what to do to combat this evil. Perhaps you should be our leader."

Merlin shook his head. "Leadership never really suited me," he said quietly.

Kingsley nodded and he seemed to examine Merlin's face carefully, as though trying to read his thoughts.

"Very well," he said, and there was a ghost of a real smile on his face.
Harry wasn't sure what to think about all of this; Merlin telling everyone who he was? Was it really a good idea?

But strangely, he had a quiet confidence in it. Merlin was taking charge; he was more or less directing the Order. He was more assertive than he had been. Something had changed about him. The loss of the Cup had brought him back to the forefront.

Kingsley stood up. "You all heard Merlin. We have much to do."

Merlin sat at the Gryffindor table a few hours later trying to eat breakfast but failing miserably. He should be exhausted, he should be weak after only a few hours' sleep, but he was raring to go. He couldn't sit still. Morgana getting the Cup had filled him with a determined fire. He could beat her. He'd done it before.

Dean and Seamus were watching him warily. They'd noticed that four of their friends had disappeared from the dormitory in the middle of the night and were now looking exhausted and haggard. They must suspect what had happened. But Merlin wasn't about to enlighten them just yet. There'd be time for that at the DA meeting that evening.

At that moment, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Ginny approached the table, all looking rather bedraggled.

"You look like the living dead," observed Merlin. Ron scowled at him.

"Is it any wonder after the night we had? And now we're supposed to go to class like nothing happened?"

Merlin said nothing, but Ginny's eyes were narrowed in suspicion. "You're not going are you?" she asked, gesturing at his clothes, which were of a Muggle design.

Merlin shook his head. "What's the point in sitting in class? I'm going to try and locate Morgana and Voldemort's base. I'll check all her old haunts. They were ruins even in our day, and there'll probably be supermarkets and things built over the top of them now, but I have to check. I should have checked Camelot for the Cup. I can't miss something as obvious as this again."

"Let us come with you," said Harry, and Merlin felt bad as he saw the desperation in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But these places might be dangerous. Old Magic dangerous."

"I don't care!" said Harry. "I have to do something! If you don't see the point in sitting in class why should I have to?"

"Yeah!" objected Ron. "We've faced danger before! And you promised McGonagall that you weren't going to skip any more classes. If we don't get to go, neither should you!"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Yesterday, Ron, Morgana didn't have the Cup. And besides, you all need your education. I don't. I learned all this stuff hundreds of years ago. You're much better off staying here and learning how to defend yourselves than coming with me and checking out old ruined castles for something that probably isn't there."

All five of them opened their mouths to object, but Merlin held up a hand to stop them.
"I'm going, you're not," he said firmly.

Ron unleashed a full mouthful of expletives that Merlin was sure he'd never use in his mother's hearing. Merlin raised an eyebrow.

"What happened to respecting your elders, Ron?" Merlin asked, flashing him a cheeky grin. "Believe me, I've heard it all before. It's not going to convince me. I'll see you all later."

And before they could object, he swigged back the last of his pumpkin juice and stood up to walk out of the hall.

"Bloody infuriating old git," he heard Ron mutter after him, and Merlin smiled. It almost felt good to be giving commands again. He had a sense of purpose.

He was crossing the Entrance Hall when he heard-

"Mr Emrys!"

Merlin winced and turned around to see McGonagall walking towards him briskly.

"And where are you going without your uniform on?" she asked him, and the look in her eye made Merlin secretly feel if she had been his teacher as a child he might actually have been afraid of her.

"I'm doing what I said I'd do in the meeting last night," he said. "I'm … searching,"

McGonagall glanced around quickly before moving in closer.

"Not that it's not a good idea, but you think it's wise to do it during school time? You don't want to draw attention to yourself."

"Why not?" Merlin asked. "Soon everyone's going to know anyway."

"Yes," said McGonagall. 'But until then-"

"Look," said Merlin. "This is important. I can't pretend to go to school when there are important things I need to be doing. If you're so preoccupied with keeping up the charade then you can tell the other teachers that … I don't know, my mother's ill or something. But I need to do this."

McGonagall still looked unhappy, but she nodded curtly.

"Be careful, won't you?" McGonagall said, her voice suddenly concerned. She glanced around the hall. "I know you feel responsible for this … situation, but don't be reckless."

Merlin nodded. McGonagall patted him awkwardly on the arm for a moment and walked away.

Merlin watched until she had vanished out of sight before continuing on his way out of the castle.

Harry walked amongst the dueling members of the DA that evening, though his mind wasn't really on what he was watching- it was on Merlin, who still hadn't returned. He wasn't worried, just slightly annoyed he couldn't go with him. Sitting through his classes that day had been frustrating, but at least here at the DA meeting he was doing something pro-active.

Everyone was fighting with more determination than ever. The news that Morgana now had the Cup of Life spurred people on. No one was afraid, just more focused on becoming as strong fighters as
they could.

The evening was drawing to an end, and duels were rapidly beginning to end as people dropped out exhausted or were defeated. Harry was encouraged to see even the first years doing some real damage to their opponents, despite their limited spell vocabulary.

Harry glanced at his watch. "Right everyone, that's enough!"

Miraculously they all stopped when he shouted, swaying on the spot, clutching some minor injuries. He nodded as he looked around at them all.

"That was really good," he said sincerely. "You're doing brilliantly."

They all looked pleased with themselves and starting whispering excitedly to each other. Then, they all stopped suddenly.

Harry turned to see what had caused their sudden silence, and saw Merlin entering the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Merlin didn't even look uncomfortable any more with all the attention. He walked calmly over to Harry and the others.

"Any sign?" Ron asked.

Merlin raised his eyebrows. "Would I be so calm if there was?"

"So we still don't know where Morgana is?" Ernie asked disappointed.

"Not yet," said Merlin. "I didn't really expect her to be in one of her old hideaways anyway. Most of them have been pulled down and built over and the ones that remain are just lumps of stone in a field. She must be hiding somewhere new."

"Ah, well," said Seamus. "Worth a look anyway."

Merlin nodded, but Harry noticed he looked disappointed, as though he'd hoped secretly to at least find some trace of her.

The DA meeting wrapped up pretty quickly after that, though some people still lingered around, just staring at Merlin. They scarpered pretty quickly though when Merlin turned his gaze on them. They seemed awed and terrified of him in equal measure.

Soon, it was just Harry, Ron, Hermione and Merlin left. Harry made to go to the door, but Merlin held him back.

"We need to get on with your training, Harry. I think it best we stay here and do it, so we're out of the way."

Harry nodded. Hermione and Ron looked at the two of them.

"Should we go?" Hermione asked hesitatingly.

Merlin looked at Harry. "It's your choice, Harry. It might be distracting having them here, but it might be encouraging."

Harry looked at their two hopeful faces and felt a sinking feeling. "Sorry," he said. "But he's right. I don't want to be distracted."
They looked disappointed, but nodded and left. Harry felt bad; he knew they’d been dying all week to watch one of his lessons.

Merlin didn't waste any time. He strode over to the centre of the room, summoned two cushions with a flash of his eyes, and sat himself down on one. Harry sat himself on the one opposite suddenly feeling nervous. He'd been doing this all week yes, but now Morgana had the Cup everything seemed so much more desperate.

Merlin pulled some candles out of his pocket and sat them down in front of Harry in a long row.

"Light them."

Harry pointed his wand at them and said: "Forbearnan."

The candles burned brightly.

"Now, snuff them out."

Harry focused. "Forþ."

Merlin nodded. "Now do the exercise that I taught you. You should always do this before practicing. You need to always be able to control this power within you."

Harry nodded, and went through the little ritual he did every training session. He lit each candle individually, and slowly and deliberately turned each of the lights a different colour, before lifting the flames free of the candles themselves and making them dance in the air before placing them back on the candle wicks. He noticed Merlin always looked sad when he did this particular part.

He finished, and he was pleasantly surprised he wasn't as exhausted as he usually was when doing this. What Merlin had said the other night was true; it did get easier and less tiring with practice.

Merlin nodded, satisfied, and stood up quickly. Harry followed suit, noting that Merlin was unusually somber. The lessons were usually more upbeat than this straight-forward method. Harry could definitely sense a change in Merlin since last night.

Merlin stood facing Harry a few feet away.

"Now, Harry," he said. "Use that same spell to direct flames at me. Like what you did to Morgana last night, but better. Don't use so much force at once. Only release a small part of the magic at first, and let it flow out slowly and build up power that way. The spell will be more effective."

Harry nodded and lifted his wand and pointed it at Merlin. Then he hesitated. "What if I hurt you?"

Merlin raised his eyebrows amused, and Harry realised that had been an incredibly stupid question. "Oh, right …"

He concentrated on releasing the magic slowly. "Forbearnan."

The flames streamed from his wand, and were so hot they seared Harry’s skin. He tried to do as Merlin said and release it slowly, but the force of the spell was too strong, and soon he was gasping for breath in exhaustion.

Merlin raised the shield he'd erected and frowned. "You didn't control it properly. You don't understand me. Use a miniscule amount at first, focus on just that tiny little part, and then release it. It'll build up really quickly, you have to be ready. Don't use all your energy on the first blow."
Harry tried not to feel annoyed, but after another hour of the same process he couldn't help but let it show.

"This isn't working!" he said to Merlin, bending over in fatigue. "I'm not making a dent in your shield! I won't make a dent in Morgana's either!"

Merlin smiled. "No, but you might make one in Voldemort's." He sighed. "Your power is there, Harry. Your problem is that you're releasing it too soon. You need to rein it back. Don't focus on the spell or the power of the spell, always focus on the control. Ease into it gradually."

"Why can't I do something more useful than just fire spells?" Harry asked. "I can already light fires with this magic!"

"Yes," said Merlin. "But lighting a fire isn't the same as controlling it. You have to refine your technique until you have absolute control. You should feel no exhaustion whatsoever. At the moment you find yourself struggling for breath just trying to send a bunch of flames at me. What use is that?"

Harry scowled. Merlin noticed.

"Perhaps we'll try another spell then?" he said. "Try the same process with this spell. 'Acwellan'. It's kind of an equivalent to 'Reducto', I suppose. This isn't an elemental spell, so you're not focusing on easing into the magic. You're trying to deliver a quick sharp blow. There's still a focus on control, but it's not as long-lasting."

Harry tried the new spell, and found it much easier, or at least, his practicing was making it easier. He easily destroyed the several targets Merlin conjured for him, and even made Merlin take a step back when the force of Harry's spell hit his shield, though admittedly it had only been a tiny step, and Merlin hadn't really been trying.

Then the process reversed, and Merlin taught Harry how to shield himself. Remarkably, it was a very different process to using a 'Protego' charm. Harry didn't really get the hang of it.

"Do you have to do that?" Harry asked after the hundredth time of being knocked to the floor after one of Merlin's spells broke through his pathetic shield.

Merlin smiled, and Harry detected a hint of mischief there, reminiscent of the Weasley twins. "No, but it'll help you learn."

Harry seriously doubted it. It was only making him mutter obscenities at Merlin under his breath.

"Now what?" he asked, his wand ready.

Merlin looked him over closely. "That's enough for tonight."

Harry frowned. "But we barely did anything! We've got more to do!"

Merlin smiled. "Harry, you're dead on your feet. We've been here nearly five hours."

Harry blinked in surprise and glanced at his watch. He was right.

"I've never lasted that long before," he said, surprised at himself. "I usually get exhausted after the first hour or so."

Merlin grinned. "You see. Your body's gradually becoming used to channelling this magic through
it. The exhaustion will continue to fade until a duel in this sort of magic will leave you in the same level of fatigue you'd feel in an ordinary one."

Harry smiled back, but he wasn't as optimistic as Merlin. "I still feel awful though," he admitted. "And I can still barely do any spells and I can't do any of the ones I do know properly. Even a simple fire spell."

"That'll come, Harry," said Merlin bracingly. "You really are making amazing progress."

"Were the Founders this slow at learning it?" Harry asked, frustrated.

"Rowena took to it like a duck to water," said Merlin, smiling in memory. "She didn't find it difficult in the slightest …"

He shook himself out of his reminiscences however, realising how little this comforted Harry.

"But the others found it more difficult. You're doing really well, Harry, truly. Better than Salazar, I may add. And much better than Godric."

Harry smiled weakly. "Well, that's alright then."

Merlin laughed, and together they left the Room of Requirement and headed back to the Common Room. The corridors were dark and shadowy. Harry hadn't realised how late it was.

He tried to jump back into the shadows when he saw a Prefect coming towards them down the corridor, but Merlin smiled calmly, pulled Harry to the side, and muttered a quick incantation.

His eyes flashed, and the Prefect walked past, completely oblivious to the two people standing there. Merlin's eyes glowed again, as they apparently became visible again. Harry grinned at Merlin.

"That's brilliant! Can you teach me?"

Merlin laughed. "Yeah, it's quite simple."

He told Harry the incantation and Harry muttered it under his breath along the corridor trying to memorise it. The spells Merlin used were really strange. And long.

"Have I got it?" Harry asked. "Behýdan heonon prættig an."

He felt a burning sensation as his eyes turned golden, a feeling he still hadn't properly adjusted to yet. He knew he had succeeded when Merlin grinned.

"Perfect, Harry," he said smiling.

Harry grinned back even though he knew Merlin couldn't see him. "Now, what's the counter-curse?"

But Merlin just smiled and continued on down the corridor.

Five minutes later they arrived at the portrait hole of the Fat Lady, Merlin still ignoring Harry's pleas for the incantation. Merlin gestured for him to be silent, while he cleared his throat in front of the Fat Lady.

She woke up with a start and blinked her eyes wearily. She looked down at Merlin, and seeing him apparently alone, scowled.

"Must you do that?" she asked, annoyed. "What are you doing wandering the corridors late at
night?"

Merlin just smiled. "Had some stuff to do."

She raised one painted eyebrow. "Mysterious as ever, Mr Emrys. Shouldn't someone of your advanced age be in bed at this hour?"

Merlin grinned, and Harry blinked in surprise. He should have known the Fat Lady would know of his secret. He'd been in Gryffindor centuries ago; of course she'd remember him! He remembered that first night at Hogwarts a few weeks ago when she'd stared at him oddly. It made sense.

She shook her head. "You frustrate me no end, Mr Emrys. When will you ever tell me your secret?"

"About that," said Merlin, barely suppressing another grin. "Everyone in the school is soon going to know, but I thought I'd tell you first. After all, you've been asking me for centuries. I promised I'd tell you the truth one day. I think it's time you knew my real name."

She gasped and leaned in excitedly, her face flushed in anticipation. "What is it? Martin? Mortimer? Matthew? Which was your real name?"

"None of those," Merlin laughed. "My real name … is Merlin."

She blinked for a few moments, her face slack with shock. Then she slumped back in her frame and huffed.

"You're infuriating, Mr Emrys! Get me all excited and then fob me off with a cruel lie! I don't know why I put up with you …"

"He isn't lying," said Harry suddenly. By the Fat Lady's gasp and her wide eyes, he reasoned he'd just become visible again. "He really is who he says he is. He's Merlin."

The Fat Lady looked between the two of them several times, her face blank with shock as though looking for a contradiction. When none was forthcoming she let out such a loud shriek Harry thought it must have woken half the castle.

"Merlin?! You're jesting! It can't be true!" she blabbered. "All these years! That was your secret? And to think of all those times I told you off for being late back to the Common Room! And the times I didn't let you in because you forgot the password! Oh my goodness!"

He eyes filled with tears. "Oh I'm so honoured! I knew there was something! I knew you were special! Thank you! Thank you for everything you did for wizardkind!"

Then she burst into full on sobbing and swung forward on her hinges, and Merlin clambered in grinning to himself. Harry followed him.

He turned to face Merlin once inside, with the Fat Lady's sobs in the background. "Do you think it was right to tell her? You know how much of a gossip she is."

Merlin nodded. "She's never revealed my immortality. None of the portraits have. She'll keep it a secret, I know she will. I just thought it was time she knew. She interrogated me at least once a week in my previous years at Hogwarts."

Harry nodded. It seemed a little strange that Merlin knew a portrait this well. It really emphasised just how old he was.
"How did I become visible again?" Harry asked suddenly, remembering. "I didn't do a spell."

"Yes, you did," said Merlin. "I felt the magic. You just didn't realise it."

Harry frowned. "But how can I do a spell without meaning to?"

"How could you speak to snakes without meaning to?" Merlin asked with a wry smile. "Some spells of the Old Religion, counter-curses in particular are non-verbal, and often don't need actual incantations at all. You were invisible for as long as you wanted to be. But when you really wanted to become visible, you did. It's a natural reaction, and it just proves to me further that the Old Religion wants this of you. It's all a matter of will-power and control. That's why I didn't tell you how to undo the spell. I wanted you to discover it for yourself."

Harry frowned. "What if I hadn't figured it out? Would I have stayed invisible forever?"

Merlin shrugged. "It would have worn off in a few days … probably."

He crossed the Common Room and ignored Harry's indignant splutters. "You mean … with this magic, I can do spells without meaning to?"

Merlin smiled. "Not usually. Only myself, and Morgana I suppose, ever really had the ability to use magic completely instinctively. But you can undo spells instinctively, at least, some spells … if you have enough power and strength of mind, and of course providing you cast the spell properly to begin with."

Harry felt his head spin. "This makes no sense."

"Not really, no," Merlin agreed. "Even I don't understand it fully all the time. Don't worry about it. Just trust in it."

Harry found that difficult. How could he have faith in such a tempestuous form of magic like this? It unnerved him more than anything, especially how right using this magic felt. Like this had been something he'd been leading up to throughout his life.

"Merlin," Harry asked. Merlin stopped heading towards the dormitory, and looked around.

"Yes?"

Harry gulped. "You- you really think I can master this magic?" he asked, voicing his concerns. "It's all so complicated and dangerous, and I don't know what I'm doing half the time. There's so much at stake here and … I don't want everyone to be disappointed in me if I mess this up."

Merlin took a step closer to Harry, his expression sympathetic, but determined.

"Yes, Harry," he said simply. "I believe you can master this magic. I have no doubts whatsoever."

And without another word, he turned and headed back up the staircase to the dormitory, leaving Harry standing there alone.

There had been no lie in Merlin's eyes. He really believed Harry could do this.

Harry only wished he had as much confidence.

He moved over to the fireplace, where only a few dying embers were left. He looked at it contemplatively.
He crouched down and reached out with his wand.

"Forbearnan," he said. And this time, he concentrated on only releasing a small trickle of magic, like a tiny droplet of water from a tap. He felt his eyes glow.

He gradually released more and more magic until it became a steady stream of power flowing through his wand. It felt like an hour that he crouched there willing the fire to light, but in reality it was all over in a split second.

The fire leapt to life, and crackled away merrily. Harry felt no exhaustion whatsoever.

He sat back on the ground, and grinned to himself. Maybe there was hope after all.

Unknown to Harry, Merlin stood there on the dormitory staircase watching from the shadows.

He smiled.
Harry sat at the table in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place holding an old bed sheet to his arm to staunch the heavy bleeding. His arm throbbed and his body was trembling with adrenaline.

"That was a close one!" said Charlie Weasley sitting opposite him. The entire Order nodded, each one of them tending to their own injuries. Mrs Weasley and Lupin were flitting here and there trying to help.

"Were there any Muggles killed?" Percy asked, holding some ice to a large bump on his forehead.

"No," said Kingsley from the head of the table. "We got there just in time. But we didn't manage to capture or kill any Death Eaters. We barely managed to drive them off."

"They're Muggle-baiting again," said Bill, shaking his head. "Just for fun."

"No," said Lupin gravely. "They were distracting us, trying to draw us out."

"Distracting us from what?" Ron asked.

"From the fact that they were trying to break into Gringotts," said Kingsley sighing.

"What?" asked Fred sitting up straighter. "They broke into Gringotts?"

"No," said Kingsley. "They tried to. But they couldn't get through the protective enchantments Merlin placed around Diagon Alley and by the time the Aurors showed up they'd already moved on."

George exhaled in relief. "Thank Merlin for that. Literally."

"You're welcome, George," Merlin said casually, strolling through the door. Kingsley stood up to meet him.

"All's well at Gringotts?" he asked.

Merlin nodded. "They didn't get within fifty feet of the place. Morgana obviously didn't anticipate my enchantments and didn't have time to break them before they lost the element of surprise."

"Why would she want to break into Gringotts?" Hermione mused. "They already have the Cup. What else could they want?"

Merlin shrugged. "Morgana always did have a weakness for pretty things. Being locked up in a cave for thirteen hundred years … she probably just wants to go shopping."

"Shopping?" Ginny repeated, looking sceptical.

Merlin nodded, looking serious. "Oh yes. Morgana liked her home comforts. I used to be a palace servant remember? You should have seen the amount of dresses and jewellery she had-"

"This isn't a joke, Merlin," said Ron. "Her minions damn near killed us all tonight!"

Merlin looked at him evenly. "It wasn't intended as a joke. There is no motive for her to attack Gringotts other than to steal riches and allow Voldemort to do some Muggle-baiting at the same time. She sees herself as a Queen remember? She probably thinks of this as her right. I understand."
Morgana. We used to be friends."

"Still can't believe that," muttered Fred, shaking his head. "Morgana and you friends."

Merlin nodded, and frowned. "Neither can I sometimes," he said quietly. "She's so different now."

"Well, all I can say is that it's a relief she didn't manage to get into Gringotts," said Mrs Weasley. Kingsley grimaced. "Yes, but how many people saw her? There will be more questions in tomorrow's Prophet about who she is."

"Then tell them," Merlin said simply.

Harry glanced at Kingsley who sighed deeply. "Not until we have the sword. Not until we know for sure that we can defeat them. I won't give the people false hope."

"We can't defeat them at the moment," agreed Charlie. " Barely any of our spells made contact! How could that be?"

"They were protected by Old Magic," Harry said. Everyone turned to stare at him.

"How do you know?" asked Tonks.

"I felt it," said Harry, trying to ignore their awed looks. "I sensed they'd had some protective enchantment placed around them. One that's incredibly hard to break through."

Everyone exchanged glances. "But how could they have used Old Magic?" Neville asked, looking worried.

"They didn't," said Harry. "Morgana must have done it beforehand. That's why we eventually were able to break through it. She wasn't there to keep replenishing the spell."

"If that's true," said Bill. "Then why didn't you use Old Magic against them?"

Harry blinked and glanced up at Merlin uncomfortably. He felt a quiet anger simmering away within him. He could have. He could have ended the fight much more quickly. He didn't answer them, but Merlin did.

"I don't want Harry using Old Magic in a fight just yet," said Merlin calmly.

Lupin frowned. "But I thought you said he had made excellent progress these last few weeks?"

"He has," Merlin agreed. "But this magic is exceptionally dangerous. I don't want Harry using it unsupervised. He's still learning."

Harry scowled. He wasn't a child! He could have fought back with his Old Magic! Merlin was reminding him of Lupin in his third year when fighting the Boggart. He was perfectly capable of handling himself.

Merlin seemed to sense Harry's discomfit and glanced at him warningly. Harry tried not to feel resentful, but it was difficult. He'd been training with Merlin every night for the past several weeks and he believed he was doing well. He was now able to cast most of the spells Merlin had taught him without exhaustion and could keep them under control. Every time he cast one successfully he was filled with exhilaration. He understood why Merlin loved it; it was different from New Magic. He could feel the energy and the power rushing throughout his entire body and his eyes burn brightly as he released it. He was getting better at it- why couldn't Merlin see that?
"But how will he learn without combat experience?" asked Tonks. "You can't keep teaching him in private."

Harry couldn't help but smile.

Merlin frowned. "We will practice in a combat situation, but not in real life. Harry has yet to understand how different it is to use this magic in battle than it is in a classroom. I can't just thrust him into the deep end. It's hard enough for him to control it in a lesson without pitting him against a foe."

Tonks opened her mouth to argue, but Merlin cut across her. "I taught this magic to the Four Founders," he said determinedly. "They also had many foes, and there was not a single one of them that I sent into battle unprepared. Godric tried to. He ended up in a coma for two months because he underestimated the power of the spell he was trying to use. The fury of battle and the adrenaline in your veins alters your perceptions of control. Harry needs to practice this control under a variety of scenarios with me to supervise before he can use it against an enemy. I know what I'm doing."

Tonks refrained from further argument, and even Harry grudgingly accepted his words. He understood deep down where Merlin was coming from. He could perfectly well understand how possibly dangerous it could be if something went wrong. He trusted Merlin, and that's why he hadn't disobeyed his orders to not use Old Magic without Merlin there by his side. But when there were attacks like these ones, as there had been ever since Morgana had gained control of the Cup several weeks ago, his resentment rose to the surface and he couldn't help but feel like a naughty school child who couldn't control himself. He wanted to make use of what he'd been so carefully studying.

Kingsley nodded to Merlin. "Very well, but you must remember: you had several years in which to train the Founders. We on the other hand barely have several months." Merlin stiffened at this, but Kingsley changed the subject before Merlin could retaliate. "Has Morgana still not made use of the Cup?"

Merlin sighed and made a face. "It's hard to tell. But I'm certain that if either Morgana or Voldemort were to use the Cup I would sense it. Or Kilgharrah or Aithusa would. And they haven't sensed anything, or noticed any sign of their base."

George rolled his eyes. "Just how secret is this base if two gigantic dragons can't find it from the sky?"

Kingsley began drumming his fingers on the desk. "Why would they not?" he asked, looking strained. "Why go to so much time and effort to find something to not use it?"

"Perhaps they're just biding their time?" suggested Percy.

Merlin nodded. "Samhain approaches. Morgana may believe then would be the opportune time to use it and perhaps increase its power."

"Hallowe'en is on Saturday," Hermione said, though she really didn't need to; everyone already knew. Harry felt a fluttering in his stomach as he thought about it. Avalon. The Lady of the Lake. Excalibur. It was like all the legends he'd heard as a child were coming to life.

Harry noticed that Merlin flinched as Hermione said this, but gave no other indication of discomfort. Harry felt a pang of sympathy. He was once again being forced to confront his past. And from what he'd told them all, he'd known this Lady of the Lake. It was probably going to be upsetting for him.

Kingsley nodded and stood up. "Well, I believe that is all that can be said for the present. Another Death Eater attack repelled successfully. I must get back to the Ministry." He moved to the door, but
hesitated in the frame and looked back to Merlin. "Will you be able to manage on Saturday?"

Merlin nodded, his jaw stiff.

"Then as soon as you have the sword you must come back here," said Kingsley. The room was silent. "The next day I'll call a press conference at the Ministry. Then we can … "

He trailed off, and hesitated. Then he shook his head and left the room. Merlin watched him go, his expression unreadable. Harry watched him carefully. Was he scared about telling everyone? Or was he finally at peace with it?

"Ow!" Harry yelled, as Mrs Weasley began to tend to his arm.

"Don't fuss, Harry," she said soothingly. Then she frowned as she looked at the wound. "It's deeper than I thought. Perhaps a trip to St. Mungo's …"

"That won't be necessary," said Merlin, ceasing his silent vigil watching after Kingsley. He came over to Harry and drew out a seat next to him.

He placed his hand over the wound on Harry's arm. "Hālian se āmyrran," he said, and his eyes went gold. A few people who were still unaccustomed to see Merlin use magic gasped.

Harry's arm tingled for a moment, and a second later it was healed, with only a few scraps of bloodstained fabric to attest to the presence of a wound in the first place.

"Thanks," said Harry, and Merlin smiled.

"Are you accomplished in Healing?" Lupin asked in interest.

Fred rolled his eyes. "He's Merlin. He's accomplished in everything."

Instead of being annoyed as he usually was by such a statement, Merlin laughed.

"I lived with the Court Physician," he said. "I learned many ways of Healing with magic. I've been a Healer a few times over the centuries. Helga Hufflepuff was a Healer as well, and unlike the others, all the Old Magic she cared about learning was healing magic. And she was very good at it. She came up with whole new methods of Healing, and I actually still use some of them today. I like helping people." He smiled sadly. "Gaius taught me practically everything I know. Because magic was banned for so long we both became incredibly accomplished in Muggle medicine as well. Although," he said, standing up. "My knowledge is a little out of date. All these modern antibiotics and vaccines baffle me. Give me a good old poultice and herbs any day."

Mrs Weasley smiled. "A little old-fashioned are we?"

Merlin laughed. "You have no idea."

"We should get back to Hogwarts," said Hermione, also standing up. "McGonagall will be wondering where we are."

"Yeah," Ron said, standing up. "It'd be just like her to give up detention straight after risking our lives to save a load of screaming Muggle villagers."

"They'll be alright won't they?" Neville asked.

Mr Weasley smiled. "Yes, their memories are being modified right now."
Merlin grimaced. "Memory-modification," he spat. "I miss the days when we didn't have to control the Muggle population like they were our pets or something. I hate lying to them and treating them like ignorant children."

"Yeah, and I'm sure they miss the stench of sorcerer roasting on a stake," Malfoy said sarcastically. Harry jumped; he hadn't notice him come in- he hadn't been at the battle.

Merlin regarded him intensely, and Malfoy almost seemed to shrink back slightly. "That only happened because we gave them reason to fear us," he said. "An equal society is possible. I've seen it. I hope I live to see it again."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "Are you talking about abolishing the International Statue of Secrecy?" she gasped.

Merlin smiled wistfully. "If only."

Then without another word he strode out of the kitchen.

Merlin struggled to keep his eyes open. He was sitting in his Thursday morning Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson and he was wished he was anywhere but here. The constant restlessness that he'd experienced in his early lessons had vanished and now all he felt was extreme boredom.

He and Harry had been up until late last night practicing. Merlin was pleased with Harry's progress. He was roughly at the same level as one of the ordinary run-of-the-mill sorcerers in Camelot, which didn't sound like much, but really was a great achievement in such a small space of time. And now Harry had more or less mastered the basics and a few of the more complex spells all indications were that he'd continue drastically improving. Merlin was extremely optimistic. Harry was rapidly becoming very proficient and Merlin had no doubts that in a month or so he'd rival Voldemort in power. Even the Founders hadn't progressed as quickly as this. Except perhaps Rowena.

But what use was that when he had no idea where Morgana was hiding? After Harry's lesson, Merlin had gone into the grounds and called the dragons, but they still had no information on Morgana's location. She had proven herself skilled at concealment.

When they got Excalibur, how on earth were they supposed to use it? How were they supposed to get close enough? Lay a trap? Give themselves up?

Merlin's stomach clenched as he thought of what was going to happen on Saturday. He would see Freya again …

How would he cope? How could he face her after so long? The thought of seeing her face, hearing her voice …

He wrenched himself out of these thoughts. Worrying about it would do no good. He'd call her, get the sword, and leave. That's all. She was dead. There was nothing either of them could do about it. There was no point in lamenting over it.

Merlin sighed and buried his face in his hands. Get the sword, teach Harry Old Magic, kill Voldemort, kill Morgana, don't collapse into a gibbering mess … there was so much to do. He was too old for this.

"Mr Emrys? Am I boring you?"
Merlin jumped in his seat, and looked up to see Professor Connolly glaring down at him, and the rest of the class looking at him curiously. Merlin inwardly cursed. He was supposed to be inconspicuous. Connolly still didn't like him much. She was grudgingly impressed with his skills, but found him arrogant. Merlin found himself thinking the same about her.

"No, professor," Merlin answered, attempting to smile at her. She scowled in response.

"Is there something wrong with my lesson, Mr Emrys?" Connolly asked dangerously.

"Not at all," answered Merlin.

"Then why were you so uninterested?" Connolly asked mildly. "Do you know everything there is to know about all of Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration and its five Principal Exceptions?"

*Pretty much, I helped him come up with it.*

"No, professor," he answered instead, forcing back his retort. "I'm sorry."

"You don't know?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "I would have thought that someone who spends his time daydreaming through his lessons yet still managing to score perfectly in every test I set would know such a simple aspect of magic."

Merlin kept smiling with difficulty. "With all due respect, professor, I thought we were in Defence in the Dark Arts and not in Transfiguration?"

Her nostrils flared and he heard Hermione gasp beside him.

"Indeed, Mr Emrys," Connolly said looking down at him. "But if you had been listening you would have known that I was instructing the class on how Transfiguration can come in useful during a duel and how to properly implement it. Or do you dismiss this?"

*Nope. Tonks showed me that.*

"No, professor," he said, trying to sound innocent.

*Don't rise to the bait, just pretend like you're an idiot.*

He couldn't help but look into her eyes and smile victoriously. Just a few more days and she would know the truth. Then he'd never again have to pretend to be a simple student.

She sniffed. "Perhaps a demonstration then?" she asked him, obviously trying to provoke him into showing his supposed ineptitude. "Show me your abilities."


He reached into his pocket, but found it empty. He frowned and looked down. He searched through his pocket again frantically, stuck his hand into his other one and patted himself down thoroughly. He didn't have his wand.

He groaned inwardly. He was such an idiot! He barely used his wand these days, only really using it during classes. He'd stopped carrying it everywhere he went. How stupid was he? Of course someone would end up wondering where it was!

She raised her eyebrows. "What, no wand?" she smiled. "I wonder how Mr Emrys means to get through his magical education at Hogwarts without the most basic of magical equipment? It really is not such a good idea to wander around unarmed, Mr Emrys. Particularly these days."
Merlin sighed. *What an idiot!*

She smiled again, and Merlin didn't like the look in her eye.

"You are an exceptionally gifted student, Mr Emrys," she said, moving back towards the front of her classroom. "But I fear your attitude to using these gifts leaves much to be desired. You perform well in all tests and lessons yet your lack of concentration, commitment and determination disturbs me. I told you at the beginning of this year that I would not tolerate this. You seem to think you can glide through this class on your talent alone and not exercise any hard work at all. You are wrong."

Merlin blinked in surprise. Was he getting into *trouble?*

She continued. "You must realise the seriousness of these times we find ourselves in. You cannot afford to be ill-prepared, either by laziness or by forgetting your wand. You must learn. You must grow up and live in the real world."

At this, Seamus Finnegan let out a huge snort of barely suppressed laughter. The entire class was staring at him, their mouths open. Merlin realised that most of them were DA members and knew his real identity. Merlin felt distinctly embarrassed now. He was the world's most powerful sorcerer and here he was being told off by his teacher.

Connolly ignored Seamus, and moved closer to Merlin. "Detention, Mr Emrys. Tomorrow night. I suggest you take the time to reflect on whether you really are as powerful as you think you are."

Merlin stared at her in complete shock. *Detention? Him?*

This was ridiculous! Here he was trying to save the entire wizarding world from two evil sorcerers and he had detention? If he wasn't so shocked he'd find it funny.

Ron's eyes had grown as wide as saucers. "You can't give *him* detention!" he protested his mouth hanging open.

"Yes, I can, Mr Weasley," Connolly retorted. "But he's-he's … you can't make *him* do a detention!"

Connolly raised one eyebrow. "You loyalty is admirable. Perhaps Mr Emrys would benefit from not being alone?"

Ron's face sank as he realised what she had just said. He glanced at Merlin looking as horrified as Merlin felt. Hermione looked disapproving, but Harry looked like he was barely holding back his laughter.

Merlin rolled his eyes.

"Detention?" Seamus laughed later that evening, holding his sides. "That's the funniest thing I've ever heard!"

Merlin scowled. "Glad you find it so hilarious."

Ron looked as indignant as Merlin but the others in the common room were all laughing.

Dean, Neville, Seamus and Harry were laughing openly, and Ginny and Hermione looked they were
trying to hold it in to spare their feelings but weren't having much success.

"It's ridiculous," muttered Ron. "You're Merlin! You shouldn't have to do a detention! Just wait until Sunday when she finds out who you really are!"

"Can't wait to see the look on her face," said Dean. "When she finds out she had Merlin scrubbing the staircases in the North Tower!"

Merlin sighed. "I can't believe it."

"Haven't you ever had a detention before?" Harry asked.

"Not in about five centuries," said Merlin. "I liked being the model student."

"What did you do back then?" Dean asked eagerly.

Merlin hesitated. "I … turned the Headmistress into a wild boar. It was just before the Christmas feast. The house-elves were preparing the food, they saw her and … started chasing after her with cleavers … it wasn't pretty …"

The room collapsed in laughter, and Merlin joined in after a while.

"Why did you do that?" Hermione asked, her mouth only twitching slightly, such was her disapproval.

"I didn't mean to," Merlin protested, prompting further laughter. "Me and a guy named Erikus Gaunt were having a duel, which by the way, I didn't start, and she kind of … got in the way."

"What did you do then?"

Merlin grimaced. "Well, I had to try and convince the house-elves not to butcher her, but she slipped away and took me ages to find her. Me and Nick searched for her forever. She eventually turned up a couple of days later sniffing about around Inverness."

The room erupted in laughter again. Merlin sighed. "I'm not done yet. Nick … wasn't much good at Transfiguration; that's how he ended up getting executed years later, a Transfiguration spell gone wrong. Well, he tried to change her back, but instead … he sort of … turned her green. Even when I changed her back into a human her hair was green and she wouldn't let me undo it. It stayed like that for two months."

Tears were now streaming down people's cheeks with laughter.

"Surprised you only got a detention," said Seamus, after regaining his composure. "If we did that to McGonagall …"

Merlin laughed. "Well, detentions were different back then. Nick and I were thrown in the stocks for a day and a night."

"Stocks?" asked Neville frowning. "Hogwarts had stocks?"

"Oh yes," said Merlin darkly. "I told the Founders they were a bad idea, but they didn't listen. Kids used to use them for playing pranks on each other mostly. Locking each other up and the like. Stayed there for days, because of course, teachers wouldn't believe any student that told them they weren't supposed to be there." He sighed. "I hate stocks. Always have. Ever since Camelot."

"It's barbaric!" Hermione said. "Putting children in stocks!"
Merlin smiled. "Different times, Hermione. It was acceptable back then." He smiled in memory. "It wasn't so bad. I used my magic to make it slightly more comfortable, and at night I magicked us out so we could sleep easier. Nick didn't tell anyone, though he had no idea how I'd managed to do it."

Ron frowned. "When you say Nick, do you mean-"

"Nearly-Headless-Nick?" Merlin asked. "Yeah. He was two years above me. We weren't friends exactly. He didn't like me much, especially after this. But we got to know each other years later. I'd had no idea he'd been executed until I came back to Hogwarts the next time. I don't know who was more shocked to see who!"

There were a few titters.

"Well, I'm just glad we don't have to do that," said Ron.

Merlin nodded fervently. "Me too."

The next evening came far too quickly for Merlin. Filch met them in the evening after classes and leeringly told them where to find the buckets and scrub brushes. He left Mrs Norris behind to watch them.

Merlin sighed as he scrubbed, Ron beside him. There were far more important things he could be doing. Tomorrow night he'd be at the Lake of Avalon …

"Urgh!" said Ron, throwing down his brush in disgust. "Why do we have to do this without magic?"

"Because it's supposed to be a punishment, Ron," Merlin said, though he privately agreed. There were so many steps in the North Tower even cleaning them with magic would be hard.

Ron sighed. "Can't you, you know, speed things up a little?"

Merlin glanced at Mrs Norris, who sat there watching them with gleaming eyes.

"Not in present company."

Ron frowned. "She's a cat! She can't tell Filch who you are!"

"No, but she can let him know we're using magic to clean the stairs," Merlin reasoned. Ron huffed. "Can't believe this," he said. "We didn't even do anything!" He kept scrubbing. "This is torture."

Merlin smiled. "It's not so bad."

Ron stared at him. "Scrubbing the stairs in a massive tower isn't so bad?"

"Nope," said Merlin, continuing with the scrubbing. "Time was when I'd have to help scrub an entire castle. The palace in Camelot may not have been as large as Hogwarts but it had a lot of staircases."

Ron frowned. "I thought you were a manservant?"

"I was," said Merlin. "Technically, the maids were supposed to do the scrubbing. But Arthur … well, he liked to assign me extra duties."

Ron looked confused. "Didn't you mind?"

"Of course I did!" Merlin said. "I had loads of work to do! Arthur's laundry, dressing him, scrubbing
his chambers, making his bed, cleaning his armour, getting his horse ready, going off on quests with him, mending his clothes, preparing meals, serving at table, attending council meetings, cooking, carrying heavy stuff, waiting on him hand and foot … and all that extra stuff he made me do just for the fun of it. I swear, without my magic to help I'd still be doing it today."

Ron frowned. "Why are you laughing about it? It sounds awful! How could you have been friends with someone who treated you like that?"

Merlin laughed. "To tell you the truth, I don't know. I felt like throttling him sometimes, but underneath all that prattishness he was a good man. And we were friends. It was mainly just friendly banter."

"Doesn't sound it," muttered Ron.

Merlin smiled. "It's … complicated. Incredibly complicated. I don't expect you to understand. No one did. They all just accepted our rather strange relationship. And I wasn't Arthur's servant all his life. Things got better after he found out."

"I don't understand," Ron said. "You tell me all this great stuff about King Arthur and all the good he did, but then you tell me about all the crap he put you through! What am I supposed to think?"

"That people are often more complex than they seem," Merlin said to him.

Ron cast him a sidelong glance, but didn't say anything. Merlin found himself lost in memory. Something about scrubbing the castle steps was filling him with so many memories. Oddly, they weren't unpleasant. Servant's gossip sessions with Gwen as they scrubbed the palace together, when they did their chores, complained about their workloads … it had been a hard life, but there had been plenty of laughs.

They worked in silence mainly, Ron uttering a few curses here and there as he got blisters on his hands.

They emerged onto a landing.

"Ho! Ho! Intruders! Intruders! Stand and fight you mangy dogs!" a familiar portrait started yelling at them.

Ron rolled his eyes and hurried past the painting. Merlin followed and they didn't stop until Sir Cadogan's shouts were only very distant.

"Mental that one is," Ron said, resuming his scrubbing. "Barmy."

"Yeah," said Merlin. "And the real one wasn't much different."

Ron dropped his scrubbing brush and his mouth fell open. "You knew the real Sir Cadogan?"

Merlin laughed. "Yeah, he was one of Arthur's Knights."

Ron's eyes widened. "You mean to tell me that idiot was a Knight of the Round Table?"


"Yeah, but him?"

Merlin smiled. "He wasn't the highest-ranking Knight, I grant you. He rarely got trusted with
anything important. He spent most of his time going off on ridiculous quests and barely spent any
time in Camelot. Scatter-brained and a memory like a sieve, that's why he doesn't recognise me. He's
said to me before that I look familiar, but he'll never place me. We never really had any dealings. But
as idiotic as he was, he was brave. He died at Camlan, fighting beside Arthur."

Ron blinked and looked awkward. "It's hard to imagine … I mean … him …

He didn't finish his sentence and Merlin understood why.

"You judged him didn't you?" he stated without any hint of accusation. "You saw the idiot and not
the man. Like you do with Malfoy."

Ron looked away from Merlin, and Merlin saw he'd touched a nerve.

"I don't trust him," Ron said slowly. "All that stuff he did … not just the childish stuff that happened
at school. He joined the Death Eaters! He helped them kill Dumbledore and almost killed other
innocent people in the process, and we're just supposed to believe he can come back and be sorry?"

Ron sighed, and looked uncomfortable under Merlin's intense gaze. "I-I'd like to be all noble like
you and Harry and forgive him and stuff, but it's hard."

"I understand," said Merlin. "But he's helped us a great deal, you cannot deny that."

This was true. Ever since Morgana had gleaned the location of the Cup of Life from his mind,
Malfoy had been eager to make amends. He often participated in Order meetings and gave advice
about Death Eater tactics and strategy. He was uncomfortable with all of them, sulky and often
downright rude, but Merlin saw that he really did want to help. And it was a relief that most of the
Order were accepting him, albeit slightly grudgingly. He had a chance.

Ron nodded. "I know." He glanced back towards where Sir Cadogan's portrait was. "People are
complex I suppose," he said. "I just never imagined that Malfoy could be anything but an evil git."

Merlin laughed slightly. "And I bet you never considered that the great Merlin would be so adept at
scrubbing floors?"

Ron smiled weakly. "No, I didn't."

He sighed.

"I'm trying," he said. "It'll just take time for me to get my head around it."

Merlin nodded. "I don't care how long it takes. The main thing is that you do. After all, Harry
welcomed you back after you abandoned the Horcrux hunt. You couldn't help yourself, and you
wanted to make amends. So do other people. But people have to be willing to offer those chances."

Ron looked at Merlin in shock, but Merlin didn't look at him. Just let him think that over. He'll come
around. Ron was a decent person. Old prejudices may die hard, but Merlin had learned over the
centuries that they did die.

What seemed like hours later they walked back to the Common Room together, both rubbing their
aching muscles. They passed through the portrait hole.

Ron sighed. "I'm going to be exhausted tomorrow. And I really can't afford to be."

*Neither can I,* said Merlin, his stomach once again writhing at the thought of what he must do.
"Hopefully, it won't affect my performance too much," Ron said, clapping his hands together and smiling.

Merlin frowned. "Performance?"

"Yeah!" said Ron, looking baffled. "The game! First Quidditch match of the season! Gryffindor vs Hufflepuff. Remember?"

Merlin only looked blank. "You're playing Quidditch tomorrow?" he asked, barely believing what he was hearing. "We'll be contacting the realm of the dead tomorrow night, and you're playing Quidditch?"

Ron frowned. "I thought you knew! We've been talking about it all week!"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Really? Well, funnily enough I've had more important things on my mind."

"You sound like Hermione," said Ron. "It's just a bit of fun!"

Merlin sighed. He'd thought the Knight's obsession with jousting and melees had been bad enough. He never could have anticipated the modern generation's obsession with Quidditch.

This was utterly ridiculous.

"Right, Ron, remember, you can do this!" Harry said urgently. "We need to win this!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I can't believe you're going to play Quidditch today of all days," she said.

"Neither can I," muttered Merlin, looking around at all the Hallowe'en decorations. "Not exactly opportune is it?"

Harry frowned. "Look, I know there are more important things going on. They're all I can think about all the time. All I want is a few hours on one day to have fun."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, by the look of things we're not going to have much opportunity for that in the future. Let's enjoy it while we can."

Harry nodded, but deep down he agreed with Merlin and Hermione. He should be practicing Old Magic or helping the Order instead of playing a stupid game. But then he thought of how it'd feel to get back on a broom and soar through the air thinking about nothing more than finding a silly golden ball, all of his reservations vanished. A few hours wouldn't hurt him, and tonight was probably going to be so emotionally draining the others deserved a carefree afternoon.

His light-hearted feelings drained away however when he saw Professor McGonagall hurrying towards him. As Headmistress she wasn't allow to show favouritism and so wasn't wearing her usual Gryffindor scarf and Harry could tell she wasn't happy about it. But something else was disturbing her more deeply.

"What is it, professor?" Harry asked, dread growing in his stomach.

She shook her head. "Don't look so serious, Potter, nothing more awful than a Quidditch inconvenience has occurred."

Merlin rolled his eyes, but Ron gaped at McGonagall. "What's happened?"
She frowned. "Dean Thomas was hexed by a Slytherin this morning on his way down to breakfast. Madame Pomfrey says he'll be out of it all day. The team is short of a Chaser."

Harry's heart stopped. Not now, not the first time he'd been able to relax! Why now?

McGonagall looked at Harry closely. "Do you have a reserve Chaser?"

Harry shook his head. "No, and we can't play with just two!"

"We'll need to get someone to stand in!" Ron said, his face shining with a nervous anticipation.

"But where?" asked Hermione, actually looking seriously interested in the conversation. "Who else do we know that's a good Chaser?"

Harry looked around the table, his heart sinking. Ginny had been listening into the conversation as well, and was now biting her lips. Their eyes met.

Ginny looked away. "Seamus?" she called. "Any good at being a Chaser?"

Seamus snorted. "Love watching the game, but I can barely stay upright on a broom! Remember my awful try-out a couple years back?"

"Could I help?" Neville asked from further down the table. Ron cast him a quick glance.

"Uh, no offence, Neville but … well, you know."

Neville nodded, and grimaced. "Fair enough."

Ginny cursed. "I can't think of anyone!"

Harry couldn't either. "Who else was there that tried out a couple of years back?" he asked, trying to think.

Ron shook his head. "None of them were any good! And we don't have time to train with them! We need someone we know personally!"

McGonagall was now looking worried, unable to appear unbiased.

"Then I'm afraid you must play with only two Chasers," said McGonagall regretfully. "Hopefully, Potter your training has been sufficient enough to do well without Mr Thomas."

Harry made a face. "All our tactics and new moves will be useless!"

Ron frowned. "Can't we reschedule it? Malfoy got his match rescheduled because he was injured! Can't we do the same?"

McGonagall shook her head. "I don't know how Professor Snape managed that. But I'm afraid the school rules are clear, and Madame Hooch will not permit a match to be rescheduled at the last minute." She sighed and looked around at them all. "I'm afraid you shall just have to proceed. There is nothing I can do. Unless you can find another Chaser that you trust within the next hour then you'll just have to try your best and …"

McGonagall trailed off and a tiny frown crossed her features, as though she was thinking hard. Harry felt a fluttering of hope.

McGonagall's gaze shifted from Harry and settled on Merlin, who suddenly looked apprehensive.
"Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr Emrys," she said slowly. "But did you not once play Chaser for the Ravenclaw House team?"

Merlin paled dramatically and he froze. Everyone's heads whipped around to stare at him. His eyes went wide and he blinked rapidly. "Me?" he practically squeaked.

"Yeah!" said Harry, falling on this opportunity gratefully. "You know how we work! You have experience! You have great reflexes! Why not?"

Merlin laughed nervously. "You have to be joking me!" he said, sounding panicked. "I can't play!"

"Why not?" Ron demanded, he too grasping at this opportunity like a lifeline.

Merlin looked around at everyone staring at him in complete bewilderment and dread.

"I can't play Quidditch!" he said to them all firmly.

"I beg to differ, Mr Emrys," McGonagall said formally. "I checked your school records. You played for the Ravenclaw team for six years, captained it for three years and won the Inter-House Cup four times in a row."

Harry was impressed and turned to look at Merlin eagerly but he was shaking his head.

"That was part of a team," said Merlin. "And it was mainly luck!"

"Don't be so hard on yourself!" said Ginny. "You're an excellent player!"

This was pushing it a bit, thought Harry. She's never even seen him play; she was just desperate for another Chaser.

Merlin was still shaking his head. "Look, I haven't played Quidditch in two hundred years! The game has changed a lot! Not to mention the brooms! Mine didn't go anywhere near as fast as modern ones! I can't play! It's too different!"

Harry bit his lip. He knew enough from Quidditch through the Ages to know what he said was true. But he couldn't give up so easily.

"Come on," he said. "It'll be alright. It'll come back to you. Just like riding a bike."

Merlin eyed him beadily. "I've never ridden a bike."

"Come on, Merlin!" urged Ginny. "It won't be so bad! Demelza and I will do most of the work! Just score a few goals and fly about looking useful!"

Merlin sighed. "I won't be able to keep up. The game is a lot faster now. And besides, when I was a Chaser, the goals were baskets, not hoops! The rules have changed, the game itself has changed too much!"

Then he glanced around again. "And anyway, we've more important things to do tonight! What if the match goes on too long?"

"It won't," Harry reassured him. "Please, Merlin. We need you."

"Yeah," urged Ron. "Don't you want to beat Hufflepuff?"

Merlin raised his eyebrows. "If I'm honest I actually preferred being a Hufflepuff. I've been there as
often as I have here. I have just as much loyalty for them as I do for Gryffindor."

"Mr Emrys," McGonagall began warily, and Merlin went quiet. "I cannot force you, but please consider it. Goodness knows the lot of you deserve a bit of fun, especially on a day like this, after all you've been through."

"Exactly," said Merlin. "This will be even more torture!" He looked around at all of them again, and sighed heavily. "Then again … I am in Gryffindor now. I can't really let you all down …"

Harry and Ron grinned widely, and Ginny leaned over and hugged him briefly.

"You won't regret it, Merlin," she said. "We'll win!"

Merlin looked sceptical. "No, you'll win. I'll just look like an idiot."

"No more than I will, mate," said Ron, starting to look nervous again.

"We'll all be amazing," said Harry firmly. "We can win this."

"Yeah," said Ron, smirking, as soon as McGonagall had moved away. "If we don't Merlin can use some of his little tricks."

"He will not!" protested Hermione indignantly. "He won't cheat!"

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Did you ever cheat, Merlin?"

Merlin bit his lip, and avoided Hermione's glare. "Well, only occasionally. I mean, slowing down time and stuff to catch the Quaffle and that, sometimes nudging it into the goal, helping the Seeker catch the Snitch if the game went on too long … but hardly ever!" he added, as Hermione looked furious. "Only like in Cup finals and stuff!"

Hermione wasn't impressed however, and kept berating Merlin all the way down to the Quidditch pitch. They'd decided to go down early to try and get Merlin back into the game.

They emerged onto the pitch and Merlin looked around in interest. "It's different," he said, peering around. "There were new regulations introduced a hundred years ago and pitches changed around a lot." He looked up at the goal posts and frowned. "I don't know if I can do this again. I'm too old for games."

"It'll be alright," said Harry clasping him on the shoulder. "Here, take Dean's broom and have a trial flight."

Merlin looked at it in apprehension. "Brooms are very different." He said, holding it carefully. "For one thing, in the 1780s the Cushioning Charm hadn't been invented."

Ron grimaced. "That can't have been comfortable."

"Nope," said Merlin. "And brooms were of shoddy craftsmanship; there were no established manufacturers. They were difficult to control at high altitudes and didn't go very fast."

"Well," said Ginny bracingly. "The only way to get used to it is to practice. We've only got about half an hour before people start showing up."

Merlin nodded, and mounted the broom, and began hovering a few feet above the ground. Harry mounted his new Firebolt and hovered beside him.
"Ready?" he asked. "We'll go twice around the pitch just to let you get the hang of it."

Merlin nodded, and a few moments later they were zooming around the pitch, the stands blurring past them. Harry glanced to his side and saw Merlin's eyes flash several times, but Merlin stayed on the broom, and seemed to cope really well.

They stopped and hovered above the pitch. Ron whooped. "Not bad!"

Merlin grimaced. "I used my magic to slow it all down and to improve my reaction time."

Harry shrugged. "That's alright."

"No," said Merlin. "I don't want to be distracted by my magic. Besides, I don't want to wear myself out before tonight."

Harry nodded, and they went off on another few practice flights. Merlin wobbled and almost crashed a few times; he was obviously unaccustomed to the speed and the smoothness of a modern broom. But after a few laps he seemed to grow in confidence. Harry was encouraged.

He called Ron and Ginny up and they practiced a few manoeuvres, with Merlin ducking in between them and diving. He and Ginny tried a few practice throws and goals with the Quaffle as well. He wobbled and often dropped the Quaffle because he had misjudged the speed he was travelling at.

"Arthur always said I was a clumsy oaf," Harry heard him mutter to himself a few times.

But after a while he seemed to get the hang of it, despite the occasional wobble and fumbling of the ball. Harry couldn't help but be impressed. He could tell that Merlin had once been a skilled player, but was just struggling to adjust after two hundred years of neglect. He felt a thrill of hope. Maybe they'd win the game after all?

People started arriving, so Harry and the others left the pitch and entered the changing rooms, where Merlin spent ten minutes charming a set of spare robes to fit him. He looked nervous.

The rest of the team arrived and looked apprehensive at the thought of working with Merlin; all of them were in the DA and fully aware of who he was.

As the noise of the crowd grew louder and louder Harry felt the nerves increase, yet it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was almost a relief to feel nervous at something as trivial as a sports game, rather than a potentially life or death situation. He felt the adrenaline build up and the excitement take over. This was Quidditch, this was something he could do. Something that didn't involve life or death situations.

Then he glanced at Ron and Merlin and almost laughed. They looked like it was life or death.

He'd be alright, Harry decided. Merlin was a decent player underneath, and he always had his little tricks to fall back on. It wasn't really cheating; Quidditch rules banned the use of a wand, not magic itself.

He felt the excitement building. Soon, they were walking out onto the pitch to a tumultuous crowd.

Harry grinned and mounted his broom. He looked to his side and saw Merlin with a barely suppressed grin on his face almost hidden under his nerves.

Madame Hooch blew her whistle and they were off.
Harry rose up above the other players and zoomed around the pitch keeping his eyes skinned for the tiny Golden Snitch. As he did so, he heard the commentary, and laughed out loud.

"Welcome to the first Quidditch game of the year," Luna Lovegood said dreamily, her voice magnified. "I do hope Gryffindor win. I like the people on the team. Especially Ginny. She's my friend. And Harry and Ron, they saved me from Death Eaters you know."

McGonagall was looking distinctly unhappy with the arrangements as she sat beside Luna, but there seemed to be nothing she could do.

Luna kept on. "Oh look! Martin Emrys has joined the team! I wonder when that happened? He's my friend too."

McGonagall buried her head in her hands.

Merlin whooshed past Harry on his broom, Quaffle under his arm, grinning broadly at Harry. Harry paused in mid-air to watch. Merlin dodged the Hufflepuff players, only wobbling slightly on Dean's broom, and headed towards the goals-

"Martin scored!" Luna said happily. "Oh that is good news."

"Not if you're a Hufflepuff," Harry heard McGonagall grumble, the megaphone picking it up easily. Merlin whooped and Ginny flew up and pulled him into a brief hug, delighted. Harry grinned too.

The game wore on and Harry continually circled the pitch, eyes darting here and there searching for the Snitch, feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline that came with a Quidditch match. Before long, Gryffindor was 70-20 up, with a fair few of those goals being scored by Merlin. The Gryffindor fans, particularly those in the DA were going insane.

Harry grinned again as Merlin soared past him clutching the Quaffle. All his nerves seemed to have vanished in the face of the game. He winked cheekily to Harry as he easily dodged Zacharias Smith's tackle and went on to score another goal. Harry noted with pleasure that Smith looked half terrified at playing against Merlin.

"Of course, Martin was always going to be good at Quidditch," Luna said dreamily, over the screams of the Gryffindors. "He's good at almost everything."

Smith scowled as he heard this and raced after the Quaffle again fuming.

The Hufflepuff Seeker was hot on Harry's tail, and seemed determined to dog his every move. Harry tried out a few stunts with his brand new Firebolt to try and shake him off. He thought he'd succeeded when-

"Oh look! That Hufflepuff's seen something!" Luna exclaimed, as the entire stadium gasped. Harry's heart stopped as he watched the Seeker's dive and the look of joy on his face as he reached out for the tiny golden ball in front of him.

He jerked his own broom around and went into an equally steep dive. The world rushed past in a blur of colour, the ground looming up in front of him. The noise of the crowd seemed to be extinguished.

The Seeker was just in front now. He gained speed, drawing level with the Hufflepuff. Harry's heart was racing. He had to win! He couldn't miss the Snitch, not now, not after everything. He needed this.
Inch by inch his broom drew in front. Harry reached out his hand-

"Harry's got it!" squealed Luna. "Oh that is good! He deserved that!"

As Harry drew level again, the tiny fluttering ball clenched tightly in his hand he saw Smith land with a look of thunder on his face, screaming at his teammates.

The rest of the Gryffindor team swooped on Harry screaming wildly. He was pulled into so many hugs and thumped on the back so many times he was actually in pain- but none of that mattered. *They'd won.*

He didn't know why he was so exhilaratingly happy as winning as something as trivial as a Quidditch match, but it felt good. It was familiar, an experience he'd had ever since he was eleven years old, before any of the darkness had fallen over the world. He couldn't stop grinning.

They landed on the pitch in a giant heap, the roars of the crowd still ringing in their ears. Ginny rushed up to Harry and hugged him, and Harry didn't even try to maintain the illusion of keeping his distance from her. He hugged her back fiercely, still grinning.

"You did it, Merlin!" Ron roared, thumping him on the back. "All that 'Quidditch has changed too much' crap didn't stop you! You really can do everything can't you?"

Merlin grinned, his raven hair windswept. "At times like this, I really believe I can," he answered. Harry laughed. Merlin had needed this too he thought. The shadow that had been on his face all week as he'd thought about the meeting with the Lady of the Lake tonight had vanished and now there was nothing but pure joy on his face.

*This, Hermione, Harry thought, is why Quidditch is so much more than a game.*

At the Hallowe'en Feast that night however, worry was beginning to creep back into Merlin's heart. He looked around the table to see happy smiling faces everywhere and couldn't help but feel resentful. How could they be so happy when in just a few hours time he would be face-to-face with Freya again?

He was terrified of seeing her. He’d always avoided his past, he had always run from it. And here he was, running right back to it.

Would Freya have changed? Would she still care for him? Would he feel the old pain again? Things were different now; he was a far different man from the one he had been when he had last seen her. He was older now, and been through so much. He had enjoyed a few precious years with Rowena, had fallen for her as deeply as he had for Freya. Would she resent him for it? Or would she be glad he’d found someone, even if it had only been for a short while?

He shook his head and tried to clear himself of these thoughts. It would do no good to worry about it. He was being ridiculous. He'd see her, he'd get the sword, and he'd leave. That would be it.

But would it? Or would yet more old wounds be reopened?

Then there was tomorrow, when the entire wizarding world would learn the secret he'd been attempting to conceal for thirteen centuries.
He should just try to enjoy the moment for what it was. They'd won a Quidditch match, they were celebrating at a feast- this wasn't a time for melancholy.

"I heard you were great today, Merlin," Dean Thomas said to him over the table having just been released from the Hospital Wing.

"Not that great," grimaced Merlin. "I haven't played in a long time."

Dean nodded, looking happier. Ron laughed.

"You don't need to worry, mate, you're not chucked off the team yet! Merlin's not that good! No offence!"

Merlin grinned. "None taken. I never really went in much for sport. It's alright for a bit of fun, but …"

Neville chuckled. "You know, I always pictured Merlin as an old man with a grey beard and pointy hat. I never thought I'd see him play Quidditch."

Merlin laughed as well. "I never thought I'd ever do it again," he admitted. "Quidditch gets you too much attention, and I've always tried to avoid that."

He stared down at his plate of food. Had it been a wise decision to play? Tomorrow the entire school would know his identity, would they take him seriously after this?

"What's wrong?" asked Ron through a thick mouthful of chicken. "Something wrong with your food?"

"No," said Merlin smiling, trying to rid himself again of his misgivings. "I've always loved the feasts at Hogwarts. Helga's recipes are sublime. They even outdo the ones at Camelot."

"You mean we're eating better than a king?" Seamus asked, looking more appreciatively at his food.

"Well," said Merlin laughing. "There's a lot more variety of food stuffs in this century, and Camelot didn't exactly have the benefit of a hundred house-elves. Just one grumpy cook, who really didn't like me."

"So, was it like in all those old Muggle movies?" Dean asked. "Was there like a suckling pig with an apple in its mouth?"

Merlin laughed. "Sometimes."

"What sort of things were there?" Ron asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Trust you to ask about food, Ron."

"What else is there to ask about?"

"Oh, I don't know, Ron, perhaps the centuries of history, culture, heritage, people-"

"I take it," said Sir Nicholas, suddenly drifting towards the table, "that your friends now all know your identity?"

Merlin nodded. "Most of them do. And tomorrow everyone will."

Sir Nicholas nodded, and smiled. "I am glad of it. The burdens that have lain on you for so long shall
soon be lifted. And I will have the honour of knowing that I knew it first."

Harry frowned. "You told him before you told us?"

"They already knew half of it," Merlin pointed out. "The ghosts know I'm always coming back here. It wasn't too much of a leap for them to guess the truth."

"No, particularly when you are so careless," Sir Nicholas said. "Subtlety was never your strong point, Mortimer."

"Mortimer?" Neville asked, frowning.

"The name he went under when we attended Hogwarts together," Sir Nicholas explained. "He's had so many names I find it easier to stick with one only."

"Yeah," Ron said grinning. "We heard what you got up to at Hogwarts. Something about your Headmistress and time in the stocks?"

Sir Nicholas seemed to go even paler if that was possible. He drew himself up and tried to look dignified.

"That was an exaggerated misunderstanding," he said proudly. "The punishment was ridiculous in its severity. It was his fault."

"Was not!" Merlin objected. "You're the one who turned her green!"

Sir Nicholas sniffed. "Regardless, it doesn't matter now. I'll admit, I didn't much like you at Hogwarts, Mortimer. I found you rather annoying actually with your perfection in every subject. I regret that I couldn't see past my own ego and didn't pursue a friendship. It might have come in handy exactly 506 years ago this night."

Merlin's face creased in sympathy. "I'm sorry, Nick."

Sir Nicholas waved his hand. "Do not blame yourself, Mortimer. It was my own stupid fault. I only wish it had been quicker and less painful." He adjusted the ruff at his neck. "Humiliating for a wizard to be executed by a Muggle."

"It didn't happen very often though did it?" Ginny asked. "I mean, we could just use magic to escape usually couldn't we?"

"Yes," said Merlin sombrely. "But sometimes, like Nick here, the witch or wizard was stripped of their wand. And more often than not, executions were Muggles killing Muggles on suspicion of witchcraft only. I tried to help where I could. But there was only so many I could save."

Everyone was silent and looked distinctly uncomfortable. Merlin tried to draw himself out of his past, there was no point in going back down that route yet again this evening. The witch hunts had been horrifying enough without reliving them.

Ron turned to look closely at Sir Nicholas. His eyes hovered over the ruff and doublet and he frowned slightly.

"Did you ever wear that stuff?" he asked Merlin, looking incredulous.

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Obviously."

"Yes, Mortimer had a particularly fine set of clothes," Sir Nicholas recalled. "I'd always wondered
how someone of such low birth had such rich clothes, even more so than me, who was a member of the nobility. But then, by the 1400s, you must have accumulated quite an amount in Gringotts."

Ron's eyes went wide, and everyone else stared at Sir Nicholas.

"You actually wore that?" Dean asked, staring Sir Nicholas up and down.

"Yeah!" said Merlin frowning. "It was the style of the times!"

Seamus stifled a laugh. "Not very stylish."

Merlin and Sir Nicholas both frowned. "Hey!" Merlin objected. "Styles change, a lot. In another few hundred years people will be laughing at the way you dress! If someone had shown me a t-shirt and jeans when I lived in Camelot I'd have fallen over from laughing!"

"What did you wear in Camelot?" Neville asked.

Merlin shrugged. "Rags mostly. Didn't get a decent wardrobe till I was made Court Sorcerer."

Ron was still staring at Sir Nicholas. "Can't imagine you wearing that."

"Well, I did," Merlin said huffily.

"Even the hat?"

"Yes."

"What about the long hair?"

"You're getting ridiculous now."

Ron's eyes lit up. "Ha! You did, didn't you!"

Merlin rolled his eyes, as everyone at the table collapsed in laughter. "Honestly, you lot. I've been around for thirteen hundred years. I shouldn't think it would be such a surprise that I've worn a lot of different styles of clothes over the years!"

"Didn't it bother you?"

"No," he answered. "It was strange at first, to see styles changing right in front of me, but I adjusted, I had to. I couldn't go around wearing the same clothes forever. Admittedly though, there were some styles I preferred more than others. The powdered wigs in the eighteenth century … awful. And the 1960s? Very strange decade."

Ginny collapsed in giggles. "I can just imagine you as a hippy."

This prompted another round of laughter, and Merlin sighed. Sir Nicholas had long since drifted off, seeing his audience had turned their attention away.

"Have you all finished?" Merlin asked, annoyed.

Harry chuckled. "Come on, mate, you have to see the funny side!"

Merlin stared at them all, barely holding in their laughter. He thought back to the vast amount of different clothes he'd worn over the years. He couldn't help it, he laughed too.
The rest of the feast passed in more hilarity and Merlin found his doubts and worries about the coming night fade away as he laughed with his friends. It was easily the most enjoyable Hallowe’en Feast he’d ever attended, including the ones with the Founders. This time, he had friends, and many of them. Ones he didn’t need to lie to.

Yet, a few hours later it all came rushing back. As they were crossing the Entrance Hall they were greeted by the sight of McGonagall hurrying towards them, her brow creased in worry.

Merlin immediately felt his happiness drain away.

"Are you ready?" she asked, as she stopped in front of him.

Merlin nodded. "Yes, I should head off right now."

His heart raced at the very thought of it

McGonagall nodded, biting her lip. "Should you go alone?"

"I don't see why not," Merlin said. "It isn't particularly dangerous."

But McGonagall was shaking her head. "That wasn't what I was referring to, Merlin."

Merlin didn't understand at first, but as he looked around at the faces near him he suddenly realised.

"Truth is, professor," he said. "I'd rather go alone. It's a … personal matter."

As much as he cared for these people, he didn't want them with him. This was private, he didn't want to share it. He wasn't sure how well he'd handle it.

McGonagall still shook her head. "I think you should go with someone. You need their support."

Merlin opened his mouth to protest, but it died in his throat. He glanced around at the people with him. They looked eager to come, wanting to offer their support.

But he couldn't accept it. They didn't know why he was really so hesitant. They knew he'd known the Lady of the Lake, but not the entire story. Not what she really meant to him. Could he face her again in front of them all?

"I really don't-"

"Please, Merlin," Hermione said, smiling at him. "This won't be pleasant, and we want to be there for you."

"I know it won't be pleasant," Merlin pleaded. "And that's exactly why I want to be alone."

"Listen, mate," said Ron firmly. "You've been alone enough all these years. Don't push us away now. You've only just started opening up to us!"

"But-" Merlin said desperately. Why couldn't they see?

"Merlin," said Ginny softly. "We're all in this together aren't we? This is the weapon we can use to defeat Voldemort. We need to be there. We don't want you to be alone."

"Yeah," agreed Harry. "We want to be there."

Merlin cast around searching for a way out, but found none. He sighed. He hoped he was strong
Harry and the others followed Merlin out into the dark grounds, his heart thumping wildly. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but he knew it was something he didn't want to miss.

He saw the look on Merlin's face, it was what had convinced him that he and the others should come along. It was how Harry had felt when he'd returned to Godric's Hollow, and he knew himself how valuable and comforting having Hermione there had been for him. Merlin deserved the same.

Merlin led them into a deserted part of the grounds where they were out of sight of the castle.

"Right," he said, looking distracted. "Everyone take hold of each other and me. I'll take us all there."

"You can do Side-Along-Apparition with all these people at once?" Neville asked wide-eyed.

Merlin just smiled.

"Where is the Lake of Avalon?" Hermione asked, holding on tightly to Ron's hand and to Harry's as they all linked up. "All the historical sources seem conflicted."

"Never follow the historical sources," Merlin scoffed, making sure they were all holding on tightly. "They're a bunch of rubbish. I'm all the history you need." He stepped back and himself took hold of both Ginny and Neville. "It's not far outside of Camelot, a lake in a forest at the base of a mountain."

"Will it still be there?" Ginny asked. "I mean, there won't be a dam or anything there now will there?"

Merlin chuckled. "That place was imbued with such powerful magic Muggles have always avoided it. There won't be anything around it for ten miles in every direction."

Harry barely had time to register this before Merlin began chanting in the language that was now becoming so familiar to Harry.

"Beran ūs tō se mere Avalon ætsomne!"

Merlin's eyes flashed gold, and before the spell whisked them all away, Harry felt the surge of power come from Merlin. He recognised it for what it was, and now fully appreciated the subtle nuances of this type of magic. He now realised just how brilliant Merlin was to command such magic, what Harry used in his lessons was pitiful in comparison.

Soon they were all passing through that crushing nothingness that seemed so much like Apparition and landing heavily on a stony beach. Harry cursed and pulled himself to his feet, noting with annoyance that Merlin was the only one still standing.

He looked around in interest. They were standing on the edge of a vast lake like Merlin had said. Thick woodland lined the banks of the lake. The water seemed to shimmer in the light of the moon, sparkling like crystals in the night. There seemed to be a sort of hush about the place, like some great sleeping power, ancient as the earth was waiting there for them. Harry felt immediately that this was some sort of sacred place, and reverently stopped the racket he'd been making by scuffing his shoes along the beach. This was a place of pure magic. Every hair stood up on the back of Harry's neck.
This place was *old*.

Everyone else seemed to feel it too, and they stood up silently. Even Ron seemed subdued.

Merlin was standing completely still looking out over the lake, his eyes unfathomably deep and full of some emotion Harry couldn't recognise. For some reason, he looked young in these surroundings. Yet still ancient, and sad.

"It's very pretty," said a voice from behind them.

Harry jumped and turned to see Luna smiling at them all.

Ron clutched at his heart. "Blimey, Luna! Where did you come from?"

"I was with you the whole time."

Ron blinked and looked at Neville, who shrugged. "Did you see her?"

"That doesn't matter now," Hermione said dismissively. She approached Merlin almost hesitantly. He seemed not to have heard what was going on. "Now what?"

Merlin blinked, and seemingly with great effort, turned his head to look at her.

"Now I summon the Lady of the Lake."

He took a deep breath and started walking towards the waters. Harry and the others followed, caught in some sort of strange spell.

"The last time I was here was thirteen hundred years ago," Merlin said, his soft voice ringing out clearly over the silent lake. "I was still grieving for Arthur. I met her here and gave her Excalibur. She didn't ask any questions. She seemed to know that I'd one day come back for it. I trusted it to her."

He stopped at the very edge of the water and seemed to hesitate.

"Did you know this Lady well?" Ginny asked, a growing realisation in her voice.

Merlin smiled. "Actually … we only spent a few days together before she died. And we met again only twice after that."

Harry felt a chill go up his spine as Merlin mentioned meeting someone again after they'd died. He felt like he was literally being steeped in legend.

Merlin took one step forward until the dark waters were lapping around his ankles.

"Yet," he said wistfully. "Those few times were enough to convince me of her kindness, her gentle nature and loving heart. We understood each other in a way neither of us had ever encountered before, or after. She was a kindred spirit. She died here at this lake, and I laid her to rest here. She loved lakes."

There was something in Merlin's expression now that Harry had never seen before. A tempest of emotion, pain, regret, fondness and something deeper.

Merlin smiled sadly. "I never let myself forget her."

Then, Hermione gasped and clasped her hands over her mouth. She looked stricken, and tears began
to fill her eyes.

"Oh my God," she whispered, lowering her hands to reveal her distress. "You were in love with her."

Harry felt his heart grow cold. He whipped his head back around to stare at Merlin. How could he not have seen this? Merlin's hesitation, his pain, his reluctance to allow anyone to accompany him? How could he have been so stupid?

He opened his mouth to say something, to say anything, but he was stopped by the change of expression on Merlin's face.

The pain on his face seemed to drain away, and a smile seemed to spread over his face as he looked into the distance.

"Freya," he sighed, his eyes shining.

Harry turned to look back over the lake, and his heart stopped as he saw a figure standing there in the lake, water up to its hips.

He stood in reverent awe at the sight, he was fixed to the spot. He was literally shaking.

A woman was standing there, a woman of such beauty it took Harry's breath away, an ethereal beauty that wasn't quite human. She was pale, and the moonlight glinted off her skin. Her long hair was dark and framed a small face with sparkling eyes and a sweet mouth. She was wearing a long robe of flowing silk that seemed to spread out from around her in the water, yet she wasn't wet. She was just standing there, the eternal guardian.

She smiled and took a few graceful steps forward. Merlin's smile widened and he took a few steps towards her. Harry couldn't move.

"Freya," breathed Merlin, his voice trembling. "I've missed you so …"

She smiled sadly, and her eyes seemed to be filled with water. "And I you, Merlin," she said, her voice echoing with times long gone by.

She reached out an arm her fingers stretching out in front of her. Merlin did likewise, and their fingers met, yet not quite, as if the Lady of the Lake was not quite corporeal.

Merlin looked down at his fingers which seemed to pass right through hers and chuckled quietly. "Are we always so destined this way, Freya? Are we always to be apart?"

"It is the destiny you accepted long ago, Merlin," she said sadly. "But I wait for you still in Avalon."

He laughed humourlessly. "Then you shall wait even longer. I'm still lingering on as ever before."

She shook her head, her dark hair reflecting the light of the moon. "Your time is coming to an end, Merlin, this long suffering will soon cease. Happiness lies in your future if you will only be willing to see it."

"How can I?" he asked desperately. "After all this time … how can I?"

"You must forget the pain you felt, Merlin," she said. "You will never again find happiness if you remain in the past, lamenting for what was. Look to the future, Merlin, the future that can be yours."

He frowned, and raised his eyes to hers. They stared at each other for so long Harry began to feel
uncomfortable.

"All I have ever loved is gone, Freya," he said softly. "I shouldn't be here. I'm just some ancient relic of a long-ago era. What hope have I?"

She reached out and placed one of her hands on the side of Merlin's face. He closed his eyes at her touch.

"You can find new things to love, Merlin," she said, smiling. "Let go of the past. Remember it fondly, but do not let it rule you. That is how you can defeat this evil. And defeat it you will."

He opened his eyes, and Harry was shocked to see tears there.

"I'm afraid," he admitted. "I'm so afraid I'll fail once more, and Morgana will once again destroy everything I care about."

"Then you must not let her," Freya said, her voice stronger than before. "She is an evil which must be stopped. You and you alone can do this."

He smiled. "I need a little help."

She smiled back. "Yes, and I shall help you." She turned and looked back across the lake. "Morgana uses the Cup tonight, believing the power of Samhain will increase the potency of the Cup. Once your enemies are immortal there is only one weapon that can stop them."

Merlin nodded. "Excalibur."

She nodded. "You gave it to me long ago. You did not know then how important it would become, but I did. I knew this would happen one day, and I knew that you would come to me in your despair. You are not just here to find the weapon to defeat your foes, but to find the means to defeat the foes in your mind."

She took a step back. "You must reconcile, Merlin. You have to let the past be at rest."

"And how am I to do that?" Merlin asked his eyes desperately.

"You must release your guilt," Freya said, still smiling. "And I know of only one way to convince you that you were not at fault all those years ago."

"How?"

She smiled again and looked to her right. "See for yourself."

Merlin blinked. He slowly turned his head as though terrified of what he may see. He gasped.

There was another figure in the water, the waves lapping around his chest. He stepped closer to Merlin, out of the deeper water, the moonlight shone on his golden hair and suddenly, Harry recognised him.

It was King Arthur.

Harry's jaw dropped open. *King Arthur?* He was dead! How could he be here? He didn't look like the shadowy representations he'd seen with the Resurrection Stone, yet not completely alive either. He was ethereal, and quietly grand.

Harry couldn't tear his eyes away from the long-dead king as he approached Merlin. It was exactly
the same man he'd seen the Boggart imitation. Every detail, down to his youthful face, his armour and the scarlet dragon sigil.

Arthur stopped a few feet away from Merlin, and casually looked Merlin up and down, his eyebrows raising slightly.

He smiled and spoke, his voice echoing in the silent night.

"Honestly, Merlin," he said, sounding exasperated. "I leave you alone for a while and look at the trouble you get yourself into!"

Harry looked to Merlin, to see him standing there frozen on the spot, his face slack with astonishment. He gulped and shook his head slightly.

"You can't be here …" he gasped. "You can't be …"

Arthur laughed. "Trust you to make things difficult. Of course I'm here, you idiot!"

Merlin was blinking rapidly still looking amazed. "But …"

"Merlin," said Arthur firmly. "Did you honestly think I was going to stand by and watch you struggle with your destiny and do nothing to help?"

"You know?" Merlin asked.

"Of course I do!" Arthur said. "I spent so long in life watching over you to make sure you didn't accidently impale yourself on a flagpole or something, did you really think I wouldn't do the same in death?"

Merlin didn't laugh, he was still staring at Arthur, blinking as though he thought he was dreaming.

Arthur's amused expression faded, and he looked at Merlin seriously. "You've waited so long, Merlin," he said. "You never should have had to suffer this way, but there's no time to dwell on that. You know what you have to do now."

Merlin nodded slowly. "Kill Morgana."

Arthur's mouth set into a grim expression. "Yes. She's incessant. She has to be stopped. For your sake, and for this new world's."

"But how?" Merlin asked desperately. "Even with the sword, how are we to do this? How can we defeat both of them? I don't know if I have the power anymore!"

Harry blinked in surprise. He'd never heard Merlin talk this way before, never heard him express his doubts and fears so vehemently before. Suddenly, Merlin seemed so much younger.

Arthur laughed again. "You? Don't have the power? Now, that is ridiculous! After all those years you spent trying to prove to me you weren't hopeless, now you believe you aren't good enough? You are such a riddle, Merlin!"

Merlin blinked, and Arthur continued smiling. "You can do this, Merlin, you have the power and the intelligence to defeat them, not something I would readily admit. You defeated Morgana once before."

Merlin shook his head. "No, I didn't. I failed."
Then his expression changed, instead of shock and amazement, his face was filled with an expression of so much pain Harry felt he was intruding on something private.

"I'm sorry," Merlin whispered, his face stricken. "I'm so sorry." His voice grew stronger, and thick, holding back the emotion. "I should have been there, Arthur! I shouldn't have trusted her. I shouldn't have let you ride out that day. I should have been at your side. I'm sorry …"

"Merlin," Arthur said, his voice loud. "Don't you dare blame yourself again. I've seen how you struggle with this, and there's many a time I've wanted to knock your head against a wall because of it. It wasn't your fault. It was Morgana's. In fact, it was probably mine. I told you to meet with her. I chose to ride out that day. It was I who failed in battle. I let my guard down. I was slain by a sword, Merlin, not by magic."

"I could have protected you," Merlin objected, his eyes filling with tears. "I could have prevented it!"

"Merlin, I'm a warrior," Arthur said. "Dying in battle was always an occupational hazard."

But Merlin didn't look soothed, just more agitated. "That's why I was supposed to be there!" he said. "I was supposed to stop that from happening! When you died, so did everything you'd worked for! The Old Religion declined, tolerance of magical peoples became a distant memory and the world turned to anarchy. I could have prevented that …"

Arthur took a step closer to Merlin, and Merlin bowed his head, not looking into the king's face.

"No, you couldn't, Merlin," Arthur murmured, his own voice filled with emotion. "I do not blame you. I only ever blamed myself. Blamed myself because for all these centuries you've tortured yourself with thoughts of your own guilt with no one there to help you. No one to help you see what an idiot you were being."

Despite his pain, Merlin managed a small smile at that. "Insulting me from beyond the grave, Arthur? That's a new low."

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "You deserve it."

Merlin looked back up at Arthur and searched his face with his eyes.

"I do, don't I," he whispered. "I spent so long in my guilt I couldn't bring myself to be happy, to live again. I've been so stupid."

"You won't find any argument from me," Arthur smiled, and Merlin actually laughed through his tears.

He looked at his feet briefly before looking back up to Arthur, looking determined.

"Will the sword work?" he asked.

Arthur shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I used the sword to hit people with, I know little of its magical properties."

Merlin frowned. "How is that helpful?"

Arthur smiled. "I'm not going to tell you how to win, Merlin. That is something you need to figure out on your own."

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "You don't know do you?"
Arthur watched Merlin carefully. "No, but you do, Merlin. You just have to have the confidence to do it."

Arthur took yet another step closer to Merlin.

"You need to focus on the present, Merlin," he said softly. "Forget about me and Camelot, there's nothing you do can do to reverse what happened then. But you can do something now. You have friends now, for the first time you have people who care about you. Don't push them away because you're afraid. This is something Morgana and her new ally can never understand. That is how you shall defeat them."

Merlin nodded. "I know …"

Arthur smiled and stepped back. He spread his hands out and gestured to the lake around him.

"I'm dead, Merlin," he said. "This is my new kingdom. There's nothing you can do for me. Remember us, but don't live in the past."

Merlin smiled wryly. "When did you become so wise, Arthur?"

Arthur laughed. "You'd be surprised how bored one gets in the realm of the dead. Of course, it's not all bad." He smiled. "It does get interesting sometimes, especially when there's some interesting things to watch. Who would ever have guessed that you would help win a sporting competition?"

Merlin laughed out loud, and the pain vanished from his eyes. "Yeah, likewise."

Arthur shook his head. "If I'd known you weren't completely useless at sport I would have taught you how to joust."

Merlin made a face. "Now that would have been torture!"

Arthur laughed softly. He turned his head to look at Freya who had been watching silently the entire time. She nodded briefly, and Arthur turned back to look at Merlin.

"We haven't much time," Arthur said, a frown on his brow. "The entrance to Avalon opens only briefly on Samhain."

Merlin nodded, and turned back to Freya, his fists clenched as he looked at her once again, barely controlling some great emotion.

She smiled and stepped closer to him.

"You know what must be done," she said softly. "I ask you now that you take this sword and go forth and destroy the evil you were always destined to. Have faith in yourself, Merlin, and in those you care about. The Old Religion and the Wizarding World depend on it."

Merlin nodded, his jaw set, and his eyes lit with a fierce fire.

Freya nodded slightly, and held out her arms in front of her body.

As Harry watched open-mouthed, a great golden light appeared there in her arms, setting the lake off with a fiery glow. A second later, a great sword lay there in her arms, twinkling in the moonlight.

Freya bowed her head and offered the sword out to Merlin. Merlin stepped forward slowly and deliberately, like in some sort of ritual ceremony. He reached out, and took hold of the sword. He lifted it upright and pointed it towards the night sky. Harry gasped to see it there; it seemed to sing
with the power of the Old Religion.

Merlin smiled and brought the sword back down. He looked at Freya.

"That's the second time you've given me this sword," he noted. "Both occasions in a time of dire need."

She nodded and smiled, but said nothing. Merlin stared at her for the longest time, his expression tender, before with great effort turning away from her and started to leave the lake, where he was up to his knees.

Just before he left the lake-

"Remember and be careful, Merlin," Arthur called. "That is my sword and I don't want a single scratch on it!"

Merlin laughed. "That's the only reason you're here isn't it, Arthur? To make sure I don't break it!"

"Not quite," said Arthur softly, as Merlin turned back to face him, and froze once more. Arthur was not alone.

Standing around him were many men, all dressed in the same way as the king, shining armour and proud dragons on their chests. Beside Arthur stood a woman, her arm linked in his, dressed in an exquisite dress. There was a small crown on her brow. Queen Guinevere.

She met Merlin's eyes and she smiled widely, and after a moment of shock on Merlin's face, he returned the gesture, his eyes shining.

"We're here for you, Merlin," she said. "We always will be."

Merlin looked into her face and smiled. "Thank you, Gwen," he said, his voice grateful. His eyes went to the men standing around the royal couple. "Thank all of you."

The Knights smiled back and Merlin cast his eyes around them all, lingering on each of them, having unspoken conversations. There was such a bittersweet happiness in his eyes as he looked at them, his old friends, and Harry felt his own composure begin to break.

Then, for the first time, King Arthur took his eyes away from his former servant, and instead fixed them on Harry, who was too much in shock to do anything.

"Look after him, Mr Potter," Arthur said to him. "Someone needs to make sure he stays out of too much trouble."

Harry nodded, feeling numb all over to know that King Arthur of all people was talking to him. "I will," he managed to get out.

Arthur nodded, and took one look back at Merlin, and gave one last smile.

Merlin turned his eyes back to Freya. She lifted her arms into the night sky and looked upwards. An instant later, she and everyone else had vanished.

Merlin stood there, still in the water for a few moments, watching the spot they'd disappeared from. Then, he fell to his knees and bowed his head, covering his face with his hands, overcome.

Harry didn't know what to do. He couldn't move. He couldn't believe what he had just seen. He felt like just creeping away and leaving Merlin to his grief, but that didn't feel right. Neither did going up
to him to try and comfort him. How could they possibly hope to comfort? How could they possibly even begin to comprehend what he was going through?

Harry wrenched his face away from Merlin and looked around at the others. Like him, they were standing there watching him, half in shock, half in sympathy and an air of unease and worry about what to do for Merlin permeating the air.

Hermione had tears spilling down her cheeks as did, surprisingly, Ginny. Even Ron looked distressed. Neville was sniffing loudly.

Luna however, looked as serene as always. She walked towards Merlin slowly, and crouched down beside him, her own feet in the water. She reached out with one hand and gently touched him on the shoulder.

Slowly, she turned him around so that he faced her, and gently guided him so that they were both standing up in the lake. Merlin was watching her like he'd never seen her before.

She took one of his hands in her own.

"We can never replace them, Merlin," she said softly. "But we care about you. You're one of us now. I hope you can come to care about us as well. Consider us as a part of your new family."

Merlin watched her for a moment, before turning around and looking at each of them in turn as he had with the Knights.

He glanced back at Luna and his face split into a wide smile and he squeezed her hand. He looked back at all the others.

"I already do," he said.
The Reveal at the Ministry

Merlin said nothing as he and the others travelled back to Grimmauld Place, he couldn't. He was still numb all over and his hands were shaking slightly.

The others smiled uncertainly at him and Merlin tried to relax the strained expression on his face. He was now more glad than ever that McGonagall had insisted they come with him to Avalon. He doubted he could have managed it alone.

Their faces were lingering in his mind even now, the faces he hadn't seen in thirteen hundred years, the sound of their voices once again; Freya, Gwen, Lancelot, Leon, Elyan, Percival, Gwaine and … Arthur.

He felt a sharp pain in his chest as he thought of them, and the unspoken words they'd shared, but not for long. He wouldn't let himself be buried under his grief, he couldn't afford to. He didn't have the time to dwell on it right now.

He tightened his hold on Excalibur. Despite being over a millennium old, it was still as splendid as ever, and wasn't even cold, but warm, as though some great energy was running through it. It felt right in his hand, like an old memory was washing all over him. It was familiar. This was the culmination to the events he had set in motion all those years ago.

As before, the others grabbed on to him, and he magicked them away to Grimmauld Place, all seven of them appearing in a gust of wind on the street outside the house. He remained standing, but the others had crumpled to the ground.

"Blimey!" exclaimed Ron, rubbing the spot where he'd fallen. "I hate that spell."

Merlin laughed quietly. "It's takes a bit of getting used to."

Ron scowled and scrambled to his feet. "I prefer Apparating."

"Of course you do," said Hermione, bustling past him to head up to the front door. "And how many times is it now that you've Splinched yourself?"

Ron's scowl deepened and he said nothing.

Harry glanced at Merlin quickly, but Merlin just smiled and continued up to the front door. The look in Harry's eyes was a bit too perceptive.

They all made their way through to the kitchen, and were surprised to find the entire Order of the Phoenix sitting there around the table with barely concealed excitement. They immediately ceased their chattering as Merlin and the others walked in.

Merlin waited until Harry and the rest were seated around the table before stepping forward and gently laying the sword down on the kitchen table before everyone's awestruck eyes.

"Excalibur," he said simply, and stood back to gauge their reactions.

"Bloody hell," the twins murmured, their eyes wide.

"Amazing," said Lupin, his eyes travelling up and down the length of the sword in admiration.

"Merlin laying down the sword Excalibur before me," said Kingsley," I never thought I'd see that
"Exquisite," said Bill, examining it closely. "Even the best goblin-made swords I've seen at Gringotts don't compare to it."

"Is it goblin-made?" Percy asked him.

Merlin shook his head. "It was made by a man named Tom, a blacksmith in Camelot. He was Guinevere's father."

"Queen Guinevere was the daughter of a blacksmith?" Mrs Weasley asked in shock.

Merlin nodded. "Yes. It's a bit of a long story. An evil sorceress named Nimueh summoned a Wraith, the spirit of Arthur's uncle to kill Uther in mortal combat. I found out the only way to destroy it was to use a weapon forged in the breath of a dragon, so I got this sword from Gwen and took it to Kilgharrah."

"And then Arthur got it?"

"No, Uther used it," said Merlin. "But it was never intended for him, so I took it and hid it in the Lake of Avalon. I went back to get it when Morgana and Morgause took control of Camelot."

"And then Arthur got it?"

"Nope," said Merlin. "I hid it again until Arthur was ready for it. I placed it in a stone in the woods."

"You put the sword in the stone?" Lupin asked in amazement.

Merlin nodded. "Yes. And when Arthur doubted himself, I told him that if he pulled it from the stone he would prove himself worthy as the King of Camelot. And he did, while the people of Camelot watched. It was his from then on. They all sat staring at him. "Told you it was a long story," he shrugged apologetically. "But its history isn't really important at the moment. We have it, that's all that matters."

Everyone nodded, but Merlin noticed they were all still staring at the sword in reverence. He rolled his eyes.

"It isn't about to jump up and start doing tricks," he said annoyed. "What are we going to do now?"

Kingsley blinked and shook his head slightly. "Of course," he said. "Forgive me. I heard many stories about this sword as a child, and to see it here now …"

Merlin let his eyes drift back to the sword, shining even in the dim light of the room. The memories flooded back. Freya holding the sword high above the lake, the look in Arthur's eyes as he drew it from the stone … this was just as much his sword as it was Arthur's. It was a huge part of his own past, not just a weapon in a fairy tale.

Kingsley cleared his throat, and Merlin's eyes snapped back to him.

"I am greatly relieved to see it here," he confessed. "Now we finally have a method of striking back at the enemy."

"But how?" Mr Weasley asked frowning. "How can we use it on You-Know-Who when we don't know where he is?"

Kingsley sighed. "We can't. But at least we have it here for when we finally need it. A step in the
right direction at least."

Perhaps, thought Merlin wryly, but a much greater step than this is required. Their base must be found at all costs.

Neville was looking closely at the sword. "Um, Merlin?" he asked nervously. "Is- is that b-blood on the sword?"

Pulled in by a morbid fascination, everyone leaned in to look, and Merlin himself peered closer. Near the tip on the flat of the blade, there was a tiny little mark. If it hadn't been a magical blade, Merlin might have mistaken it for rust.

"Yes," he said heavily, regretting he hadn't properly cleaned the sword before giving it to Freya, amazed that it'd lasted this long. "It probably is."

Many people began to look sick. "Whose blood?" Ginny asked nervously, after a long silence.

Merlin frowned as he continued looking at the blade. "If I was to guess …" he said slowly aware that everyone was hanging on his every word. "I would say that it's Mordred's."

"How can you know that?" Tonks asked.

"Because," Merlin began, sighing heavily. "Mordred was the last man Arthur killed before he succumbed to his own wounds from Mordred's blade."

"Wait," said Fred frowning. "I thought Morgana killed Arthur?"

"Morgana brought about Arthur's death," Merlin explained. "But it was Mordred who struck the fatal blow."

He pushed back the guilt he felt. *It wasn't his fault.* Wasn't that what Arthur had only just finished saying to him? He wouldn't be so stupid as to blame himself again. He'd given Mordred his chance, again and again. He'd chosen to do this. Merlin hadn't driven him to it.

"Wasn't …" began Neville. "Wasn't Mordred … um, Arthur's son?"

Merlin snorted with laughter, his guilt immediately draining away. *That* is a stupid myth. Mordred was already a young boy by the first time Arthur and I met him when we were barely more than boys ourselves. I honestly have no idea where that story came from."

"You knew him as well?" George asked. "Did he turn evil like Morgana?"

Merlin's hilarity vanished, and he became rather solemn. "I'm not sure," he said. "He was very young when we first met, and we helped to save his life from Arthur's father. He was a Druid you see, and Uther wanted him executed."

"A young boy? Tonks gasped. "He would have done that?"

"He did do it," said Merlin. "Uther had many children killed because of their Gifts or because of who their parents were."

Everyone looked horrified, but Merlin continued on with the story.

"Kilgharrah warned me not to help Mordred, because of the prophecy that he would be the one to eventually kill Arthur. But I didn't listen. I didn't feel it was right to condemn a child to death because of something he may do in the future."
Merlin sighed heavily. "Relations with Mordred were … complicated for many years. He was driven to allying with Morgana because of the hatred he and his people bore for Uther. I'm not entirely sure how evil he was at heart, whether or not he …"

"Whether or not he did it because he was expected to and felt it was the only way out, regardless of how he felt," came a voice from the corner.

Merlin turned to see Malfoy standing there shiftily, looking obstinately at his feet.

"Yes, that's it exactly," said Merlin softly, watching Malfoy closely. Malfoy shifted slightly, moving his weight from one foot to the other as he noticed Merlin's scrutinising gaze.

"You can't be blamed for that, Merlin," said Hermione. "You couldn't have killed a child."

"No," Merlin answered. "I suppose not."

Kingsley looked directly at Merlin. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"Yes," Merlin said quietly, oddly calm about the situation, "though I think we may have a hard time convincing them that I am who I say I am."

"I did consider that," Kingsley said, frowning. "I think a demonstration may be needed."

Merlin sighed. "Perhaps. Hopefully though they're all so afraid of this 'new female Death Eater' they won't have a problem believing that she's Morgana."

"You have proof though don't you?" Hermione asked worriedly. "I mean, there are records of you! And that painting in Ravenclaw's book, plus the ghost's testimony and-"

"Relax, Hermione," said Merlin, smiling. "I'm sure I'll find a way to convince them."

He was very surprised at how calm he was being at this, about telling everyone the truth. But, after seeing Arthur and the others …. Something seemed different to him. Perhaps it was the reminder of the time when he could introduce himself as Merlin, and not have to hide away and pretend? Suddenly, everyone knowing the truth didn't seem as horrible as it had before. He was doing this for Camelot, for Arthur and the Knights, and for himself. He shouldn't be afraid to be himself.

"It'll be an interesting day," agreed Mr Weasley. He frowned and looked over to Merlin. "What will you do after everyone knows?"

"What I'm doing now," said Merlin, confused. "Teaching Harry and looking for the base."

Mr Weasley shook his head. "No, I mean, where will you live? Can you go back to Hogwarts and sit in lessons when your teachers will be fully aware of who you are and that you don't need the education?"

Merlin blinked. He hadn't thought of that. He couldn't stay at Hogwarts once all his teachers knew. Flitwick, who was almost a member of the Order himself had been told by McGonagall and he hadn't acted the same since. He blushed, squeaked and got all excited whenever Merlin so much as opened his mouth. He could no longer sit in class and pretend to be less than he was when everyone knew the truth. He couldn't return to Hogwarts.

He wasn't sure why that thought made him so sad.

"I suppose not," said Merlin, feeling very strange all of a sudden. "I- I'll stay here I think. I'll head
back to Hogwarts for DA meetings and to teach Harry, but I don't really think it's feasible for me to
remain there, the entire status quo will be changed."

Harry frowned. "But it makes sense for you to be there! You'll need to be on hand in case Morgana
or Voldemort attack!"

Merlin shook his head. "It's impossible. It'll only distract the other students. Besides, if I'm not there,
Morgana will have no need to attack Hogwarts, and Voldemort won't either. The enchantments I
placed there will hold. You'll all be safe even if I'm not there."

Harry and the others looked disappointed, and Merlin shared in it. It would feel odd to not return
there with them, to not be around them all every day. But his student disguise would no longer exist,
and what teacher could teach a thirteen-hundred year old sorcerer? It would be better for everyone if
he didn't go.

It hit him like a physical blow to not be returning to Hogwarts. After Camelot, Hogwarts had been
the one constant in his life. He had helped to create it, and watched and protected it over the years. It
was almost home to him now. He’d been so determined to be miserable over the years that he’d
never really noticed just how good Hogwarts was for him. Despite the constant reminders of his need
to move on, his times at Hogwarts had been like the calm in the storm, a few years of fun and
happiness before the pain would begin again. And he’d never been happier during those thirteen
hundred years than those few with the Founders as they set about creating a wondrous safe haven for
wizardkind. He’d been happy then, with Rowena, Helga and the others, and he could be happy
again. The thousand years since then had almost driven all his hope for happiness away, but now,
with talking to Arthur again …He had protected Hogwarts over the years from love of the Founders,
and in so doing kept one little light of contentment burning away inside of him. Yes, not returning to
Hogwarts was a painful thought.

But, he tried to brush this away. He had to focus on the present. He knew that now more than ever.

"It's not so bad," he said, smiling. "Now I don't have lessons and essays to do, I can spend more time
searching for Morgana's hideout. And I'll be at the castle most nights anyway to teach Harry. I just
can't pretend to be a normal student anymore."

"There's plenty of room here," said Lupin. "I've been staying here mostly, keeping an eye on Mr
Malfoy, and a lot of the Order spends a night or two here when on a mission. And of course, Tonks
and young Teddy are here with me almost constantly. You won't be alone, there's plenty of life here
yet!"

Merlin smiled at him gratefully. At least he'd have company. He liked Lupin, he could relate to the
suffering the poor man had endured all these years. He'd never known the man during the first years
of the Order, he'd like the opportunity to get to know him better.

"We'll stay here too," said Fred, and George nodded eagerly.

Mrs Weasley frowned. "Now, don't you two keep badgering him about-"

"Mum!" exclaimed George indignantly. "When have we ever badgered anyone?"

"We just want to keep him company is all!"

"And if he does feel like talking about all the cool things he's seen over the years-"

"-pranks he's pulled, girls he's known-"
"-who are we to stop him?"

Fred and George smiled innocently up at their mother, and they looked so much like Gwaine when he'd been caught in the act and trying to sweet-talk his way out, that Merlin couldn't help but laugh.

"Don't worry, Mrs Weasley," Merlin said, amused. "I'm sure I can think of a story or two that could keep them entertained."

"Yeah," snorted Ron. "Start with the one where you turned your Headmistress into a pig."

Fred and George's eyes lit up at this, and Mrs Weasley scowled disapprovingly. Merlin laughed, glad to see their delight. It felt good to laugh. The evening had been trying enough already.

Kingsley began talking, but Merlin couldn't hear him. Everything suddenly went dark and confused. Merlin staggered as an overwhelming feeling of weakness overcame him and his vision swam. His magic boiled in his veins. He felt cold, and shivered all over. He gasped as an icy grasp clenched over his heart.

He fell to the ground and knew no more.

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Harry sat by Merlin's bedside an hour later, waiting for him to wake. They were back in the room they had shared during the summer, and were alone, Harry having requested that the others leave them be for a while.

Merlin's skin was icy cold to the touch and he shivered slightly, but otherwise seemed alright. Harry watched him closely. The colour was beginning to come back into his cheeks.

Slowly, Merlin opened his eyes and looked around blearily. He stopped when he saw Harry sitting there.

He slowly sat up in the bed and swung his feet over the edge, looking at Harry with a look of grim acceptance.

"Morgana and Voldemort used the Cup," Harry said, rather unnecessarily.

"You felt it too?" Merlin asked.

Harry nodded. "Not as bad as you. I felt really cold all over and a bit dizzy, but I didn't collapse."

Merlin shook his head. "No, I didn't think you would. You're not nearly perceptive enough yet. The first time the Cup was used I barely felt it either."

He sighed and hung his head in his hands. "How long was I unconscious?"

Harry shrugged. "About an hour. I told the others what it probably meant."

"It was to be expected," Merlin said. "Freya did say Morgana intended to use it tonight. It isn't much of a surprise. We knew it was coming."

"Doesn't make it any easier though does it?" Harry asked. "Now we know for certain they're immortal."

Merlin frowned at the tone in Harry's voice. "Harry-"
"I'm sorry," sighed Harry. "It's just … after everything we went through last year to make Voldemort mortal again, it's just hard to think that it was futile. He's immortal again. And it'll be impossible to kill him."

"Not impossible, Harry," said Merlin. "Just nearly impossible. We have Excalibur now."

"Yeah, and how am I supposed to use it?" Harry asked bitterly. "A sword against Voldemort?"

"The sword's only one way to do it, Harry," said Merlin. "You can empty the Cup of the blood within it. That would kill them both at the same time. And if you can't get to it, then you'll just have to use Excalibur."

Merlin smiled. "I can teach you how to use the sword, Harry, even though Arthur would probably kill himself laughing at the idea of me teaching anyone swordcraft. I'll help you."

Harry smiled back, though still feeling miserable. "You've suddenly got more optimistic."

Merlin sighed. "I know we can defeat them, Harry," he said. "We have the power, the intelligence, courage and the Old Religion behind us. Arthur and the others were right. All we need is the confidence to know we can do it. Stop feeling guilty, stop torturing ourselves with the idea that we were responsible for the deaths of our loved ones and just have faith in ourselves."

Harry looked away from him. "We?"

Merlin moved a little closer to Harry. "Yes, we. Hermione's told me of your 'saving people thing'. That you blamed yourself for the deaths of Cedric Diggory, Sirius Black and the house-elf. I was so blind to my own guilt that I didn't see that you too had these burdens. I see it now. We're more alike than we know."

Harry looked back up at Merlin. "I'm sorry for what happened earlier, Merlin," he said. "I know it must have been hard to see all your old friends again. I know for me when I used the Resurrection Stone …" Harry broke off, unwilling to say anything further, but Merlin understood.

"I'm at peace with it now, Harry," Merlin said, and for the first time his eyes were sincere. "I got a chance to see them again, to say the things I'd wished that I'd said. And I realised, they don't want me to be continually at war with myself. They hate to see me in pain because of their deaths, and I owe it to them not to be buried by my grief."

Merlin reached a hand out to place it on Harry's shoulder. "You can be at peace with it too, Harry. We will defeat them, the ones who took so much from us both. And it's the memory of those people that will aid us, the love we bore for them, not a nagging doubt that we were responsible. Don't remember them with regret, Harry, remember them as the source of your strength."

Harry smiled and nodded. "You've changed," he noted. "You really have made your peace haven't you?"

Merlin nodded. "Arthur always did have the ability to knock some sense into me," he joked.

Merlin stood up, and crossed to the door. "I need to see Kingsley," he explained. "About tomorrow."

Harry nodded. "I wouldn't like to be in your shoes tomorrow."

Merlin winced. "No, it won't be pleasant. At least at first. But it's the right thing to do."

He left the room, and Harry continued sitting there looking at the empty painting of Phineas Nigellas
on the wall. Once again, Voldemort was immortal.

Harry stood up suddenly, invigorated with a new fire. He would do this, he had to. Merlin was right. If he could accept his own past and mistakes, so could he.

"Nervous?" Kingsley asked him, as they sat together in his office early on Sunday morning.

"Course not," answered Merlin jovially, leaning back in the hard backed chair. "I'm just revealing my true identity to the entire wizarding world. What is there to worry about?"

Kingsley chucked, and glanced at the clock on his wall. "It's almost time, they'll be here by now. I'll go and see."

Merlin nodded as Kingsley stood up and left the room, the door shutting quietly behind him. Merlin glanced around the room trying to quell the thumping of his heart. It was going to be alright. It had to be.

How would they react? What would happen? What would Morgana do when she discovered he'd outed them both?

Merlin began drumming his fingers on the arms of his chair. He wished it would hurry up and just happen.

As if on cue, the door opened slightly, and Kingsley popped his head in.

"It's time," he said grimly.

Merlin nodded and stood up slowly, gathering all the courage he knew he possessed deep down. It was going to be alright.

He turned and followed Kingsley out the door and along the corridor. Their footsteps echoed out loudly in the deserted corridor, with no workers here this early at the weekend. Merlin breathed in deeply. Why was he acting like this? He'd faced far worse over the years! This was finally it, the final milestone. The thing he'd waited for all these years.

Kingsley led him to a large conference room, and took a seat at the long table at its head, which sat there facing out over the room. Merlin took a seat next to him, and tried to make himself comfortable.

Kingsley nodded to a Ministry worker who was standing next to a pair of double doors at the opposite side of the room. The wizard opened the doors and in poured a stream of chattering wizards and witches armed with quills and parchment, large cameras and expressions of extreme anticipation.

They took their seats in the centre of the room, setting up their quills and ink and their cameras. Merlin's eyes grew wider as more and more people entered the room.

"Just how many people did you invite here?" he hissed to Kingsley.

"All the main publication bodies in the UK," Kingsley told him. "Also the WWN, some other minor publications and a couple from abroad."

"Abroad?" Merlin asked. "Why?"

Kingsley laughed. "You're famous worldwide Merlin. This will cause ripples through not only the
wizarding community of Britain but those all over the globe. The wider wizarding world will never be the same again."

Merlin groaned quietly. "You're not making this any easier."

Kingsley smiled. "When was it ever going to be easy?"

Merlin had to acknowledge the truth of this, but as he looked out at all the people in front of him his nerves increased. They looked expectantly up at Kingsley and curiously at Merlin, wondering who he was and why he was important enough to be seated next to the Minister. A few flashes went off as people took some photographs, and Merlin winced involuntarily. He usually avoided having his photograph taken; it made it easier for people to recognise him. Like when Harry had found that image of him in Rowena's old book.

Kingsley glanced at Merlin, as though asking for permission to go ahead. Merlin nodded briefly; it was too late to turn back now.

Kingsley stood up and held out his hands in a welcoming gesture. Everyone in the room quieted immediately.

Kingsley smiled at them all.

"Welcome. I have called you all here today on a matter of the utmost seriousness and urgency; a menace that threatens not only the wizarding and Muggle populations of Great Britain, but that of the entire world. I also come to tell you of an event that not a one of you could have anticipated, that could never have dared dream possible. I am about to test the limits of your credulity to the utmost. You may not believe me, you may think I have gone mad or that I am a liar, but I swear to you all that everything I am about to tell you now is the truth. As hard as it may be for you all to hear it, I ask you to … keep an open mind."

Merlin almost snorted out loud. He doubted even the most open of open minds would accept these revelations easily. The only reason the others had believed him when he said who he was, was because they'd all had their previous suspicions and questions. These people didn't.

Nevertheless, after Kingsley's opening speech, they all leaned in as one, quills scribbling away furiously, looking like vultures after a piece of meat.

Kingsley sat down again and shifted in his seat, and for the briefest of moments seemed to wonder where he should begin. But the uncertainty soon vanished.

"I'm sure all of you by now are aware of the attacks that have been happening in our country for the past few months," Kingsley began. "The Dark wizard who calls himself Lord Voldemort has made an alliance with another and is terrorising the people of Britain, magical and Muggle alike."

"You're referring then," asked one reporter. "To this new female accomplice of his that has been sighted?"

"I am," said Kingsley.

"Then you know who she is?" another reporter asked. "Why has no statement been issued from the Ministry about the identity of this woman and details that the public deserve to know?"

"That is because of the rather delicate nature of the woman in question's identity," explained Kingsley. "Any deliberate attempt at concealment was entirely in the best interests of the public."
"Is it in the public's best interests then to be kept uninformed?" the first reporter asked. "Who is this woman?"

"Is it true that she's Bellatrix Lestrange reincarnated?" another reporter asked.

"No," said Kingsley. "She is not. She is altogether far worse." He looked around at them all evenly, noting that their fear spiked. "There are however several similarities. This woman is indeed someone that the entire wizarding world believes to be dead, and she is a sorceress of incredible power."

The reporters exchanged worried glances, and Merlin felt his heart grow colder. Just how much more afraid would they be by the end of this meeting?

"This woman," continued Kingsley, "is one that you all believe to be dead, but I assure you she is not. She never died, she was not resurrected. It is through a strange form of magic that she still lives to cause terror among you. This woman's name is-" Kingsley paused for a moment." Morgana Pendragon."

There was a brief moment of silence as the reporters and camera men stared open mouthed at Kingsley. There was nothing but shock on their faces.

"Please!" laughed one reporter at the back of the room. "Have you been reading those ridiculous conspiracy theories Minister? Morgana Pendragon died centuries ago!"

"I did say you would find it hard to believe," said Kingsley grimly. "But I ask you all to consider the evidence. Voldemort said himself to many witnesses in Hogwarts School that he possessed the power of the Old Religion and that of Morgana herself. She was imprisoned many years ago by Merlin in a form of suspended animation. She contacted Lord Voldemort through Legilimancy and taught him the magic of the Old Religion, the knowledge of which died out centuries ago. He used this knowledge to free her from her imprisonment and together they are working to undermine everything good in this world. Think back to those attacks. There was a mysterious force protecting the Death Eaters involved, which not even the strongest of my Aurors were able to penetrate. She is not working for Voldemort. She is allied with him. You must all have heard the stories of the witnesses who saw her attack Hogsmeade, or the testimony of the Muggles who saw her. The magic she used is unlike anything that exists in this millennium."

Still, the faces looking at Kingsley were covered in shock. No one was moving, no one was making any sort of a sound. One witch had ceased her scratching of a quill, hovering it above her parchment, the quill now steadily dripping scarlet ink onto her pale robes.

Fear began to creep into their expressions as they realised that Kingsley wasn't about to contradict his previous statements. Some people began to whimper and cover their mouths with their hands in horror.

"But how?" squeaked one little witch. "How can she be alive after all this time?"

Kingsley again explained how Morgana had been trapped in the Crystal Cave how she had taught Voldemort the magic of the Old Religion. Merlin watched as the horror on their faces steadily grew as it began to sink in. Yet, he still saw scepticism there.

"And how do you know this for certain?" one reporter asked. "How do you know this is Morgana?"

"Because we have fought her," Kingsley said to loud gasps. "We have had several dealings with her now. We have no doubts about her identity."

"Then what is she up to?" an elderly warlock asked, his eyes popping out of his head. "If she is
Morgana, what is she doing now? Why is she here in this century?"

Kingsley glanced at Merlin before answering. "She has managed to obtain hold of an old relic of the Old Religion; the Cup of Life. Some of you may know of it as the Holy Grail."

Several loud cries rang out in the room, leading Merlin to believe they knew fine well what this meant.

"Last night," said Kingsley, ploughing on despite the evident panic now in the room. "Morgana and Voldemort used the Cup. They are now immortal."

Merlin winced. That was rather blunt.

There were several more cries of despair in the room and a feeling of both terror and hysteria permeated the air. Merlin bit his lip. This wasn't going smoothly, but probably as well as could be expected.

Kingsley called the room to attention again, and people fell quiet as they looked up at him, with fear in their eyes.

"All is not lost however," Kingsley said, his slow, calm voice ringing out through the room. "There is a means to defeat her. We came into possession of that knowledge last night. I tell you this to give you hope. We will defeat her. We can defeat her. We are going to defeat her."

Kingsley's commanding voice had brought the room to silence and faces turned to him with a look of hope.

"I cannot tell you what this is," Kingsley went on. "Information such as this cannot fall into enemy hands. But I tell you this to reassure you all that there is a method of defeating her."

Hushed murmuring overcame the room as reporters exchanged hissed conversations at Kingsley's words, speculations, questions and worry running rampant. Their notes and cameras lay abandoned.

"How do you know all this?" one reporter asked Kingsley, his face white with fear. "How have you been working against her?"

"The Order of the Phoenix has been."

"The Order of the Phoenix?" one reporter exclaimed indignantly. "We're trusting our entire futures to a secretive organisation that exists outside of the law? What business does the Minister for Magic have to abandon his governmental duties to lead a bunch of vigilantes?"

Kingsley all but glowered at said reporter. "The Order of the Phoenix was never affiliated with the Ministry, and for good reason. Often the aims of the Ministry were contrary to what was best for wizardkind, especially in the case of my Ministerial predecessors. The Order has been there all though the troubled times when they were persecuted by the Ministry for trying to warn the world of a legitimate threat. They alone have stood for equality and justice for the common witch or wizard. They exist outside the government for good reason. They are there to ensure the wizarding population is safe from corrupt government. Where would you all be now if it were not for them? They alone stood against Voldemort during Fudge's last inept year in office, and again during Thicknesse's reign. They have always fought for you, and often for little credit. They do so now. You must trust them."

"Your loyalties are divided!" the reporter retorted. "How can the wizarding population trust in their leader when he conducts half his business in secret?"
"Because he is what is best for all of you," Merlin said heatedly. "The Order kept this information from you all only to protect you and to gain time in which to mount a defence. Now they have come forward to tell you the truth so that you may all now be as enlightened, to end the lies that Fudge and Scrimgeour fed you. You must listen. Minister Shacklebolt is the best leader you could possibly have in these times. He is working to protect you all! Trust him, for a greater leader you couldn't find anywhere else."

Kingsley glanced at Merlin in surprise and Merlin saw a small flash of emotion in his serious eyes that betrayed his gratitude. He was touched by Merlin's praise of him.

The reporters however turned to Merlin in confusion and squinted at him.

"And who are you to tell us this?" the reporter asked. "You're just a boy!"

"He's older than he looks," Kingsley said, winking at Merlin. Merlin's heart fluttered as he realised that the moment was now almost here.

"What do you mean?"

Merlin sighed heavily, and mentally prepared himself. This was going to be torture.

"Morgana," he began, aware everyone was leaning in to him as they had with Kingsley. "Morgana isn't the only one who survived from the days of the Old Religion."

Again, shocked expressions.

"You mean … " a witch began uncertainly. "You're from back then as well?"

Merlin nodded, even as the reporter from earlier snorted.

"Now Minister Shacklebolt you beggar belief," he said. "You expect us to believe this boy is over a thousand years old?"

"He is," said Kingsley, once again, his calm and powerful voice sending everyone into silence. "He is a sorcerer of the Old Religion. This magic kept him alive all these years until now, when he has found another use for it. In him lies our best hope of defeating Morgana and Voldemort."

"I have evidence if you wish it," Merlin said, staring at the wizard who was questioning him. He spoke not in the hesitant and unsure voice he adopted in public to maintain his disguise of ignorance, but in one which betrayed his power, and commanded as much respect as Kingsley. "I have attended Hogwarts several times over the centuries and my extensive school records speak for themselves. As do the ghosts who reside there; any one of them could tell you the truth of the matter- several of them I even knew in life. I am thirteen hundred years old, and I'm telling you now that everything Minister Shacklebolt has told you is the truth. Morgana has returned. I fought her. I alone knew her in the Old days, the dying years of Camelot and of King Arthur."

More silence, eye popping and jaws hanging open.

"But-" spluttered the reporter. "It's impossible. No magic could keep a man alive for thirteen hundred years!"

Merlin smiled. "No magic that you use today. The magic of the Old Religion is unlike anything any of you has ever encountered before. I am not lying to you."

He poured a little magic into his final statement, making it as forceful as possible. He couldn't leave
them in any doubt at the moment. Especially as there were more groundbreaking statements to come.

"You all remember a few months ago the escape of the dragon from Gringotts and its remarkable ability to elude capture?" Merlin asked, realising they'd all been struck dumb. "Aithusa is a dragon of the Old Religion, she and another, Kilgharrah are the last of that race, and I am the last of the Dragonlords, men of the Old Religion entrusted with the ability to control these creatures. They will back up my story."

There were a few astonished squeaks, but no one said anything. They were gazing at Merlin as someone would look at an animal in a zoo.

"Impossible, impossible," a reporter was murmuring to himself, shaking his head in disbelief. One reporter clutched at his heart and sat down hurriedly.

Then, all the reporters launched into a flurry of questions, hurling them at him so quickly Merlin could barely keep up. What had it been like surviving all these years? What exactly was a Dragonlord? What were Old dragons like? Could they help in the war? What exactly was the Old Religion? Did he think Morgana could be defeated? Could he do it? How powerful was he? What sort of magic could he use?

Merlin answered them all as best as he could, overwhelmed at the sheer number of them all, but pleased that they seemed to be believing him, as incredulous as they all were. All sense of decorum had gone out of the window as reporters swarmed forwards yelling out questions at him. Merlin felt his anticipation increase as he realise the ultimate revelation was now very near indeed.

At someone's prompting, he stood up and demonstrated a few simple Old Religion spells, itching with discomfort. These simple demonstrations of his power were enough to send the room into raptures. Magic without a wand? Strange incantations? Glowing eyes? They seemed to believe he was going to save them all from Morgana with a simple snap of his fingers.

He eventually sat down again, his heart thumping. He glanced at Kingsley, and in that look an acknowledgment passed between them. This was the time.

"How many know of this magic?" another reporter asked eagerly. "How many know about you?"

Merlin bit his lip. "The Order of the Phoenix knows," he said. "As does the student group Dumbledore's Army at Hogwarts. I kept it hidden from all of them for as long as I could, so accustomed was I to hiding. They all know my true identity, and now I think it's time you all found out."

He took a deep breath. "Everything I have so far said to you all has been beyond belief and I'm sure is testing you all to the limit. But what I'm about to reveal to you now may surpass all of that put together. It is something I have struggled with for many years, and what I've tried to keep secret for so long."

He stood up slowly. "You have all heard of Morgana," he said calmly. "You all know about the legends of Camelot and the Old Magic. But what you don't know is that you've heard of me too."

He looked around at them all, holding them captivated. Then, as he had done in the DA meeting, in accordance to the plan he'd worked out with Kingsley earlier on, his eyes flashed gold. He felt his spine bend, his skin wrinkle and hang in folds, his hair turn white and flow down his back and a long beard sprout from his chin.

"My name," he began, in his hoarse old-man voice, "is Merlin Emrys."
"So," asked Ron that evening. "How many of them fainted?"

Merlin groaned. "About half. The other half screamed and turned into a pack of chattering monkeys."

Fred and George chuckled appreciatively. "Wish we could have been there."

Merlin shook his head. "It was a nightmare," he confessed. "Some of them attacked me because they said it was an insult to the name of the great Merlin to pose as him, others burst out crying, others were afraid, some started screaming in excitement, some thought it was an elaborate hoax and others ran out the door."

Ron snorted. "Really wish I could have been there."

Everyone laughed. The Weasleys, Harry, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Lupin, Tonks and, strangely, Malfoy who was skulking in a corner, were all sitting in the drawing room of Grimmauld Place. Merlin was rubbing his temples.

"How did they take it when they'd calmed down?" Hermione asked.

Merlin sighed. "Well, the calming down itself took about half an hour, then there was another three hours of questioning about me alone, then another two hours asking me about Morgana and the Old Religion. I got rid of the Ageing Spell pretty quickly; I couldn't have kept it going that long!"

"Well, you look magnificent!" Charlie teased, throwing a copy of the Evening Prophet at him which was festooned with a large photograph of 'Dragoon' and the headline: **Merlin the great sorcerer returns to the wizarding world to face new threat: resurrected Morgan le Fey allies with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.**

"Ha ha," said Merlin with no humour. "This headline is ridiculous! People aren't going to believe it!"

"It's going to be a turbulent few days," agreed Mr Weasley. "The country will be divided."

"And Morgana will use that to her advantage," sighed Merlin, leaning back in his chair. "All of this because of my name. Sometimes I wish my mother had just called me John."

"Wouldn't have been half so interesting though," said Bill, examining the headline himself. "This'll be massive. You'll be mobbed whenever you leave the house."

Merlin groaned. "Looks like permanent disguises from now on."

"Surprised they let you leave the Ministry today," said Tonks, bouncing baby Teddy on her lap. "I'd've thought they'd have tried to keep you there and solve all of their problems."

"They did," said Merlin sighing. "Seemed to think I was some sort of saviour or something, after they'd all started to believe me. I shook so many hands and was hugged so many times I'm numb all over."

"Things will really be different now, won't they?" Hermione said, biting her lip. "With all this hysteria about you, will we be able to concentrate on our task?"

"We'll have to," said Harry. "It might be crazy for a bit, but it was the right thing to do. The people deserve to know the truth."
Merlin had fallen silent. So many thoughts were tumbling around in his head he found it difficult to make sense of them all. Was this the right thing? Would this actually be to Morgana's advantage instead? Now the whole world knew her identity would it hinder or help her?

"You should all get back to Hogwarts now," Mrs Weasley announced, glancing at the clock and standing up. "You need to be ready for school tomorrow morning."

Ginny snorted. "Yeah, like we can go back to normal after this! We won't get any peace!"

"Nevertheless," said Mrs Weasley sternly. "You all went back to Hogwarts for a reason, and part of that was to complete your education."

"But we have Merlin now!" Ginny protested. "We didn't know that back then! We'd learn so much by staying here!"

"Yes, and what about that DA of yours?" Mr Weasley asked, removing his glasses. "Don't you have a responsibility to them? Don't they deserve to learn as well?"

Ginny scowled. "Merlin can teach them so much more than we can! If he doesn't have to go back then why do we?"

"Because that's the way it has to be," Merlin said quietly, looking into the fire contemplatively. They all looked at him in surprise. He sighed, feeling the sadness of his realisation the evening before. "Don't ask me how I know, but I do. Hogwarts still has more in store for them, but my time there is done. I feel it."

Ginny looked like she wanted to argue, but Harry glanced at her and gave her a look. He looked back at Merlin, and he realised that Harry finally understood. He could feel the Old Religion inside of him; he knew that these instincts were not to be ignored.

"Before you go, Harry," Merlin said, reaching into a bag he had by his chair. He pulled out a book and gave it to Harry who looked slightly puzzled.

"It's Helga Hufflepuff's book," Merlin told him, smiling. "It took me a while, but I finally found a handy little spell that translated it all into modern English and transferred the entire text in here. I might not be there every night now to teach you, so I want you to continue your studies on your own when I'm not there. I thought Helga's book would be the best one. They were all equally as brilliant, but she was the best teacher; Rowena found it frustrating that not everyone was as smart as her, Salazar found children irritating and Godric was more interested in slaying dragons than teaching. Helga however … well, I'm sure you'll find it useful."

Harry grinned and looked eagerly down at the book. "I'll read it every night," he promised.

Merlin resumed his staring into the fire while the room came to life around him, as the others stood up and began to leave the room, grumbling slightly.

When the place had gone quiet, Merlin sighed heavily. He reached over for the newspaper Bill had abandoned and quickly read through it.

This Daily Prophet reporter is both thrilled and overwhelmed to announce the astonishing news that the great sorcerer, perhaps the greatest sorcerer ever known to have existed, is alive and walks among us to this day. At a special press conference called today at the Ministry by Minister Shacklebolt, a seemingly young and nondescript man revealed himself to be the legendary warlock and confessed to have been in hibernation for the last thirteen hundred years.
The news is sure to shock and delight the wizarding population in equal measure. How is such a thing possible?

Merlin, who has recently been attending Hogwarts as a seventh year Gryffindor student under the alias of Martin Emrys, told awestruck reporters today of how he has survived the centuries unchanged, waiting for the opportune moment to reveal himself to the world.

Though it may seem hard to believe, the reporter is adamant in his belief that this is no elaborate hoax. The man offered proof of his identity, by way of demonstrating with extreme prowess, Old Magic, an ancient form of magic believed to have died out with the Druids. He performed such amazing feats of seemingly impossible magic that this reporter, and the others present were left in no uncertainty of the truth of the matter.

As can be expected, this revelation was met with no small outpouring of joy and exhilaration. This man truly is Merlin.

Yet, not all of the news that was offered by Minister Shacklebolt was of such happiness. He also announced the return of Merlin’s ancient adversary: Morgan le Fey, also known as Morgana Pendragon.

Merlin told the press conference of how he defeated Morgana thirteen hundred years ago after the death of the Muggle King Arthur, trapping her in stasis, intending it as an eternal punishment. However, Morgana has managed to escape this confinement, and has allied herself with none other than He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and is believed to have taught him Old Magic.

Such news is of course devastating, and may well cause panic amongst the general population as stories of Morgana's dastardly deeds are all too well-known. This is furthered by the fact that we have been told that Morgana and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named have acquired the legendary Holy Grail and have made full use of its powers of immortality. Yet both Minister Shacklebolt and Merlin himself assured the gathered reporters that they are doing everything in their power to address this new evil and have made considerable progress. Indeed, in a remarkable show of faith, Merlin himself declared his loyalty to Minister Shacklebolt and stated his firm belief that the Minister is the man to lead the wizarding population of Britain out of this crisis.

Merlin also adamantly declared his support for the Order of the Phoenix, the secret organisation of which Minister Shacklebolt is the leader, which has attracted so much controversy in recent weeks. It is believed that Merlin has been working closely with the Order in fighting Morgana, and is also believed to be close to the Boy-Who-Lived, working together with Potter’s defence group at Hogwarts, Dumbledore’s Army. It is believed they became friends as Merlin impersonated an ordinary Hogwarts student, and is now helping him in his quest to overthrow He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

How can we lose when there is such a partnership? With Merlin on our side, who can stand against us?

This news is such that this will reverberate throughout the entire world and have lasting impact on the world as we know it. Today truly marks the most momentous day in wizarding history and will be remembered for centuries to come.

For a complete history of Camelot, Merlin, King Arthur, Morgana and how it compares to the myths, see pages 2, 3 and 4

For more on the Old Religion, how it differs from modern magic and how dangerous it is, see pages 5 and 6
Merlin chuckled as he cast the paper aside. The front page itself was enough for him. It was everything he'd both wished for and dreaded.

Hermione was right; everything was going to change.

Merlin just hoped it would be for the better.

"Full of lies is it?" asked a voice from the corner.

Merlin turned in surprise to see Malfoy standing there awkwardly— he thought he'd been alone.

"No, actually," said Merlin. "The facts are accurate. It's the hyperbole that seems ridiculous."

Malfoy frowned, and read over the article himself.

"Isn't exactly unexpected is it though?" Malfoy said. "They're all going to treat you like some heroic god, like they do with Potter. Only you'll deserve it."

Merlin frowned. "You doubt Harry?"

Malfoy glanced away. "I just think that everyone makes too much of a big deal over him."

"He's done more than you realise," said Merlin, watching Malfoy carefully. "He's sacrificed so much, suffered so terribly. None of it was ever his fault. He never asked to be famous. And neither did I."

"But you deserve it though," objected Malfoy, still not looking at Merlin. "You did all that stuff in the legends. All Potter did was get lucky when he was a baby."

Merlin smiled. "I never intended to be famous," he said gently. "I was a mere servant; I wasn't after fame and glory, I neither wanted it nor expected it. I did what I did to protect the people I care about and help the city I loved. I was just me, and it was the people who built me up into legend. It's the same for Harry. You can hardly blame him for that. He never yearned for fame either."

Malfoy glanced at Merlin uncertainly. "I- I know," he said, blushing. "I know it, but I … just …"

"Don't want to admit it," Merlin finished for him.

Malfoy sighed. "Why does he have to be so damn perfect? He never does anything wrong! He's always the one saving the day, always the one the people worship. It makes it so hard to hate him."

"Then don't try to," said Merlin. "You have this chance for a new life, Draco, don't throw it away because you feel unworthy. Harry's willing to offer you another chance, the entire Order is. Prove to them that their trust is not in vain."

Malfoy frowned, and looked upset. "They have every reason to hate me," he said. "More so than ever. It's because of me that Morgana found out where the Cup was."

"No," said Merlin so firmly that Malfoy looked up in surprise. "I should have seen the signs; it was my fault as well. You could never have resisted her intrusions into your mind; even I have difficulty
repelling her. Do not blame yourself for that."

Malfy said nothing, and Merlin saw that his words had done little to comfort him.

"Did the spell I performed help you?" Merlin asked. "Has Morgana stayed out of your mind?"

Malfy nodded. "Yeah, but the nightmares are still there."

Merlin sighed. "I know. She can't enter your mind, but she can still influence your dreams."

Malfy stood up and crossed to the door. "Thanks anyway," he said, and Merlin was shocked to see the bags under his eyes and his extreme tiredness. He looked far older than a teenager should.

"Draco," Merlin said, and Malfy turned, frowning at someone using his first name. "You can help us you know. Don't feel that you can't."

Merlin thought for a moment. "Though perhaps it would help if you were as pleasant with the others as you are with me. Sulkiness and rudeness won't get you anywhere."

Malfy looked at Merlin for the longest time before finally speaking in an uncharacteristically timid voice. "The difference is," he said, "I have a history with the others. With you, I have a fresh start."

And he left the room without another word. Merlin stayed there in his chair before the fire for the longest time afterwards, staring into the flames and thinking.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna crossed the Entrance Hall, late that evening in silence, far too preoccupied with their own thoughts to speak. Harry clutched the book Merlin had given him tightly under his arm. He could feel an itching in his fingers to open it and devour it, behaviour he would normally associate with Hermione.

Something seemed to have changed within him. Everyone knew now, there were literally no more secrets to worry about. It was though reality had come crashing down. Everything seemed so much more real.

Everything was going to be so different.

Ron stepped forwards and opened the doors the Great Hall. The six of them walked in.

The hall was in chaos. No one was even attempting to eat. Students were rushing here and there clutching copies of the Evening Prophet talking excitedly with their friends, poring over the words on the page, reading out quotes to rapturous audiences. Everywhere there was excitement and joy, but also an underlying fear. Some people were in hysterics, some were crying, but everyone looked delightfully amazed, as they pounced on the students known to be members of the DA, looking for juicy details.

The staff table was no different. Professor McGonagall, Flitwick and Hagrid were being swarmed by the other teachers as they demanded to know the truth, desperate for answers, for confirmation. Professor Connolly was sitting rigid in her chair, staring straight ahead in shock, a copy of the newspaper clutched in her hand. Professor Slughorn was practically bursting with glee, bouncing around excitedly, his stomach jiggling with every movement, his face flushed.

At first, no one noticed the new arrivals, but slowly, those closest began to stare open-mouthed, silent
in their amazement. The silence spread out throughout the hall as suddenly as if everyone had simultaneously been cast under a spell.

Students and teachers alike stared at them, blinking rapidly. Harry noticed Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan at the Gryffindor table grinning broadly, looking extremely amused.

Harry glanced at the others, who were blushing under such intense scrutiny.

He turned back to the students in the hall.

"I know what you're all wondering," he announced, gathering the nerve to speak out in the silent hall. "And yes, it's true. It really is."

The cheers that followed shook the very foundations of the castle.
Harry and the others were sitting in their Potions class the next day waiting for Slughorn to arrive. Harry felt restless; there were far more important things he could be getting on with than this. The thought of Hufflepuff's book lying up there in his trunk in the Gryffindor dormitory tempted him sorely. He'd stayed up late the previous night, after the parties in the common rooms had finally finished. He'd pored over it by wand-light, completely absorbed.

He'd never been as enchanted by a book before; that was Hermione's area of expertise. But reading about Old Magic like this, it was truly amazing. He could almost hear Helga Hufflepuff's voice coming out of the book at him. It wasn't a typical boring textbook; these were her memoirs, recording her experiences, her thoughts, her joys in the magic in her own voice. It was as though there had been no thousand year interval. It was like reading his own mind.

He too was feeling the exhilaration in the magic that both Merlin and Hufflepuff described. For the first time, it actually made him sad to remember that this magic had died out. He could only imagine how painful it had been for Merlin to watch it happen, slowly but surely over so many years.

He was itching to try out more of the magic that Hufflepuff described, but he knew he had to wait for Merlin. By Hufflepuff's account, attempting this magic without supervision was dangerous. It was far too easy to lose control of it.

A slamming sound brought Harry abruptly out of his day dreaming. He looked up to see Professor Slughorn lumbering to his desk, carrying a load of papers. He deposited them on his desk and stood there looking at them all. Harry was surprised to see his face flushed and his hands shaking.

He looked over at Merlin's empty seat and gulped. Then he looked at each of them in turn, lingering on Harry, Ron and Hermione in particular.

"How many of you knew?" he asked quietly. "How many of you knew the truth?"

Harry and several others raised their hands uncertainly - many members of the class were in the DA. Slughorn seemed to deflate when he saw the amount of hands in the air.

"You knew?" he asked, looking disappointed. "You all knew?"

Slughorn looked at Harry and frowned.

"Harry, m'boy! You could have told me! You could have trusted me!"

"Merlin didn't want anyone to know just yet," Harry explained, noticing that Slughorn flinched a little as Harry said Merlin's name.

Slughorn shook his head. "Still! We're all on the same side aren't we? He could have trusted me! What a fine addition he would have made to the Slug Club!"

Ron hastily stuffed his fist in his mouth to keep from laughing. Slughorn didn't notice. He bustled about his desk, rearranging papers and putting up the instructions on the board.

He turned to face them all and grinned like an overgrown schoolboy.

"Just imagine, eh?" he asked excitedly, rubbing his hands together. "I taught Merlin! The Merlin! Of course, he didn't really need the teaching, but still! What a thing to say! There's not many who can
say that! I knew he was an exceptional student of course. Never seen a potion-maker like him! I knew deep down that he was more than he appeared! A whizz at potions!"

"Is that why you gave him an 'Acceptable' in his last essay, professor?" Ron asked innocently.

Slughorn blanched. "Well …" he stammered. "I'm sure he won't hold that against me! I mean, he must have been pretending! So as not to get noticed! Yes, yes, that must be it. It was an act. I mean, obviously it wasn't his best … I would never presume to judge the Merlin after all!"

Hermione was inches away from collapsing into a fit of giggles, and Harry himself was trying his hardest not to burst out laughing. Slughorn loved his celebrities, and to see him like this … worrying about his relationship with possibly the most famous of them all, it was oddly gratifying.

Slughorn stopped his frantic pacing and turned to look at Harry again, a question on his lips.

"He once told me that I had known his father," he said, frowning as he remembered. "That he'd worked in the apothecary in Diagon Alley in the fifties. That- that wasn't true was it?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Matthew Emrys, the man you knew back then, is the same man that you knew here as Martin Emrys. Merlin."

Slughorn's jaw dropped open in amazement. "Extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "Why, I can hardly believe it! All these years have passed and he looks just as he did then!"

"Well, he has gone thirteen hundred years without ageing," said Ron, raising an eyebrow. "A period of time like that is nothing to him."

Slughorn was still blinking in astonishment. "Of course, I know now. But still, to see evidence of it before my eyes! To think of the great Merlin working in a shop! I bought things from him! He must have thought of me as a mere child, yet I used to lecture him about how his true potential was being wasted! I used to try and convince him to leave and seek a more prominent position! At least I know why now why he always refused …. Merlin's beard!" Then Slughorn flinched again. "Well, I suppose we can't really say that now can we? I mean … he has no beard, has he? At least, not now he doesn't. Maybe he did once …"

Slughorn sighed and plonked himself down on the chair behind his desk and ran a hand over his perspiring brow.

"Good heavens," he sighed. "I don't think I shall ever come to terms with this! How can we? Never did I think I would live to see this day …"

Most of the rest of the lesson was spent with Slughorn muttering to himself about Merlin, only in the last ten minutes of the class did he regain his lucidity and began to earnestly question Harry about Merlin and everything about him.

"What is he like to talk to?" Slughorn asked eagerly. "Is he as wise as they say? Is he intimidating when he's behaving naturally? When he's not maintaining his mask, does he act any differently? Does he speak like he's from the middle ages? Does he ever talk about the past? Have you seen him use magic? Is it as amazing as they say?"

Harry was quite relieved when the bell rang at the end of the lesson and he could escape the questioning. Mrs Weasley had said they had to return to Hogwarts, but to be honest, in the next few days, there probably wasn't going to be much teaching going on.

It was the same in every class. Professor Connolly's reaction was particularly amusing. She seemed
to wish to completely ignore everything that had happened and refused to mention it, even though she blushed every time she walked past Merlin's empty seat. It wasn't until the end of the class that she let her guard down. As the bell rang and everyone scrambled to their seats collecting their things together, Harry saw Connolly sit behind her desk and bury her head in her hands and groan: "I gave him detention!"

Dinner in the Great Hall that evening was as rowdy as it had been the night before. The *Daily Prophet* had even more sensational headlines; there was literally nothing else written there other than the news about Merlin and Morgana. Speculations, rumours, conspiracy theories and questions abounded. It was the subject on everyone's lips.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna, who had forsaken her usual spot at the Ravenclaw table in a show of solidarity, sat together, while everyone else in the hall seemed to stare at them. Whispers had followed them around all day. If it hadn't been for his friends and the DA members in his classes, Harry thought he would have been driven crazy by it all. Harry had been the subject of gossip before, but *never* on this scale.

He looked down at his dinner plate and sighed. Luna, sitting opposite, looked up and gave him one of her dreamy smiles.

"Don't worry, Harry," she said sweetly. "They're just curious. It'll all die down eventually."

"It had better," Harry said darkly.

Merlin woke with a start, as though someone had shouted. He sat upright in bed alert for any danger, but he sensed nothing. He was about to lie back down and catch another few hours of rest when he heard a voice speaking to him.

"Is it true?"

Merlin looked over to see the normally empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus there with its occupant staring at him, mouth agape.

"That I'm Merlin?" Merlin asked wryly, swinging his legs out of bed. "Yes. It is."

Phineas looked amazed. "*That* is your secret?" he asked incredulously. "*That's* how you've survived all these years? I could *never* have guessed that! None of us could!"

"I know," said Merlin, who was hurriedly dressing. "That was the point."

Phineas shook his head. "*Merlin!* When you were a student at the school, I could never have guessed this! Even years later! I thought you were just some annoying little Gryffindor toad when we were at Hogwarts together and all the time you were … Incredible!"

"Have you anything else to say?" Merlin asked, turning to face him. "*I do* have two evil sorcerers to defeat."

Phineas scowled. "Ah, your rude manners at least were never faked. Never mind. I came to tell you that the Founder's portraits are *very* interested in speaking with you. As is Professor Dumbledore."

Merlin halted his journey to the door. He sighed.
"Of course," he said. "None of them ever knew the truth, or at least voiced their suspicions when they were alive. I suppose I'd better go and see them next time I'm at the castle."

"Yes, you'd better," drawled Phineas, examining his nails, seemingly trying to regain some dignity after his child-like display of astonishment. "Slytherin is fuming that you never told him the truth, Gryffindor wants to congratulate you, Ravenclaw wants to hex you for lying to her and Hufflepuff wants to give you a hug, though I hardly see how that's possible. She is two-dimensional."

Merlin chuckled, casting his mind back to the times he'd spent with the Founders. Save Harry and the others, they were really the only ones since Arthur that he'd ever been comfortable around. The only ones he'd really come to regard as friends. He'd suspected many a time that they had figured out his secret, Rowena in particular seemed to know the truth, though she never said it aloud. Salazar as well was so shrewd that it would be ridiculous if he'd never suspected him at least once. After all, he'd never told them anything about his past, admitted that he was older than he looked and was always hedgy when they asked him how he knew Old Magic. They would all probably have guessed he was from the time of the Old Religion. Then again, they would probably have dismissed the idea of him being Merlin himself as being too fantastical.

He could picture them all now, and their reactions as Phineas described them. He should talk to them.

"And what of Dumbledore?" Merlin asked. "How did he take the news?"

Phineas rolled his eyes. "As only Dumbledore can. Just sat and gave that infuriating eye twinkle of his. I think he already knew to be honest with you. He wants to talk to you about the Potter boy."

Merlin nodded. "Yes, I thought he might."

He thanked Phineas and left the room. He'd head up to McGonagall's office at the next opportunity he got.

He came down to the kitchen, to find Lupin, Tonks, Teddy and Fred and George were already there. The other Weasleys and Order members had all returned to their own homes.

"Alright, sleepy-head?" Tonks winked at him, as she tried to entice Teddy to open his mouth to take the spoonful of food hovering before his face.

"Leave him be, Dora," Lupin smiled. "He did reveal his identity to the entire world yesterday, I'm sure that merits a few extra hours in bed."

Tonks grinned. Fred tossed a newspaper over to Merlin.

"Just take a look at that," he said laughing.

Merlin looked. The headline read: **Merlin has returned to the world at last! He has come to rescue us all from impending evil!**

Merlin snorted and tried to laugh it off with the others, though mightily uncomfortable. "I'll never be able to read the newspapers again," he laughed. "It'll be far too embarrassing."

Fred and George chuckled. "Just think how much more embarrassing it will be if we reveal to the papers what you're really like," George cackled, a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Ha ha," said Merlin, staring at George intensely. "And just think what I could do to you if you did reveal anything embarrassing."
He fixed George with his best dangerous stare, until George began to look worried. Then Merlin laughed, and George grinned in relief.

"You're too perfect for that," George said. "You don't hold grudges."

Merlin looked away. "Oh but I do," he said quietly. "There's one in particular that I've been holding almost all my life."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment or two, before Lupin hesitatingly broke it.

"So what do you plan to do today?"

Merlin opened his mouth to answer, when suddenly, the door opened and in came Malfoy. He looked nervous as everyone turned to stare at him. He looked as though he wanted to head back the way he came, but Merlin nodded to him and Malfoy seemed to grow in courage. He shot a knowing look at Merlin, and moved around the table to sit on the opposite side, and, seemingly at a loss of what to do with himself, grabbed a piece of toast and started chewing it in earnest.

Lupin and Tonks were watching him curiously and Fred and George raised their eyebrows, but no one said anything. Merlin took this as a good sign.

"I'm not really sure what I'm intending to do today," said Merlin, picking up the conversation again. "I suppose I'd better search for signs for Morgana and Voldemort's base, but I'm not really sure where to begin."

Lupin frowned. "You've already searched old hiding places of Morganas?" he asked, and Merlin nodded.

"I searched everywhere I know that had a connection to Morgana," he said. "Then again, I didn't search in other places." He thought for a moment. "I didn't search old sites of the Old Religion. The magic is still strong there, the only places where it still thrives. It would make sense to locate a base there."

"Then why not go and look?" Fred asked.

Merlin shook his head. "Morgana knows that I know these areas well. It'd be too easy for me to find her."

Everyone slumped in disappointment.

"We might as well go and look," George suggested. "It won't do any harm will it? We don't have any other leads do we? And besides, we might find something else interesting there."

"Good," Tonks announced. "It's settled. Remus and I are heading to my mother's for the day and then to the Ministry to coordinate with the Aurors. You lot can do your little search."

"Little search?" Fred asked indignantly. "I'll have you know that this is extremely vital to the war effort!"

"It's very unlikely she'll be hiding anywhere that I know myself," Merlin said to him, but Fred shook his head.

"I won't listen! We're off on our own quest! Harry got his, and now we have ours!"

Merlin laughed. "Well, I wouldn't like to deny you."
Tonks nodded. She stood up, holding Teddy. "I'll just go get changed then," she said, gesturing to her pajamas. She shifted Teddy's weight in her arms. "He's getting too heavy to lug around now." She glanced at Remus, whose hands were full with the paper, engrossed in one of the more sensational stories about Merlin. She turned to her other side. "Here."

Then, to Merlin's surprise she leaned over and deposited Teddy in Malfoy's arms, taking no notice of the alarmed expression on his face.

Tonks grinned. "See, he likes you!" she said, as Teddy gurgled happily, squirming in Malfoy's rigid arms.

"I - I can't," protested Malfoy, looking down at Teddy like he was an unexploded bomb.

"Nonsense," said Tonks, all businesslike. "It's only until I get changed. And besides, he's your cousin, isn't he? He's family! It's time you bonded with him."

She left the room, and Malfoy sat there in shock. He looked down at Teddy again as though fascinated with him.

"Family?" he repeated quietly to himself, as he looked into Teddy's face.

Merlin smiled at Malfoy as he slowly began to relax a little.

Lupin put down his newspaper and looked over at Malfoy and his son, a strange expression on his face.

"I don't suppose you've much experience with children do you?" he asked Malfoy. "Being an only child and all?"

Malfoy shook his head, looking away. "No." he said shortly.

"Well he doesn't seem to mind," said Fred, looking at Teddy’s contented expression. "Strangely …"

Merlin frowned at Fred, but Malfoy didn't seem to react at all. He just looked away again.

"I'm glad you decided to come down to breakfast instead of hiding in your room like you do every morning," Lupin said kindly. "You'll fit in better with the group this way. We can get to know you better."

Malfoy shrugged. George looked at him closely.

"What brought on this sudden change?" he asked curiously.

Malfoy looked at George, and then glanced at Merlin. "Just … thinking about it. Really thinking."

Merlin smiled to himself, glad that Malfoy had taken something away from their conversation the previous night. It pleased him that he was able to help Malfoy like this. Helping to take him away from the darkness that had almost consumed him. He hadn't been able to do it for Morgana or Mordred, but at least here, he was doing something useful.

"Well," smiled Lupin. "I am glad to hear it. I'm sure you'll make a fine addition to the Order."

"Thank you, professor," Malfoy mumbled to himself.

"I haven't been your professor for over four years, Mr Malfoy," Lupin said in amusement. "And as I recall, you did not hold such respect for my title back then."
Malfoy bit his lip. "Yeah, sorry about that."

His apology was mumbled, and so faint that Merlin could barely hear it, but Lupin nodded to Malfoy. Merlin was thrilled to see it.

At that moment, Tonks re-entered the kitchen and took back Teddy from Malfoy. A few goodbyes were exchanged and then she, Teddy and Lupin left, leaving the kitchen in an uncomfortable silence. Fred and George were regarding Malfoy with interest, but there was no hostility in their expressions.

Merlin drained his glass of pumpkin juice and glanced at the clock over the mantle.

"We'd better get going," he said, standing up. "There aren't really any likely places that Morgana will be hiding, but who knows, I might get a stroke of inspiration going back to all those old places."

Fred and George stood up as well, and Malfoy glanced up at Merlin, biting his lip.

"Um," he began, avoiding Fred and George's looks. "Could- could I come? I mean, I'm not really supposed to be here on my own any way, and I have nothing else to do all day, so …"

"Of course," said Merlin, trying to conceal his pleasure. "I'll be glad of your company. We all will be."

Fred and George exchanged a glance, but they nodded. Malfoy almost smiled.

He stood up as well, and looked at the cluttered table uncertainly.

"Um, shouldn't we, I don't know, clear up or something?"

Fred and Georges faces took on identical expressions of shock, but Merlin kept his blank, despite his own surprise. Draco Malfoy offering to do chores was as about as unexpected as Arthur doing his. He must really have been thinking hard.

"You're right," Merlin smiled. He held out a hand over the messy table. "Feormian fǣt." His eyes flashed, and dishes leapt to life, stacking up and zooming over to the sink where they deposited themselves. The tap turned on and the dishes began to wash themselves until they were gleaming. They were making quite a racket. Malfoy watched them with amazed eyes. Merlin laughed.

"When you spent a great deal of your youth as a servant," he explained, "you have a remarkable ability to pick up simple household spells that'll make the work easier. Of course, Arthur would have killed me if he'd found out."

"Because of the magic?" George asked, frowning.

"No, because of the laziness of it," Merlin said. He moved over to the kitchen door and glanced back. "Are you coming?"

They immediately followed him, and Merlin led them out the kitchen and through the front door. He turned left and began walking briskly down the street.

"Is this wise?" Fred asked, walking in step. "What if someone recognises you?"

Merlin grinned. "Behŷdan mîn ânsîen." He felt the magic flow through him. "Now only you three will see me for who I am."

"That's handy," nodded George. "Bet Harry wished he could do that."
"He soon will," said Merlin.

The others glanced at each other in mild amazement, but said nothing.

They passed a Muggle joke shop and Fred and George peered eagerly in through the grimy windows.

Merlin cleared his throat, and Fred and George fell back looking disappointed.

"Just checking out the competition, Merlin," George said briskly. "Looking for inspiration, you know?"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Aren't there more important things than joke shops?"

Fred and George looked scandalised. "Of course not!" they objected.

"What's so great about it?" Malfoy asked sulkily.

Fred looked at him with the air of an adult teaching a child. "I'll tell you, Mr Malfoy, what Harry told us when he gave us his start-up loan. 'In times like these, we could all do with a few more laughs,' or something to that effect. And it's true. If we lose the power to laugh, what are we?"

Malfoy said nothing. He looked as though he hadn't had occasion to laugh in the longest time.

"Speaking of which," said George, sidling up closer to Merlin. "We were wanting to talk to you about … a proposed business deal, if you like."

"You see," said Fred, coming up on Merlin's other side so that he was hemmed in. "We have a few products named after you, ones we made years ago."

"Merlin's Mystical and Magical Book of Malicious Pranks' … 'Merlin the Great's Magical and Mysterious Concoction for Manipulating the One You Love' …"

"Excuse me?" Merlin spluttered indignantly, but Fred and George waved this aside.

"Just marketing, my dear fellow," said Fred, clapping his hand on Merlin's shoulder. "Clap your name on something and the masses assume it's worth something!"

"Anyway," intervened George. "Well, with your name on them … and you as a particular friend of the founders of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes … well, imagine what it would do for business if you were to be seen buying these products, endorsing them!"

"People would flock to buy them," Fred said.

"And you know, an autograph or two wouldn't go amiss," George winked.

Merlin laughed. "Trust you two …"

He looked at their eager faces. "Perhaps when this has all died down and Morgana defeated … I may consider it."

They both grinned. "Couldn't ask for more!"

Merlin shook his head, still chuckling. He saw Malfoy roll his eyes from the corner of his eye.

"Where is it we're going?" George asked after a few more moments of walking.
"Some of the old sites of the Old Religion," Merlin explained as they turned a corner. "I checked a lot of them a while back, the ones I know that Morgana used as bases or hideouts in the past. But I didn't check other ones."

"We got that," said Fred. "But we're roaming about in central London. There can't be any of them around here can there?"

"No," agreed Merlin. "Whatever sites there are that still have remnants of the Old Religion left have little or no human habitation anywhere nearby. Muggles are repelled by the magic there, and wizards avoid these areas, subconsciously influenced by the magic. We're heading outside of London. But we need to get some transport first."

"Transport?" Malfoy frowned. "Can't you just do that whirlwindy thing you do for Potter and the rest?"

"These sites are sacred," Merlin said. "It's impossible to enter through magic. I don't even like using magic to Transport close to these sites, or Apparating. It feels wrong somehow. We'll get there through other means."

"What other means?" George asked, looking around at the deserted residential street.

Merlin smiled. He stepped up to the kerb and stuck out his right arm. A violently purple triple-decker bus appeared out of nowhere with an enormous bang and hurtled towards them.

"You're not serious?" Fred asked.

Merlin nodded. "I didn't want it coming to Grimmauld Place. People know you two are associated with the Order and with me. They might get suspicious. We don't want Morgana to get wind of where the Order headquarters are. I'm not entirely sure the Fidelius Charm is powerful enough to keep her out if she wanted to get in."

It screeched to a halt directly in front of them and Merlin winked to the others before climbing on board. They followed him and Merlin found them some seats at the back of the bus while he gave some directions to the driver. He frowned in confusion but nodded.

He went back to the others. Malfoy was looking around with barely concealed disgust on his face.

"Something wrong?" Merlin asked him.

"I've never been on the Knight Bus before," he said, still looking around, clutching at his chair as the bus hurtled along some country road, making hedgerows leap out of the way.

"Don't suppose Daddy wanted his precious son mixing with the common folk," George commented, frowning at the expression on Malfoy's face.

Malfoy scowled. "I can hardly be blamed for the fact that my family was wealthy."

"No," said Fred. "But you can be blamed for being snobbish about it."

Malfoy was spared from his indignant retort by the arrival of the conductor. He was young, and pale, looking as if he'd been ill-treated in the past.

Fred and George took out their money bags but Merlin shook his head. "It's a rather long journey," he said apologetically. "Let me take care of it."
They started to object, but Merlin silenced them with a look. He certainly had no shortage of money after thirteen hundred years of saving up.

The conductor took his money wordlessly, yawning as he did so. Then he caught sight of the twin's bright red hair.

"'Ere!" he said pointing, suddenly reenergised. "You're them Weasley twins ain'tcha?"

"Yes," said Fred and George simultaneously, glancing at Merlin. The conductor looked suddenly gleeful.

"But you're friends wiv Potter ain'tcha? You must know Merlin!"

Merlin tried to look inconspicuous, but the conductor's shout had alerted other passengers who gathered around quickly, looking excited.

Fred and George stared back at all the others. "Yes, we do," said Fred simply.

The conductor grinned. "Woss he like?"

Fred looked at Merlin. "He's … not what we expected."

"Can he really use Old Magic?" an elderly warlock asked, pressing closer. "Is it is powerful as they say? Have you seen him use it?"

"Yes," said George slowly, suddenly uncharacteristically nervous. "We have."

The gathered crowd clamoured around, asking question after question of Fred and George, all of them betrayed their joyous excitement. Several of them missed their stops.

"I knew 'im!" the conductor announced suddenly to the tumultuous audience. "I knew as soon as I saw that picture in the papers! 'E got on this bus so he did! I mind when I woz a nipper, me ol' dad used to take me on 'is night shift 'ere. I seen him! 'E 'elped me dad with a pain 'e 'ad in 'is shoulder. My ol' man got treated by Merlin 'imself! I never forgot that! Merlin was 'ere, on this bus! An' I met 'im!"

Merlin raised his eyebrows. He certainly didn't remember that, but it wasn't implausible. He often used his Healing abilities in public, an old habit of his from Camelot.

"What was a man like Merlin doing on this old rust bucket?" a witch at the back of the crowd asked.

The conductor puffed out his chest proudly. "Heart of gold 'ee 'as! Cares 'bout the common man! 'E ain't full of 'imself like others. 'E cares, see? Truly the best man as ever lived!"

The gathered crowd nodded their fervent agreement, their faces flushed, but Merlin squirmed in his seat. He knew this would happen, they all thought him some sort of hero even though they didn't even know him. Still, it was to be expected.

"Hey!" one of the gathered crowd suddenly shouted. "What are you doing here?!"

They were pointing at Malfoy, who was sitting in his chair determinedly looking away from the conversations. He jumped as the person shouted.

"But he's the Malfoy boy!" a witch yelled. "What's he doing here?!"

"Shouldn't you be in Azkaban?" growled the elderly wizard.
"Yeah," another said. "After all those things you did, you have a cheek to come back here!"

"You should be locked up!"

The crowds which had been in excited raptures only moments before had now turned on Malfoy, who sat there, his arms folded, looking moodily at the floor. Some of the crowd had even drawn their wands.

"He's with us," Merlin intervened, and everyone turned to stare at him.

"But he's a criminal!"

"No," said Merlin. "He's working for the Order."

Many were shaking their heads in disbelief. "But how can you trust him?" several asked.

"Look," said Fred, drawing his own wand. "He is one of us. Merlin trusts him. And so do we."

George nodded, and took out his own wand. Malfoy watched them with open amazement.

The passengers grumbled amongst themselves, but soon headed back to their own seats. Malfoy looked at the Weasley twins, a slight frown on his brow.

"Th-thank you," he mumbled.

"No problem," said Fred, stowing his wand away matter-of-factly. "Like I said. If Merlin trusts you …" Fred glanced at Merlin. "Well, I for one will trust his judgment."

The bus suddenly jumped from a country lane, to the middle of a bustling city. As they passed, Merlin noticed many multi-coloured cloaks mixed among the drab Muggle dress. Wizards and witches were gathered on almost every street corner, speaking together in hushed voices, looking thrilled at something.

Merlin's stomach turned over. He knew what this was about.

Fred looked out of the window as well. "My dad said they did this when Harry defeated You-Know-Who as a baby," he said, watching a group of the wizards, who soon sped past as the bus carried them away.

"They did," said Merlin, remembering. "Almost gave us away to the Muggles. Looks like they have a new topic of conversation now."

George chuckled. "Imagine what they'd say if they knew the man they're all talking about is rushing past them on this rickety old thing?"

"Shh," Merlin said quickly, glancing at the other passengers, but he too couldn't help but smile. They didn't say another word the entire journey. Merlin gazed out of the window watching the countryside race past. He smiled as he saw the little farm houses, electricity pylons, motorways and cafes; so much had changed over the years, and he'd watched most of it happen. It humbled him.

About half an hour after they boarded, the bus jumped to a wild forest and hurtled around sharp bends in the road. The conductor came towards them and nodded.

"Your stop next. You sure this is right? There's nuffink for miles about."

"This is perfect, thank you," said Merlin, as the bus screeched to a halt. He motioned to the others to
follow, and together they made their way off the bus.

It disappeared with a bang, and the four of them were left alone in the country lane. The trees were eerily silent, and seemed to press closer to them.

"Uh, you do know where you're going, don't you?" Fred asked warily, as Merlin began to head on through the trees on no particular path.

"Trust me," Merlin said, continuing through the bleak trees.

They did, though with much grumbling and cursing as they snagged their clothes on brambles or stumbled over tree roots. They made such a racket Merlin had a new found appreciation for what he must have put Arthur through on all those hunting trips.

The place had a majestic quality to it, like an ancient hibernation. Merlin could feel the magic present in every tree, every leaf, every animal. But it was weak, like the fading heartbeat of an animal caught by a predator.

After about another half an hour of trekking through identical trees, he found what he was looking for. He pushed aside a branch, and in front of him, there it was.

The others stopped by his side and gaped open-mouthed at the sight before them, a huge ruined castle on an island in the middle of a mist-shrouded lake.

"What is that?" George gasped.

Merlin smiled ruefully. "That, is the Isle of the Blessed."

Malfoy turned to him in surprise. "Isn't that where the Old Religion used to be centred?"

"How do you know that?" Fred asked suspiciously.

"Through my research at the Ministry when I was helping find the Cup," Malfoy answered defensively.

"Yes it was," Merlin said, not taking his eyes from the horizon. "It's been practically hidden all these years. It's only accessible through a certain route through the trees, which I just led you on. I doubt Morgana would be here, the place holds … painful memories for her. But, I may find something useful."

"Let me guess," said Fred, as they all followed Merlin down to the water's edge. "This is one of those places you never returned to after King Arthur's death."

"Actually, no," said Merlin, moving down to the bank. "After Arthur's death, when magic began to be feared again, many Druids and other followers of the Old Religion sought refuge here, myself among them. It survived for a while, but soon, it too dwindled."

"Well, it certainly fell to pieces," said George, looking over to the ruins.

"It was like that even in my day," said Merlin. "Uther ordered it attacked and the High Priestesses slaughtered during the Purge. Even after Arthur's acceptance of magic it never regained its former glory. I never saw it at its height."

"Uther sounds pleasant," Malfoy grumbled, as he stumbled and slipped on the mud on the ground. Merlin didn't answer, but just kept heading down to the water.
"So," said Fred. "Shouldn't there be a boat or something?"

Merlin smiled. He held his hand out over the water. "Naca ætīewan."

A gurgling sound, rather like a plug being pulled from a bath came upon them, and out of the gloomy darkness of the lake, an ancient little boat emerged, preserved by the magic within its wood.

"That'll never hold all of us!" Malfoy said.

Merlin grinned and leapt forward and sat himself in the bow of the boat. "It once held myself, Arthur, Lancelot, Elyan, Gwaine, Percival and Leon in it, plus the rather unpleasant ferryman. It's stronger than it looks."

The others looked doubtful, but followed him into the boat, clutching on to the sides. Merlin's eyes flashed, and the boat slowly began to move through the black waters on its way to the Isle.

It drew closer and closer, and Merlin found himself drinking in the sight of the familiar ruins, unchanged since last he saw them.

As they drew closer to the shadow of the castle, Malfoy shuddered. Merlin looked around at him.

"You feel it don't you?" he asked, watching him closely.

Malfoy nodded. "It's an ancient magic," he said, wrapping his arms around his body. "I can feel it like it's inside of me."

Merlin nodded. "Your ancestors were Druids, they may once have lived here. Their magic may once have helped defend it."

"I feel really strange as well," said Fred, shivering. "Like I want to be anywhere else but here."

Merlin laughed softly. "That's because you use modern magic, that is what feels familiar to you. But for me and Mr Malfoy, this magic is a part of us, perhaps only in a small part in Draco, but there all the same. For me, it's like coming home."

He didn't speak another word until the boat brushed up against the stone walls of the castle. He got out of the boat and wordlessly led them all up into the main areas of the ruins, barely even noticing the awestruck expressions on their faces. There, he paused and looked around, drinking it all in.

He looked at a particular spot with sadness in his heart.

"That is where a close friend of mine died," he said pointing. "Sir Lancelot. He sacrificed himself so that others may live. He truly was a noble man."

He shook himself out of his reminiscences and looked around.

"Well, Morgana isn't here," he said. "Not that I expected her to be. And from what I can tell there's very little that has changed here." He looked around again. He frowned. "Yet I feel that there is something missing. Something that I can't explain."

After a few moments silent contemplation, he sent the others out searching, to see if there was anything to find. He didn't really expect there to be, but something still nagged at him.

He wandered through the ancient ruins, immersing himself in old memories. He didn't feel particularly sad; it was just like watching his old memories from a distance. It almost didn’t feel real. Had he really once walked here with Arthur and the Knights? Was this really the spot that he'd
defeated Nimueh when he was little more than a boy? It almost didn't seem like it was his life.

He entered a stone hall that was still partially standing. He moved down the length of it, and started when he saw Malfoy standing there in semi-darkness gazing at something on the wall. He looked completely intent on whatever it was there.

He jumped when he saw Merlin approaching.

"What is this room?" he asked, glancing back to the wall.

Merlin looked around, trying to remember. "It was a gathering place," he said. "Disused by my time, but still occasionally frequented by pilgrims. The Druid clans and prominent families met here with the High Priests and Priestesses. They inscribed their personal marks on the walls."

Then, Merlin realised. He stepped closer and saw what it was Malfoy was looking at closely.

"It's the Malfoy family crest," he said shakily. "At least, an early version of it, and I doubt we were called Malfoys back then … but it's there."

Merlin nodded. "They must have been important to have their mark here in the most holy of places. Powerful too I imagine."

Malfoy turned away from his family's mark and slumped to the floor of the musty hall.

"Pity we went downhill from there," he said bitterly. Merlin moved closer and sat down next to him.

"Yeah, pity," Merlin said. Malfoy met his eyes. "I won't pretend with you, Draco, I saw your family rise to prominence centuries ago, and I was angry at the way they coveted power and revelled in their greed. Throughout the years the Malfoy name commanded not respect, but fear. I confess I avoided dealing with them at all costs. But," he said, as Malfoy looked away. "I did know some decent ones, ones who escaped the shackles of their bigoted family. I knew a Malfoy very well once, you remember I told you? He was decent, and he was kind. You cannot be blamed for your family's past, Draco."

Malfoy sighed heavily. "It's just …"

He bit his lip and looked nervous. "I have this magic within me right?" he asked. "I can feel the power of the place, my ancestors could use this magic, Morgana was able to contact me because of it. If I have it, then why can't I learn to use it like Potter can?"

Merlin sighed. "Because you have only the remnants of that ancient power within you. It isn't powerful to manifest itself in a spell. Harry has it because the Old Religion gave it to him. He's completely unique. You don't have to compete with him."

Malfoy frowned. "I don't want to compete with him. Everyone expects him to save the day because he has this magic, but I have it too! Isn't that the best way to show everyone that I'm not worthless like those people on the bus were saying?"

"You're not worthless, Draco," said Merlin. "Truly. It isn't through using this power that you'll prove your worth. It's through other means. And I think I know what I'm referring to."

Malfoy nodded and looked deep in thought, and troubled. Merlin felt a stirring of sympathy. Malfoy was at a crossroads in his life. The outcome of this war would decide his future in a way that it would for no one else in the same way.
"Merlin!"

The voice from one of the twins echoed out from the main courtyard, and Merlin leapt to his feet, followed closely by Malfoy.

They found Fred and George crouched in the courtyard. They pointed to a spot a few feet away.

"Someone's been here recently," they said, gesturing to the ashes and scattered charred logs.

Merlin nodded, and bent down to examine the remains of the fire. "It's no more than a couple of days old," he concluded. "It must have been Morgana and Voldemort. They must have come here on Hallowe'en to perform the Cup ritual. This was its ancestral home after all."

He sighed and looked around at the silent ruins. "They're long gone. They wouldn't linger here. I'm not even sure why I bothered to come."

He stood up. "We should go," he said to the others. "We can gain nothing by remaining here."

The others nodded, and followed him as he made his way back to the boat. As they drifted away from the island, Merlin cast one last look back at the place. Why had he come?

"Where now?" Fred asked cheerfully, trying to break the awkward silence.

Merlin tore his eyes away from the ruins. "How do you like the sound of the Cave of Unending Sorrow?"

The rest of the week passed with Merlin spending a lot of time with the Weasley twins, Lupin, and surprisingly but not unpleasantly so, Malfoy. As he'd suspected, he found nothing of note in any of the ancient sites that he visited; indeed, the Old Magic in some of them had drained away completely and been overgrown with Muggle inhabitation. Fred and George came with him every day, Lupin came most days, eager to see more of the historical aspect of the Old Religion, and Malfoy tagged along often as well, though he didn't say much.

Merlin met several times with Aithusa and Kilgharrah as well, but they too had no new leads on where Morgana could be hiding. Merlin tried to hide his frustrations, but found it difficult. Just where could she be hiding?

He spent every other evening up at the castle with Harry in the Room of Requirement, going over Old Magic. He was greatly encouraged by Harry's enthusiasm for it. He had to go to the castle with an Invisibility spell, just walking through the corridors he caught snatches of excited conversations about the great reveal and was sure he'd had been mobbed if he'd been seen.

The DA meetings were louder than ever, it seemed with this latest revelation, everyone wanted to join, eager for the chance to be taught by Merlin himself. There were now far more people in the DA in Hogwarts than wasn't.

"That's great, Harry," Merlin grinned as Harry successfully pulled off a particularly complex spell. "That was perfect!"

Harry grinned back. "I didn't feel exhausted at all that time!"

They were once again in the Room of Requirement on Friday night, and Merlin was thrilled to see
that Harry really had been putting in a lot of effort.

"That's it for tonight," he said, standing up from his place on the floor. Harry looked disappointed, but stood up also, and stowed Helga's book away in his bag.

"I feel really good about it," Harry said. "It's not like Occlumency. After the first few times of doing it wrong, everything seems to be coming together. It's getting easier. I even almost beat you in that duel!"

Merlin laughed softly. "Only because I wasn't trying properly. Voldemort will be."

"Yeah, but still," Harry said, looking exhilarated. "I love the feeling of using this magic. It's so different! I'm really getting the hang of it!"

"Yes, you are," said Merlin quietly, turning away and tidying up the mess they'd made.

Harry frowned. "What's wrong?"

Merlin sighed and turned back to Harry.

"You're doing amazingly well, Harry," he said. "Don't get me wrong. You've come a long way. But, just don't get … too sure of yourself."

Harry blinked. "What do you mean? I thought to be able to do all this you had to have confidence in yourself?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "But there's a fine line between being sure, and being arrogant."

"Are you saying I'm arrogant?" Harry asked indignantly, all happiness gone from his face.

"No," said Merlin, already cursing his ill choice of words. "I only mean that … don't get ahead of yourself."

Harry just stared, and Merlin tried to explain further.

"Harry," he said firmly. "You really are doing well. But remember, this form of magic, takes years to perfect. It took me years to perfect! You're never going to be as powerful as me or Morgana. You've only been training a few weeks, and while you've come a long way in those few weeks, you have to remember, you're going up against foes that have far more training and experience than yourself."

"I know that!" said Harry. "I've always known I'm never going to win on power alone. I don't expect to become all-powerful right away!"

"Good," said Merlin, moving towards the door to the Room of Requirement. "Just try and not get carried away. I know how, tempting, it can be to discover this power and how good you are at it. It can make you feel invincible, like now you have this power you can take on the world. Just … don't get complacent. Remember your limitations."

Harry followed Merlin to the door, scowling.

"I know my limitations," Harry said to him. "I know I can't get carried away. I don't long for power, not like Voldemort does."

And Harry swept from the room, leaving Merlin feeling like an idiot. Why did he say that to him?

He shook his head to himself as he walked along the corridors. If there was anyone least likely to get
swept up by longing for power, it was Harry.

He sighed. He just wanted to keep Harry grounded. He had a lot of potential for Old Magic, and with a bit more training could easily rival Voldemort, but Merlin just wanted to ensure that Harry didn't do something stupid with it. He'd seen it before with Morgana.

But Harry wasn't Morgana, or Voldemort. He wasn't like that. He didn't have to worry.

Merlin stopped at a large window in the corridor and gazed out at the grounds without really seeing them. He should apologise to him.

He turned to head after Harry, but paused. Not right now.

Instead, he turned in the opposite direction. He had something else to do.

Five minutes later, he stopped in front of the Headmistresses' office and knocked. A voice told him to come in.

He opened the door to find Professor McGonagall sitting behind her desk, writing furiously. She blinked in surprise when she looked up.

"Merlin!" she said, standing up hurriedly and moved around the desk. "What can I do for you?"

"Actually, professor," he said. "I was wondering if I could borrow your office for a little while?"

She frowned. "Borrow my office? Why, of course you may ask anything of me and I shall oblige, but why?"

He smiled and motioned to the portraits on the wall. "I have a few people I need to catch up with."

She followed his gaze and nodded. "I see. Very well, you can. Only please don't be too long, I have many things I need to be getting on with."

He assured her he wouldn't be, and waited patiently while she left the room. Then he turned to the four portraits hanging behind McGonagall's desk.

"Well? You wanted to see me?"

The four occupants who had been feigning sleep sat up abruptly and peered at him eagerly.

"Merlin!?" yelled Rowena, scowling. "You really are Merlin?"

"Why didn't you tell us?" Salazar demanded.

"Ha ha! I knew it!" Godric beamed.

"Oh, I'm so pleased," smiled Helga, her painted eyes filled with tears.

He grinned. "I'm sorry I never told you," he said apologetically. "But I'm sure you can understand why."

They all exchanged glances, and grudgingly nodded.

"I believe I already knew," said Rowena. "There was so much about you that was mysterious. I always knew there was something you were concealing from us. I suspected this."
Merlin raised an eyebrow. “Really, Rowena? You’re not just saying that to save face?”

Her eyes flashed in that familiar way they did whenever he teased her. “You underestimate my intelligence, Emrys,” she said, keeping her voice carefully restrained. “The pieces fell together remarkably well. Even Godric was able to guess at it!”

"Yes," agreed Godric, not noticing the implied insult. "It isn't really that much of a surprise."

"I'm just so glad that you no longer have to hide," said Helga, smiling that sweet smile of hers. “If anyone deserves happiness, it is you, after all you have suffered. Never again will you be friendless."

Merlin grinned. "Yes, that's true." He stepped closer to her. “Thank you, Helga."

“What for?” she asked, looking confused.

“That prophecy,” Merlin said. “Remember, on the last day we met, you told me of the vision you had had. About the person who would return the Old Religion. The boy with the lightning scar. That vision kept my hope alive for a long time, stopped me feeling so resentful. And it finally came true.”

He looked to them all now. “Thank all of you. You stopped me from becoming a bitter old man. You taught me that I could once again find happiness, that there was goodness to be found. And this school has helped me to remember that over the years. Thank you.”

He looked at them all, sitting there smiling at him, even Salazar, the usually sulky one. He had that shrewd look in his eye, and Merlin knew immediately that he too had known the truth. He hadn’t expected anything else.

"I'm so proud to have called you my friends," he said to them. His eyes drifted over to Rowena, and she nodded, taking his unspoken message. His eyes rested on her longer than on any of the others.

"Likewise," said Godric, nodding. “We are honoured to have had you as a friend, Emrys. And it’s nothing to do with your real identity.”

Nothing more needed to be said. Merlin smiled one last time and turned away from them all, and cast his eyes over all the other portraits who were sitting there showing signs of excitement and joy, until he found the other portrait he’d come here to see.

Dumbledore was sitting there, a smile on his ancient face, his usual twinkle in his eyes. He beamed at Merlin.

"You knew, didn't you?" Merlin asked him. "You knew from the moment we first met."

"You overestimate me," said Dumbledore, bowing his head humbly. "I did not know. However Fawkes did alert me to the fact there was more to you than meets the eye."

"But you figured it out pretty quickly," said Merlin, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, I did," Dumbledore admitted, winking. "You hid your secret well, but I could see the truth in your eyes. You were far older than you cared to admit, there was such power there beneath the surface. And to add to all of that, you were far cleverer and wiser than myself, and that's saying something."

Merlin laughed. "I suppose," he said. Then he frowned a little. "If you knew, then why didn't you listen to everything I had to say? When I urged you to tell Harry about the prophecy sooner, about the Horcrux within himself, why didn't you?"
Dumbledore's eyes darkened. "I was wrong," he said. "I was foolish enough to think that I knew best. I knew Harry better than you, and I believed what I was doing was the right thing."

Merlin nodded. "I can respect that," he said. "If anything, it's reassuring to know that you didn't follow my every instruction blindly just because of who I was."

Dumbledore nodded. "I was a foolish old man."

"We both were," Merlin said. "Perhaps me more so."

Dumbledore smiled. "I doubt any one could have accused you of being foolish, Merlin. Misguided perhaps, we great men often are."

Merlin nodded. "Perhaps. But I can't afford to be misguided if I'm to protect Harry."

"Harry is made of stronger stuff than you know," said Dumbledore, peering over the top of his glasses. "You shouldn't doubt him."

"I don't doubt him," said Merlin. "I just … worry."

"Worrying is good," said Dumbledore. "It means that we care. No one is without worry for their friends, no matter how competent they are."

"The last time I tried to protect someone like this, they ended up dead," said Merlin. "And though I know now it wasn't my fault that Arthur died, I can't deny the fact that he did die. I worry that I'm not doing enough to prepare him, or that I'm guiding him in the wrong direction."

"Something that kept even me awake for many nights at a time," Dumbledore said quietly. "Your only option is to trust in yourself, and in Harry."

"He has so much pressure on him," said Merlin. "To be the one prophesised to defeat Voldemort, the one prophesised, to bring back the Old Religion, I fear it may be too much for him. I know myself how frustrating it is to believe that your life has been mapped out for you and that no matter what, you can't do anything to change it."

"It is cruel," agreed Dumbledore. "But you and I both know, that Harry can do this, and that he is the only one who can. Believe in his future."

Merlin sighed. "I fear that by pushing him to become able to use Old Magic well, it may change him in ways I cannot yet comprehend."

"It will change him," Dumbledore said softly. "But it may yet be for the better. Be there for Harry; don't focus only on your own tasks. There has been too much solemnity between you all. Too much despair. Talk to him. Don't distance yourself from him."

Merlin frowned. Had he been doing that? Merlin tried to remember a conversation between Harry and himself this past week that wasn't spent talking about Morgana, Voldemort, the Cup or Old Magic.

"Thank you," he said to Dumbledore, smiling. "It's strange to think that I've been accused of being too serious."

"Dark times can do that to the best of us," Dumbledore nodded.

Merlin smiled, and, sensing the conversation was over, began to leave the office. Then he halted, and
looked back at all the portraits.

"I'm pretty sure the Order must have had a conversation in this room about my true identity before now," Merlin said. "How is it you've only just all found out?"

Salazar snorted. "We aren't always feigning sleep you know. Sometimes we are asleep."

Merlin laughed, and was about to leave again, when McGonagall burst into the room looking flustered.

"It's all right professor I was just leav …" he broke off at the look on her face. "What's happened?"

"Death Eaters," McGonagall gasped. "They're attacking a Muggle village right now!"

"I'll be right there," Merlin said, and made to push past her, but she reached out and grabbed his shoulder. She spun him round to face her.

"One more thing," she said, her eyes wide. "You-Know-Who is leading them."
The Death Eaters were attacking the small village from all angles. Houses and other buildings were ablaze, people ran screaming through the streets, pursued by jets of multi-coloured lights, which occasionally met their targets. Cries pierced the air, sobs were all around. And so was death.

Merlin arrived on the scene barely minutes after the attack had begun, but already the Death Eaters were making short work of the people living here. Although Merlin had told Kingsley to begin to have all dwellings in Britain protected with enchantments, this one had been low-priority and not yet properly guarded. There was no real reason for the attack.

Merlin's eyes flashed golden almost constantly as he sped through the burning buildings, sending Death Eaters flying, casting Shield Charms over the frightened Muggles, who screamed when they saw his magic. Several popping sounds alerted Merlin to the fact that Ministry Aurors were now standing behind him, joining the meagre Order force that had been scrambled in a rush.

Merlin felt a thrill of hope; there weren't many Death Eaters here, it only seemed like more due to the devastation and confusion they were causing. They were about to be overwhelmed.

But he remembered what McGonagall had told him. Voldemort was also here.

He felt it within him, like some simmering heat within his very blood. He could sense the presence of Old Magic there in the village. It was weak, not in the least like Morgana's, or even any other sorcerer he'd known back in the Old days, but it was there. It was close.

Out the corner of his eye, he saw Tonks and some hooded Death Eater engaging in a fierce duel while two Muggle children huddled in the nearest doorway, frozen in fear. Merlin hurriedly cast a Shield Charm over them, and not a moment too soon, as Tonks successfully repelled a jinx the Death Eater had thrown at her which veered in their direction and it bounced harmlessly off them. A moment later and Tonks had incapacitated the Death Eater, and held out her hands to the children to guide them to safety. They hesitated only for a second before going with her, their faces lined with tear tracks.

Merlin reached out with his magic to sense all around him. There were no more Muggles in the immediate vicinity. Good, that would make this easier.

"Onsenden mīn andsaca geftieman," he incanted, his voice steadily rising in volume until he was shouting, raising his hands as he did so.

He released the magic and it went out like a shockwave, the ground trembled, houses shook and glass was shattered. Death Eaters fell to the ground while their combatants remained standing. Several began Apparating away in fear.

Merlin allowed himself a weary grin. They were winning.

Then, every sense in his body seemed to tingle in anticipation, and he felt the magic within him rise up in revulsion as he sensed the new presence behind him.

Several screamed in fear, and Aurors began rushing away, dragging Muggles with them, Apparating them to safety.

Merlin turned slowly, and saw exactly what he'd expected to see.
"Hello, Tom," Merlin said with a small smile, remembering that the use of this name was fiercely antagonistic to him.

But Voldemort didn't even flinch. He just took a step closer and looked at Merlin in open awe. His eyes looked him up and down hungrily, and Merlin felt his skin crawl as he fixed his eyes on those terrible scarlet ones.

"I must admit to have been surprised when I discovered your true identity," Voldemort said in a cruel voice, stepping closer. "I knew when I saw your magic at the battle that you were more than a mere modern-day wizard, yet it was not until later I discovered the truth. How it shocked me to find out that such a man as yourself was content to live such a lowly life."

"What can I say?" Merlin said, his hand outstretched, trembling with his suppressed magic. "I like a quiet life."

"But why?" Voldemort asked, an awful smirk on his face. "When you could be so much more? Are you truly content to wallow around in the mud and disgrace and fawning admirers that the present day world is offering you?"

"Yes," said Merlin, still smiling, though with great effort. "And are you truly content to act as Morgana's lapdog?"

Voldemort's expression broke and his eyes flashed in anger. "The Lady Morgana and I are allies," he said fiercely. "Equal in everything. We have vowed to bring down everything Potter and his kind stand for. And we shall do it together."

Merlin snorted. "I thought you always worked alone?"

Voldemort said nothing, so Merlin pressed his advantage. "Such a letdown," he said, pacing to and fro, his eyes never leaving Voldemort's face. "All these years working on your own, to have to share your power with someone? It must be frustrating."

"It is an honour to work alongside the Lady Morgana!" Voldemort hissed, his face contorted with rage.

"But are you?" Merlin asked, staring intensely at the man he hated almost as much as Morgana. "You may be a bigoted, cruel man, but even I know that you are not an idiot."

Voldemort glared but said nothing. Merlin's smile widened. He'd touched a nerve.

"She is using you, Tom," Merlin said, laughter in his voice. "I have seen it many, many times before. You don't know her as I do. She'll abandon you as soon as she gets what she wants, just like I've seen her do before."

"I will not let her," Voldemort said, his voice dripping with malice.

"You will have no choice," Merlin said. "You are no match for her, not even close. She would crush you like an insect. And I for one will not be sorry to see that day."

Voldemort practically growled with rage and, quick as a flash, withdrew his wand from his pocket. Merlin looked at it and laughed. "What, you think you can take me on?"

"I have the power of the Old Religion," screamed Voldemort, looking like a madman. "And that combined with the Elder Wand shall make me all-powerful. The Cup of Life has made me immortal!
I am more powerful than you think!"

Merlin shook his head. "You have not learned humility then? The Cup of Life does not make you invincible; Morgana should know that better than anyone."

Voldemort sneered. "She will not make the same mistake again. The Cup is somewhere you shall never find."

Merlin gave a sneer of his own. "That is not what I was referring to."

Voldemort looked visibly startled, but quickly hid his surprise. Merlin considered this with curiosity. Morgana then had not told him of the power of Excalibur to destroy immortals? Why not? - she knew perfectly well that a dragon-forged sword was a potential weakness. Merlin smiled to himself; good, let that unsettle him a little.

"You speak lies!" Voldemort yelled. "I am immortal! Even the great Merlin can do nothing to stop me now!"

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"Derian!" Voldemort screamed, and a jet of fiery energy came bursting from his wand tip.

Merlin smiled lazily as he conjured a shield to block this rather pitiful spell. True, it was more powerful than anything any other modern wizard could muster, but, challenging it was not. Even Harry with only a few weeks training had managed a spell like this one the other night!

But then, Merlin mused, Voldemort wouldn't be aiming to kill. Morgana would flay him alive if he did. Like he would at least try to do to her if she killed Harry. He could use this to his advantage.

"Not bad," said Merlin, sounding almost bored, as Voldemort ceased his spell, and he lowered his shield. "Try it once more, with feeling."

Voldemort screamed in frustration. "You think you can mock me?" he demanded. "I have power more than you realise!"

"As do I," said Merlin quietly, his voice dangerous, taking a step closer.

Voldemort laughed. "The Lady Morgana has already told me much about you, Merlin. A mere servant in a house of Muggles? You were glorified beyond what you deserved. In truth, your magic was never more powerful than hers. When it came down to it, you were unable to kill her!"

"Unwilling, not unable," said Merlin taking even more steps closer to Voldemort. "I wanted her to suffer. And I ensured that was possible. She was trapped for thirteen hundred years."

"And I broke that spell," Voldemort laughed, his eyes gleaming. Merlin shook his head. "No, you didn't. You aren't nearly powerful enough. You merely circumnavigated it, and I'm sure Morgana had some input."

Voldemort scowled so fiercely that if Merlin had been a lesser man he may have ran away in fright. "Your words are meaningless!"

Merlin smiled. "What lies has she told you? Has she whispered to you about your mighty power, how no one shall stand in your way, how you will crush your enemies and live forever in glory? She's whispered the same things to many others. You are no different to them. You are just as foolish
and arrogant as they were and it shall be your downfall."

"Then why not do it yourself?" Voldemort asked, brandishing his wand threateningly. "If the great Merlin Emrys really is so powerful, then why does he waste time on mere words when he could strike me down in an instant?"

"Because," Merlin said fiercely, his eyes ablaze with his magic. "It is not your destiny to die at my hand."

Voldemort took a step back in confusion. Then he laughed, a high cold laugh that sent shivers up Merlin's spine.

"It is as I thought," he almost whispered. "Morgana was right; history truly has exaggerated your greatness."

Merlin said nothing, though he shook in anger. He wanted nothing more than to attack him at this moment, strike him down. But he didn't attempt to attack him. Not only because he knew he couldn't, the blood in the Cup of Life prevented that, but that this was not his fight. This was Harry's and Harry's alone.

Voldemort seemed to take his silence as a sign of acknowledgement.

"So disappointing," he said silkily, running his long fingers along the length of the Elder Wand. "The great Merlin, a coward."

Merlin still said nothing. He would not react, would not give him the satisfaction. Voldemort wanted to provoke him. Let him wonder, let him be unnerved by Merlin's silence. He didn't need to stoop to Voldemort's level. Let him think what he wanted. Merlin wasn't giving anything away.

Shouts came from behind Merlin, and he reached out with his magic to discover that the Aurors from earlier were approaching rapidly, their wands outstretched, ready to do battle.

Voldemort took one look at them and sneered.

"Pitiable fools," he said. "Soon they will realise just how much more powerful the Old Religion is than them."

"Beorgan ongēan scinnraeft!" Voldemort cast, and an enormous barrier erupted in the street in front of them, blocking access to Voldemort. Aurors futilely cast powerful spells at it, hoping to break through. Merlin could have done it in a single spell, but chose not to. There was no point. There was no spell that could bring Voldemort down. There were no more innocents for him to attack. Let him think he had his victory. Merlin knew better. He knew now that Voldemort was under Morgana's command, and he wasn't too happy about it. That was far more worthwhile.

Voldemort, as he had done during the Battle of Hogwarts, began to summon the whirlwind that would spirit him away. But before the winds closed around him, he called back to Merlin, one last time.

"You think you appear wise and gracious, great Merlin. But really, you are weak. You allowed yourself to be lured here tonight by a man many centuries your junior; one is who is far more capable than a foolish old man! A truly wise man would not have fallen for such a trap!"

And a second later, he was gone.

Merlin watched the spot for a moment, his heart growing cold as a terrible sense of foreboding set in.
"What did he mean?" Tonks asked, coming up suddenly behind Merlin.

He turned to her. "I don't know," he said honestly.

He looked at her for a long moment. "He knew that I would come. He knew that it would get me out of the castle." He looked around the village where all other Death Eaters had also vanished. He realised what had been missing. "Morgana was not here."

Tonks' eyes widened in horror. "Hogwarts!"

Harry was frowning to himself as he sat in his chair before the Gryffindor Common Room fire. He remembered what Merlin had said to him during their meeting. He felt angry, and hurt at Merlin's comments. Did Merlin seriously think he was too arrogant?

He scowled and threw a piece of scrunched up parchment that was on the table next to him into the fire. He wasn't.

What was wrong with what he was doing? He'd vowed at the beginning of the school year to work extra hard, to make sure he was ready for the inevitable final showdown, and now he was fulfilling that vow Merlin was criticising him? He'd worked tirelessly these last few weeks, reading into the small hours of the morning, practicing ceaselessly, knowing that this was the most important thing he could be doing at present, and all Merlin could say was that he shouldn't get ahead of himself? He'd finally found an aspect of magic that he was really good at, this magic felt natural and easy to him now, and Merlin was …

He slumped further down in his chair. It wasn't being arrogant to know that he was good at something was it? This was his only chance at defeating Voldemort! This was the only way he could possibly hope to end this war. He'd listened to everything Merlin had said, he'd bided his time, had patience, not overexerted himself, and Merlin was saying all this?

The injustice of it stung him.

The laughing image of his godfather in his final moments flashed through his mind, but Harry immediately shook it away. This was different; he knew his limitations, knew not to get complacent. But he also knew what he was capable of, and it was more than Merlin was giving him credit for.

He sighed. He shouldn't be sitting here moping about it. He should find Merlin now and tell him all this before it got between them.

He stood up, ready to try and get to Grimmauld Place to speak with Merlin, but shouts from the upstairs dormitories stopped him dead. People screamed.

"What's going on?" he asked, but no one heard him over the clamour as more and more Gryffindor students came spilling down the stairs, congregating in small groups and clutching each other wide-eyed.

"Harry!"

He spun around to see Hermione come running down the girl's staircase and straight at him. "Have you seen?"
"Seen what?" Harry asked, baffled as to what could be causing so much alarm.

Hermione shook his head, and wordlessly grabbed the sleeve of his robes. She pulled him over to one of the curtained windows of the Common Room, even as Ron, Neville, Dean and Seamus came up behind her, looking worried. Hermione pulled back the curtain, and Harry looked outside. His heart almost stopped.

The Forbidden Forest was on fire. Not just any fire. If anything it looked like Fiendfyre, but even more deadly. As far as the eye could see, vast swathes of the thick woodland were engulfed in tempestuous fire. Fierce, blood-red flames leapt from the tops of the trees. The night-sky was ablaze with colour.

Tongues of flame leapt up into the air, taking the forms of twisted evil creatures, like ravenous wolves they consumed the trees. Thick billowing smoke swirled around the forest, sparks ignited within the smoke as though it was a living creature with snapping jaws. This was no ordinary fire. It was magic, and Dark Magic at that.

Harry and some of the others stood frozen at the window. It was as if the entire castle was surrounded by a blazing inferno. Like all that was outside the castle boundaries was hell itself.

"I can hardly believe it," Hermione moaned, her eyes wide as she looked at the sight before her.

"All those poor creatures," said Lavender Brown in a hushed voice. "The centaurs, the unicorns …"

"Who cares about the bloody unicorns?" some other Gryffindor shouted. "What about us?"

"It isn't breaching the protective enchantments," said Hermione. "They only ever went as far as the Forest boundaries, the school grounds don't extend that far. We'll be safe in here."

"For how long?" another student demanded. "That's not ordinary fire!"

"That's Old Magic!" a first-year girl screamed. "It's Morgana!"

"It'll get through the enchantments!"

"No, it won't!" Harry said in a loud voice. "Merlin enhanced the wards with Old Magic; even Morgana isn't powerful enough to break through so many layers of enchantments."

"And where is he?" someone else asked with barely concealed panic. "What if she does get through? Who will protect us?"

"There'll be another battle!"

"Everyone calm down!" Hermione shouted forcefully. "There will not be another battle."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm Head Girl and I say so," said Hermione, practically glowering at the assembled Common Room. "Merlin's enchantments won't be defeated by a fire. You're all safe here!"

No one in the Common Room looked particularly convinced, but they stopped their yelling. They huddled together around windows, watching the windows with horrified eyes, whispering together.

Harry moved away from the windows and motioned for Ron and the others to come closer, as he found a secluded corner for them to talk in.
"You reckon it is Morgana?" he asked, and they all nodded their heads grimly.

"Got to be, mate," said Ron. "Who else?"

"Voldemort?" Hermione suggested.

Harry shook his head. "That's powerful magic, from what Merlin's told me, he can't summon that much. And there's no way he could even attempt to get through the barriers."

"You think Morgana's trying to do that?" Dean asked, biting his lip.

Hermione shook her head. "No. She isn't attacking the school. She's just… I don't know … demonstrating her power to us."

"Like a warning?" Neville asked frowning. "Just to scare us?"

"There's more to it than that," said Harry, a feeling of foreboding increasing in his heart. "She can't just be here to scare us. She's trying to make a point."

"You think You-Know-Who's out there as well? Ron asked.

"Probably," said Harry. "But it doesn't make sense. Why now? Why burn down the Forbidden Forest? What's the point? It's not like it's hurting anybody. And there are better ways to frighten the public."

"Is there?" Ron asked. "I dunno. Setting a fire like that right outside a school full of frightened kids? It'll make the public panic."

Harry considered this, his heart thumping. "Voldemort and Morgana know they can't get into the school," he said slowly. "Maybe they're trying to draw us out."

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Why on earth would we risk going out there?"

"To meet them face on," Harry growled, and clenched his hand tightly on his wand, which emitted several scarlet sparks.

He spun around and ran outside the Common Room with a new-found purpose. He heard Hermione shriek after him.

"Harry! What on earth are you doing?"

Harry didn't heed her, but headed on down the many staircases to the Entrance Hall, his entire body flooded with adrenaline and simmering anger. The others hurtled after him, calling him back.

He skidded to a stop when he reached the Entrance Hall, where all the teachers and several Prefects were gathered. Professor McGonagall turned to face him, her face unusually pale.

"Potter!" she exclaimed, taking a step backwards when she saw his frantic state.

Ron, Hermione and the others had come to a stop beside Harry and Hermione grabbed his arm in a vice like grip to stop him hurtling off, but Harry had stopped dead.

"What's going on?" Harry asked them, watching them carefully.

"You know what's going on obviously, if you came running down here as you did," McGonagall said, her voice shaking.
"There's something else," Harry said, stepping closer to her. "I knew it as soon as I saw your face. What else has happened?"

He looked around at all the solemn faces around him. Each one looked haggard and afraid. Even Professor Connolly looked shaken.

Harry looked directly into McGonagall's face. "Professor," he said, dread creeping into his heart. "What else has happened?"

She glanced at the other professors in distress before answering Harry in an oddly choked up voice.

"I went outside straight away when I saw the fire," she began. "I went to the edge of the boundaries to examine the situation. That's when I saw him, running through the trees, shouting to the forest creatures to run from the flames."

"Who?" Harry asked in horror.

McGonagall winced. "Hagrid."

Harry went cold all over. No …

"Hagrid's in the forest?" Hermione squealed. "But why would he go there?"

"Isn't it obvious, Hermione?" Ron said, his face deathly pale. "Remember during the battle when he tried to protect the Acromantula that were trying to kill us?"

"But he couldn't have been so stupid to do it again," said Neville. "Surely …"

"You obviously don't know Hagrid," said Harry faintly. He couldn't believe it. Hagrid …

"When was this?" Professor Connolly asked of McGonagall.

"About ten minutes ago," answered McGonagall.

Harry looked up sharply, hardly daring to hope. "There's a chance he's alright," he said, desperately.

"Have you seen those flames, Potter?" Connolly asked. "No one could last long in that."

"No!" Harry shouted, and she looked taken aback. "I refuse to believe it! We have to go and help him!"

"Potter-" McGonagall began, but Harry interrupted.

"We can't abandon him!"

"Potter, it's a suicide mission!" Connolly said. "You would be dead before you ever found him!"

"No," said Harry. "I can shield myself from it. I'm the only one who can."

"If that is true, then he's already dead, Potter," said Madame Pomfrey with tears in her eyes.

"NO!" Harry shouted again. "He can't be!"

He looked around at them all desperately, feeling his throat begin to close in on itself. This couldn't be happening. Why couldn't they see that?

"We have to go and help him!" Harry said to them, shocked at how his voice sounded both
demanding and child-like at the same time.

He turned away from them all and attempted to run for the front doors.

"No, Harry!" Hermione screamed and grabbed hold of him. "Don't you see? It's what they want! They know you have the magic to shield yourself! They know you'll go out there to meet them! It's a trap! Can't you see that?"

He tried to shake her off. "I don't care!" he said fiercely. "I can't leave him out there when there's a chance I can save him!"

"No, Harry," begged Hermione, tears in her eyes. Ron too grabbed hold of Harry, also looking shaken. "You can't go out there, mate," he said, looking as though he hated what he was saying. "You'd be killed for sure. We just have to hope. Hagrid wouldn't want you to do this."

Harry looked at them both in betrayal. "I have to try!"

"It's Sirius all over again, Harry," said Hermione. "This is what Voldemort wants."

"Yeah?" said Harry fiercely, ignoring the angry tears that were now flowing down his cheeks. "Well I want nothing more than to face him!"

"You can't fight them, Harry!" said McGonagall, all formalities aside, as she too grabbed hold of his arm. "They're immortal! We don't have the means to defeat them here with us!"

Harry scowled as he remembered that Excalibur was indeed at Grimmauld Place. But he wouldn't be fazed.

"I have to-"

"No, Potter!" said McGonagall fiercely. "It isn't Voldemort that's out there! He attacked a Muggle village earlier this evening and Merlin went off to defend it. It's Morgana out there! And Merlin isn't here to fight her! You don't stand a chance!"

"I've been training!" said Harry just as fiercely. "I might have no chance of defeating her but I can distract her long enough to get Hagrid out of there!"

"Harry, can't you see this is madness!"

"Don't fall for it, Harry!"

"At least wait until Merlin gets back! We'll send a Patronus, he'll be here as soon as possible!"

"We're wasting time!" Harry yelled, once again, trying to wrench himself free of the people clutching on to him. "He might be dying right now!"

"Harry, please!"

This last call came from Ginny, who had followed the others down to the Entrance Hall. She looked at him with such fear that Harry had never seen it's like on her face before. He felt a painful twinge of his heart as he looked at her pleading expression.

"I'm sorry," he said to her, his voice thick with emotion.

He turned to face the others, trying desperately to make them understand. "I'm sorry," he repeated.
He raised his wand. "Abædan!"

The people holding on to him were suddenly thrown several feet backwards, finally releasing him. He made a break for the front doors.

"Impedimenta!" he heard someone cast at his back.

"Hilderand!" Harry shouted, and he was surrounded by one of his Old Magic shields. Spells bounced harmlessly off it.

He heard their cries, but tried his best to ignore them. He couldn't abandon Hagrid. He couldn't stand by when there was a chance he could do something to save him.

He wrenched open the front doors and ran outside.

Immediately his eyes were almost seared from their sockets from the brightness of the flames engulfing the forest. An enormous wall of fire was before him, burning heat seeming to sear every inch of his body while his lungs filled with smoke, despite still being far from the flames themselves.

He looked in horror between the trees at the devastation being wrought there. Hagrid.

Without further hesitation Harry continued running down the front lawns towards the blazing trees, ignoring the pain in his side from running so fast. He felt the blood pumping in his ears. He had to get there.

As he drew closer the heat of the flames buffeted against him and felt like his very skin was being burned off his body. Now was the time.

He thought carefully for a moment; he couldn't afford to mess this up. He had to get every word precise.

"Byrne forþringan."

He barely felt the warm glow in his eyes from the spell with the heat of the flames, as a golden shield surrounded him. He took one hesitant breath before stepping into the flames.

It was like stepping into the midst of an erupting volcano. Fire was on every side, lapping against his shield, clawing away at it, desperate to envelop him as it had done the trees. The shield stopped most of the heat and the smoke, but walking through the flames was like stumbling blindly in the dark. He could make out nothing except the fury of the flames on every side.

"HAGRID!" he yelled desperately, swinging his head from side to side. "HAGRID!"

But if Hagrid had answered him, there was no way of knowing. The roar of the flames drowned out any reply Hagrid might have given.

Harry lifted a hand above his head to shield his eyes from the brilliant glow of the fires and ran straight ahead, hoping against hope he would get lucky.

But after five minutes passed, despair began to sink in. There was no way for him to tell which way to go, no way in which he could hope to find Hagrid like this. He'd literally have to fall over him.

"Hagrid!" He yelled again, though no not really expecting an answer.

His shield was weakening under the onslaught of the flames. He didn't have the power to keep it going much longer.
Why hadn't he waited for Merlin?

"HAGRID!"

"HARRY?"

Harry stopped dead, hoping against hope he hadn't imagined it. "HAGRID? IS THAT YOU?"

"I'M OVER HERE, HARRY!"

Harry felt a brief sense of relief wash all over him. He sounded all right. He stumbled in the general direction of where he'd heard Hagrid's voice.

"I'm coming!"

He ran forwards blindly, desperately casting his eyes in every direction, searching the ground frantically.

"YEH SHOULDN' BE HERE, HARRY! I'M NOT WORTH IT!"

Harry saw a gap in the flames ahead and ran towards it desperately. Was it possible Hagrid had sought refuge in a part of the forest that wasn't aflame?

He leapt through the gap in the flames, and found himself in a gloomy clearing. He fell to his knees and quickly scrambled to his feet again.

The clearing was untouched, entirely untouched. Not a single tree had so much as a soot mark. The ground was moist.

Harry blinked in confusion for the briefest of moments.

"I'm over here, Harry."

Harry spun around to see Hagrid sitting there on a log, miraculously unscathed, looking up at him.

"Hagrid!" Harry yelled in relief. "I'm so glad you're …"

He trailed off however as he looked at Hagrid. He was sitting there, with a calm look on his face, seemingly unperturbed by the flames surrounding the clearing. There was no smile on his face, no sense of gladness at being rescued. He just stared at Harry, stared at him in a way that made his very skin crawl.

Harry felt a strange feeling grow in his very bones. His magic reacted, it writhed within him. He took a step back.

Hagrid smiled in a way Hagrid would never smile. He stood up, and as he did, he changed. Where a second before, had been one of Harry's closest friends, now stood someone else.

Morgana.

Harry took another step backwards in horrified shock. Morgana laughed softly as she saw this.

For the first time, Harry really got a good close up view of her.

He supposed she was beautiful, but the ugly red lights from the intense flames cast such shadows on her face as to render it almost demonic as it set her eyes aglow with a murderous glint. Her skin was
pale and her lips blood red. She wore flowing black robes, and her hair fell about her face in thick waves which seemed to bring out the darkness in her eyes in the half-light.

She smiled.

"Lord Voldemort was right," she said, her voice smug. "You would do anything to rescue your friends. Even one so idiotic as a half giant that befriends monsters. How remarkably easy it was to trick you. Just ensure someone sees me running through the forest, and here you come searching for me."

Her smile widened as she came even closer.

"This century's Polyjuice Potion may be limited to human-only transformations, but the Old Religion has the capacity to do things you could only dream of, young Harry."

Harry forced his fear away and held out his wand in front of him.

"Where is Hagrid?"

She laughed. "You really care about that great oaf?"

"Where is he?!" Harry demanded, brandishing his wand at her, a lot more confidently than he felt.

Morgana watched it in amusement.

"Going to skewer me with your stick?" she asked, a cruel half smile on her lips. "It amazes me how low magic-users have fallen over the centuries. Hiding from the Ungifted like frightened children, waving sticks around at each other with only a fraction of a decent amount of power? It's laughable."

"Is what you're teaching him laughable?" Harry asked, holding his wand steadily pointing at Morgana's heart.

"Yes," she admitted. "Voldemort's powers are laughable. And I'm sure whatever that fool Merlin has taught you is equally so. Your magic can never compare to mine. This fusion of Old and New is pathetic. Like someone like you could ever aspire to the powers of the Old Religion!"

Her eyes glowed golden and the flames around the clearing seemed to double in intensity.

She laughed maniacally. "What could you possibly have hoped to achieve by coming here?"

Harry took a slow step back, searching for any possible escape route, but everything he thought of seemed hopeless. He had to keep her talking.

"Perhaps I came here because I, unlike you, have a sense of duty and loyalty," he said to her, never taking his eyes off her face.

She blinked and smiled. "You know, Merlin once said the exact same thing to me," she said. "And by coincidence, he too was in rather a sticky situation. I only hope I won't have to resort to torturing you also."

Harry couldn't help but be surprised. Morgana had once tortured Merlin? But if Merlin was so much more powerful than her ...

She laughed again and stepped closer.

"It is amusing," she said, turning her head to the side to observe him closely. "Thinking how much
trouble you've caused Lord Voldemort. You're just a mere child with no particular talent."

"And how much trouble did Merlin cause you?" Harry asked, trying to buy time.

"Merlin was a mere thorn in my side," she said, casually walking towards him. "A minor annoyance in my plans.

"Really?" asked Harry. "I got the impression that you really hated him. That he foiled your plans at every move. I think that's why you're doing this, you're afraid of him! You'll never be as powerful as him!"

She laughed. "Merlin couldn't manage to keep me trapped in that cave," she said, her eyes glinting. "He's made so many mistakes it's only through sheer luck any of you have survived this far."

"Funny how you're so much braver when he's not here," retorted Harry, his wand still outstretched. He began to sidle slowly around the clearing back to where he'd come in, keeping his eyes fixed on her. "You'll never defeat him, and you know it. It isn't the power alone that'll do it. He's a greater person than you'll ever be. He doesn't betray his friends."

Morgana's smug smile disappeared and her eyes flashed angrily.

"Did he tell you how he betrayed me?" she asked, her voice dangerous. "Did he tell you how he poisoned me? We were friends! I trusted him, and he willfully gave me poisoned water. He turned against me!"

"He would never have had to do that if you didn't turn against Camelot first," Harry answered back, though he was well aware he didn't know all the ins and outs of the situation.

"He had magic the entire time," Morgana hissed, and the flames seemed to grow again as her anger increased. "He watched me struggle with my powers, saw how much I was afraid and how alone and desperate I was. Did he help me? No! He abandoned me! He didn't offer me the friendship I deserved. He kept his secret! He refused to share it with me in my hour of need. He betrayed me! He poisoned me! He killed my sister!"

Harry blinked, and Morgana looked smug again. "Or have you been imagining him as some sort of hero?" she said. "Does it shock you to discover the darker side of your friend? How he stood by and watched as countless innocents were executed? He watched it. He stood by Arthur's side and watched as these men, women and children were murdered. If that isn't cold-hearted I don't know what is."

Harry shook his head. "You're the cold-hearted one. He isn't like that."

She laughed yet again. "How would you know, young Harry? You were not there. You didn't see the cold-hearted malice in his eyes as I cradled my sister's dying body in my arms. You didn't see the expressionless look on his face as Uther sentenced yet another innocent to death. He served Uther, saved his life! He betrayed his kind."

"No, you did that," said Harry desperately, still edging his way around the clearing. "You just showed people that magic was evil. You didn't even try to let people see the good side of it."

"Are these your words, Harry?" asked Morgana. "Or are they Merlin's? You should not believe everything you hear him say."

"He's a good man!"
"He's a coward," hissed Morgana. "And a fool, and a traitor. I will be the one to kill him."

"Why won't you kill me?" Harry asked, still moving. "If killing is so natural to you?"

She smiled, and her eyes gleamed. "I have better plans for you, young Harry. You can be very useful to me."

"I'd never help you," Harry spat. "And besides, Voldemort would kill me right away."

"Do you really think your Voldemort has much say in the matter?" laughed Morgana, stepping even closer to Harry. "He is nothing but my pawn. He will do whatever I say."

Harry stepped backwards. *Just a little further.*

"He won't like that," Harry said to her.

"There's little he can do to stop me," said Morgana. "He is weak and foolish. I however.-"

"*Weorpan onweg!*" Harry yelled, and a flow of green light came flowing from his wand. Morgana raised a shield in time despite her shock, but Harry didn't stick around to see it.

He plunged himself back into the fiery inferno. He couldn't stop, he couldn't afford to. He had to get back to the castle, he had to figure out where the real Hagrid was; he couldn't fight her.

What had he been thinking?

"*Opstandan styrung!*" He heard from behind, and cast a Shield Charm to counter it. Morgana's spell struck his shield like the force of the sledgehammer and Harry almost lost his feet. The shield was completely shattered, and Harry didn't have the time or energy to raise another.

The flames licked at his skin, pain burned over every inch of his body, but he didn't stop.

"*Gestillan!*" Morgana yelled, and Harry threw himself to the ashy ground to avoid being hit. He couldn't continue like this!

He stumbled to his feet and turned to face her.

"*Weorpan onweg,*" he threw at her, but she blocked it easily. She laughed at his pitiful efforts.

He had to trick her! Wasn't that what Tonks was always telling them? Your power didn't matter, it was how you used it!

He hurriedly threw himself to the ground to avoid another of Morgana's spells as it sailed over his head. He felt like a silly child. Morgana was missing on purpose. She was enjoying this.

What was he to do?

"*Behýdan heonon prætig an!*" he yelled, and, like Merlin had shown him once, he turned invisible.

Morgana started in surprise.

Harry took the opportunity to run again, stumbling through the flames once more, Morgana in pursuit, easily following the racket he was making. This time, her aiming was a lot more precise. She was tired of toying with him.

But before he'd gone far, he felt the spell drain away. He couldn't maintain it and run at the same
time. He remembered wildly everything that Merlin had taught him about how important it was to control these spells, and how perceptions of control could drastically alter in the heat of battle.

The words 'heat of battle' had never been more appropriate.

Harry heard Morgana laughing as he ran further. He had to face her.

He spun around and cast another spell wildly, one he'd seen Merlin use against Morgana during their Hogsmeade duel but never actually tried himself: "Sēcan sār!"

The spell shot off towards Morgana, but again, failed to make contact. Almost immediately, Harry felt a wave of exhaustion sweep his body. He'd poured too much energy into that spell. He hadn't controlled it in the way Merlin had taught him.

He collapsed to his knees. He couldn't move.

Morgana stepped closer and smirked.

"Gelæccan!"

Harry felt his body jerk suddenly and fly through the air until he was lying at Morgana's feet.

She looked down at him with a triumphant air.

"Like I said, Harry," she said softly. "I have plans for you."

"He did WHAT?!!" Merlin yelled in the Entrance Hall.

His magic flared up, and his hands began to glow with fierce magic. Several people backed off looking alarmed.

"He ran off into the forest!" whimpered Hermione, tears spilling from her eyes. "We tried to stop him! But you know how stubborn he is!"

"It's my fault!" Hagrid wailed. He'd stumped in only a few minutes previously, blood pouring from a wound in his head. "I shouldn' have let me guard down! I was only tryin' ter visit Grawp up on the mountains! She sneaked up from behind! I never saw her comin'! I came as soon as I woke up an' saw the flames!"

"It isn't your fault, Hagrid," Madame Pomfrey reassured him as she examined the wound on his head.

But Merlin was by no means calm either.

"WHY did he DO that?" He yelled in frustration. "Couldn't he tell it was a trap? Morgana's out there!"

And with that, he ran out through the front doors, and everyone in the Entrance Hall followed suit.

He ran across the grounds towards the blazing forest, but before he could, a dark shadow loomed over the grounds.

Aithusa landed in front of Merlin and folded her wings. As soon as Merlin and Tonks had realised
Hogwarts was in danger he'd sent the dragons on ahead to check on the school.

"Well?" Merlin demanded breathlessly.

Aithusa tilted her head.

"I saw the Potter boy only for the briefest of moments before he was taken away by magic."

"Taken?" repeated McGonagall in horror.

"Yes," Aithusa bowed her head. "Taken by Morgana."
Merlin stared down at his hands without really seeing them. His heart was beating wildly and every nerve in his body seemed to be tingling in nervous anticipation. But he sat still and silent while the others rushed frantically around the kitchen of Grimmauld Place shouting questions and wringing their hands together.

*Morgana has Harry.*

Surprisingly, his elicited no fear from him. He wasn't afraid, or panicked like everyone else. Just lit with a determined fire as never before to defeat Morgana and get Harry back.

He'd been sitting here for the last half an hour while Kingsley called the Order to the meeting. Many of the others were leaping to their feet and insisting that they leave at once to search for Harry, Ron and Ginny loudest among them, but still Merlin remained seated. That wasn't the right course. They weren't going to find him that way. Morgana had something planned. And Merlin had to find out what that was.

"What are we all waiting around for?" Ron demanded loudly. "We have to get out there!"

Kingsley held up a hand to silence him.

"I appreciate what you must be feeling right-"

"No, you don't!" Ron yelled back. "You don't understand! This is just typical bloody Harry; trying to be the hero, risking his neck for all of us and getting into trouble for it. We need to find him!"

"And where do you suggest we start?" Kingsley asked, a slight edge to his voice. "We don't know where their secret hideout is located. We don't know where Morgana has taken Harry. Where do you suggest we start looking?"

"I don't know! But we should start doing *something!*" Ron said, and Merlin could feel the frustrations in his voice and could see the pleading in his eyes.

"This is my fault," said McGonagall, her hands over her face. "When he ran off into the forest I should have done more to try and stop him."

"It wasn't your fault, professor," said Hermione, whose face was extremely pale. "We all tried, but we couldn't get through that Old Religion shield of his. He knew we wouldn't be able to follow him."

"Why weren't you there?" Ron asked of Merlin, suddenly rounding to face him. "If you'd been there none of this would have happened!"

"Well, I'm sorry I was too busy holding off Voldemort!" Merlin retorted in annoyance. "Next time why don't you try and face him?"

"It was a diversion!" said Ron. "Why didn't you figure that out?"

"How was I supposed to know?" Merlin asked, standing up as Ron's anger showed no signs of abating. "Voldemort's been attacking Muggle villages for weeks now, how was I supposed to know this time was any different? Was I supposed to abandon all those innocent Muggles and stay at the castle on the off-chance that Morgana shows up and sets the Forbidden Forest on fire? There was no..."
Merlin hadn't realised he'd been shouting until he saw the shocked expressions on the faces around him. He lowered his voice before continuing.

"This wasn't anyone's fault," he said, looking around at them all. "It was them. They knew Harry's weakness and they exploited it. We'll never get anywhere if we keep blaming ourselves and each other." He paused here to look directly at Ron, who now looked more afraid than angry. "All we have to focus on now is what to do."

Ron nodded his head, looking ashamed, as everyone else glanced around. The atmosphere changed from one of absolute panic to one of silent determination.

Merlin sat back down again. He noticed that everyone's attention was fixed solely on him, but this didn't disconcert him. Oddly, it made him feel empowered in a not unpleasant way.

"Aithusa saw Morgana taking an unconscious Harry away with her forty-five minutes ago," Merlin summed up, holding the room's attention. "That is all we know for fact. As far as I know, there is no magical way to trace them. Transporting is like Apparition in that respect; I can't tell where she took him. But what we must remember, is that Harry was alive."

"He might not be now!" said Neville, his face crumpled with worry.

"On the contrary," said Merlin. "I think Morgana has no intention of killing him."

Everyone gasped.

"What do you mean?" Mrs Weasley asked in a terrified whisper. She'd been sitting in the corner all evening, silent tears running down her cheeks, clutching the hand of Fleur of all people for comfort.

"Do you think he's still alive?"

"I'm certain of it," he said to her.

"What makes you so sure?" asked Mr Weasley.

Everyone leaned in to listen, eager to hear good news.

"What we have to ask ourselves, is why Morgana is the one who took Harry," said Merlin. "Voldemort could just as easily have set those flames, Morgana could just as easily have attacked that village."

He was met by confused frowns.

"If their sole intention had been for Voldemort to kill Harry, he would have gone to the forest," Merlin explained. "It would have been the perfect opportunity for Voldemort to finally strike the fatal blow."

"So you think that means they're not trying to kill Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," said Merlin. "Morgana kidnapped him. To me, that suggests she has some greater purpose for him."

"But how do we know that she isn't taking him to You-Know-Who to kill?" Ron asked. "They were working together to kidnap him!"

"Because of something Voldemort let slip tonight," Merlin said, his heart hammering. "Morgana is in
control. Voldemort is working for her, even if he doesn't want to admit it. If she kidnapped him instead of killing him on sight like she's done to her enemies before, then she must have something planned."

"Torture?" asked Neville shaking all over.

Merlin shook his head. "No, from what Harry's told me of Voldemort, he wouldn't want to waste time like that if all he wanted to do was kill him, and Morgana is more subtle than that. She only tortures when there's information she wants, and Harry doesn't know anything that they don't; they know that they can't get the location of the Order out of him, they already know he's studying Old Magic, and Morgana's perfectly aware that a dragon-forged sword is her weakness and that acquiring one would be my first reaction to her using the Cup. Plus, she doesn't hate him enough to want to sadistically torture him. There's nothing to gain from it. Not like there would be if it was me."

Merlin paused here to gauge their reactions. They were listening intently, and there were flickerings of hope there.

"I have no doubt that Voldemort wants Harry dead," Merlin said. "And I know he'd stop at nothing to do that. But Morgana is in control. She is the one calling the shots and she wouldn't kill someone that valuable to her straight away."

"I think you're underestimating how evil Voldemort is," said Lupin grimly.

"No, it is you who are underestimating Morgana's power of manipulation," Merlin said firmly. "I know her. I know how she works, just like how Harry knows how Voldemort works."

"How do we know that You-Know-Who just simply won't listen to her and kill Harry anyway?" Fred asked.

"Because Morgana is more powerful," Merlin said. "Who knows what she's promised him? She has some sort of a hold over him."

"It's hard to imagine Voldemort letting anyone have a hold over him," Kingsley observed.

"I know," said Merlin. "But I saw the resentment in his eyes this evening when I spoke about Morgana to him. He says he's honoured to be working with her and loves their alliance. But that just isn't the case. He likes to think he's in control because he summoned her, but he's mistaken. She's using him."

He paused another moment. "If Morgana had wanted Harry dead, she would have killed him, regardless of whether or not Voldemort would be angry at her. She has some greater plan, and Harry plays a part in it. She's stopping Voldemort from killing him. At least for now."

Merlin leaned back in his chair as the room dissolved into whispers. His heart wouldn't stop hammering. Despite his assurances, he wasn't entirely sure what Morgana would be doing to Harry right now. She was far above such trivialities as the Cruciatus Curse. What horrors did she have in store for him?

Kingsley cleared his throat and the room went silent. "If what Merlin says is right," he said, "we know that Harry is alive for the moment. That doesn't however mean we can be complacent. We must find this hideout."

"If she even took him there," said George dully. "If You-Know-Who wants Harry dead so badly maybe Morgana would take him somewhere else so he wouldn't be ... tempted."
"Two secret hideouts?" Charlie moaned in dismay. "We'll never find him!"

"Yes, we will," said Merlin so forcefully that everyone turned to stare at him. "Harry is destined for greater things than to die wallowing in the dungeons of some pitiful wreck of a man. We will get him back."

He avoided their gaze. He could tell what the power of those words had had over them, but he didn't want to see it. Their hope was almost too much for him.

"If you are so certain that Morgana has captured Harry for use in some greater plan," said Kingsley slowly. "Then you must have some idea of what that plan is."

Merlin shook his head. "I wish I did. But it must be something to do with the Old Religion. Some ancient ritual perhaps. I'll do my research."

"Research?!" shrieked Ginny, staring at Merlin as if he'd gone mad. "Harry could be being tortured right now, and you want to do research?"

"What do you suggest?" he asked her trying to remain calm. Didn't she understand how hard this was for him as well? "If you want action right now, then what do you suggest we do? Hm? There's nothing we can do at the moment. We've been searching for their hideout for weeks, we're not about to find it in the next five minutes. If I figure out what Morgana's plan is, we may have a clue to where she's taken him. It's the only lead we have!"

"It's not good enough!" Ginny objected, tears filling her eyes. "We need to do something!"

"What?" Merlin demanded, and the very room seemed to darken with the force of his voice. "We are doing something! Until you can tell me where Harry is being held and give me a plan of how to break him out there is no action that we can take! Our best hope is to use our minds instead of rushing blindly into danger. That's what got Harry where he is now!"

Ginny's eyes flashed in anger. "Are you saying this is Harry's fault?"

"Yes!" Merlin shouted back at her. "Harry was reckless and foolish! It may have been brave and heroic, but he didn't stop to think before he acted. Typical bloody Gryffindor!"

"He was trying to save a friend!"

"Are you telling me you weren't one of the ones trying to stop him before he ran out of the castle?" Merlin asked her. "Weren't you one of the six that rushed off to the Ministry of Magic to save Sirius Black without thinking and almost got yourself killed? Harry was acting impulsively. That's Harry's weakness."

"You're saying Harry's weak because he cares about his friends?"

"No," said Merlin, his voice suddenly going quiet. "If anything, that makes him strong. But it's also something that can be easily exploited. It was my determination to see good in people that brought me misery, even as it brought me joy. Harry's the same. His one great strength is also a weakness."

Ginny shook her head adamantly. "That's who Harry is!"

"I know," said Merlin gently. "And don't tell me you've never been driven crazy by his drive to protect the ones he cares about."

Ginny fell silent and avoided Merlin's meaningful gaze.
"How can you just stand there and criticise Harry's actions and not try and do something to help him? Don't you care?"

Merlin leapt to his feet and all but glared at her.

"Of course I care!" he said. "I care a lot! I've been through this before! I've had to experience friends being locked in dungeons and be tortured by Morgana and not be able to do anything. To have to flee the city in tactical retreat knowing that the ones who're being left behind are being consigned to pain and misery. I know what it's like! I know what it is to be helpless! But if there's one thing I learned it was that rushing back in to save them would have been a death sentence. Far better to bide your time and think of a plan than do something stupid just for the sake of not feeling useless sitting around!"

"That's different!"

"How?" demanded Merlin. "It is no different. Arthur was the same. He was hot-headed, and rushed into things to protect his people, but even he had the common sense to plan before major confrontations."

"Harry isn't Arthur!" Ginny yelled. "You can't treat him the same way! He isn't your long lost friend back from the grave!"

Everyone in the room gasped, and even Merlin recoiled as if she'd just slapped him. He stood staring at her for a moment before answering.

"I'm aware of who Harry is," he said firmly. "I've never once confused them. For one thing Harry's not nearly as arrogant. It is however my duty to protect Harry as he fulfils his destiny, as it was for Arthur all those years ago. Those are the only similarities. I'm not abandoning Harry because I think he can get out of the situation the same way Arthur did if that's what you're thinking. I'm doing this because I believe this is the best way to help Harry."

The room was silent for a good few moments as everyone's eyes flicked back and forth between Merlin and Ginny. Finally Ginny's composure broke and she took a shuddering breath.

"I know," she whispered, looking stricken. "I'm sorry … I'm just so worried. Harry's just so determined to save everyone else he never thinks about his own safety. And that scares me."

"It scares us too," said Luna suddenly, gliding over to where Ginny was standing. "But like you said: that's who he is. He wouldn't be Harry otherwise now would he? That's why we all love him. And that's why we're going to get him back. Trust in Merlin."

Luna smiled at Ginny and pulled her into a warm embrace. When Luna pulled back, Ginny's face was oddly calm and there a new fighting fire in her eyes. She looked at Merlin and nodded.

"I'll trust you," she said. "I know you won't let us down. I'm sorry for doubting you."

"That's alright," said Merlin. "If it had been just a few weeks ago I would have been doubting myself. But I'm not about to do that now."

He turned to the rest of the room. "We need to get moving. Kingsley, you need to get every available Auror and non-essential Ministry employee working on finding that base. Don't let the search cease for even a moment. Scour the entire country if you have to. Ron, Hermione, head back to Hogwarts and get those Founders books. We'll search through them and my old spell book I've got to see if there's anything that can help us here. Kingsley, get the Unspeakables working through the Room of Records again for the Old Religion, anything that could help us. McGonagall, do the same in the
Hogwarts library; there probably isn't anything there but we should check anyway. Neville, Luna, Ginny, get the DA on board with that and get some of them here as well. They can help with the search. The rest of you, start questioning Muggles if you have to. Wizards and Muggles have been separate for too long. Maybe one of them has noticed something, an old ruin suddenly showing lights at night, anything like that. Muggles are more observant than you give them credit for. Morgana's gifted at concealment, but even she can't erase all traces. There must be something. We should all start right away."

Everyone nodded and leapt to their feet. Kingsley looked Merlin up and down closely.

"For someone who didn't want to be a leader, you're doing a pretty good job of it."

Merlin shook his head. "I just have more experience at this than all of you. You've no idea how many raids and infiltrations of enemy castles Arthur and I went through … and a lot of that was without magic. I'm no leader."

Kingsley stood up slowly. "You could have fooled me," he said, with the ghost of a smile on his face, before turning and leaving the room.

Before he left, Bill stopped and turned back to Merlin.

"Can't you do something now?" he asked desperately. "You're Merlin! Surely you can do everything?"

Merlin shook his head. "I'm not all-powerful," he said, his voice choked with a sudden emotion. "I never was. I'm just a man. I'm human, like all of you."

Soon, Merlin was left alone in the kitchen. He collapsed back in his chair for a moment, suddenly exhausted.

Harry … where are you?

---

Darkness …

Pain …

Burning …

Cold …

Harry drifted in the tempest of horrors and pain that was his mind. All around him was darkness. He strained his eyes to see, but everything was like a vast empty void. There was nothing here.

Nothing except pain.

Was he awake? He must be, this pain couldn't be imagined.

All his skin burned, burned like tiny fires were still dancing along it. His very bones were alight with raging flames.

What had happened? Where was he?

Slowly, ever so slowly through the pain, reality came creeping back. Morgana!
He gasped out loud and tried to move but found his movements restricted. He struggled. His hands were suspended above his head by thick chains, the metal digging deep into the skin on his wrists. He was lifted half off the floor by these chains, his feet just touching the ground trailing along it, his entire weight being suspended by those chains. He pulled his feet along the floor and tried to stand upright to relieve the pressure on his wrists, but found himself too weak to do so. Every inch of his body burned.

He cried out in frustration as everything came flooding back. The fires, Morgana … how stupid had he been? Merlin had told him of everything Morgana was capable of, her power, her manipulation … why had he been fool enough not to listen? To think he could take on Morgana himself?

Maybe Merlin had been right; Harry had grown too arrogant with this magic.

Harry struggled some more but knew it was futile.

"Abricaþ benda!" he yelled, trying to summon the Old Magic, but nothing happened. The chains remained firmly in place.

"Abricaþ benda!" he shouted again, concentrating fiercely until he felt himself go red in the face. "Abricaþ benda!"

But try as he might, nothing would happen. He wasn't like Merlin. He couldn't use this magic without his wand.

He slumped down in his chains. There had to be something he could do!

He looked up and tried again to see in the darkness. The floor was stone, that much he could tell, and there were no windows. Not a speck of light reached the room. A steady dripping noise told him he was probably underground somewhere, with water dripping down from above. The room was freezing, but instead of being soothing on his burned skin, the cold air only served to exacerbate the pain he felt.

There was nothing he could do. He was trapped.

Harry tried not to panic. He tried to remember everything Tonks and Professor Connolly had taught him the past couple of months. He had to stay calm if he was to find a way out of this. He had to keep his wits about him. That's what Merlin would want.

Why had he been so stupid?

Harry had no idea how long he waited there, hanging by his wrists in that pitch black room. A steady dripping told him his wrists were bleeding from the chafing of the chains, but he barely felt that over the searing burns on his skin.

He felt himself drifting in and out of unconsciousness. He could barely concentrate on anything except the pain. One thing did break though however, and that was confusion. Why wasn't he dead yet?

He forced himself to try and concentrate. If Voldemort had him, then why wasn't he dead already? He wouldn't be likely to waste time now. What was Morgana planning to do with him? Was there hope? If he wasn't to be killed straight away … maybe he could escape?

He dismissed this immediately however. He could barely even move at the moment, let alone escape, and without his magic … he had to bide his time.
He hung there for what felt like an eternity.

Through the pain, he heard what he thought were footsteps. Surely not? This was a delusion.

Then, a creaking sound, as an ancient wooden door slowly edged open. A blazing torch suddenly came into view and Harry's eyes clenched shut at the pain of the infusion of light after so much darkness. He heard a soft laugh.

"This is amusing. I once had Merlin in the exact same position as I have you now. I have a feeling I'll enjoy this."

Harry stayed silent. Morgana edged closer. Harry hung his head so he wouldn't have to look at her. Simmering hatred and anger were building up inside him and he didn't trust himself to speak to her. He couldn't even look in her face.

She laughed again, and began pacing around him, her footsteps echoing off the stone walls. The torch remained floating in mid-air.

"Not going to talk to me, Harry?" she asked in a teasing voice. "Is that how you're going to defy me? Stubborn silence? I expected greater from the legendary 'Boy-Who-Lived'. I don't see what could possibly have caused Lord Voldemort such trouble. You're nothing but a scrawny boy!"

Harry still remained silent. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of an answer.

She stopped right in front of him. "But you can be useful to me," she murmured.

"I will never help you!" Harry said through gritted teeth, unable to resist any longer.

She laughed. "I did not say it would be of your own free will," she said. "But why not? What loyalties have you to Merlin? He lied to you! I know how he must frustrate you; the great Merlin, a riddle wrapped up in a mystery. Why do you ally yourself with him?"

"Because Merlin doesn't slaughter innocents," Harry said fiercely. "He doesn't kill for pleasure like you."

"Uther killed for pleasure," she said softly. "He slaughtered innocents. Yet Merlin helped him! Willingly served such a monster and protected his son!"

"Uther has been dead for hundreds of years!" said Harry. "Why can't you let it go?"

"Let it go?" Morgana shrieked, and Harry heard the danger in her voice. "You have never had to stand by and watch as an innocent man, woman or child is tied to a stake and slowly burned alive! I have! And so has Merlin! I will never let it go! Uther did that evil, Merlin helped him. And I will make him pay."

Harry kept his eyes resolutely on the ground. He knew what she was trying to do. She was trying to turn him against Merlin. But it wouldn't work. Harry had seen the pain in Merlin's eyes when he talked about Uther and the Purge. He hadn't escaped unscathed.

"I don't know what happened all those years ago," Harry said, fighting with all his strength not to show the pain he was feeling. "You're right- I wasn't there. But I know that Merlin is a good man. He cares about people. He didn't let himself be twisted by hate and fear."

"I grow weary of your hero worship," said Morgana, and resumed her pacing. "We must agree to disagree about Merlin. But that is another matter entirely. I have come to see what you can do for
"I already told you," Harry said. "I will never help you."

"I beg to differ, young Harry," she laughed. "Lord Voldemort and I have plans for you."

"And how did you convince him to agree to that?" Harry asked. "He's wanted to kill me since I was a year old. Why is he suddenly so happy to let me live?"

"Oh, he's not happy," said Morgana swiftly. "Far from it. He had such a temper tantrum that would rival that of even the most unruly two year old. But I … persuaded him to think otherwise. He's agreed that my plan is the better option."

"And what is that?"

"To help me overthrow Merlin of course!" Morgana said, stopping once more in front of Harry.

Harry was the one laughing now. "Merlin was right; you are insane."

"Oh yes, Harry," she said coming closer. "And soon you shall see just how much."

Suddenly she reached out with a grasping hand and seized hold of Harry's arm tightly. Harry couldn't help but cry out in pain as she tore against his seared skin. The shock of intensified pain forced him to look sharply upwards until he was eye-to-eye with Morgana.

She smiled briefly at his cry of pain, but then forced her features into one of forced sympathy.

"That must be painful," she said, in what she must have thought was a kind voice, but one in which Harry heard nothing but contempt. "Running through a forest of enchanted fire was a very silly thing to do. Let me help you."

Harry tried to struggle, but Morgana laid a hand on his forehead, directly over his scar.

"Halian se biernan. Macian se fell fægere. Ece gestillan."

Her eyes flashed golden, and Harry gasped out loud again without meaning to. The pain vanished. His skin seemed to tingle, and he was once again able to concentrate on something other than agonising pain. He looked up and saw the reddened skin on his hands turn pale again. The fires were gone. The relief was monumental.

Morgana smiled at his reaction. "That's better isn't it?" She stepped forward again and reached out with her hand and laid it on Harry's cheek. He recoiled. "Now that wasn't very nice was it? After what I just did?" she reprimanded him. She lifted his chin so they were once again looking into each other's eyes. "I'm not a cruel woman, Harry," she said quietly.

Her eyes glowed golden again, and Harry's chains suddenly snapped and he went crashing to the floor, where he sprawled out on the cold stones. He scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could despite his extreme weakness. She was already standing by the door, holding the flaming torch in her hand.

"There," she said, smiling. "Healed, unrestrained, some light," she sent the torch flying over the room where it settled in a bracket on the wall. "What else could you want?"

Harry opened his mouth to retort angrily, when something wet dripped on his arm. He looked down to see a droplet of some black tar substance sitting on his robes. He looked up in confusion. It
appeared that dripping sound he'd heard earlier was not water. Some strange gnarled plant covered in some black potion was hanging from the ceiling above him.

"Ah," said Morgana, her eyes glinting. "That was very difficult to procure. I understand you have a similar plant nowadays, but with lesser power. You see, the mandrakes I use don't kill someone when they hear its cry. No, they do far worse."

She turned to leave.

"Pleasant dreams."

Merlin flipped through his old spell book for the twentieth time that day. It was approaching twenty four hours now since Harry was taken, and still nothing had turned up.

A smashing sound from his left indicated that Ron had thrown yet another cup against the wall.

"Keep that up Ron and Grimmauld Place will have no crockery left at all," Merlin said absent-mindedly to him.

"This is hopeless!" Ron said, throwing his book away from him. "We're never going to find anything!"

"Keep looking, Ron! There has to be something!" Hermione muttered, her nose inches from another book. Her hair was frazzled and her eyes were puffy. None of them had slept.

"Hermione, we're never going to find anything," said Ron. "Our best bet is to go out and help search for the base!"

"No," said Merlin. "There's something here, I know there is."

"Is that the Old Religion telling you that?" Ron asked sarcastically.

"Yes, actually," said Merlin, opening his spell book again. "It is."

" Convenient," snorted Ron, but Merlin ignored him.

His eyes were beginning to droop with sheer exhaustion, but he couldn't stop. Not when Harry was still in danger.

"What about this?" Hermione asked suddenly. "Salazar Slytherin used spells to trace people through their blood."

"We need a close relative of Harry's to be able to do that one," said Merlin regretfully, having already considered that option. "His only blood family is his aunt and cousin and that's just not close enough. It's only effective with siblings or parents."

"We could try it!" said Hermione, leaping up from her desk.

"Yeah, and how are you going to convince them to give blood to save Harry?" Ron asked sceptically. "They hate him!"

"I'm sure they'd make an exception for this!" said Hermione. "This is life or death! And besides, remember Dudley sent Harry that letter for his birthday? He'll help us!"
"Yeah, but if you read further, Hermione," said Merlin. "You'll see something interesting."

Hermione frowned and looked down at the book once more and suddenly collapsed in her chair looking defeated.

"Only effective if both parties are magical. Muggle blood is useless." Hermione quoted. "Well that's that!"

Merlin sighed heavily and turned another page. He felt like a teenager again, poring over this book in the dead of night by candlelight, desperate for answers about his powers. He hadn't read the book this thoroughly in about a millennium.

There was a noise at the drawing room door and in trooped about half the Order, Kingsley among them. They'd made arrangements for everyone to meet up every two hours to check in.

"Any progress?" Kingsley asked them immediately, but Merlin shook his head.

"Nothing that can help us," he said bitterly.

Kingsley hid his disappointment well. "I regret to say the same is true of the Unspeakables. They found mentions of the method of Apparition you use- Transporting, did you call it?- but nothing to enable us to trace where they went."

"And there's still no luck with the search for the base," said Tonks gloomily, her hair lank and dull. "She must be using a Fidelius Charm, or some old spell we haven't heard of. The entire country has literally been combed head to toe."

"Yeah," said Charlie. "And Kilgharrah and Aithusa have both just told me the same thing. They've been searching as well."

"And none of this is even mentioning the fact that the Daily Prophet has now gotten wind of what has happened," said Mr Weasley, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "The public will panic if they find out Morgana kidnapped the Boy-Who-Lived."

Merlin swore loudly. "Bloody press! Thing were much simpler when we had a town crier. Give him a casket of ale and he'd forget all the news!"

"He's still alive isn't he?" asked Neville, looking at Merlin. "I mean, you'd … I dunno, sense it or something if he was dead wouldn't you?"

Merlin nodded to reassure him, but secretly was beginning to have doubts of his own. Would he? He must! He and Harry were linked in more ways than one. He would sense it.

The meeting lasted only a few more minutes. No one really had anything to say. Everyone was beginning to leave again when Merlin noticed a fair-haired figure enter the room.

"What are you doing here, Draco?" he asked quietly, surprised to see him.

Malfoy looked nervous when everyone turned to stare at him, but determined all the same.

"I want to help," he announced.

"Why would we want your help?" Ron asked suspiciously.

Malfoy glowered at him. "I can read Ancient Runes, Weasley, unlike some. I can help with the research."

"You're going to let him help?"

"Yes."

"It isn't up to you, Weasley," sneered Malfoy. "You don't get to tell me what to do."

Ron glared at him. "I don't trust you."

Malfoy ignored Ron and turned to Merlin instead. "I want to come with you," he said rather quickly. "If you find out where Potter is and go to get him I want to come as well."

"In your dreams!"

"I wasn't talking to you, Weasley!" Malfoy shouted, and turned back to Merlin.

"Please," he said. He had a proud look on his face, but Merlin saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

"We could use everyone we can get," said Merlin, smiling despite the wretched mood he was in.

"Are you crazy?" asked Ron. "Why should we trust a Malfoy when we're fighting Death Eaters?"

"Because I am not a Death Eater, Weasley!" Malfoy retorted. "I'm sick of you making me out to be the enemy! Look!" He wrenched up the robes on his left arm and exposed his inner forearm and the unmarked skin there. "You see? No Dark Mark! Merlin got rid of it! Merlin knows the truth about me! You could never hope to understand. All you see is evil, because of my name. Well, you know what?" Malfoy looked around at them all in defiance. "I'm not going to be ashamed any more. I'm not going to think less of myself because of the evil that's in my family! I am not ashamed to be a Malfoy! I'm not responsible for what my family have done, but I can be responsible for what it will do. Look at the Blacks! You were quick enough to trust Sirius Black and my aunt Andromeda even though they were from a Dark family! Why not do the same with me?"

Everyone looked rather stunned at Malfoy's outburst. Ron's mouth was gaping open.

"But- but-"

"Leave it, Weasley," scowled Malfoy. "I don't care if you all hate me. I don't like many of you either. But I want the same things you do. And if you don't believe me, then take it up with Merlin. He's the one who helped me realise that it was stupid to keep feeling worthless. I'm not. I'm proud of who I am, and my family. I'm going to show you all that there's no shame in being a Malfoy."

Again, stunned silence.

Merlin's mouth broke out into a broad grin. "Then you're very welcome, Mr Malfoy."

The others looked dubious, but no one spoke out against it. Even Ron seemed cowed.

Malfoy nodded and seemed to let out a huge breath. He stomped over to the nearest table and seized the nearest book, which so happened to be Rowena Ravenclaw's and started reading, or at least pretending to, while everyone still stared at him.

Gradually, the room emptied, and Merlin, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Ginny and Neville were left alone with Malfoy who was still silent.

Merlin turned his attention back to his book, smiling despite himself. Everything was coming
The screams were deafening. They seemed to pierce the very heart and soul and Harry sat with his hands clasped over his ears though it did nothing to help.

The torch had long ago crumbled to glowing cinders, and left the room in a murky gloom that seemed to close in around him. Harry closed his eyes. Maybe if he did that he wouldn't see them.

They'd started appearing after Morgana had left. It seemed like days since she'd been here. The screams had barely stopped since. It caused such pain that Harry desperately clawed at his ears to try and stop himself from hearing the cries.

He sensed a presence in the room. A cold and menacing presence.

He couldn't help it. He looked.

The presence was in the far corner of the room, standing there, skin paler than moonlight, ragged dark hair framing a gaunt face.

Harry shook his head frantically. No …

"It's alright Harry, I'm here," said Sirius, stepping closer, smiling.

"No, no," moaned Harry, clutching himself into a tighter ball in the corner of the room. "You're not real. You're not real."

"Of course I'm real, Harry," said Sirius.

Harry shook his head again. "Not real. Not real."

Then, Sirius started laughing, and his laughs echoed all around the tiny room and seemed to pierce Harry's heart with cold shards of pain.

"It's your fault, Harry," Sirius whispered, coming even closer. "It's your fault I'm dead. I came to find you. It's your fault."

"No," Harry murmured, burying his head in his hands. "You're not real. That isn't you. This is a trick of Morgana's. I won't listen to you."

He clenched his eyes shut tightly as another cry pierced his soul.

When would it end? When would she be done tormenting him? He couldn't last much longer!

He lifted his head out of his hands when there was yet another painful cry and saw a different figure before him.

"Mister Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby squeaked, his skin far paler than it ever had been in life. "Dobby is here, sir! Dobby will help Harry Potter!"

"You're not Dobby," said Harry, shaking his head, feeling a deep torment in his soul. "You're not him!"

Dobby's face fell and his ears drooped. "No, I isn't, sir. Dobby is dead, sir. And it was Harry Potter's
fault! Dobby came to help Harry Potter and his friends! And now Dobby is dead. It was because of Harry Potter."

"No," Harry moaned again, burying his head in his arms once more trying desperately to get away from this living nightmare. He couldn't take much more. His mother, father, Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore and now Dobby had appeared before him, all blaming him for their deaths.

He couldn't listen to them! He wouldn't!

"Harry!"

Harry looked up in astonishment to see Ron standing there before him, grinning.

"Ron?" Harry asked in bewilderment. "Is it really you?"

"Of course it is!" said Ron. "I've come to help you get out of here!"

Harry grinned and stood up and moved towards him. "You need to get me out!"

Ron's friendly smile suddenly changed then, and he began laughing maliciously. He said nothing more, just laughed and laughed and laughed until Harry once again clapped his hands over his ears.

Ron became Hermione, who became Hagrid, who became Merlin. Each one of them offered help, each one of them backed off, laughing.

Harry huddled in his corner once again, rocking back and forth.

_They aren't real. They aren't real. Morgana's trying to manipulate you. Don't let her! Don't give in!_

"Help me, please," Harry murmured. "Someone … please …"

"I've got it!" Malfoy yelled suddenly just as day was breaking. Merlin was jerked out of his dozing and leapt up.

"Got what? What have you found?!"

Malfoy pointed triumphantly to a something scribbled in the corner of Rowena's book as everyone gathered around.

"Scrying?" Hermione asked, looking sceptical. "Seeing the future and all that?"

"Scrying isn't just for seeing the future," said Merlin, reading over what Rowena had written, though he’d read it before, and was the one to tell Rowena about scrying in the first place. "It shows many things; the past, present and future."

"But-"

"It's real, Hermione," said Merlin. "I've done it before, many times. Using the crystals in the Crystal Cave and other places."

"Then why haven't you suggested it before?" Ron asked grumpily.

"It's very difficult," said Merlin. "And it has many limitations. Scrying another magical person is near
impossible without alerting them to your presence, especially when it’s someone as powerful as Morgana. And she's an expert at this. She's a natural Seer. I'm not. She can hide herself from me if she so chooses."

"We should try anyway," said Neville. "She might not be expecting it!"

"But there's also the question of whether or not what I'm seeing is accurate or not." said Merlin. "Sometimes it doesn't show what you expect, particularly for me; it shows me the things I should know and not the things I want to know. And Morgana may be able to influence it, lead me down a false trail."

"We should still try," said Ginny firmly, looking over Malfoy's shoulder at the book. "My Ancient Runes aren't so good. What do we need?"

"A basin of water is all," said Hermione, hastily summoning one with her wand. "Then Merlin says the spell and focuses on who he wants to see and-"

"Hold on a minute!" said Merlin. "This probably won't work! I never was much good at scrying!"

"Well, I'm not much good at sitting around waiting and doing nothing and I've been doing that for you, so you're doing this for us," said Ginny, forcing Merlin down into a chair before the basin.

"This won't work," insisted Merlin. "Morgana's not fool enough to make a mistake such as this. She'll have guards against this!"

"Just try," said Hermione.

Merlin looked around at them all and sighed. "Alright."

He pulled the basin closer towards him. He closed his eyes and summoned his magic and more concentration than he'd ever used before.

"Dyegol cnytte, gewitte me yst. Dyegol cnytte, gewitte me yst!" he said, placing the tips of his fingers in the water.

He focused on Harry's face and tried to make sense of the swirling clouds in his mind.

Harry … where are you …

He opened his eyes and looked intently into the water before him. Nothing appeared there. Yet Merlin felt something strange, like some sort of barrier that was pushing him back.

"Ah, well," said Ron, frowning in disappointment.

"He's protected," said Merlin.

"What?"

"I mean," explained Merlin. "Morgana's put wards around where she's keeping him to stop him being scried."

Hermione gasped. "That probably means she's doing something awful to him."

Neville was deep in thought however. "You say she's protecting Harry?" he asked. "Well, can you scry her?"
Merlin shrugged. "She'd notice my presence. And that might compromise any element of surprise that we may need."

"Can't you hide yourself from her?"

Merlin shook his head, but Malfoy gasped. "I think you can!"

He leapt up and ran to the other table and seized Slytherin's book. "Slytherin was a Legilimens right?" he asked excitedly. "I was reading this earlier and there was some mention about how to hide your presence from the other person."

"This isn't Legilimancy," said Merlin.

"It must work on the same principle," said Malfoy, still flipping through the book.

"Morgana was always a greater Legilimens than I was," said Merlin, but Malfoy wasn't fazed.

"She can't have been greater than Slytherin," he said enthusiastically. "I mean, didn't you say once he was the greatest one you'd ever known?"

"Yes, but-"

"Here it is!"

Malfoy pushed the book under Merlin's nose and Merlin read through it quickly.

"Well?" Ron asked breathlessly, whilst the others looked on eagerly.

Merlin bit his lip. "It might work ..."

"Then try it!"

"But it might not!" Merlin said. "There's so much that could go wrong! I have to adapt the spell to work for scrying and even then she might still notice, or even gain access to my mind! She might notice but pretend not to and leak some false information!"

"We won't know until we try!"

Merlin thought for a moment, weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

"What the hell," he said, reading through the spell again. "What other options do we have?"

He repeated the same procedure, but with the new spell, and focused intently on the Legilimancy training he'd had in his youth. Morgana could not know!

"Diegol cnytte, gewitte me yst. Behýdan mec fram se manfull an. Diegol cnytte, gewitte me yst. Behýdan mec fram se manfull an!"

Something happened this time. The water rippled and swirling images appeared there, distorted by sudden waves in the basin. With a thrill of anticipation, Merlin recognised Morgana from the murky depths.

"She's with Voldemort," he murmured, and leaned in closer. They were talking intently together, and Voldemort didn't look happy.

"What are they saying?" Hermione whispered, as though afraid they'd be heard, her eyes fixed on
Voldemort and Morgana on the surface of the water.

Merlin held his hand out over the water. "Leatan us hieran se giedden."

Slowly, voices arose out of the still waters, echoing.

"-must object, my Lady," Voldemort hissed, his red eyes gleaming. "The boy must die! I have waited too long!"

"Patience, my Lord," said Morgana silkily, settling herself back in a throne like chair. "I have my plans for the boy. It won't be long before you'll have the pleasure of killing him."

"I want him dead now!" Voldemort said. "I don't want to play your ridiculous games. All I want is the boy's lifeless body at my feet!"

"And it soon will be," assured Morgana. "Don't worry, my Lord. He's suffering at the moment in any case. Such pain he will have never experienced before or ever will again."

Ginny and Hermione gasped loudly and Ron went pale. Merlin had to force himself to stay calm and maintain the spell.

"You really think you can use the boy to kill Merlin?" Voldemort asked, and Merlin's blood went cold.

*What was Morgana planning?*

"You underestimate me, my Lord."

"You underestimate Potter's stubbornness."

"Oh I know all too well how annoying righteous stubbornness can be," said Morgana lazily. "Merlin certainly displayed enough of it. But fear not. The boy's free will, will soon no longer be his own. He will be as a slave to me. Potter's friends will undoubtedly enact some ridiculous escape plan, and we'll allow it to proceed. But what they won't know is that when he leaves, Potter will be mine. Then, he'll bring Merlin to me, and you can do with him what you will as I kill Merlin. Will that satisfy you?"

"Hardly," said Voldemort. "The boy has an uncanny knack for getting out of tight scrapes. I should kill him now while I have the chance. There's no guarantee this plan of yours will work!"

Morgana laughed coldly. "The Teine Diaga never fails."

Merlin cried out and lost the scrying link as he recoiled in horror.

"Oi!" yelled Ron. "We didn't find out everything we needed to know!"

"Yes, we did," said Merlin, pacing up and down frantically. "The Teine Diaga. *The Teine Diaga? That bitch!*"

"Not that I don't agree with you," said Ron. "But what the hell's the tenor dagger?"

*Teine Diaga,* said Merlin. "The sacred fire. An ancient and cruel practice of the High Priestesses. A form of torture so awful that by the end of it the victim is left with no free will whatsoever and is a slave to the High Priestess."

"What?" cried Hermione and Ginny, both leaping to their feet. "Harry's got no free will?"
"It depends," said Merlin, still pacing. "Some last longer than others. Harry told me he learned to throw off the Imperius Curse, that'll help him. He might still be resisting the effects of it now. We have to get to him before it takes hold completely!"

"And what if it does?" Ginny asked, pale. "Can it be reversed?"

"Only with extreme difficulty," said Merlin.

"Well, we have to go now!" said Ron.

"But where, Weasley?" asked Malfoy, rolling his eyes. "Neither Morgana nor the Dark Lord let slip where they were!"

"It isn't protected," said Merlin to himself as he paced.

"What?"

"If the place had been surrounded by wards or a Fidelius Charm, the scrying wouldn't have worked. That's why they can't scry us in Hogwarts or Grimmauld Place. They're not in their main hideout. Of course! To make it easier for us to break in and get Harry back. They want us to rescue him so we have a ready-made traitor in our midst!"

"But Harry wouldn't betray us!" said Hermione.

"He doesn't have a choice," said Merlin. "The ritual is absolute. He'll have no control whatsoever. The Mandrake is merciless."

"Mandrake?" said Neville.

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"It's the cry of the Mandrake that is used to torture the victim," explained Merlin. "Its cry causes the very worst manifestations of fear and terror possible for the victim. Drives them mad."

"But the cry of the Mandrake kills!" said Hermione. "It doesn't do anything else!"

"Actually, it does," said Neville almost timidly.

Ron wheeled round to face him. "Did you seriously just contradict Hermione?" he asked, goggle-eyed.

"Yes," said Neville, sounding more confident. "The ancient varieties of Mandrake were very different. For wizards, it caused pain to hear the cry, for Muggles it pierced their soul and caused their worst fears to manifest themselves. They're all but extinct now though."

"But Harry is a wizard," said Ginny, frowning. "Why is it affecting him like that?"

"Different rituals have different effects," said Merlin grimly. "Morgana once used Uther's tears in a potion to cover the Mandrake in order to drive him insane. She must have used a different variety of the potion to cover the Mandrake this time in order to affect Harry. Neville's right, it usually only affects Muggles in that way."

Merlin kicked a chair in his frustration. "I forget sometimes just how evil Morgana's become," he said bitterly.

"Well we have to go and save him!" said Ginny. "If that place isn't protected by wards and Morgana
fully intends to let us leave with him, we should go! We should get to him before the Mandrake takes complete control."

"We don't know where that is," said Malfoy. "By the time we find out where they're keeping him, it'll be too late for Potter. That's what she intended."

"Shut it!" Ron snapped at Malfoy.

"There must be a way to find out where Harry is!" Hermione said.

"I'm afraid there's-"

Hermione and most of the others shrieked as there was a sudden flash of fire in the room with them, blinding them all momentarily.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL WAS- Fawkes?"

Ron broke off as the magnificent red and gold bird turned to gaze at him with large sad eyes.

"That's Dumbledore's bird?" Malfoy asked.

"What's he doing here?"

"I think he likes you," said Luna with a smile, looking at Merlin, and Fawkes hopped over to him, crooning as he went. "I think he wants you to look after him."

"Well that's nice," said Merlin, distracted. "But I have a few more important things to be getting on with ...

He trailed off and looked straight into Fawke's ancient eyes. Something seemed to pass between them.

"He knows," Merlin said, suddenly comprehending.

"The bird knows?"

"You can't be serious?"

"He does!" insisted Merlin. "Fawkes recognises me as kin. We're both of the Old Religion. And so is Harry, indirectly at least. He knows where Harry is."

"Well, why don't you ask him and see what he says?" Ron asked sarcastically.

"No need," said Merlin smiling.

Fawkes had turned around and was waving his tail feathers at Merlin, signalling him to take hold. Merlin looked around at the others and gestured them to come closer as he grabbed hold of Fawkes' surprisingly warm feathers.

Luna came without hesitation, but the others looked wary.

"Are you sure about this?" Ron asked, looking unsure.

"Absolutely," said Merlin.

"Shouldn't we wait for the rest of the Order?" asked Hermione uncertainly. "We don't want to rush
"There's a reason Fawkes showed up at this precise moment," said Merlin. "A reason that he waited until now, until it was just the seven of us. I can take a hint. Can you?"

The others exchanged glances, and then moved slowly over and took hold. Malfoy was the last one to come over. He nodded briefly at Merlin, before he too took a great handful of Fawkes' feathers.

"Right, Fawkes," said Merlin. "Take us to Harry."

A second later, all of them had vanished in a spurt of flame that filled the entire room.
With a resounding thump, Merlin, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Ginny and Malfoy were deposited on the hard earth. They all lay there, limbs tangled, trying to recover from being so winded.

Merlin recovered first. He scrambled to his feet and searched the land around them, his heart racing. He saw immediately what he was looking for and his heart went cold. This wasn't going to be easy.

He turned back to the others who were all still lying on the ground, groaning and rubbing their limbs. Fawkes, who had by now vanished again, hadn't been too gentle with them.

"Come on," Merlin urged, reaching out and dragging them to their feet. "We're here, and we need to come up with a plan of action."

"Where exactly is here?" asked Ron, dusting off his robes and looking straight ahead into a dense and unwelcoming looking forest that was straight ahead of them.

"The Dark Tower," Merlin said solemnly.

Ron frowned. "I don't see a tower."

Hermione rolled her eyes, though she looked anxious. "Turn around, Ron!"

Ron did so and saw immediately what everyone else had been staring at in horror. A tall and forbidding tower in the middle of a vast dry and empty plain. "Blimey," he murmured.

"This doesn't look like anywhere in Britain," said Ginny doubtfully.

"It is," confirmed Merlin. "No one's ever settled here, even though Muggles seem to have gotten everywhere else. There's too much evil here. People unconsciously avoid it."

"I can see why," said Neville biting his lip. "Harry's in there?"

"He must be," said Merlin. "This is where the … victims were brought to be used in the ritual. Something about the place makes it easier."

Everyone flinched at the word victim. Hermione frowned.

"You've been here before?"

"Yes," said Merlin shortly.

"I thought you'd already searched everywhere that had links to Morgana?" Ginny asked, and there was an accusatory hint to her voice.

"I did," Merlin insisted, his eyes fixed on the distant tower. "She must have come here after I'd searched it. Just more evidence of the fact that she wants us to take Harry away. She'd never hide him in such an obvious place otherwise. She knows I've been here before."

"It's a trap," said Neville.

"Of course it is, Longbottom," said Malfoy staring at him like he was an idiot.

"But if we know it's a trap, then it's not so bad." Luna said almost cheerfully. Malfoy stared.
"She wants us to rescue Harry," said Hermione. "But she was counting on the time it took us to find him to convert him to this … whatever it is. It might not be as easy as we think. She won't let us rescue him if he's still in his own mind."

"Easy, Granger?" Malfoy asked sceptically. "Was this ever going to be easy?"

"No one asked you to come," said Ron darkly. "You're more than welcome to leave if you're afraid."

Malfoy glared at him. "I said I'd help and I will," he said. "I'm not turning back. Potter was stupid enough to let himself get captured and whether I like him or not we all need him. At least then he'll be in my debt."

Ron scowled but Merlin came between them.

"Leave it will you!" he said fiercely. "There are more important things at work than your petty bickering. I'm not asking you to be friends, just stop antagonising each other! Harry needs us, all of us."

Rona and Malfoy were still glaring at each other, but eventually they nodded.

"What's the plan then?" Ginny asked, turning back to the Dark Tower. "We can't just walk up to the gates can we?"

"Actually," said Merlin. "That's what we have to do. There's no other way in."

"That's insane!" Ron objected. "They'll see us coming!"

"No, they won't," said Merlin. "I can hide us from their eyes. Invisibility spells aren't hard, and they're certainly more reliable than Invisibility Cloaks or Disillusionment Charms. We need to sneak in and search the tower for Harry. I'm pretty certain he'll be in one of the upper rooms, somewhere dark and cold. We need to find him, and get out. If Morgana is there, we avoid her, is that clear? Our main priority is to find Harry and get him to safety."

They all nodded, but Malfoy glanced at Merlin.

"Does that mean that if you see her you won't try and kill her?"

Merlin's face darkened. "Yes, unfortunately. Even if we split up and you get Harry and I take care of her, you'll still be in danger. You can't Apparate away from here for miles around, or use a Portkey. The magic here is too intense for weak magic like that to penetrate it. I'm the only one who could get you out. Then again," he said, and he shook with anger. "If I get the chance to do it without putting Harry at risk … I won't hesitate."

He took a deep breath to calm himself. "This is a mission of stealth, not a full on assault. Don't engage the enemy unless absolutely necessary. We must find Harry. If we start killing Death Eaters left, right and centre we could compromise our ability to get to him. We get in, we get out. Harry will probably be weak and defenceless. We protect him at all costs. You must all listen to me and do as I say. I know what I'm dealing with."

They all nodded, and drew their wands. They all stood proudly and looked at Merlin with determined faces.

Merlin smiled to himself. "Wow, I almost sounded like Arthur there with all my battle talk." He looked again at the tower. "Well, we'd best head off. Every second counts. I'll cast the Invisibility spell now."
But as he turned back to the others, Malfoy spoke:

"Um, what am I supposed to do?"

Merlin frowned, and suddenly realised what was missing.

Ron smirked having noticed the same thing. "Yeah, no wand, Malfoy? You'll have to stay here."

"I never got a new wand after Potter took it and the Ministry confiscated my mother's," Malfoy explained, looking almost sheepish. "What am I supposed to do without one?"

"You can still come," said Merlin, looking at Ron to keep him silent. "I went many, many years at Camelot without using magic in dangerous situations so no one would find out. I survived, as did the Muggles I was with. You can still be helpful."

Malfoy didn't look reassured. "I'm not a Muggle, and I don't have swords or armour or anything like the people you knew. I don't want to be defenceless in there!"

"Then you'll just have to stick with us," said Merlin.

"So, we have to protect him as well as find Harry?" asked Ron, scowling.

"He's coming," said Merlin firmly. He took a step closer to them all. "Stay still," he told them. He held his hand out. "Behýdan heonon prættig an!"

A shimmering mist came over them all, and their outlines became hazy, invisible to all others except themselves and Harry. Merlin looked them over and nodded.

"That'll do. When we get in, we divide and search the place for Harry. If one of you finds him, send a Patronus to me and the others; now that you're invisible your Patronus will be as well, and I'll come and get you all out. You can't lead Harry out if he isn't invisible and only I know how to do that."

"Do you think Morgana and Voldemort are inside?" Hermione asked, slightly nervously.

Merlin frowned and looked over at the tower. He was silent for a long time, listening to nothing but the beating of his heart, exploring his senses.

"No," he said finally. "They might have been there as recently as half an hour ago, but they're not now, or at least both of them aren't. Don't ask me how I know, I just do. She must have cleared out to leave the path open for us to get Harry."

"Seems a little too easy," said Neville.

"Oh, it won't be easy," said Merlin. "She wants us to get Harry, but she doesn't care how many of us she has the Death Eaters kill in the process. She'll want to make it as real as possible. But we have to fool them. We have to get Harry and get ourselves out alive."

The others all nodded in agreement, and Neville stepped forwards, his wand clenched tightly in his hand. "Then we'd better get started."

Merlin nodded, and silently, he led the others on the road to the Dark Tower. He watched it loom closer and closer, leering down at them, a pillar that epitomised fear and despair. Merlin shivered involuntarily.

"So," said Ron quietly, as they came closer. "What do you know about this place?"
"It was a place feared above all others," Merlin answered, his eyes fixed ahead. "It was almost never mentioned by name, so much did people fear it, much like you all do with Voldemort these days. A horror story told to warn children, it was everything that was dread, fear, despair and loss. Even Arthur feared this place."

This didn't make anyone look any happier. Merlin wasn't going to conceal anything from them; they had to be able to anticipate what lay inside. His heart beat faster as he thought of Harry. Would he be alright? What had this place done to him? Was it already too late?

"Harry wouldn't really betray us though would he?" Neville asked. "I mean, he can throw off the Imperius Curse! Couldn't he resist this as well? Couldn't he just stop being her slave?"

"It's not as simple as that, Neville," sighed Merlin. "Especially where the Old Religion is concerned. Something similar happened to me once. Morgana kidnapped me and used a Formorrah, a sort of serpent thing, to control my mind and have me assassinate Arthur."

"But it didn't work though!" said Ginny.

Merlin winced. "It almost did. I had no control whatsoever. I don't remember much of it. But I was completely at Morgana's mercy. I tried to kill Arthur several times, and I almost succeeded. That is how powerful these things are."

The others looked shocked. "Blimey," said Ron. "If they could make you do that … what chance has Harry got?"

When they were only a few feet away from the entrance, Merlin held out a hand to stop the others. He motioned in front, and they all saw that two hooded Death Eaters were standing guard there.

"Swefe nu," incanted Merlin, and the Death Eaters fell into a deep sleep where they stood. He gestured to the others to follow, and led them into the tower itself.

"This place is creepy," said Ron unnecessarily as they looked around the dark, murky gloom that filled the place. The place seemed to exude unfriendliness and fear.

"Split up," Merlin whispered, all too aware that there were Death Eaters all around. "Ron, Hermione, you head off in that direction, Luna, Ginny, Neville, the other way. Malfoy, you're with me. Be careful, this place is known to be booby-trapped. If you all find nothing within half an hour meet back here. But we will, I can sense it. He's here."

They nodded their acknowledgement, and crept off, wands outstretched. Merlin headed off away from them, Malfoy trailing in his shadow. They tiptoed through the stone passages, and Merlin felt his unease growing. He kept his magic at the ready and his senses spread outward, alert for any sign of Morgana or Voldemort in the tower with them. Mercifully, he sensed nothing but several averagely-skilled Death Eaters in the tower.

He wasn't reassured however. Something didn't seem right about this. His heart hammered and Merlin bit his lip. Was this too easy?

Footsteps approached, and Merlin leapt back into the shadows despite being invisible, dragging Malfoy with him. A Death Eater came patrolling down the corridor towards them, his black robes swishing around his ankles, his hood casting his face into shadow. Merlin barely breathed as the man passed himself and Malfoy. He waited until the footsteps faded away before proceeding.

"Something tells me you're a bit too good at this," Malfoy whispered as they set off again.
Merlin chuckled without humour. "I've spent my entire live skulking in the shadows."

Malfy cast him a strange look but said nothing.

After another ten minutes of creeping along dark passages and hiding from two more Death Eaters they had still found nothing.

"Can't you, I dunno, sense him or something?" Malfy asked, after they came out of hiding for the third time.

"I've already tried," Merlin said. "The room is shielded remember?"

"Well, where would she be keeping him?" Malfy asked. "Where did they do this ritual thing?"

Before Merlin could answer, a silvery otter swam into the air in front of him.

"We know what room he's in," the otter spoke with Hermione's voice. "Follow this."

Merlin glanced at Malfy, and without a word, they followed the otter. Merlin's heart beat even faster as they hurried after it. This was definitely too easy.

Another few minutes later, and they emerged into a corridor where the others were all standing around two unconscious Death Eaters.

Hermione stepped forward and spoke in a hushed voice. "He's in there," she said. "It's the only room that was guarded and the door's locked with some magic that I can't undo. His wand was in the room opposite it."

Merlin looked down at the Death Eaters as Hermione handed him Harry's wand. "What did I tell you about not engaging the enemy?"

Ron rolled his eyes impatiently. "We Stunned them without a sound!"

"You'd better hope so," Merlin said. "We can't risk a full out battle. I sensed that some of the Death Eaters I passed were guarded by some Old Magic shields of Morgana's. They'd be difficult to defeat."

"Yeah, but can we get Harry now?" Ginny whispered furiously, not willing to be distracted. "Can you open that door?"

Merlin sighed, and moved over to the door and laid his hand over it.

"Open it!" hissed Ginny, her face frantic.

"Didn't I tell you this place was dangerous?" Merlin hissed back. "I'm checking for any traps."

Ginny glared at him, and Merlin turned his attention back to the door. His unease was growing.

"This is too easy," he voiced.

"Who cares?" Ron asked. "Why are you complaining? I thought this was supposed to be easy?"

"It's too easy," said Merlin, and a sense of foreboding came over him.

"Aliese," he said, and the door swung open without complaint.
The others streamed in immediately, causing such a racket as made Merlin wince.

"Harry!"

Merlin himself stepped in and saw a sight to make his blood run cold. Harry was indeed there, huddled up against the far wall, his legs drawn in tightly to his chest. The room was cold and dark, and an evil existed about the place.

As they approached, Harry looked up. His face was pale, and somehow looked older, though he'd only been here a day and two nights. His eyes were wide and fearful. He shrank back as they came closer.

"It's alright, Harry," said Ginny soothingly. "We've come to help you."

But Harry moved away from her, breathing heavily. "No!" he yelled, and his voice was hoarse. "You're not real! None of you! I won't fall for it again!"

"Harry, it really is us!" Hermione said, also attempting to move towards Harry. "Don't worry."

But Harry was shaking his head, and clenched his eyes together tightly. "No, no. You're not real. I won't let her do this to me. You're not real …"

"What's happening to him?" Neville asked, his voice high in alarm.

"That," Merlin said grimly, pointing upwards. They all glanced up and saw the Mandrake hanging there, a tarry potion dripping steadily from it.

Merlin reached out his hand: "Onbredgan! Byrne!" he cast, and the Mandrake fell from the ceiling and burned with a fierce flame. As it crumbled to ashes, it let out one last piercing cry. Everyone in the room clutched at their ears in sudden pain.

"I've never seen a Mandrake like that before," Hermione breathed, staring at its remains.

"Well, I have," said Merlin, and now he came closer to Harry. "And it's gone now, Harry. I promise you. It can't hurt you again. We are real."

Harry looked at Merlin, shaking from head to toe. He frowned and looked puzzled. He looked over to where the remains of the Mandrake lay.

"You're real?"

"Definitely," Merlin smiled.

"Please, Harry," said Ginny desperately, falling to her knees in front of him. "Come with us. You're not well. We'll look after you. You'll be safe."

Then, impulsively, she darted forwards and planted a quick kiss on his lips. Harry barely reacted other than to stare at her with dumbfounded silence. He blinked.

Luna knelt down at his other side. She reached out and took one of his hands in hers. "Feel that?" she asked smiling. "We're here, Harry. Your friends have come for you."

Harry stared at her, and looked around at them all again, this time, his face starting to relax. He stood up slowly with the help of Ginny and Luna, and gave them a shaky smile. He was unsteady on his feet and looked extremely weak.
"What took you so long?" he joked feebly, but Harry saw the darkness in his eyes. He shook almost uncontrollably.

"Come on," urged Merlin. Again, his sense of danger was increasing.

They all filed out the tiny room, but as soon as Harry took one step beyond the door, a dreadful wailing sound filled the tower, so loud it made Merlin's ears ring. Almost immediately, shouts could be heard from the tower, and the sound of many people running towards them. A shimmering filled the air and Merlin realised suddenly that his Invisibility spells had somehow been lifted.

Jets of light came soaring over their heads as Death Eaters rushed onto the scene and cried out in rough voices.

The others raised their wands and a battle began. Multi-coloured sparks burst everywhere in the tiny corridors as spells collided and the words of countless incantations filled the air. Harry collapsed against the opposite wall in exhaustion, unable to do anything to help himself.

"Merlin! Get us out of here!" Ginny screamed as more and more curses came flying at them.

Merlin tried to summon the Transporting spell, but couldn't manage it.

"I can't!" he yelled. "She's warded the place against it!"

He didn't have time to break her enchantments right now. The others needed help. Harry was vulnerable.

He made a split second decision.

"Malfoy!" he yelled, dodging another spell sent by a Death Eater and moving over to where Malfoy was sheltering from the battle. "Here! Take Harry's wand and get him out of here! Head for the forest. We'll meet you there!"

Malfoy's eyes widened, but he didn't object. He took the proffered wand and ran over and dragged Harry to his feet none too gently.

He hesitated for a second, then lifted Harry's wand and cast a powerful Shield Charm, seized Harry's robes and ran through the fight with him heading for the way out. The Death Eaters sent curses after him, but none reached their mark.

"Traitor!" one Death Eater yelled at him, who Merlin recognised from the wanted posters as being Rodolphus Lestrange, Bellatrix's husband. "You've betrayed your family!"

Malfoy glared at him, and sent a vicious spell at him. "No, I'm helping my family!"

But Malfoy didn't stick around, and instead raced off again, ducking as his uncle sent another Killing Curse after him.

When Malfoy and Harry were out of sight, Merlin stepped up. Now he could focus.

"Acwellan!" he yelled, and sent several Death Eaters flying. Others were barely impacted though; Morgana had shielded them well.

"Avada Kedavra!" several of them screamed at once, and Merlin immediately raised a shield to protect himself and the others.

The Killing Curses slammed against his shield with the force of several sledgehammers and
resounded with a loud clanging sound, like some giant bell. The shield absorbed the spells easily, but something was off. Merlin frowned. The spells were more powerful than usual, and Merlin felt his shield weaken slightly and he had to reinforce it quickly.

What had happened? Merlin stared at the wands the Death Eaters were holding, and a chill went through him. There was something powerful there.

"Mægenþise!" he yelled, and great blasts of energy issued forth from his palm to crash upon the shields Morgana had given them. He had to break them down; the spells from the others would be useless otherwise.

One last spell and several shields flickered out of existence.

"Stupefy!"

Red lights came from all around Merlin and flew towards the Death Eaters. They raised shields however and the spells rebounded and hit the stone walls all around them, bringing dust and stone raining down from the ceiling.

The Death Eaters sent spell after spell back at them, and though Hermione and the others raised shields, the spells were too severe, and broke through them easily, causing them to have to throw themselves to the ground to avoid being hit.

Merlin frowned. Those shields had been powerful; they'd all perfected strong shields during their training sessions. Why had those spells broken so easily through them, passing through as if they weren't there?

"Hæte þurhstrang!" Merlin cried, and two Death Eaters fell to the floor, their bodies black and charred.

Several Death Eaters leapt back in shock and ceased their attack, and Merlin finally realised what was going on.

Their wands were different. They weren't the typical Ollivander wands of this century. Several of them possessed wands made from ancient materials, enhanced with powerful magic. Morgana had armed them with wands capable of inflicting far more damage than these men would otherwise be able to produce.

Merlin's face darkened, but he allowed himself a small grim smile. Morgana thought she could win by giving them powerful wands? She wanted to catch him unawares. She knew that he expected their magic to much weaker than this. She was trying to catch him and the others out.

Well, he smiled to himself. *Let her play that game. I won't be defeated by something as weak as this.*

Even enhanced, the magic these wands could produce was no match for his. Time to take a leaf out of Harry's book.

"Forniman wēōpen!" he yelled, and, like Harry's favourite Expelliarmus Charm, the wands of the three Death Eaters closest to him flew high into the air, prompting terrified cries of shock from their owners. "Byrne!" Merlin shouted, and the wands burst into flame before they could be picked up again.

The Death Eaters rounded on him, glaring at him with blazing eyes. But wandless, they could do nothing. They were soon overpowered by Ginny and Luna, who sent them flying backwards several feet into a stone wall where they crumpled, blood dripping down their temples.
Then, Merlin heard a cry of pain from his own side. Neville had fallen to the ground, clutching his arm which was gushing with blood.

"Reducto!" Hermione cried, trying to break through their shields, but to no avail, and she had to duck suddenly as a Killing Curse came sailing her way.

Merlin looked around frantically. They weren't about to break through their shields on their own. He sensed also at the back of his mind, the presence of dozens of other Death Eaters, making their way quickly towards them. They had to get out.

"Forniman wēopen!" he yelled again, and yet more wands went flying through the air, and as before he set them quickly aflame.

"Hilderand se belewit!" he incanted, and a massive barrier erupted in the corridor before them, blocking the Death Eaters in the corridor with them from pursuing.

"Come on!" he called to the others, stooping down and pulling Neville to his feet. "We need to get out!"

His heart raced as they all ran down the nearest staircase. More and more Death Eaters were running through the tower towards them, Merlin could sense them on the staircase above them, unable to reach them with their spells yet. He cast another barrier on the stairs behind him.

They'd gotten what they'd come for, now it was time to leave and take Harry, and the now injured Neville with them. Merlin was all too aware that Morgana herself may soon turn up.

Two Death Eaters appeared on the stairs in front of them suddenly, coming out of an adjoining corridor. They raised their wands-

"Reducto!" Ron and Ginny shouted simultaneously, and the Death Eaters were blasted backwards and fell unconscious. Luckily, they hadn't been some of the ones given protective shields and enhanced wands by Morgana.

They were almost out now and Merlin could begin to see daylight again. Hope flared.

They all rushed out into the morning sun, and Merlin squeezed his eyes together with the sudden glare. He opened them again, and saw the forest ahead of them, hazy on the near horizon.

"Into the trees!" he shouted to the others, who never ceased in their running.

Spells from the windows of the tower came pelting after them, hitting the ground nearby, and causing massive craters all around.

"Here," Merlin said to Luna, giving her Neville who was barely managing to run, clutching at his bloody arm.

They ran a little further, but Merlin soon stopped and turned back. Here was far enough.

"Merlin!" Ginny called to him, stopping as well. "What are you doing?"

"Keep going!" Merlin ordered. "Wait for me in the forest. Find Harry and Malfoy!"

She looked hesitant, but nodded and continued running, dodging the spells that were still issuing from the dark windows in the tower.

Merlin faced the tower and set his face in a determined grimace. Time to stop this.
He lifted both his arms up so that his palms were facing the tower and summoned the most powerful magic he could muster.

"Eorðe ac stanas hiersumæ þæ. Ic can stanæs tobrytan. Hiersumæ þæ! Tōberstan! Gebrecan!" he muttered, feeling his power grow with every word until it rang out like thunder. His eyes flashed.

A terrible shockwave issued out from where he was standing, spreading out through the ground towards the tower like a ripple in a stream. The ground trembled and rumbled like some great monster was stirring beneath the surface.

Merlin poured ever more energy from himself into the spell, letting the power grow and grow until it was a raging torrent, and the earth shook.

The tower wobbled and every stone seemed to cry out in protest as the rumbling sound grew ever louder. With one last flourish, Merlin sent every last drop of magic he possessed into the spell and his eyes flashed once more.

With a resounding crash that jarred Merlin to his very bones, the tower began to crumble into dust. Merlin watched its descent with his eyes, focusing with every fibre of his being as the centuries old stone turned to dust.

After what seemed like an age of earthquakes and deafening sounds, the tower was finally no more. All that remained was heaps of rubble in that vast plain as dust swirled through the air.

Merlin breathed a monumental sigh of relief and of exhaustion. He hadn't performed a spell as powerful as that in well over a thousand years. He looked at the rubble, a feeling of grim satisfaction taking over. The evil that resided in that tower was finally gone.

He turned back to the forest and walked towards it slowly, recovering from that phenomenal spell. Every inch of his body was tingling with the power he had just released and his head was spinning. He'd missed using magic like that.

Once he stopped shaking from the adrenaline of it, he broke out into a run and made for the dark trees. He hoped the others hadn't gone too far in. The forest played tricks on the mind and let its wanderers get lost in aimless circles.

But as it turned out, he needn't have worried. Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, Luna, Malfoy and Harry were all standing at the very edge of the trees, semi-concealed in darkness. They were all watching him with open mouths.

"Well," said Merlin bracingly. "Hadn't we all best get back to Grimmauld Place?"

They nodded weakly, still watching him. Merlin looked down at Neville and Harry who were sitting on the ground. Both were pale and trembling; Harry with fatigue, Neville with blood-loss.

"Hold on," Merlin said, extending his arm so he could Transport them all back to Grimmauld Place, but before they could grab hold, there was a spurt of flame and a flapping of wings.

"Fawkes?" Merlin asked, as the bird settled himself on his shoulder. "Why is it you only ever turn up when we need you? Don't you like sticking around?"

Fawkes responded with a long melodic note with seemed to invigorate Harry and Neville with new light.

Merlin smiled at them all. "Well, since Fawkes is offering …"
They all gathered around again and grabbed hold of Fawkes' feathers.

The next second they all vanished in a flash of fire, and reappeared in the drawing room of Grimmauld Place, which was packed with chattering Order members.

"Uh, yeah," said Ron uneasily, as the Order shrieked as one at the sight of them all. "We got Harry back."

Utter pandemonium erupted, and Harry was soon enveloped in bone-crushing hugs from Mrs Weasley, Fleur, Tonks and dozens of others, all exclaiming at the poor state he was in. Food and drink was sent for immediately and Harry was given a fresh change of clothes, as his robes were burnt and hanging off him, even though the wounds underneath had been healed. Merlin frowned when he noticed that.

"Oh!" Mrs Weasley wailed, her eyes filled with joyful tears as the Order crowded around Harry, grinning insanely. "We were so worried, Harry! We're so happy you're back!"

"So am I," said Harry, but his broad grin didn't quite reach his eyes. Well, thought Merlin. That was only to be expected. He must have been through hell.

Harry was soon settled down into a comfy armchair, cups of soothing tea forced into his hands while everyone fussed over him.

Crookshanks, Hermione's cat soon wandered into the drawing room; he'd been brought there the day before when it became apparent that Hermione and the others would be remaining at Grimmauld Place for some while. He looked quite put out that no one was paying him any attention.

"I know you must have been through a lot," said Kingsley moving forward, smiling despite his haunted expression. "But we need to ask you a few questions."

Harry nodded shortly. "Alright," he said, but his voice was dead. Merlin watched him closely. Just how badly had Morgana affected him?

"Did you see Morgana there?" Kingsley asked. "Did she say anything to you?"

Harry looked blank for a moment. "No," he said expressionlessly. "I never saw anyone. I was just locked in that room the whole time."

Something seemed off to Merlin, and something deep within him seemed to clench with unease.

"What? Not once?" Merlin asked curiously. "Morgana didn't even come in once to boast about capturing you or anything?"

"No," said Harry, now looking at Merlin. "I never saw her after she caught me."

"That's not like her," said Merlin. "She would have at least said something to you. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," said Harry, and his voice was harder than usual. "She didn't need to say anything to me. That plant thing was bad enough."

"Plant?" Bill Weasley asked in confusion.

Merlin explained briefly about the Mandrake and its effects, all the time keeping his eyes fixed on Harry, who didn't even react, just stared straight ahead of him. He took no sips of the steaming tea in his hand, just sat there. Was he that badly traumatised?
Everyone looked horrified at what had happened, and they all started fussing over Harry again.

"Oh, you poor boy," sobbed Mrs Weasley. "That monster!"

"It's alright," said Harry blankly. "I'm out now. Thanks to the others."

He smiled at them, but again, the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. The sense of unease inside of Merlin grew even further.

Fawkes, who this time had stayed with them, swooped down and settled on Merlin's knee, and Merlin stroked him absent-mindedly. The warm feathers and crooning sound from the bird seemed to fortify him and unsettle him at the same time. Fawkes turned his head and looked up at Merlin with sorrowful eyes. There was something there that worried Merlin.

"Thank goodness," said Tonks, placing her hand on Harry's shoulder. "We thought you were a goner there for a while! I just wish you'd all waited for me! I'd have liked nothing better than to get my hands on a few Death Eaters!"

"Sorry," grinned Ron. "Fawkes didn't give us much of a choice. And besides, we were being sneaky. You'd have given the game away!"

Everyone laughed, even Tonks, though she pointed her wand at Ron in a mock-threatening manner. The only two who didn't laugh, were Harry and Merlin. Harry didn't even smile. Merlin clutched at Fawkes feathers desperately. Did this mean what he feared had come to pass?

There was something about Harry, something about the way his presence seemed to Merlin now. He didn't seem like Harry, like his entire being had somehow changed. It made the hairs on the back of Merlin's neck stand up. Something deep within him was different.

But was this to be expected? Harry had just endured a horrific experience, surely he wasn't left unscathed? Was this normal?

But Merlin sensed it was something fundamentally deeper. Fawkes continued crying out in a mournful manner.

"You owe us, mate," said Ron, clapping his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Getting yourself caught like that and making us all risk our lives to get you back!"

"Yeah!" agreed Neville, who was in the corner with a Healer member of the Order, getting his arm seen to. "You owe us!"

"I'll remember that," said Harry smiling, but he didn't sound grateful or even as though he was joking.

"What was it the Mandrake did, Harry?" Hermione asked in a hushed voice.

Harry was silent for a moment. "Not much to be honest. It screamed a lot, and that was painful. But that was it mainly."

That was it; Merlin now knew there was something dreadfully wrong.

"But," said Hermione frowning. "I thought it was supposed to do all this awful stuff and twist the unconscious into fear?"

"Guess I wasn't there long enough for that to happen," said Harry shrugging. Merlin watched him...
intensely. *He was lying.*

But was that because he didn't want to worry the others, or because of what Merlin feared had happened?

"But why were you so afraid when we turned up?" asked Ginny. "You didn't seem to recognise us."

"I was just tired," said Harry, smiling expressionlessly at her. "And I wasn't really expecting you all."

"Well that was silly!" said Lupin, grinning broadly. "Did you honestly think any of us would rest until we found you? It shouldn't have been a surprise!"

"I know that now," said Harry, smiling again.

But there was something in his eyes that made Merlin afraid.

"Are you sure you're alright, Harry?" asked Luna. "You seem different."

"I'm fine," Harry reassured her. "I wasn't going to let her get to me that easily!"

But Luna looked uncertain and she stared wide-eyed at Harry. Merlin kept his gaze on her face. She sensed it too? Did this mean …

"Harry?" Merlin said, cautiously.

Harry fixed his eyes on Merlin's, and in the moment their gazes met, Merlin knew without a doubt. There was a darkness there; a coldness that made Merlin shiver internally, even as his heart seemed to be pierced with icy fear.

At that moment, Crookshanks came out from underneath the table he'd been hiding under. He looked at up at Harry and immediately started hissing and spitting with an intensity that surprised even Merlin.

"Crookshanks!" reprimanded Hermione, rushing over and attempting to calm him. "What are you doing?"

"That cat of yours is mental, Hermione," said Ron shaking his head. "Fling him outside."

But Crookshanks resisted, continuing to writhe and spit in Hermione's arms, glaring at Harry who sat there with a blank look on his face.

"Crookshanks," murmured Hermione in a soothing voice, even as Crookshanks tried to scratch every inch of her he could reach trying to get to Harry. "What are you doing? You know Harry!"

"Yes, he does," said Merlin standing up slowly, taking this as final confirmation. "But this isn't Harry. At least, not the Harry we know."

"What are you on about?" said Ron, frowning. "He's back! He hasn't been all evil-ified by Morgana! He's just Harry."

"That's what he wants you to think," said Merlin, now more certain than ever.

Harry made his expression look innocent and surprised, but Merlin wasn't fooled. "Come on, Merlin! It's me! Can't you tell it's really me?"

"It isn't," said Merlin firmly. "Morgana got to you."
"Don't be ridiculous, mate," said Fred, though he looked slightly alarmed. "He's fine. You lot got to
him in time!"

"No," said Merlin, moving ever closer to Harry, whose eyes were slowly hardening. "We didn't.
That Mandrake certainly did much more than just scream. He's been taken over by Morgana. He's
lying to us."

"But Harry wouldn't!" objected Tonks.

"He has no choice," said Merlin. "She's twisted the very deepest parts of his soul. He is a slave to her
will."

"I am no one's slave!" shouted Harry, leaping to his feet and glaring at Merlin. "I'd never serve her!
Don't you know me at all?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "And I know that you're not Harry. Harry would never behave like this. She's
got you trapped."

"How do you know?" Kingsley asked sharply, and Merlin could tell he was getting suspicious.

"I can just tell," said Merlin.

"A feeling?" asked Ron, looking wary. "Old Religion stuff?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "Something's not right with him. Don't tell me none of you haven't noticed."

"He's upset," said Ginny, looking pale. "He's been through a lot."

"Exactly," said Merlin. "If we'd gotten to him in time he'd be much more shaken up than this. He's
too calm. He's been mentally tortured the last two days. It must have had an effect on him but he
claims it hasn't. No one can survive that amount of time with a Mandrake without feeling its effects."

"Maybe you can't," retorted Harry. "But I'm fine!"

"No, you're not, Harry," Merlin said softly, stepping closer.

"You're exaggerating," said Ginny desperately. "He's alright!"

"No, he's not," said Luna gently, looking unusually distressed. "I can sense it too. There's something
dark inside of him."

"Stop turning against him, both of you!"

"We're not," said Luna. "We need to help Harry! Can't you see that he's different?"

"We can help you, Harry," said Merlin, stepping ever closer to Harry, going as slowly and gently as
possible. "We can free you from her influence."

"I'm not under her influence!" Harry yelled, his face flushed and eyes glinting.

"Please, Harry," said Merlin gently, laying his hand on Harry's arm.

"NO!" Harry yelled, batting away Merlin's hand. "Don't touch me!" he hissed, his eyes wild with
madness.

"You see?" Merlin said, turning to the others. "Would Harry ever act like that?"
"Of course I would if I was defending myself!" Harry objected, and Merlin saw only darkness in his eyes now.

"Harry," began Lupin uncertainly, looking between them. "Maybe you should-

"I'm fine!" Harry insisted yet again. He looked around the drawing room desperately, staring into the faces of everyone there who were now gazing at him in shock. "Don't you all believe me? How can you all turn against me? I've known you all for years! You've only known him six months! Who do you trust more?"

"That's not Harry," whispered Ginny in horror, backing away shaking her head.

"Why won't you believe me?" Harry yelled fervently.

Merlin came closer again, noticing how everyone in the room, like Ginny, had backed away in horror. "Harry, please, calm down. Let me help you. I'll rid her evil from you."

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" Harry screamed, and his eyes flashed golden.

Caught by surprise, Merlin was thrown several feet backwards until he hit the wall with the Black family tapestry on it and slid to the floor. Shocked cries filled the room.

"Harry!" screamed Hermione, her hand over her mouth.

"The Harry we know would never attack a friend," said Lupin grimly, and rather reluctantly, pointed his wand at Harry, who by now looked quite insane.

Merlin got to his feet, ignoring the pains in his back and looked directly at Harry.

Before Merlin could say anything, Harry's hand shot up and he assumed a defensive stance, his hand beginning to glow slightly.

"You really think you can take me on?" Merlin said quietly, walking forward slightly. "Harry knows that he's no match for me in a fight. Be reasonable. I'm your friend."

"No!" hissed Harry. "All you ever did was lie to me! You held me back, wouldn't let me embrace my full power. You treat me like a child. Well I'm not! I won't let you do this anymore!"

"You can't fight me, Harry."

Harry laughed a laugh that sent shivers down Merlin's spine. "You're not as powerful as you think," said Harry. "You're pathetic! You've never really embraced the power of the Old Religion. You've always been too afraid. I'm not."

"Harry," said Merlin calmly, though his heart was hammering wildly and a choking fear was spreading through him. "Can't you hear what you're saying? I'm just trying to help you-

"Like how you helped all the others?" asked Harry, his voice filled with a strange hatred. "How many did you watch die? How many innocent people did you watch be tied to a stake and burned alive and did nothing? How many times did you help Uther and his men kill people of your own kind. And since then? What were you doing during all the witch-hunts? Did you do anything? Or were you just too much of a sadistic coward?"

The room gasped as one, and Merlin recoiled in shock. The old pain in his heart for what he had witnessed in years gone by resurfaced and threatened to overwhelm him. But he wouldn't let it.
Harry didn't mean it. This wasn't really him. Harry would never say these things to him.

"I did what I could," Merlin said, trying not to let the hurt creep into his voice. "This isn't you talking, Harry, this is Morgana. She's slaughtered countless innocents. You know that. She kills without mercy."

"And what about you today?" asked Harry. "You destroyed that whole tower with one spell. How many dozens did you kill then? Where was your mercy?"

"They were evil," said Merlin. "They were trying to kill us."

"Still, you slaughtered them without a second thought," said Harry. "How are the two of you any different? Why are you so noble? Why do we all listen to you like you're got some sort of divine knowledge? What gives you the right to tell us what to do? You're supposed to be dead! You never should have lived this long! You're past it. You don't deserve our loyalty!"

Merlin tried not to let these things hurt him, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't listen to this. Harry wasn't in his right mind.

"Harry," said Ginny, stepping closer fearfully. "Please, this isn't you. Please let Merlin help-"

"Why are you all taking his side?" Harry asked, looking at them all incredulously. "Can't you see what he's doing? He's turning you against me! He knows I'm getting better at Old Magic; he doesn't want a rival. He's just using you all in his personal vendetta against Morgana! He doesn't actually care about any of you!"

"Harry, dear," said Mrs Weasley softly. "You know that isn't true. These are the things Morgana wants you to think. You have to fight her!"

"No," insisted Harry, his eyes crazed again. "It's him I have to fight! Acwellan!"

And with a flash of Harry's eyes, a great rushing bolt of power came flying at Merlin, who raised a shield easily. The room was filled with blinding light and searing heat as the spell and shield collided.

"You see?" said Merlin softly, looking straight at Harry. "The old Harry couldn't use Old Magic without his wand. This is the darkness of Morgana inside of you giving this power. You're nothing but her puppet."

"How do you know I'm not just more powerful than you think?" Harry sneered. "You were always trying to hold me back!"

"Harry-"

"Why won't you fight me?" Harry asked. "If you think I'm possessed by Morgana, why not fight me? Or are you too afraid? You're a coward! I hate you!"

Merlin opened his mouth to utter a spell, but found himself unable to do so. He couldn't attack Harry, not even like this. He had to be able to reach him somehow!

"Harry-"

Harry raised his palm again and opened his mouth to utter a spell-

"Stupefy!"

A jet of red light came streaming from out of nowhere and Harry collapsed in a heap on the floor.
Merlin whirled around to see Malfoy standing at the side, Harry's wand clutched tightly in his hand and pointed at Harry himself on the floor.

"What did you do that for?" demanded Merlin.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "He wasn't listening to you," he said. "He's completely lost. You can't reason with him."

"Did you need to knock him out?" demanded Ron, glaring at Malfoy as Mrs Weasley rushed to tend to Harry.

Merlin scowled.

"I had to reason with him!" he shouted. "That's the only way this can be undone; if I can reach the part of him that's still there underneath. I had to try!"

"You mean you can't reverse it?" Neville asked, trembling.

"Not easily," groaned Merlin, settling in a chair. "There's only one method that I know of, and it's near impossible to do. Particularly these days when the Old Religion is no longer as prominent as it was. It may very well prove to be irreversible."

"But you have to do something!" shrieked Mrs Weasley, who had arranged Harry on the nearest couch. "You heard those awful things he was saying! We need to get him back!"

"I can't believe she was able to do that to him," said Hermione, looking down at the unconscious Harry with tears in her eyes.

"That's the Mandrake for you," spat Merlin bitterly. "That was exactly what Morgana wanted."

"But I thought he was supposed to lure you to where Morgana was," said Neville. "It was supposed to be a ruse wasn't it? Was he supposed to attack you?"

"No," said Merlin. "We foiled that part of her plan. She overlooked the fact that one of us would notice the change in him. She's a fool. Whenever there was a traitor in Camelot, I always knew. You'd think she'd have learned."

Merlin looked at the sleeping Harry for the longest time, despair flooding through him. What was he to do? This wasn't supposed to happen!

"Did you really kill dozens of Death Eaters with a single spell?" Kingsley asked Merlin suddenly.

Merlin nodded. "Yes."

He looked impressed. "That's quite something. Their ranks will be severely depleted. Morgana's little stunt has backfired on her."

"Has it?" asked Charlie, looking down at Harry despairingly. "Harry's still loyal to her! Isn't that a victory for her?"

"No," said Luna suddenly, and she smiled. "Because this isn't the end. Harry won't stay like this. He can't."

"Luna," said Merlin. "You don't know what the ritual to reverse this entails. It may very well impossible to-"
"I know that Harry's filled with too much goodness in his heart to stay evil forever," said Luna adamantly. "There will be a way to stop it. And it might be right under our noses."

"What do you mean?" asked Merlin, looked at her desperately. She merely smiled and pointed.

Merlin whirled around and saw what she was pointing at. After leaping from Merlin's knee sometime during the fight, Fawkes was now sitting on the back of an old hard-backed chair. He cried out mournfully again.

With a shimmering fiery glow, Fawkes took flight, and soared around the room singing. As he sang, Merlin felt a burning hope and courage boil up inside of him, mesmerised by Fawkes' flight. Everyone was silent as they listened to his song, and suddenly, the fear and despair that Merlin was experiencing was gone.

Fawkes landed after what seemed for an age, and hopped over to where Harry was lying prone on the couch. He sat on Harry's chest, and laid his head against him, directly over his heart. Then he began to cry.

Merlin felt a great sorrow in his own heart as he watched the silvery tears spill from the bird's eyes, so powerful was the magic the phoenix was exuding. Would it work? Could phoenix tears heal something like this?

Tear after tear fell from Fawkes, and eventually the darkness that had seemed to hover over Harry like a cloud vanished and the feeling of hostility emanating from him evaporated.

Merlin leaned closer in breathless anticipation.

Harry suddenly opened his eyes and breathed in deeply, blinking rapidly. A tiny frown lay on his brow, and if anything, he looked merely confused.

Fawkes who was still sitting on him crooned softly, and Harry looked down in surprise. He hesitantly raised two fingers and stroked his magnificent plumage.

"Fawkes?" he asked, his voice weak. "What …"

Then he noticed everyone in the room. He sat up suddenly, sending Fawkes flying with a disgruntled squawk.

"What happened?" he asked wildly, staring round at them all. "How did I get here?"

"We rescued you," said Luna gently, kneeling down in front of him. "You're safe now."

Harry breathed a massive sigh of relief, and looked almost tearful. "Thank God," he murmured. "I couldn't have taken much more …"

"What's the last thing you remember?" Mrs Weasley asked him gently.

Harry frowned and his hands clenched suddenly as he remembered. Fawkes returned to his side and lay his head on Harry's arm, and Harry seemed to take courage from him.

"Morgana was there," he said shakily. "She had me in this small room and there was this plant thing … it screamed and it screamed, and I saw … things. It was horrible. I thought I was going mad. And she kept coming back and trying to be kind to me. Telling me about what happened back in Camelot and how … Merlin betrayed her and everything. I tried not to listen to her but …"
Harry shuddered, and immediately, Ginny was beside him on the couch, her arm around him.

"It's alright, Harry," she said. "She's not here. She's gone."

Harry smiled weakly at her. Then he frowned again. "I remember getting out …" he said slowly, face screwed up in concentration. "I remember … running away from some tower and then coming back here and …"

His eyes went wide with horror. He looked up at Merlin appalled. "I attacked you?" he asked, looking incredulous. "Why did I do that?"

"You were under her control," said Merlin softly. "But you're not any longer" The sense of relief Merlin was feeling at this moment was beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

"We should let him rest," he said to the others who were starting to crowd around Harry as they had before, looking joyous. "He's experienced something traumatic which must be very confusing for him. Leave him to rest and we'll talk about it later. All we need to know for now is that he's alright. Or he will be."

Merlin smiled at Harry, letting his happiness flow freely. Finally, something was going their way.

Mrs Weasley and Lupin helped Harry up and escorted him from the room. Harry was incredibly pale and shaking, but Merlin saw that he'd be alright with some rest. Already the darkness was gone and the light was returning to his eyes,

He turned away and heaved another sigh of relief. He grinned to himself in satisfaction. He had foiled Morgana's plan. She'd rage furiously when she discovered what had happened and over the death of Voldemort's followers. It made Merlin feel triumphant almost. She might lash out with all her evil, but ultimately, she was powerless.

Luna sidled over towards him and smiled. "You see? Evil could never take over Harry. We're going to win."

Merlin smiled back. "We haven't yet though," he said heavily. "Morgana will be angrier than ever. Not to mention the fact that she's ensured many of her Death Eaters are well protected and enabled them to use more powerful magic. She's learning all the time and adapting to the modern world."

"You'll find a way around that," said Luna confidently. "The shields she gave them and the enchantments she put on the wands won't last long. Didn't you say once that without her being there in person those sorts of spells will eventually wear down if she doesn't replenish them? It's only a temporary advantage. We have more important things on our side."

Merlin sighed and smiled again, looking down into her deceptively innocent eyes. "Yes, we do."
A Meeting with the Dursleys

Harry stirred. Wearily and with great effort as though there was a great weight upon them, he opened his eyes. He blinked for a few moments as his eyes adjusted to the light streaming into the room.

He looked around, and for a moment he had no idea where he was and thought he was in the midst of some great powerful dream. But gradually, as he looked towards the foot of his bed, a sense of familiarity crept over him. Of course! He was in his room in Grimmauld Place.

He sat up slowly and ran his hands over his face, trying to pull himself out of this confusing trance. How did he get here?

He furiously tried to force his mind to work. What had happened? But his mind seemed determined to be sluggish.

He had been at Hogwarts … he remembered that. He'd been with Merlin, learning some Old Magic. They'd had an argument …

Harry frowned. Then how did he get here?

Then, flashes of fire leapt into his mind. Burning, darkness, pain … Morgana's laughing face.

All traces of weariness dropped from him as he bolted upright in horror. What had he done?

"You remember then?"

Harry jumped as a voice came from a chair beside his bed. Merlin was sitting there cross-legged; Harry hadn't even noticed him.

"I'm sorry!" gasped Harry, appalled at himself. "I'm so sorry! I don't know what I was-"

But Merlin didn't look angry or upset. He was smiling.

"Don't worry, Harry," he said leaning a little closer. "You were not yourself. It is over."

But Harry shook his head. "How can you say that? I attacked you! I was going to betray you all!"

"It wasn't your fault, Harry," Merlin said soothingly.

"How?"

"Didn't you hear what I said to the others about the Mandrake?" Merlin asked. "You had absolutely no control over your actions."

"I could have resisted her!" Harry insisted, feeling more and more wretched. "Why did I let myself become her slave?"

"Harry!" said Merlin sternly, his voice suddenly sharp. "Don't you dare blame yourself. This is what she does. Don't let her win!"

"If I hadn't been so weak-"

"You weren't weak!" Merlin said earnestly. "Believe me … what you went through can break even the most resilient of minds."
"You mean even you would have succumbed?" Harry asked bitterly.

Merlin paused for a moment. "Yes," he said finally, looking directly at Harry. "I would have. It's happened before."

Harry looked up. "You mean-"

"It wasn't a Mandrake," Merlin said, sighing. "It wasn't the same process. But Morgana did use an ancient ritual, and took control of my mind. She made me try to kill Arthur. And she succeeded. If it hadn't been for Gaius and Gwen who noticed I was acting strangely, I would have killed him."

Harry stared at him in shock. "You- you tried to kill Arthur?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "I tried to kill my best friend because of Morgana's influence over me. But that enchantment was eventually broken, and so was this one. I do not blame you in the slightest for what happened, Harry, I would be a hypocrite if I did. You are back with us now and that is all that matters."

Harry tried to speak but couldn't. His head was swimming and he wasn't able to make sense of all that was rushing through his mind.

"What did she make you see?" Merlin asked gently, when Harry was silent for a while. "Tell me, what horrors did she show you?"

Harry considered for a moment not telling him, but then thought of how keeping it all inside would drive him mad eventually. He had to know …

"I saw … everyone," he confessed, staring down at the bed-sheets. "My mum and dad, Cedric, Dumbledore, Sirius, Dobby … everyone that … well, everyone who's dead. They … blamed me."

"It wasn't them," said Merlin softly. "The Mandrake plays on your worst fears and twists the unconscious to manifest the deepest and darkest parts of your soul. What you saw was what you fear they would say to you, not what is true. Believe me, Harry when I say not a single one of them would blame you for their deaths."

"But you didn't know them!" Harry blurted out, his heart hammering. "You have no idea what they would've said to me!"

"True," said Merlin. "I didn't know Sirius, or your mother and father. But I did know Dumbledore, perhaps not well, but I did know him. And he would never blame you for his death, even if it had been your fault! And I believe none of the others would have either."

"It was my fault that Sirius died," Harry said, still staring down at the bed and avoiding Merlin's eyes. "He would never have come to the Ministry if I hadn't been there."

"He wanted to help you, Harry," said Merlin. "You cannot blame him for caring too much about you."

"But I never should have been there in the first place!" objected Harry, looking up at Merlin now. "If I hadn't been so stupid, I wouldn't have fallen for Voldemort's trap!"

"What is this really about, Harry?" Merlin asked, his eyes narrowing. "What is really upsetting you?"

Harry sighed and looked away again, suddenly filled with shame. "I was an idiot," he said. "Hermione was right about my saving-people-thing. I rushed out into that forest without thinking. If
any of you had died trying to rescue me from my own stupidity …"

"It is no crime to be lured into a trap, especially one set by Morgana," Merlin said. "I've been guilty of that myself. You could not have stood still and did nothing when you thought a friend was in danger. That isn't who you are, Harry."

"Well maybe I shouldn't be who I am," said Harry bitterly.

"Don't ever think that," said Merlin, looking so fiercely at Harry that the room seemed to be filled with a quiet but powerful magic. "Never be ashamed of who you are, of what you are. If anything that's the most important thing I've brought with me from my times in Camelot. I've struggled with that over the years, being ashamed of myself for what I did all those years ago, and what I didn't do. But now I see how important it is to never allow anyone, including yourself, to make you doubt your decisions. It isn't worth it."

Harry looked back at Merlin. "You were right," he said. "I was too arrogant about my magic. I thought I'd be able to distract her, I thought I would be able to do something. But she threw me down like I was some weak toddler."

"That was partly my fault," said Merlin. "I shouldn't have said those things to you. I shouldn't have suggested that you were getting too complacent. Maybe if I hadn't you wouldn't have tried to go out there like that to prove yourself. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," said Harry. "You weren't too far off the mark. I was too reckless."

They were silent a moment when suddenly Harry felt a great fear grip his heart. "What happened to Hagrid?" he demanded. "If Morgana was using him to get to me, then what happened to him?"

"He's fine," Merlin reassured Harry. "She gave him a nasty knock on the head, but he'll be alright. He's worried sick about you; he thinks it was his fault."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, and gave Merlin a small smile. "Well, we can't all blame ourselves."

"No, we can't," said Merlin, returning Harry's smile. "You'll be alright, Harry."

Harry nodded, feeling a little better. A sudden long quavering note filled the room, and Harry felt a fire alight in his heart and spread through his veins giving energy to his weary body and vanish the darkness from his mind.

"Fawkes?"

Merlin smiled, and suddenly, a large scarlet and gold bird came soaring down from the other side of the room and settled on Merlin's shoulder, who reached up to stroke the magnificent plumage.

"He helped us find you," Merlin told him, turning his head to Fawkes and smiling. "He brought us to you and brought you back. He's the one who broke Morgana's enchantment. I hadn't even known phoenixes could do that."

Harry watched Fawkes for a few moments with a strange feeling inside. "Fawkes did all of that for me?"

Merlin turned his eyes back to Harry. "Yes. He's of the Old Religion, just like you and me. He knows how important you are, to both the Old Religion, and to all of us."

He turned back to the bird again, who was now crooning softly as Merlin continued stroking him.
"He stuck around this time," Merlin informed Harry. "The last few times he's turned up he vanishes almost immediately. But this time he seems happy to just stay with me. Luna says he wants me to be his new companion, and I'm beginning to agree with her."

Merlin was almost grinning as Fawkes continued sitting there singing softly. His face seemed to be filled with a new light that Harry hadn't seen there before. Almost as if now that Fawkes was permanently with him he was more powerful, more content and at peace than Harry had ever seen him.

Then, Merlin stood up slowly. "I have to go," he said. "I was just waiting for you to wake up. I didn't want you to be on your own." He went over to the door and stopped. "The Order will be meeting in about an hour or so in the kitchen. It's been a whole day since you came back and we need to meet to determine what we'll do now. Morgana is of course furious that you escaped, and a furious Morgana is even more dangerous than a merely insane one."

He put his hand on the handle and prepared to leave.

"Wait," called Harry, one last thing still playing on his mind. Merlin turned to face him and suddenly Harry almost lost his nerve.

"The things Morgana was saying," he began uncertainly.

"Don't listen to her, Harry," Merlin said immediately. "She's nothing but a manipulative liar."

"Not about me," Harry said. "The things she was saying about you."

He noted Merlin's look of surprise. "I mean, I know she was just trying to turn me against you, but … I just want to know, was any of it true?"

"That depends on what she said," said Merlin, though he looked wary.

"She said you abandoned her," said Harry, watching him closely. "That you were her friend and you didn't tell her about your magic and just left her to be afraid on her own. That you … killed her sister, and you poisoned her when she trusted you. And that you didn't do anything to help. That you didn't try and stop Uther from killing wizards, you just stood back and watched."

Harry expected Merlin to contradict everything immediately, tell him Morgana was just lying to him to make him doubt Merlin, but instead, Merlin just stood by the door and sighed heavily, closing his eyes in defeat. Harry felt a chill all over.

Merlin eventually opened his eyes and looked over to Harry.

"I wish I could tell you it was all lies," he said solemnly. "But … it isn't."

Harry swung his legs out of bed and stood up slowly, his eyes fixed on Merlin. Merlin watched him almost anxiously.

"Thanks," said Harry finally. "Thanks for telling me the truth."

Merlin frowned. "Doesn't it bother you?"

"A little," Harry admitted. "But I know better than to believe everything's as black and white as Morgana paints it. I know you, Merlin. I trust you. And I know how those things have tortured you over the years. I'm definitely not going to hold it against you. I won't let her poison my mind again."
Merlin grinned and Fawkes crooned once more. "That's why you're so strong, Harry," Merlin said. "Morgana let herself be corrupted by these thoughts; you fought against it."

And without another word, he swept out of the room, Fawkes still on his shoulder.

Harry stood there a few moments, trying to come to terms with what he'd just heard. In the end, he decided, it didn't matter. Merlin had never hidden the fact that he'd seen and done some awful things over the years. He was honest, and Harry was truthful in saying he didn't blame him in the slightest.

He shook himself out of his thinking and rummaged around the room and got dressed, finding that his trunk from Hogwarts had been placed at the foot of his bed. Despite having felt exhausted and shaken only a few minutes ago, he now felt stronger; possibly Fawkes had something to do with that.

He finished getting dressed, but frowned when he found he was missing something—his wand. He searched the room a dozen times and completely emptied his trunk but it was nowhere to be found. He swore silently; it must still be in the place he'd been held, Morgana must have destroyed it. He kicked his trunk in frustration; Merlin said the phoenix feather core was perfect for using Old Magic. Not to mention he felt even more attached to it now after having lost it the first time.

He sighed heavily, and reached back into his trunk. He pulled out Malfoy's old wand. He still had it, though hadn't used it since Merlin had repaired the phoenix wand. It would have to do for now.

He opened the door silently and looked out into the empty corridor. He left the room and proceeded down the stairs wondering where everyone was; he could hear no voices. He turned at the next landing and headed into the drawing room, hoping someone might be in there.

Someone was in there, but not someone Harry was particularly thrilled to see. Malfoy was standing and staring at the Black family tapestry, the same way he had back in the summer when Harry had come in here before. He looked around when Harry came in and frowned a little.

"Stopped trying to kill us all then?" he asked, but the usual malice was gone. He just sounded bored.

Harry moved over to the tapestry and saw what he was looking at. He frowned.

"I thought Rodolphus Lestrange had survived the Battle of Hogwarts?" he asked, noticing a year of death had been added next to the Death Eater's name.

"He did," answered Malfoy in a curiously detached voice. "He was one of the ones keeping you in the Dark Tower. Merlin killed him."

"Does that bother you?" Harry asked, seeing how Malfoy's eyes suddenly changed from cold observance to anger.

"I don't give a damn," he said in such a way that made Harry believe him.

"He was your uncle," said Harry. Malfoy laughed humourlessly.

"Some uncle," he said. "He was in Azkaban most of my life. I never knew him, even when he escaped. He was completely under the control of my aunt and the Dark Lord. He didn't care about me."

Malfoy eyed him curiously. "Would you care if your Muggle uncle died? You didn't get along with them either did you?"

Harry frowned, and didn't answer for a moment. "I hate him," he said, no idea why he was telling
"Malfoy this. "He made my life nothing but a misery. But I don't want him dead."

"Neither did I," said Malfoy, turning back to the wall. "But like I said, I don't really give a damn either way. He's nothing to me."

Harry didn't know what to do, and to be honest, he was feeling a bit awkward. Malfoy was acting differently than usual. It was almost like he was a completely different man from the one Harry had gone to Hogwarts with.

Malfoy suddenly turned away from the wall and grudgingly reached into his pocket and withdrew from it a wand that looked very familiar.

"Here," he said, holding it out to Harry. "This is yours. The others will flay me alive if I don't give it back to you."

Harry gasped as Malfoy passed him his wand and relief washed all over him.

"How did you get it?" Harry asked. "I thought Morgana had taken it."

"She did," answered Malfoy. "But we found it when we went to get you, and Merlin gave it to me to use. I Stunned you with it when you started ranting and raving about how evil Merlin was and trying to attack him."

Harry flinched as he remembered this incident. Then he frowned in confusion.

"Wait, we?"

Then it came back to him; shouting and spells in the dark corridors, someone leading him by the arm and getting him outside the tower and into some strange forest.

He looked at Malfoy in amazement, and he had a small smug smile on his face.

"Yeah, you owe me, Potter."

Harry was still amazed, but Malfoy didn't say anything more. He moved around Harry and made for the door on the other side of the room. Harry recovered from his shock and called him.

"Wait," he said, and Malfoy turned, his face expressionless. Harry reached deep into his own pocket and produced Malfoy's wand. His eyebrows shot up into his silvery hair as he looked at it. "This belongs to you."

Malfoy took it and he frowned, looking down at it. "I don't want your pity-"

"It's not pity," said Harry. "If you're going to work with us against Voldemort and Morgana you need something to defend yourself with."

Malfoy looked up at Harry in amazement, like Harry had been doing only a few moments previously, hardly daring to believe what was happening. "What makes you think it'll work for me again?" he asked, clenching it tightly in his hand. "I thought wands had to be won?"

"Well, if you did Stun me," said Harry. "Maybe …"

Malfoy shrugged and looked down at it a small smile playing on his lips. "Good enough for me …"

"Why did you do it?" Harry asked him. "I get that you want Voldemort dead, but why risk your life to save someone you hate?"
Malfoy frowned again, and turned and headed towards the door. Just before he left, he turned back to Harry.

"I don't hate you," he said quietly. "But I don't like you either."

"Fair enough," said Harry nodding. "I can live with that."

Malfoy nodded curtly and left the room.

Harry ran his fingers over his wand, grateful beyond belief to not have lost it to Morgana. He looked back to the door Malfoy had just left through. Sometimes things just have a way of surprising you like that.

The kitchen was packed, and as noisy as it had ever been. Merlin sat there silently, waiting for Kingsley to arrive so the meeting could begin. He was impatient to start.

Harry had come down for the meeting, and everyone was overjoyed to see him, Mrs Weasley in particular was forcing mugs of tea and plates of sandwiches on him. She had barely left his side the entire time he slept, neither had many of the others. But circumstances had called them all away to more pressing matters and Merlin alone had remained; he hadn't wanted Harry to awake on his own, not after going through that.

He hadn't looked well when he'd awoken, but after Fawkes had … well, done whatever it was that phoenixes did … he looked much stronger. Merlin was grateful. He knew that an experience like that could be traumatising to most people. But Harry was strong, he'd faced evil before and come through it. He was tougher than Merlin gave him credit for.

Kingsley arrived and settled himself at the table. Kingsley was still leader, yet more and more people looked now to Merlin to lead them, even Kingsley. Merlin would normally have felt uncomfortable with this, but he was now almost glad of it.

"So what's been happening?" Harry asked, looking around the table, seeing that many people were bearing minor injuries.

"Morgana," said Kingsley, "isn't best pleased that you escaped, and even less so that many of her Death Eaters were killed in the process. I suspect that she also knows that the enchantment placed on you has been broken, though I'm not quite sure how."

"She's been issuing attacks of even greater frequency and violence in the last twenty-four hours," said Remus. "Muggles in particular are at risk. She blames them for the 'subjugation' of wizards over the last thirteen hundred years and forcing us to go into permanent hiding. At least, that's what she told one of the Muggle survivors of a town she burned to the ground. He was the one sent to inform us of Morgana's intents."

"She does have more reason than most to hate Muggles," said Merlin. "Modern Muggle-hating wizards hate them because they believe them to be inferior. Both she and I know the real reason that such enmity arose in the first place. We both suffered at the hands of oppressive Muggles in our youth."

"Yeah, but I don't think this is just because she hates Muggles," said Bill. "She's just pissed off and wants to do some damage."
"What exactly happened?" asked Harry.

"She's burned down ten Muggle towns," said Mr Wesaley, sorrow in his voice. "Many were killed."

"Not to mention the fact that she summoned a- a- what did you call it, Merlin?"

"A serket?"

"Yeah, one of them," said George. "It's like a massive scorpion thing that makes Blast-Ended Skrewts look tame. They're supposed to have died out centuries ago, no idea where she got it. Anyway, she let it loose right in the middle of London amongst all the Muggles."

"Caused complete havoc," said Tonks shaking her head. "Thousands of people must have seen it. It attacked a bunch of people but Merlin gave us a couple of potions that healed the poison stings. We're not even trying to do any Memory-Modification. Too many people saw what happened. We just released a statement saying it was some mutant crocodile hybrid that escaped from a lab."

"Yeah, and just hopped on a bus to the centre of London," said Ron sarcastically.

"But with so many things going on all over the country we're run off our feet trying to control them all," said Tonks, ignoring Ron. "We're putting out the story that faulty gas pipes are responsible for the burning towns, but since they're close to cities as far apart as Bristol, Manchester, Swindon and Aberdeen, it isn't really believable that they all exploded at the same time."

"Muggles are noticing," agreed Remus. "We're trying to Modify the memories of only the people who saw actual magic and hope the others come up with their own explanations. But we can't get to them all, and some of it's leaking to the Muggle media."

He threw a copy of The Daily Telegraph on the table and the headline was clearly visible: Chaos all over the country. Reports of hooded men burning down entire towns. Multiple deaths.

Harry stared at it for a moment. "Wow, a lot happened when I was asleep."

"I'm beginning to think we should have just left you there, mate," said Fred, winking.

"This is no time for jokes, Fred!" reprimanded his mother. "This is serious!"

"Oh you know me, mum, I never do serious!"

"Enough," said Kingsley firmly. He turned to Merlin. "What do you suggest we do now?"

"Why are you asking me?" said Merlin. "You're the Minister for Magic, the leader of the Order of the Phoenix!"

"True," said Kingsley. "But I'm not afraid to admit to you that I'm at a complete loss. You've fought Morgana before. You've got more combat experience than all of us put together. Tell me what you think we should do."

Merlin blinked as suddenly every face on the room turned to him in a calm desperation. "I …"

He thought for a moment.

"I'm not sure," he said honestly. "These towns she's attacked, they had magical protection over them, but it just wasn't powerful enough. I noticed at the Dark Tower that some of her Death Eaters, in addition to the shielding Morgana had given them, had magically reinforced wand that are slightly
more powerful than ordinary ones. That's how they're getting through the barriers the Aurors placed."

"Is there any way to fight against these wands?"

"I can," said Merlin. "I just disarmed them and burned the wands. But fighting against them with wand-magic will be difficult. Your spells won't pierce their Old Magic shields easily but their spells will get through yours. The only hope is to just keep wearing down the shields, they will deteriorate eventually if Morgana doesn't replenish them, and then you can try and disarm them. Just don't rely on your own shields to protect you. They'll be much weaker than usual."

"Trust Morgana to make things difficult," grumbled George.

'But it can be done," Kingsley said bracingly.

"Yes," said Merlin. "But what we should really be focusing on is finding the Cup of Life."

"I thought we'd given up on that?" asked Charlie. "Weren't we going to use Excalibur?"

"Excalibur is our assurance," said Merlin. "Do you really want to try and go against them with a sword if you don't have to? Our best bet in destroying them is to empty their blood from the Cup. That will kill them both simultaneously."

"But you said yourself that it would be heavily guarded," said Remus. "How can we reach it?"

"I've done it once before," said Merlin. "I fought against an entire army to do it. It is possible."

"But it'll be in their secret hideout," said Ginny. "And we haven't had much luck in that corner have we?"

"Not exactly," agreed Professor McGonagall. "But Merlin says he's checked all of Morgana's old haunts and she's nowhere to be found."

"Maybe we're thinking about this the wrong way," said Harry quietly, and everyone turned to face him. He looked around the table. "Maybe it's not one of Morgana's old haunts we should be searching for."

Merlin felt as though he'd just been hit over the head by something heavy. Of course!

"One of Voldemort's old places?" Tonks asked, looking contemplative. "That would make sense."

"But where would that be?" asked Ron. "Where apart from the Riddle House and Malfoy Manor did he live?"

Everyone automatically turned to Draco who flushed slightly. "I don't know," he said. "He usually went from place to place, usually all the old houses of his followers. But all of those have been seized by the Ministry now."

"And he's definitely not at the Riddle House," said Kingsley. "The local community finally decided to have that old place demolished not long after Voldemort and Wormtail left it. It unnerved them, and for good reason it turned out."

"A place with a connection to Voldemort …" mused Remus. "I can't think of anywhere. His entire life is shrouded in mystery, I doubt he has any form of personal connections anywhere."

"There must be something somewhere," insisted Merlin. "We just have to look for it."
Ron groaned. "I know that look. It's back to the books isn't it?"

Harry and the others- Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Merlin, Fred, George and even Malfoy- sat in the drawing room of Grimmauld Place. Countless books were sitting on the tables around him but no one was looking at them, not even Hermione.

"We're not going to find an answer in a book," Ron had insisted a dozen times, and now, they all agreed with him. Voldemort's favourite places weren't likely to be in a book.

"So what do we do now?" Fred asked, leaning on his elbows at a small table. "Merlin?"

"Why does everyone always turn to me?"

"Oh, it can't be because you're the most powerful, most wise, most famous, most intelligent, greatest sorcerer who ever-"

"Okay, I get it."

He sighed and looked around at the lethargic occupants of the room.

"There's nothing we can do at the moment," said Merlin. "Kingsley's working on improving shielding on Muggle towns and clearing up the mess, the Ministry's still searching for unusual activity that might give away Voldemort's location … there's nothing."

"I hate sitting here useless," Ginny spat. "I almost want another attack, just for something to do. At least then we could feel like we're doing something useful."

"Be careful what you wish for," said George darkly. "Fifteen Muggles were killed in the last one."

"The new spells I gave the Aurors should keep out most of the spells Morgana's enchanted wands can throw at them," said Merlin. "Only she or Voldemort themselves could break them. And so far she's staying out of it. She likes watching destruction, not being a part of it."

Harry was thoroughly depressed. He couldn't help but feel a part of this was his fault. It was his escape that had prompted this furious revenge. He should never have let himself be caught in the first place. But he knew that voicing this would only lead to everyone calling him an idiot, and he probably was. Blaming himself would him nowhere.

"So we're just going to have to go back to school?" Ron asked incredulously. "Sit in class all over again?"

"What else is there?" Harry asked, though he himself longed for something greater. Something to take his mind off the darkness that still threatened his mind from memories of the Mandrake.

No one had any suggestions.

Fred stood up and crossed to the corner of the room where a tall cabinet sat. He reached inside it and pulled out something wrapped in dusty cloth. Merlin turned to see where Fred had gone.

"Oi!" he shouted leaping up from his chair. "Don't touch that!"

"I just want a look," said Fred, holding the object. "We've nothing else to do and this might be the thing that saves us all."
Merlin frowned and took the object from Fred. Slowly, almost reverently he unwrapped it and Harry saw what it was.

"Excalibur," said Hermione, her eyes shining. "I never got a good look before. Can I …"

Merlin looked up at her and nodded. He moved over to her slowly, and with a practiced hand flipped it over and rested the flat of the blade in his hand and offered her the hilt. She took it, and held the sword upright, her eyes wide in excitement.

"It's beautiful," she said. "If a sword can look beautiful that is."

Harry had to agree, as little he knew about swords. There was something about it that seemed to draw him to it. The Old Religion perhaps? The sword seemed to radiate its own power.

Everyone gathered around to get a closer look, even Malfoy, and they admired it from every possible angle.

"What do those inscriptions mean?" Luna asked, frowning. "It must be something very powerful."

Merlin took hold of the sword again. "This side," he said, pointing, "says 'take me up' and the other 'cast me away'."

"That doesn't make sense," said Ron. "Why would you throw this sword away?"

"I did, three times," said Merlin. "The inscriptions made no sense to me either at first. But, I had to 'cast it away' twice, because the time hadn't come for the rightful owner to 'take it up'. Then eventually I gave it away again until the next time it was needed."

Merlin stepped out into the middle of the room and swung it a couple of times. Everyone followed the blade's progress through the air with hypnotised eyes. The gold on the sword seemed to flash in the dim light and burn like fire.

Merlin let his eyes travel up its length, his face lost in memory.

"What really happened when Arthur took it from the stone?" Hermione asked breathlessly. "I'm guessing the legends aren't accurate."

"No," murmured Merlin, still lost in thought. "It was … amazing." He looked around at her. "Morgana had just conquered Camelot for the second time. Arthur was doubting himself, believing that it was his fault, that he didn't deserve to be king, that he had failed his people. So, I gathered all the survivors of Camelot and took them to the glade where the stone was, where I'd placed the sword years earlier. Then I took him there, and made up some silly story about how an ancient king of Camelot had placed it there and decreed that only the rightful King could pull it from the stone. He didn't believe me at first and thought I was making it up, which I admittedly was. But he went up to the stone and grasped the sword and pulled."

"And he pulled it out?" Ron asked, eager to hear more.

Merlin snorted. "Like I was going to make it that easy. I told Arthur that only the rightful king could pull it out, that he had to believe in himself. He didn't at first; he still doubted his abilities as a leader. He tried it a couple of times. Then, when I saw that he truly had accepted the fact that he was the true king of Camelot, I loosed it from the stone."

"Wait, you cheated?" George asked incredulously. "He didn't pull it out, you gave it to him?"
"Not exactly," said Merlin. "It was true, only he could have pulled it out. The sword was forged for him, I would never have let any other man touch it."

He smiled in remembrance. "What a moment though. He held it up high and it glinted in the sunlight. And he stopped being the uncertain and nervous newly-crowned king he had been, he became a proud and strong king of legend, a man people would willingly give their lives for. The people cheered and called out 'Long live the King!' For a moment, we as a people were undefeatable. We were invincible, proud citizens of Camelot, following the man destined to lead us. There was much celebration that night. The next day, we stormed the city and won it back from Morgana. There's never been a moment like it since."

"It sounds incredible," agreed Ginny. "I wish I'd been there. Watching something like that happen … even Muggles know that legend! And to think you were actually there …"

Harry agreed. He was more or less used to Merlin now, but at times like this, he still found it hard to accept that he was Merlin and was actually the same man in centuries of legend.

Merlin placed the sword down on the table and sat next to it, contemplating it quietly.

"It's weird," said Neville, watching the sword. "We all think of the sword as being something of beauty and something amazing out of legends, but really, it's just a weapon isn't it? I mean, think of how many people were killed with it?"

Harry also felt a creeping of unease as he thought of it this way. Did he really want to use a weapon responsible for the deaths of countless people?

"It killed no one that didn't deserve it," said Merlin. "Most of all, Mordred."

"Did they really deserve it?" asked Hermione, biting her lip. "I mean Dumbledore-"

Merlin laughed. "Yeah, Dumbledore would have us believe that it's unethical to kill anyone. And I agree with him. But circumstances have to be taken into account. Sometimes it's just not possible to imprison someone or punish them fairly. If people are attacking you, you have to fight back. Arthur wasn't a cruel man. He didn't kill anyone coldly and without caring. He never took a life if he could avoid it. But he never hesitated to do so if needed."

"How many people have you killed?" Neville asked almost nervously.

Merlin smiled grimly. "You can't really expect me to remember can you?"

Harry felt a sudden chill go through him. Merlin noticed everyone looked a bit uneasy and spoke again:

"I've killed more people this year fighting Voldemort than I have in the previous thirteen centuries," he said. "I hid myself for all the years before and stayed out of the many wars and battles as best I could. But in Camelot … I honestly have no idea. I killed sorcerers that were threatening Camelot, I killed raiders and bandits who attacked me or my village, I killed enemy soldiers that we met in battle and I killed many assassins who made attempts on Arthur's life. And of course, by emptying the Cup of Life the first time around I essentially killed an entire army of thousands of men. But not a single one of them do I regret. I was doing what I could to protect my city and my friends."

Ron exhaled loudly. "Wow, I guess that's why they call them the Dark Ages then?"

Merlin laughed shortly. "I suppose. Compared to today, they certainly were more violent times."
"And how many executions did you watch?" asked Malfoy from a corner, speaking for the first time. "How many wizards did you watch die?"

Merlin looked down. "Too many."

He said nothing more, and no one brought it up again. Harry sat staring into the fire and thinking furiously.

"Once you said to us that you didn't want Morgana to know the general whereabouts of Headquarters because you weren't sure the Fidelius Charm would be strong enough to keep her out," said Fred, looking over to Merlin. "Does that mean you could break through any Fidelius Charm that You-Know-Who has over his hideout?"

"Probably," answered Merlin. "But I'd need to have some general idea of where it is first."

"And that's what the Ministry's working on now," sighed George. "Trying to locate somewhere that odd things have been going on recently."

"We're at a dead end," said Ron. "And now we've got to go back to school."

"Find Morgana's secret base for me in the next half an hour and you're more than welcome to go there instead," said Merlin, frowning at Ron. "You don't realise the good that you can do there. Dumbledore's Army is flourishing, thanks to you lot. You know that more than half of them volunteered to help search for Harry? They put themselves at great risk to do something to help. Continue training them, not as a private army of child-soldiers, but as an example of cooperation and loyalty amongst friends. That alone makes them much stronger than Voldemort's mindless followers. Something tells me they'll have a great part to play before the end."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "The Old Religion telling you that?"

Merlin responded with a wink. "Perhaps."

"When can I continue with my training?"

"Thursday evening after the DA meeting," said Merlin. "We'll step up our routine. I'll come up to the castle every night now. Your professors will just have to get used to the fact that your work will suffer."

"Tell that to McGonagall," mumbled Harry, and Merlin laughed. He stood up again.

"It's late, and most of you've got school in the morning, you should get some rest, especially you, Harry."

"Says the old man," grumbled Ron, but he complied, and one by one everyone filed out of the room until Harry was almost alone.

He stood up himself and made to leave but found someone blocking his path. It was Ginny.

He froze and felt himself get all flustered. He couldn't remember the last time they'd been alone together.

He tried to say something but found he couldn't; he didn't know what to say. He just looked at her, and was surprised to see a glinting in her eyes.

She looked him over and smiled almost sadly.
"I was so worried about you," she said softly not taking her eyes of his face. "I wanted to tear apart the whole country to find you but Merlin wouldn't let me."

"Smart bloke that one," Harry said, trying to joke, and Ginny's smile broadened a little. He was rapidly losing what little self-constraint he had as he looked upon her face. He had to remember why he'd broken this off with her; he didn't want her to get hurt.

But then, the weaker part of his mind argued, she'd risked her life to come after you anyway, despite the fact the two of you were no longer involved, and he knew he'd do the same for her.

Such a conflict was tearing apart his mind that Harry could find no words to express either inclination. All he could do was stand there dumbly wrestling with both heart and mind, unsure which would be the victor.

Ginny seemed to realise this. She took a step forward and placed one small hand on Harry's cheek and he blinked in surprise.

She laughed. "Don't worry," she said. "I'm not about to recreate what happened on your seventeenth birthday," she said with a cheeky smile.

The smile faded from her face as she looked directly into his eyes. "But know, Harry, I've never been more afraid in my life when I thought you were dead during the Battle of Hogwarts, and when you were taken by Morgana. I'd have done anything to get you back, regardless of how we stand now. And you can see that now can't you? You're wrestling with your own conscious. Well, I'm just going to let you argue it out, because I know how stubborn you are. But Harry … I want you to know … I'll be here when you realise what an idiot you've been. And that'll be soon, I can tell."

Then she withdrew her hand and turned her back on him and headed to the door. She paused in the doorway and turned back.

She smiled again. "I'm just glad you're back. I'm glad you're safe."

And she left.

Harry was left standing in the middle of the drawing room feeling a bit light-headed, and above all, confused.

He tried to clear his mind. This was stupid; this wasn't the time to get entangled in all of this. He had two evil sorcerers to fight, an ancient magic to learn and a student defence force to lead, he couldn't afford to be distracted, especially when the person distracting him was someone as distracting as Ginny Weasley.

He let out the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding and brought himself back to reality. Excalibur was still sitting on the drawing room table. He crossed over to it and reached out a hand to pick it up and put it away.

His fingers curled around the hilt of the sword and he lifted it. The hilt felt warm and the shining blade seemed to illuminate the entire room and Harry was left breathless by the brilliance of it. He twisted the blade here and there, admiring it from every angle. Excalibur, it truly was the magical sword from legend.

He picked up the dusty material from the table to wrap it up, but before he could, the sword seemed to burn with a great energy. He tried to release it, but before he could-

The room he was in seemed to vanish in a flash of golden light, and instead, visions were streaming
before his eyes of places and people he didn't recognise.

The sword was hanging in mid-air in a giant cavern, wreathed in fire from the jaws of a massive dragon.

He saw Excalibur, lying at the bottom of a great lake, shining even in the murky depths.

He saw Excalibur being lifted high above the waters of the lake, reflecting the gold of the sun, as a pale arm thrust it above the surface of the water.

He saw Excalibur protruding from a stone in the middle of a forest clearing.

He saw a man, a man he recognised from the Lake of Avalon as being King Arthur. He watched as Arthur stepped up to the stone and grasped the hilt of the sword, a look of concentration and wonder on his face as he finally pulled it free. He lifted it up into the sun and it shone as if on fire.

He saw Excalibur again firm in the grip of the woman Harry had seen at the lake. She disappeared beneath the waters of the lake.

With a shocked gasp, Harry was wrenched from these visions and collapsed on a chair, breathing heavily. He looked once more at the sword in new found reverence.

"The sword has magic of its own," said a voice in the doorway, and Harry jumped when he saw Merlin was standing there, leaning against the frame. "Even I don't understand its power, and it was me and Kilgharrah that made it the way it was."

Harry stood up and held the sword away from his body. "What just happened?"

Merlin shrugged and stepped forward and took the sword from Harry to wrap it up. "I have no idea. Why don't you tell me?"

"It showed me, well, I suppose it was its history," Harry said, watching as the shining light vanished beneath the drab coverings. "Its life."

Merlin raised an eyebrow and stowed the sword away in the cupboard. He turned back to Harry with a faint smile.

"Perhaps that's a sign that it's found its new destiny."

He nodded to Harry and headed back to the door, and paused.

"And by the way ..." he looked back at Harry, a look of a long remembered grief on his face. "I know what it's like to have loved and to have lost. Believe me, don't waste your life. If you have an opportunity for happiness, however brief, never hesitate to take it."

And he left.

It was the middle of Wednesday and Merlin was rushed off his feet. He'd gone with teams of Aurors and helped reinforce the defences of several Muggle towns and villages with Old Magic; he didn't want any more surprise attacks by Morgana. He was exhausted- he'd forgotten just how many Muggle settlements had sprung into being during his long life.

He was now sitting with many of the others in an Order safe house somewhere in Kent taking some
lunch and a well-deserved rest. He was sitting between Fred and George who'd tagged along and they were about the only ones he recognised; most of the others were obscurer Order members not usually privy to the important meetings, or were Aurors.

"This must be Dedalus' house," said Fred, looking around at the lavishly decorated living room. "The décor is a bit …"

"Insane?" suggested George, and Merlin had to agree.

"At least he's got a well-stocked larder," said Merlin, sitting back in his chair comfortably. "Though I think your mother's cooking may be a little better."

"She's not here, you know, you don't have to do the flattery, it won't win you any points," teased Fred and Merlin laughed.

The others started leaving the room to head off for other things but Merlin was done; he had to head back to Grimmauld Place. He wasn't sure why, he was almost certain now that the place the Death Eaters were hiding had to have some connection to Voldemort but he didn't see why he should have any more luck figuring it out back there than here.

Finally, only the three of them were left. No one made a move to leave. They were all still too exhausted from Apparating all over the country all morning. They seemed content to just sit there all day in Dedalus' comfortable, if garish, living room.

But, suddenly voices came into Merlin's hearing.

"So those freaks have finally left have they? Does that mean we get a bit of peace and quiet now? This was supposed to be our safe house, not a haven for every weirdo from here to John O'Groats!"

Fred and George sat up suddenly as they heard the voice and exchanged dubious glances, and Merlin felt his curiosity pique.

The door opened and in barged one of the largest men Merlin had ever seen. He was beefy and pink in the face with very little neck but with a generous moustache on his upper lip. So large was he that Merlin almost didn't notice the small pointed faced woman behind him or the large boy that trailed in their wake. They looked vaguely familiar to Merlin.

The large man stopped dead when he saw the living room was occupied. His face turned purple. "Can't we have anywhere to ourselves?" he demanded. "Do we have to have your lot plaguing our every footstep?"

"Well, since it's not your house …" said Fred, scowling at the large man with an intensity that surprised Merlin.

This didn't seem to help much. "It isn't yours either," the man insisted. "We're stuck here every day! Aren't we allowed to have some privacy?"

"To be honest, I don't think you deserve it," said George, contemplating the family with disdain.

The big man swelled up, becoming even larger. "We're innocent in this!" he barked. "It's not our fault! We're simple, law-abiding, normal people who got dragged into this freakish war of yours!"
Then he paused and flicked his beady eyes between the two. "Wait, you're those Weasel twins aren't you?"

"Weasley," said George scowling. "And yes, we are. Surprised someone as thick as you can remember us."

"Hard to forget the hooligans that destroyed half my living room and mutilated my son," the man said in a dangerous tone.

"Oh yeah," smiled Fred. "That was fun."

The man looked mad with anger. "Freaks the lot of you! Should be locked up to protect innocent civilians! I always knew your lot was no good, anything to do with my nephew can't be good news!"

"Oh," said Merlin in a sudden realisation. "I remember now! You're Harry's family!"

The man Merlin now knew to be Vernon Dursley sniffed angrily and his moustache twitched. "In a manner of speaking. How do you know who we are?"

"I used to check up on Harry when he was a child," Merlin said pleasantly, though a disgust for the man in front of him with building with every passing second. "I remember you from then. You weren't nice then either."

Mr Dursley scowled. "That boy was a menace. And what do you mean by 'checking up on him'? What right did you have to spy on us? You're lying! Why, you're barely older than he is! How could you have?"

Merlin smiled, despite his growing hatred for the man. "I'm older than I look."

Mr Dursley snorted. "A freak as well then? Old men in young men's bodies? Sickening."

"What's sickening," said Merlin, his voice raising in anger, "is your attitude to magic and your own nephew. It's disgusting!"

"Who are you to tell me what to believe?" Mr Dursley bellowed. "That- that- thing- has brought me and my family nothing but trouble! It's not normal!"

"I've seen what hatred like yours leads to," spat Merlin. "People like you are the reason wizards went into hiding in the first place. Your ignorance and arrogance is pathetic."

Mr Dursley now looked almost too angry for words. His eyes popped and his face coloured even deeper. His wife and son looked on anxiously from the side, neither one looking particularly eager to join in.

Mr Dursley seemed to deflate a little and glared at Merlin.

"You seem very eager to dish out your opinion," he said, and Merlin had to stop himself laughing out loud from the irony. "You seem to know a great deal about us. Who are you?"

"Me?" Merlin asked innocently. "I'm Merlin."

Mr Dursley snorted. "Another one of those ridiculous names your lot give each other. Who do you think you are? The Merlin from Camelot?"

"Yes, actually," said Merlin, keeping an innocent smile on his face. "I am."
There was silence for a moment whilst Mr Dursley's mouth hung open in astonished amazement. He goggled at Merlin.

"You c-can't be!" spluttered Mr Dursley, slowly turning white. "He isn't real! He's just a story!"

"I assure you, I'm very much real," said Merlin, who was now thoroughly enjoying this.

Mr Dursley stood staring at Merlin and he began to shake all over.

"Show him your old-man trick," urged Fred beside him. "Go on- really scare him!"

But Merlin shook his head. There was no point, he was doing very well as it was in frightening Mr Dursley.

Fred fell back with a disappointed sigh. "You're no fun, Merlin."

"You're not," Mr Dursley kept repeating, staring at Merlin. "You can't be, it's impossible!"

He looked back at his wife and son who looked equally as shocked. "You're not!"

Then, as if on cue, there was a flash of fire, and Fawkes, who'd remained at Grimmauld Place all morning appeared and settled himself on Merlin's shoulder and sang one long quavering note.

Mrs Dursley shrieked and collapsed and Mr Dursley lumbered across the room to catch her. He lay her on the nearest couch, his own face pale and sweaty as he looked at Merlin and the bird on his shoulder.

Then, only Dudley Dursley was left standing. He looked at Merlin in awe.

"It really is you, isn't it?" he asked in amazement. Merlin nodded.

Dudley's eyes went as wide as saucers. He seemed to back away slightly as if slightly afraid.

"You're friends with Harry?"

Again, Merlin nodded. "I'm helping him and the Order in the war."

Dudley nodded weakly, and then glanced at his mother (who was now stirring) and his father anxiously.

"Did he- did he uh … get the letter I sent?"

"Letter? What letter?" Mr Dursley asked sharply, but both Merlin and Dudley ignored him.

"He did," said Merlin. "I was there when he opened it. I think he was more surprised than anything to get it. But he wasn't repulsed by it if that's what you want to know. He's willing to make amends if you are. It was a very brave thing to do, to send that letter."

Dudley shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I just realised … you know … Harry's risking everything to help us all and I've been a selfish pig to him all my life. And with this war … I just didn't want to … go without apologising … whatever it's worth."

Merlin nodded. "That's good of you. Everyone deserves a second chance."

He turned back to the Dursleys who were sitting on the couch, looking from Merlin and Dudley with increasing incredulity.
"You might want to follow your son's example," he told them. "He hasn't got this disgusting attitude that you do. You might want to remember that although it is magic you're running from, it's also magic that's protecting you. Hatred only breeds hatred. I've watched many people like you over the years, sending innocent people to their deaths because they were as narrow-minded as the two of you. You have a chance to turn your back on your hatred and realise that we're all human beings and this path will only lead you to misery. Take this chance, you may never get another one."

He turned back to Dudley and smiled. "The first step is always the hardest. You've already taken that. I hope that one day it'll be worth it." Dudley hesitatingly smiled back, and Merlin frowned suddenly. "You know," he said slowly. "You look like someone I used to know. He was a sorcerer, believe it or not. Maybe you're his descendent?"

He turned to leave, and heard Mr Dursley's indignant splutters behind him. Fred and George rose to leave with him and, Fawkes swaying on his shoulder, they left the living room, passed through the hall and out into the afternoon sun.

"You really think they'll listen to you?" Fred asked him as they walked.

"Honestly?" Merlin asked. "No, I don't. But I had to offer all the same. Dudley's proven that he has some decency beneath the bully, and perhaps the others may too, though I doubt it."

"They're too deeply engrained in that mindset to ever change," agreed George.

Merlin smiled. "Funny, the Malfoys were fierce believers of exactly the opposite of what they believe. And one of them changed as well. Hope is never gone."

Fred and George glanced his way, but said nothing. They made their way outside the confines of the protective enchantments and made ready to depart.

Before they Apparated, George looked at Merlin.

"Those things Dursley was saying, was that what Uther Pendragon believed?"

Merlin sighed heavily. "Not exactly. Dursley seems to believe magic is unnatural and disgusting. Uther simply believed it was pure evil and a corruptive influence."

He looked down at the ground. "This is why I always give people second chances. I've seen what hatred and stubbornness in one's beliefs can do to people. Everyone deserves a chance to change, even Vernon Dursley."

He looked back towards the house. "Unfortunately, like Morgana and Mordred, there will always be those who refuse to accept that chance that is given to them. And about that, there's nothing I can do. And that's what saddens me above everything else I've seen over the years."

And without another word, he, Fawkes, Fred and George Apparated away.
Finding the Base

"Nothing here either?" Fred asked him despondently, and Merlin shook his head.

"I can't feel anything, there's no magical presence here. No concealed base."

Fred and George sighed heavily. "Then where on earth can he be?"

"I wish I knew," said Merlin softly, staring out at the grounds of the magnificent mansion he was standing beside.

It had been a week since Harry had disappeared and Merlin and most of the others had spent most of that time searching for Voldemort's secret base. They didn't have any leads, any clues, there were just flying blind, desperately hoping to stumble across it accidentally.

"Maybe they're moving around a lot?" George suggested. "Only spending a few days in each location?"

Merlin shook his head. "No, Morgana, and I'm assuming Voldemort as well, aren't the type to be constantly on the run. They'd set themselves up somewhere grand and stay there, too arrogant to think they'd ever be found."

"Maybe they won't be," muttered Fred darkly.

Merlin was beginning to agree with him. They were currently in the grounds of the home of one of Voldemort's former Death Eaters, one who had been killed in the battle; Merlin had broken through the paltry security enchantments with barely any effort. This place was just as empty as all the others.

He looked around in frustration. There were only so many places they could be! It felt like they'd searched every castle, every manor house, every ruined building in Britain, and they probably had, Merlin using his vast knowledge of all the ancient settlements and fortifications that he'd witnessed being built over the centuries. He must be forgetting one.

George kicked a stone with the side of his shoe and it skittered off down the paved path in the garden, now overgrown since the Death Eater's house-elves had sought other positions after their master's death. The cold November air made them all shiver. The path was slippery with fallen leaves.

"We should get going," said Fred. "Merlin's right; there's nothing here."

George came back to the others and Merlin turned and called over his shoulder.

"Draco? We're leaving!"

Draco came around the corner of the building, his hands in his pockets looking rather sulky.

"I was so sure he'd be here!" he scowled. "He spent weeks here at a time!"

"That's probably why," said George. "He knows you and your parents are with us. He knows old Lucius would sell him out to save his own skin."

Draco's scowl deepened. "My father is no coward!"

"Not exactly a hero though is he?" Fred raised an eyebrow. "He might be helping us and giving us
information but he's still not on our side. He just doesn't want to go back to Azkaban."

Draco looked away, looking as though it was taking a great effort to not retort angrily.

"Lucius Malfoy isn't important right now," said Merlin, intervening. Fred and George had, by and large, accepted Draco into the Order but they still couldn't resist laying into Mr Malfoy whenever they could, and Merlin didn't think that was the best way to keep Draco on-side. "Regardless of his motives, he is helping us. Now, Draco, can you think of any other places Voldemort used to hide out?"

Draco shook his head without turning around. "No, like I said. All the old houses of Death Eaters he used to stay in were seized by the Ministry. The only ones left are ones like these that became derelict after the battle when their owners died. This was the last one."

Merlin nodded, though he couldn't help but feel deflated. "I thought as much," he said. "We should get back to Grimmauld Place."

They all sighed but acknowledged they could do no more and they all turned on the spot and found themselves in crushing darkness before reappearing in the street in front of Grimmauld Place. They hurried up the steps and into the house, Merlin still trying to regain his breath. He hated Apparating, but he had to admit, it was faster, and more discreet than Transporting.

They all trooped down the stairs and into the cavernous kitchen where Mrs Weasley had prepared a sumptuous lunch which they all delved into greedily. She raised an eyebrow.

"That was for Tonks and Remus when they came back from patrol," she said, watching them. "What on earth could have made you so hungry?"

"Disappointment?" suggested Fred thickly, his mouth stuffed.

"Nothing then?" Remus asked Merlin, and he shook his head. Mrs Weasley shook her head and turned back to the kitchen and put on some more food, just in time as Tonks and Remus came in just then. They too launched themselves on Mrs Weasley's food.

They'd been out on patrol all night and most of the morning, making sure all the protective enchantments around Muggle villages and towns were still in place. Every settlement in Britain now had protective enchantments- the Ministry had been working around the clock for weeks trying to accomplish that gargantuan task and it was now finally complete. But these enchantments were only effective against normal Death Eaters, and the few that had enhanced wands and Morgana and Voldemort themselves would easily be able to break through them. Merlin had added some enchantments of his own to the ones he thought were most at risk, but there were far too many for him to go around them all. The attacks were random and impossible to predict, and at least one place was attacked a day. Thankfully however, the mortality rates were low, since Merlin or some other Aurors managed to get there quickly and deal with the threat. Still, any Muggle death was one too many.

Teddy had now permanently gone to stay with Tonk's mother since Remus and Tonks, who were now living at Grimmauld Place, were constantly on the alert and working long hours were unable to look after him properly, though Andromeda Tonks brought him around for several hours a day. Mrs Weasley spent most of her day here helping the Order, keeping things running as well as attending to any injuries that anyone sustained but she returned to the Burrow every evening. Fred and George lived here with Merlin and Draco but most of the other Weasleys, plus the occasional Order member, divided their time between here and their own homes. The place was never quiet with six permanent residents and the rest of the Order trooping in and out at all hours of the day and night.

"Nothing then?" Remus asked Merlin, and he shook his head.
"I didn't really expect anything to be honest," he answered. "But it was worth a look."

"Maybe he's not even in Britain?" asked Tonks, her hair brown and lanky, betraying her exhaustion. "Maybe he's hiding out abroad?"

"No, they're in Britain," said Merlin. "There's no reason for them to be anywhere else, they need to be on hand. And besides, the Old Religion, though it's declined, is still stronger in Britain than in any other country, save perhaps Ireland. But I doubt they're there. Morgana's never left Britain before and I don't think she'd start now."

"Still," said Remus thoughtfully. "Perhaps we should get Kingsley to liaison with the Minister for Magic in Ireland. We shouldn't leave any stone unturned."

"Won't be difficult will it?" asked Tonks. "If he tells that Minister that Merlin's asked a favour of him he'll turn his country upside down searching to make him happy!"

"Sometimes your name has its benefits," Fred said, winking. Merlin smiled.

"Have you ever been abroad?" George asked him.

"A few times," said Merlin, thinking back. "When I lived in Camelot I travelled over all of mainland Britain, plus some of the isles and Ireland, which of course seemed foreign to me back then. The place was disunited then and Arthur liked to send emissaries all over the land to keep the peace. I went to the continent quite a lot as well, going to learn from other sorcerers after Arthur legalised magic, mainly to Gaul- that is, modern-day France. Even got as far as Rome once, though they didn't like the idea of magic too much. Went to America once as well, during the worst of the witch hunts. I wanted to help as much as I could. But I always came back, it didn't feel right leaving here for too long. This is where I belong."

"Thirteen hundred years and you still want to stay in this damp, drizzly, wet and miserable country?" Tonks asked incredulously.

"I'm a part of this land," Merlin answered her. "This is where I was born, where I lived, loved and lost. We're linked."

"Okay," said Fred. "But I still would've gone to Hawaii or something."

Merlin laughed. "Maybe I should have. Morgana won't have even heard of Hawaii."

"Well, other countries have certainly heard of her," said Remus. "Foreign governments have been petitioning Kingsley and sending him so many owls he could open his own bird sanctuary. They all want to know more about Merlin. They want you to go and visit their countries and help them with their own problems. Kingsley's making himself very unpopular by refusing them all. You can't exactly go on some sort of world tour when we're all fighting for our lives. Plus, the other Ministries' say it isn't fair that we get to 'keep you', since you're famous worldwide. They don't seem to understand that you're busy trying to save them all by defeating Morgana and Voldemort."

Merlin groaned. "Kingsley did warn me there'd be worldwide repercussions. I just hoped it wouldn't be as bad as this."

They fell into yet more idle conversation, trying to come up with more places for where Morgana and Voldemort could be hiding but without much success.

"There must be a link in Voldemort's past somewhere," said Remus, running his hand over his face in fatigue. "Some clue into somewhere he'd feel like returning to."
"Dumbledore searched all those places when looking for the Horcruxes," said Merlin. "The places he lived and visited as a child and his ancestral home. I checked them again and there's nothing. I didn't think he'd return there anyway. I mean, why would he hide out in some hovel?"

"It would suit him?" suggested Fred.

"It must be some older place," said Mrs Weasley. "Somewhere that's got a link to his or his family's past."

"Yes," agreed Merlin. He checked the clock on the mantelpiece. "Perhaps …"

He stood up suddenly, surprising all the others. "Where are you going?" Mrs Weasley asked in alarm.

"Hogwarts," he said, trying to calm her. "I'm going to search through all the school's records of Voldemort. There might be something there that'll give me an idea."

"Good luck, mate," said George. "You're not going to find anything."

Merlin said nothing to this, but reached into his pocket and withdrew a small flask and handed it to Remus.

"The last dose of Wolfsbane potion I brewed," he explained. "I told you I'd modified it, didn't I? Your transformation tonight should be shorter than usual and not leave you as tired. I'm afraid I can't do much more than that."

Remus nodded and took it gratefully and drank it in one gulp. He smiled. "That's all I need," he said. "I don't often get the potion because it's just too complex for me or the others to brew. I can't thank you enough for this. You've even made it taste better!"

Merlin smiled. "Anything I can do to help. Kingsley's said that after the war he's going to work on making this version of the Wolfsbane potion free to all werewolves. There are too many deaths every year from werewolves who can't afford the potion losing control and attacking others. In the meantime, I'll help as much as I can."

He nodded once again at Remus and turned and left the room.

Harry was rapidly becoming closer and closer to falling asleep in this afternoon's Charms lesson. It was theory-based for a change, and without the distractions of many shouted incantations and magical mishaps he felt his eyelids drooping.

He hadn't been getting much sleep all week. Since his return to Hogwarts on Tuesday morning, stares and whispered conversations had followed him everywhere, which wasn't too unusual. People used hushed tones whenever he was near, perhaps afraid of upsetting him. The news of his kidnapping by Morgana had spread rapidly, and he seemed to be getting sympathetic glances everywhere he went which just made him feel worse and stopped him being able to forget about what had happened.

He dreamed about it every night. The flames that had engulfed him in the forest and the gloating smile of Morgana as she left him to the torture of the Mandrake. Not to mention the ghostly figures of his loved ones that had plagued him in that terrifying place.
But he'd dealt with bad dreams before, that was nothing new. He'd get used to them. They'd fade eventually. His practice session with Merlin last night after the DA meeting was what was mainly making him exhausted; they hadn't finished until three in the morning.

Merlin hadn't berated him for trying to take Morgana on the previous week, but he hadn't needed to. Harry knew just how hard he had to work and how far he still had to go. Merlin had been right, using Old Magic in a combat situation was more difficult, and Harry now appreciated just how much.

Still, last night had gone well, despite his fatigue. Merlin was still pleased with his progress and a simulated battle between the two of them had resulted in Harry very nearly overpowering Merlin, but only because Merlin had been deliberately restricting his own power though some tricky little spell he'd performed before the battle. He hadn't even been trying. But that didn't matter. Voldemort wouldn't be as powerful as Merlin anyway. Coming close to defeating Merlin at even a tiny fraction of his real power was encouraging.

Harry wouldn't let himself get carried away this time. He knew full well that if it had been a real duel between the two of them, or between himself and Morgana, he would've been flattened in an instant. He knew his restrictions and his limitations.

He'd also been reading Hufflepuff's book late into every night. He wanted no surprises, no mistakes. He devoured every word, at least, whenever Hermione let him have it; she as just as fascinated by it as he was. He understood now why Merlin always said his time with the Founders had been the only truly happy years he’d experienced since his time in Camelot. Helga Hufflepuff’s voice was clearly evident through her words, speaking with her kindness and generosity. He could easily imagine Merlin finding some solace in a friend like her. Reading her book so much, Harry now felt like he knew her well too.

Flitwick's shrill little voice sounded in the classroom asking them to pack away, the bell went and the class scrambled to their feet. Harry jerked out of his dozing and followed the others down to the Great Hall for lunch.

"Think you've got a bit of drool on your chin there, mate," Ron joked as they walked. "You should be more careful about where you fall asleep."

"I wasn't asleep," Harry insisted, though he wiped his chin anyway when Ron wasn't looking.

"Whatever you say …"

Harry scowled and turned to issue a sharp retort when he caught sight of something that stopped him. "Merlin?"

Ron and Hermione whipped around to see Merlin standing in an alcove in the corridor, semi-concealed in darkness. He grinned.

"Falling asleep in class, Harry? That won't help you defeat Voldemort!"

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked him, quickly trying to change the subject. "Is something wrong? Has there been another attack?"

"No," said Merlin. "I've come to search the school records concerning Voldemort. I might get some clue as to where he's hiding."

Ron snorted. "Good luck. You'll never find anything."
Merlin raised an eyebrow. "That's just what your brother said. I thought I'd try anyway. I'm on my way to see McGonagall."

"Hiding in a corridor?" Ron asked. "You won't get very far."

Merlin rolled his eyes. "I don't want anyone to see me. I don't have time to find myself in some sort of adoring mob. I just ducked in here until everyone had gone down to lunch."

"You need some help?" Harry asked, barely stifling a yawn.

"No," said Merlin. "You can barely stay awake. And besides, you've got classes to go to."

"Yeah, even Potions will be more fun than reading through a bunch of dusty old archives," said Ron. "Come on, I'm starving!"

"Trust you to think of your stomach!" reprimanded Hermione.

"What? I'm hungry!"

"Want to come and eat first?" asked Harry; he wanted to know as much about the search for Voldemort as possible.

"No, thanks," said Merlin. "Apart from the fact I don't want to be seen, Ron's mother's fed me enough already that I won't be hungry again until next week!"

"Alright then," said Harry, disappointed. He listened carefully. "I think everyone's gone down. The way will be clear now."

"Right," said Merlin nodding, and he slipped out the alcove and hurried off down the corridor. Harry watched him go trying not to feel deflated.

"He won't find anything," Ron repeated as they resumed their trek down to the Great Hall. "You-Know-Who's not clumsy enough to leave information lying around."

"What if he does find something though?" Hermione asked thoughtfully. "I mean, are we just going to attack the place as soon as we find it? Do you think you're ready, Harry?"

Harry didn't answer and remained silent throughout all of lunch. Was he ready? He didn't know. His encounter with Morgana had shaken his confidence, but if anything had only increased his determination.

Had Tonks been right in all those training sessions? Was there really more to winning a fight than mere strength alone?

He sincerely hoped so.

"You-Know-Who's school records?" McGonagall asked in surprise. "What could they possibly tell you?"

"I don't know yet," answered Merlin. "I'm hoping I'll know when I see it."

McGonagall shrugged and stood up and moved around her desk. She went to the same alcove in the wall where she'd previously found Merlin's old records. She spoke in a clear voice:
"Tom Riddle."

A thick stash of parchments were deposited there and McGonagall withdrew them and passed them to Merlin, looking at them with disgust.

"I don't what you'll find, but you're welcome to stay here and search if you like. If you don't mind though, I'll head on down to lunch. I don't particularly want to know what he was like at school."

Merlin nodded and settled himself into a chair in McGonagall's office. "Thank you," he said, and she left.

He began his reading, and sure enough, there was little that would help him. It was fascinating reading of course; Riddle had been exceptionally gifted at school and reading all the adoring comments lavished on him by his teachers (with the notable exception of Dumbledore) was almost chilling. He went through the record of each of his years at Hogwarts with a fine-toothed comb. All it consisted of was praise after praise. Nothing about his private life other than he was an orphan and 'what a shame' it was. He sighed and threw down the parchment. Like he thought: nothing.

He stared at the parchment contemplatively. There must be something. He'd felt so sure there would some tiny little clue somewhere.

A flash of fire, and suddenly Fawkes' weight fell upon Merlin's shoulder. Merlin didn't even blink; he was used to it by now.

He smiled and turned to face the magnificent bird. "Where have you been all morning?"

Fawkes just squawked in response. Merlin turned away from him.

He picked up another parchment:

Mr Riddle has so readily adapted to life at Hogwarts and displays such an aptitude for magic I find it impossible that only a few months ago he'd never even heard of magic! Usually, children from Muggle backgrounds take some time to adjust to the change, but Riddle shows no sign of this. It's like he was born to be a success. He will go far.

Yes, he will, Merlin thought, throwing aside the account from Professor Merrythought. Too far.

Merlin sighed again. Where could he find out about Voldemort's past?

Suddenly, Fawkes leapt into the air and swooped over to the alcove in the wall. He sang in what almost sounded like a beckoning tone.

Merlin blinked. Well if that wasn't a sign, what was? He was beginning to trust Fawkes as much as any other member of the Order.

He stood up and went to the bird, who hopped back onto his shoulder. He placed his hand on the brick on the wall, without a wand to tap it with. Who should he look up?

He thought for a moment, then it came to him.

"Gaunt," he said clearly, and the wall opened and a massive pile of parchments appeared there. Merlin whistled; that was a lot of Gaunts.

He lifted the giant pile of records to McGonagall's desk and began to sort through them all. What he was expecting to find, he really had no idea.
He began with Voldemort's grandfather Marvolo, and searched back through the history of the family, finding little. They were mostly insane from what he could tell; most of them being expelled before they even got the chance to sit OWLS and of course, all of them were in Slytherin. Hardly any teacher had a good word to say about any of them.

He recognised a few like Eriku Gaunt that he'd went to school with. Merlin wasn't exactly surprised to see that he'd once gotten detention for setting fire to a Muggle-Born student's cloak.

Until about the mid-eighteenth century the Gaunts had lived in Gaunt Manor in Kent, and Merlin remembered from the time that one of the Gaunts had gone mental and set fire to the place and burnt it to the ground because he 'saw' Muggles everywhere. They'd squandered all their money, and unable to rebuild, they'd moved to Little Hangleton and remained there until Voldemort's mother ran away.

He looked in detail at the records; Gaunt Manor was built in the thirteenth century he remembered, but where had they lived before that? He knew they'd lived in some grand house, Augustus Gaunt had often boasted about it. They hadn't needed to move house, they'd just built Gaunt Manor because they had the money to do so and wanted to show off. Had the previous house simply been left abandoned? Where was it?

Unfortunately, the records were sparse; not many Gaunts at that time had attended Hogwarts, thinking themselves above going to a school that admitted Muggle-Borns, and those that did, their place of residence was just listed as 'the ancestral home of the Gaunt family', which wasn't exactly useful.

Merlin sighed and leaned back in his chair. Was this ancestral home where Voldemort was? He'd never exactly been fond of his roots in the Gaunt family.

Merlin tried to remember when the Gaunts had first emerged into wizarding society. There was no mention of them at all in Hogwarts before the twelfth century.

They must have existed, but probably just under a different name. What was it?

He had to search through the genealogical records somehow, and he couldn't do that here. Perhaps he was on a wild goose chase and this ancient house had nothing to do with Voldemort, but he had a nagging feeling that it may be significant. He should at least follow it up.

He stood and returned the records to the alcove, feeling like he was wading through centuries of history as he did so. His head span as he tried to make sense of everything.

There had to be a clue somewhere.

Half an hour later he was being shown into a large room at the Ministry by a small mousy-looking witch.

"The Ministry's genealogy records are kept in here," she said in a bored voice. "Dates all the way back to before Hogwarts was founded. Need some help finding anything?"

"No, I'm sure I'll manage," said Merlin smiling at her behind the middle-aged man disguise he was wielding.

"Fine," said the witch, clearly relieved. "What is it you're here for?"

"My family history," Merlin answered. She raised her eyebrows.
"Nice to know some people still like researching their dead relatives when all the time families are being ripped apart in the present," she said, clearly disapproving.

"The world doesn't stop when we're at war," Merlin said cheerfully, trying to get rid of her. "We all need our hobbies to distract us."

She nodded still looking unimpressed and left him alone in the room at last. He dropped his disguise and magically locked the door. He didn't want to bring to attention the fact he was in the Ministry; those foreign ambassador wizards were constantly lurking around trying to weasel Merlin's location out of Kingsley.

He sat down at a large table and summoned several books to him. It took him no time at all to find the Gaunts; they'd been pretty prominent in their day. He read through several family trees and timelines finding himself increasingly disgusted in the attempts they'd made to preserve their bloodlines over the years and the amount of incest they'd resorted to. In Merlin's day, marrying cousin to cousin hadn't exactly been unusual within the nobility, but this was far worse, with several examples of half-siblings marrying and producing children. It was sickening.

Eventually, he found one long unbroken line stretching back into the middle-ages. He recognised names as he went and he pursued it with a new fervour. He found Augustus Gaunt, someone Merlin had known personally, having attended Hogwarts together in the 1250s. Merlin had been in Hufflepuff then and Augustus in Slytherin but he vividly remembered him. He was one of the nastier members of the family, and was expelled when the two of them were in fourth year when he attempted to use the Crucius Curse on a first year Muggle-Born. He'd later gone to Azkaban for burning down a Muggle town after locking the Muggles in their own homes using magic.

Augustus had been in the first generation of Gaunts to live in the new Gaunt Manor, he knew that for a fact. Before they'd moved in he'd talked about the amazing castle he and his family owned, which was apparently grander than Hogwarts, though smaller. He'd made a particular point of pointing this out to Merlin (or Marcellus as he'd been known then) since Merlin had lived in a rather shabby Muggle inn during the school holidays. Merlin hadn't thought much of it before now. He'd gone to the former site of Gaunt Manor this week with Fred, George and Draco in tow, but it was nothing more than some crumbling blackened bricks. There was nothing there now except some squirrels. He hadn't even considered the previous home.

He searched back further. Augustus had been the only son of Tyrus Gaunt and Lobelia Black. Tyrus Gaunt had been the eldest son of Primus Gaunt and Lamia Flint …

He counted through the generations until he found Alphard Gaunt, the first one that had appeared on the Hogwarts records in 1167. He was the son of Hyperion Gaunt and-

This was it, Merlin said to himself smiling, this was the link he'd been looking for. Alphard Gaunt's mother had been Druella Slytherin.

His heart beating a little faster, he saw that Druella had been an only child and her father's sole heir. He traced her lineage back six more generations finding, as he had expected, Salazar at the end of it. This was the link.

He stood up suddenly and crossed the room searching for something else, rifling through shelves of thick parchments until he found it. The record of marriages.

It took him almost an hour until he found the record of Druella and Hyperion's marriage in 1155. The records were very basic and had almost fallen to pieces. Ancient wizards hadn't cared too much about posterity. He found the record though, and an annotation beneath it that made him grin: the
bride's dowry.

With that marriage, the Gaunts had come into possession of the Slytherin estate.

Merlin leaned back in his chair hardly daring to hope that he'd found it at last. He had to think this through rationally before he leapt into action. There was no guarantee that this house still existed; if the Gaunts had indeed abandoned it when they built their own house, what was to stop it from falling into ruin?

But Salazar wouldn't have allowed that, Merlin thought to himself. Any house he built would have had enchantments cast over every brick to prevent it from being subject to ordinary weathering, just like he'd done with Hogwarts. It would still be standing.

But if it was, then why didn't the Gaunts return there when their own estate was burned down? Why move to a hovel in Little Hangleton?

They probably didn't know anything about it. If the estate had been abandoned in the thirteenth century … aside from their Slytherin ancestry, they probably knew nothing about their past. And if they had, they may have completely forgotten where it was.

But then, how would Voldemort have learned of it? Merlin didn't think it likely that he had been allowed access to these records. Even when the Ministry had been overrun by Death Eaters, why would he have looked up his family history? What could he possibly have hoped to gain? He knew about his ancestry, that was probably enough for him. Still, it was possible …

His heart was still beating fast. Merlin stood up and tidied away the records as best as he could, still arguing in his own mind. It seemed too good to be true that he might at last have a location for Voldemort's hideout.

He crossed over to the section of the room that kept the records on old estates and properties, but after two hours of searching had still found nothing. There were little records of anything before the fourteenth century in that area. There was no mention of Slytherin's estate, though plenty of Gaunt Manor which had apparently been in a permanent state of trouble with the Ministry.

If this was indeed Voldemort's hideout, he wasn't going to find its location here.

He crossed into a smaller adjoining room which kept a large quantity of old maps and he sat down warily and consigned himself to a lengthy search well into the night.

It was frustrating. Hardly any of the maps were accurate and those that were listed only towns and villages and not independent estates. He searched through so many that his eyelids began to droop from extreme boredom. He'd no idea where the estate might be. He searched through lists of old townships, maps of ruins, lists of old buildings, searched every map of Britain that he could lay his hands on.

But of the maps that survived from the Founder's time, none listed estates, only rivers and settlements. And all the ones after that were not much better. He vainly searched a modern map of Wizarding Britain but again came up short. He began to resign himself to the fact that the Slytherin's estate was Unplottable. This wasn't entirely unexpected; Salazar had enjoyed his privacy.

He laid his head down on the table, closing his eyes, letting his fatigue engulf him. He felt himself drifting into sleep. He had to find this house …

What seemed like a minute later, there was a flash of silver in the corner of his eye. He jerked awake to find a silvery lynx staring at him. It opened his mouth and spoke to him in Kingsley's voice:
It was a cold November Saturday morning and Harry and the others shivered in their thick cloaks as their breath misted in the air before them. But each of them was grinning widely as they sat in the Quidditch stands. It was Ravenclaw versus Slytherin, and so far it was an excellently played match.

Harry and Ron had their eyes locked on the players, observing every little movement and strategy, sizing up the enemy, wondering which team would most severely rival them for the Quidditch Cup. Both teams were playing well, two hours into the match it was 140-130 to Ravenclaw and both sets of Chasers were strong. Ron looked worried at this.

Harry had his eyes on the two Seekers, having never seen either of them play before. They were young and inexperienced, but skillful fliers. They'd both seen the Snitch several times over in the match already and were only foiled by Bludgers each time. They'd be tough to beat.

Hermione was sitting on the bench next to him, her nose in a book, not even looking at the match.

"Come on, Hermione," said Harry nudging her. "This is supposed to be fun."

She gave him a scathing look. "If you and Ron aren't playing I'm not that interested," she said, trying vainly to turn the page of the book with her gloves on "I'd much rather read."

"What are you reading?" Harry asked loudly over the yells of the Ravenclaw supporters as they scored another goal.

"Hufflepuff's book!" she shouted back. "I'm looking for-"

She was drowned out by another tumultuous yell as the Ravenclaw Seeker went into a steep and dangerous dive. Harry forgot all about Hermione as he leapt up from his seat to watch the Seeker whizz past. His control on the broom was extraordinary.

A few minutes later, the Seeker pulled up triumphant, the Golden Snitch glittering in his hand. The Slytherin Seeker landed with a huge scowl on her face.

"Yes! We've won!" Luna shouted from the commentator's stand. "That poor Slytherin Seeker must have had a Wrackspurt in her ears. I do hope she gets rid of it."

"Good team that," observed Ron, nodding to the Ravenclaws who were in the middle of a group hug fifty feet above the ground. "What do you think our chances are?"

"You kidding?" asked Harry. "We'll flatten them!"

Ron laughed and clapped Harry on the shoulder. Hermione rolled her eyes.

Five minutes later they were making their way out of the stadium amidst huge crowds of people.

"We're going to have to train extra hard!" said Ginny, who'd now joined them making their way back up to the castle. "Those Chasers were really good."

"Yeah," said Harry, avoiding looking directly at her. Ever since their conversation in Grimmauld Place and Merlin's words to him he'd tried not to get too close to her. He was still fighting with himself over what to do about Ginny. He wanted to be with her, of course he did, more than anything. And he knew it was a ridiculous argument to say that he wanted to keep her safe, they
were both at risk anyway.

But still something held him back. He didn't know what. Perhaps it was just more the fact that he wanted any time they spent together to be without the looming darkness hanging over them like a shadow. He didn't want to be with her and know at the same time either one of them could die any day. If he was to be with her, he wanted it to be a time when they could truly be happy and not have to worry about staying alive. He didn't want death and destruction to tarnish any time they had together. She was a part of his nightmares every night, seeing her as one of the ghostly figures that blamed him for their deaths. How could he be happy with her when he knew that every day might be their last?

At the same time though, who knew how much time they had left? Perhaps Merlin was right and he should seize this chance while he could. Merlin knew better than most how fleeting happiness could be.

He was leaning more and more to this side of the argument every day.

"Hey! Harry!"

Harry turned around, welcoming the distraction, and to his surprise saw the entire jubilant Ravenclaw team heading towards him.

Terry Boot had been the one who'd called him and he was grinning at Harry.

"Not bad for only my second year as Captain, eh?" he asked him. "That was a tough one."

"You were really good," said Harry grinning back. "Looks like you'll be some competition!"

"You can bet on it," said Terry laughing. "We'll get the Cup this year!"

He looked back at his team who were hanging back hesitantly. Harry didn't know any of them personally and they seemed to almost be in awe of him and the way their captain was so easily interacting with him.

"We'd best be heading in," said Terry. "We've got a party in Ravenclaw Tower waiting!"

He turned to face Harry again, and his grin faded and he looked surprised as his gaze fell on a spot behind Harry.

"Professor Flitwick? Martin?"

Harry turned and indeed saw Professor Flitwick and Merlin heading down the sloping lawns towards them. They looked unusually grave. Flitwick's eyes looked more watery than normal.

Merlin avoided their eyes and hung back while Flitwick stepped forwards. He came up to the team, who were torn between looking at Merlin in awe and at Flitwick who was so unusually solemn.

"Miss Miller?" he squeaked. One of the Ravenclaw Chasers, a second-year Harry thought, paled and stepped forward at her name. "I need to speak with you in private. Please come with me."

Miller's eyes widened and she looked suddenly afraid. She followed Flitwick without a word, clutching her broom tightly.

Terry looked at Harry in confusion. Then he looked at Merlin and he seemed to see something there in his face. An expression of pain crossed his features. He nodded to his team and they left Harry,
Ron, Hermione and Ginny standing there in the grounds still reeling in confusion.

As soon as they'd left, Harry turned to face Merlin. Merlin was watching after the retreating backs of Flitwick and Miller, a frown on his face.

"What's happened?" Hermione asked him, her voice deathly quiet. "Why's Professor Flitwick taking that girl away?"

Merlin looked around at her, still frowning. He sighed heavily. "There was an attack on a Muggle village this morning. That girl … her parents were killed. I didn't get there in time."

Harry felt a clenching feeling in his stomach. He himself looked back up to the castle where the girl had now vanished through the front doors.

"That poor girl," said Ginny, her hands over her mouth.

"What happened?" Ron asked in a hushed tone.

Merlin shook his head. "It was one of the villages we'd protected. But one of the Death Eaters had one of those enhanced wands and … well, the wards had been placed by Aurors, they weren't designed to repel Old Magic. I'd given the Aurors new spells to help with that, but they haven't had a chance to get around every village yet. We got there pretty early, but not enough. Ten Muggles died, including that girl's parents."

He scowled and looked angry. "But so did the Death Eaters. I made sure of that. All four of them."

Harry got a little shiver as he heard Merlin speak with such anger in his voice. Hermione was watching Merlin with concern.

The happy contented expressions that had been on everyone's faces just a few minutes previously had now completely evaporated. A darkness hung over the grounds.

Merlin sighed again. "Come on. We need to get into the castle."

"I didn't think you wanted to be seen?" Ron asked as they walked.

"That doesn't matter now," said Merlin. "I need to do something."

"What?" panted Hermione, struggling to keep up with Merlin's fast stride.

"I think I might know where Voldemort's base is," he said. "I need to check. I can't waste any more time. I can't let there be any more orphans."

"Where is it?" Harry demanded, but Merlin stopped dead in his path. He looked out at the Forbidden Forest. All the trees at the very edge of the forest were either gone or dead, their black skeletons standing out on the otherwise picturesque grounds. An air of death now hung over the forest. The ground was grey, the place was eerily silent.

Further in however, the trees were as green as ever. They seemed to have escaped unscathed from Morgana's flames, though Harry could have sworn the fire had spread there as well.

Merlin was watching them with a small rueful smile on his lips. "A forest as ancient as that cannot be destroyed," he said almost to himself. "That which is good cannot fully be corrupted."

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked looking out at the forest, a blank expression on his face.
Merlin shook himself out of his daydreams. "Just … the Cup of Life was only ever intended for good, to heal. That was corrupted, and it now gives immortality. But that wasn't its true purpose. Corrupting that which is good has its price."

"You're still making no sense," complained Ron. "I thought you'd found You-Know-Who? What are we waiting for?"

Harry's heart leapt. Could it be true?

Merlin turned back to the others. "You're right. We should go."

"Where exactly?" Harry asked desperately as they went into the castle. "Have you really found him?"

"I might have," said Merlin. "I need to confirm it."

But he said no more, despite their pleas and marched straight to McGonagall's office. He held out his hand as he went and sent two silvery dragon Patronuses whooshing off through the corridors.

Harry's confusion deepened.

Merlin walked confidently through the corridors, ignoring the cries of the people who saw him and their exclamations of surprise. He was focused.

They arrived at the gargoyle in front of McGonagall's office and found Luna and Neville waiting for them, the recipients of the Patronuses now explained.

"What are we-" began Neville but Merlin shook his head and stated the password to the gargoyle which sprang aside immediately. While this was going on, Fawkes appeared with a flash of fire so suddenly Neville leapt backwards and stood on Ginny's toes. He settled himself casually on Merlin's shoulder who gave no indication that he was surprised.

They all followed Merlin up the revolving staircase and waited while he knocked on the door. A voice told him to come in.

They did so, and found all the Heads of Houses save Flitwick sitting in front of McGonagall looking grave.

Slughorn leapt out of his seat suddenly invigorated at the sight of Merlin and bounced towards him.

"Martin, m'boy! Or Merlin I should say now, I suppose! How are you?"

"I'm fine, professor," said Merlin, who had now been pulled into a vigorous handshake by Slughorn.

"An honour! An honour to know you! If you ever need anything, anything at all-"

"Thank you, professor," interrupted Merlin and turned away from him. Hagrid beamed at him and Sprout offered him a nervous smile, still not completely accustomed to who her former student had turned out to be.

"You know about the attack today?" McGonagall asked him from behind her desk.

"Yes I do," said Merlin. "I was there."

"An awful affair," said Slughorn, looking thoroughly miserable again. "Young Miss Miller was an exceptional potion-brewer. Such a promising future! Such a terrible thing to happen to one so young!"
"We were just discussing whether we should do something to protect the families of the Muggle-Born students of Hogwarts," said McGonagall. "Perhaps bring them to Hogsmeade where they can be safe. There is precedent for it."

"I know," said Merlin interrupting. "During the Counter-Hunts when wizards decided to start burning Muggles at the stake in revenge. Muggle-Born's families in particular were targeted and they were taken to Hogsmeade in 1597 to protect them until everything calmed down."

McGonagall blinked in surprise. "Of course, I had forgotten that you would remember that. Did it work?"

Merlin shrugged. "Depends on your point of view. The Muggles from wizard's family were saved, but hundreds of others weren't. Who's the one to make the decision that the only Muggles that can be saved are the ones that have a witch or wizard in the family? Does that make all other Muggles worthless? Besides, not everyone in Hogsmeade was happy to have so many Muggles living amongst them. There was infighting, and some Muggles left voluntarily deciding they'd rather take the risk than live where they were unwelcome."

"I see," said McGonagall. "But surely if the Muggles already know about magic—"

"It makes no difference to me," said Merlin. "Just because they already know about magic doesn't mean they're any more worthy of saving. If there was a plague in Camelot, or an attack, Arthur never shut the gates to the Citadel or to the city. He let everyone in if they needed help. He didn't save some whilst leaving others to die."

"We can't always save everyone," said Sprout sadly. "However much we may want to."

"True," said Merlin. He sighed. "If you think this is a good idea, then don't let me stop you. You'll have to take precautions though. Make sure the Muggles and the inhabitants of Hogsmeade know what to expect. Last time a Muggle child lost an eye after being attacked by a Crup which to her looked just like any other dog. But this isn't why I'm here."

"Oh, then why are you here?" McGonagall asked, raising an eyebrow. "Here to look through more old records?"

"No, I found what I needed," said Merlin. "I have an idea of where Voldemort's hideout might be."

McGonagall's face drained of the fatigue that had been in it. "You do?" she asked breathlessly, leaping to her feet. "And where might it be?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "But I've been tracing the Gaunt family looking for some place that was connected with them. Gaunt Manor was destroyed about two hundred years ago, but I found somewhere else in the records. An estate that was passed into the Gaunt family when they married into the Slytherins."

"The old Slytherin estate!" cried Slughorn. "That would indeed be a perfect hideout!"

"You've heard of it?" Merlin, Harry, Ron and Hermione asked him simultaneously. He looked a little surprised.

"Of course I have! Hasn't everyone? It was said to be an ancient castle, lost to time. The Gaunts left it hundreds of years ago but they didn't want anyone to use it after them who was 'unworthy'. So they put an enchantment on it so that only one of their descendants would be able to discover it again. The Heir of Slytherin."
"Him again," Ron grumbled, but Merlin was watching Slughorn with increasing wonder.

"Why haven't I heard of this before?"

"Oh, it's a tale that passed around the Slytherin Common Room from time to time," Slughorn said casually. "Every young Slytherin worth his salt tried to find it. I even tried, though I know for a fact the Slughorns aren't descended from Slytherin."

"I was in Slytherin twice and I never once heard this story," Merlin said. "Are you certain?"

"Very," said Slughorn. "There may be a reason for your not hearing of it. When you were in Slytherin House, what was your, ahem, blood status? What backstory did you adopt?"

Merlin frowned. "I pretended to be only what I am. A Half-Blood. Why's that significant?"

"Ah," said Slughorn. "The story is only told by Pure-Blood students to other Pure-Blood students. They wouldn't have trusted you. They wouldn't have thought you would ever be able to find it."

"But how would Voldemort have heard of it then?" Harry asked. "He's a Half-Blood as well."

"I can believe I can answer that one as well," Slughorn answered, looking quite happy to be the focus of so much attention. "Everyone knew he was an orphan, but he pretended to everyone, students and teachers alike, that he was a Pure-Blood who'd been cruelly forced to live with Muggles. And everyone believed him, after all, why shouldn't they? He was a Slytherin, and an exceptional student. In our eyes (and bear in mind that this was a very long time ago) this was all the proof we needed that he was a Pure-Blood."

"That makes sense," said Ron. "He would've heard that story and been desperate to try and find the place, wouldn't he?"

"Yeah," said Harry, suddenly feeling everything slide into place. "He would've wanted that place. He's obsessed with his ancestry. He'd have thought of it as his birthright."

"But where is it?" Neville asked.

Here, Slughorn shook his head. "That's just it I'm afraid. No one knows. No one even has the faintest idea where it is located."

"Then maybe he didn't find it?" Ginny asked hopefully.

Merlin shook his head. "He found it."

"But if only the Heir of Slytherin can find it, how can we?" Hermione asked doubtfully.

Merlin smiled. "That's why I came here."

He moved around McGonagall's desk, everyone's eyes following him and stood looking up at a portrait on the wall.

"Oi! Wake up!"

The occupant of the portrait jerked awake with a snort and glared down at Merlin.

"Do you mind, Emrys? I am trying to sleep."

"Yeah, and I'm trying to stop your descendent from destroying the entire wizarding world," Merlin
said. "The least you can do is help."

"The man has nothing to do with me," the man Harry now knew to be Salazar Slytherin said. "I cannot be held responsible for anything my descendent does."

"You might be," said Merlin. "I need to ask you some questions. What happened to your estate?"

"My estate?" Slytherin asked, raising an eyebrow. "You know perfectly well what happened to it, Emrys. You were there, after all. It was burned down by Muggles when they killed my family."

Harry flinched as he heard this. It must be the root of Slytherin’s hatred of Muggles.

"I don't mean that one," said Merlin, staring at the portrait without blinking. "After you left the school, you built a new one, didn't you, one that wouldn't be so easily destroyed?"

Slytherin looked surprised. "Yes, I did. Why does that concern you?"

"Where was it?" Merlin asked, ignoring the question. "Where did you build it?"

Slytherin frowned. "Right on the site of my old home. It had been the Slytherin home for centuries, and I wanted to show those Muggle peasants that I would not be driven away so easily. So, though it caused me great pain, I returned to the spot where my mother lost her life, where I had once lived in peace. You remember where that is, don't you?"

Merlin grinned. "Yes, I do."

He turned back to the others. "I think we may have found it."

Harry's heart leapt. Had they? Had they truly found it now after so much searching?

Merlin turned back to Slytherin's portrait. "Have you ever told anyone this?" he asked him, his voice betraying the excitement he obviously felt. "Did you ever tell anyone the site of your old home?"

"Why do you want to know-"

"Tell him, Salazar!" a small woman in an adjoining portrait barked at him, stopping her feigned sleep to point a wand at him. "Don't make me use this!"

Slytherin glanced at the wand warily and turned back to Merlin. "Alright."

Merlin nodded. "Thank you, Helga."

"Not a problem, Emrys. A thousand years stuck next to him have taught me exactly how to keep him under control."

Harry watched in amazement at Merlin's casual interaction with the Hogwarts Founders. It was just bizarre.

"Well, did you tell anyone?" Merlin asked Slytherin again.

Slytherin sighed. "Yes, I did."

"Who?" Merlin asked desperately.

"You're not going to like what I say."
"On the contrary," said Merlin. "I'm hoping for some bad news here."

Slytherin frowned at him in confusion but seemed to disregard it. He must be used to Merlin’s unusual ways. "He came to me in this office. He was waiting on Professor Dippet to arrive and he spoke to me. He told me of his ancestry and how he'd always felt alone and afraid, without a family to support him. He said that all he wanted was to relive the glory of his ancestors and recapture their pride and dignity. So I told him of my old home, and that it was his birthright. He was the first one of my descendants to appear in the Headmaster's office that didn't disgust me by their incestuous lifestyle and complete ignorance and stupidity. And ... I felt sorry for him. Ashamed that my line had gone so badly wrong as to leave this boy the result of an insane and cruel family with no hope of gaining respectability. He seemed on the surface to be a pleasant, polite, well-mannered and intelligent young man. I could never have anticipated ..."

"Tom Riddle," Merlin said, and Slytherin nodded.

"I admit it, he charmed me, and you know, Emrys, how very rarely I can be fooled. I felt that perhaps here was the man who truly embodied the spirit of Slytherin House, the good parts of it, and not the aspects of it that I have come to regret, the bad reputation for one thing."

"He charmed many people," said Merlin. "You're not the first one even in this room to be lured in by him."

At this, Ginny and Slughorn shifted a little, but Merlin did not look at them.

"That is where he's hiding now, isn't he?" Slytherin asked, looking at everyone in the room in turn.

"I think so," answered Merlin.

Slytherin sighed. "I thought so. Just promise me one thing? When you storm the place, try and not destroy it too much. I did love that house."

Merlin laughed softly. "I'll try."

He turned back to the others. "Well, I think we've just gotten one step closer to defeating them for good."
Preparing to Attack

Merlin's heart was racing as the kitchen of Grimmauld Place slowly filled with the members of the Order, so slowly it was excruciating. One by one Order members who had been dragged away from their Saturday afternoon activities by the Patronuses Merlin and McGonagall had sent out filed in, looking a mixture of confusion, excitement and dread. All the Weasleys sat along one side of the table, all of them shooting questions at Ron as to what was going on, but he just shook his head and nodded meaningfully at Merlin; he wasn't going to explain anything until Merlin did. Professors Sprout, Slughorn and Flitwick were also there. Although not official members of the Order, they had been there when Merlin had made his discovery and could hardly been discounted now. Flitwick had joined them after his meeting with the Miller girl, in which he had broken the bad news to her gently and escorted her to one of her Muggle aunt's houses to be looked after. Remus was also there looking tired after his previous night's transformation, but not as badly as he usually did, thanks to Merlin's modified potion. He smiled at Merlin almost nervously.

Merlin didn't smile back, he couldn't. A sick feeling was growing in his stomach as he remembered the look of fear in that young girl's eyes when Flitwick had taken her away. She went from being a twelve-year old girl celebrating her first victory in a Quidditch match to an orphan within a few moments. A silent fury was raging within him.

His hands were shaking with suppressed anger. Fawkes, who was perched on Merlin's lap, crooned softly. Merlin's burden immediately felt lighter, and he reached out and placed his hands over his soft warm feathers and felt the raging tempest inside of him subside slightly. He gripped Fawkes' feathers tightly, the soothing sensation that came from the bird seemed to be the only thing keeping him sane.

Harry was sitting across from Merlin at the table and his eyes kept flitting between the steady stream of Order members coming in through the kitchen door and where Merlin was sitting. Merlin could feel the impatience radiating off of him. He wanted the meeting to begin; he needed to know where Voldemort was hiding.

It was all Merlin could do not to rush off himself to where Morgana and her minion were hiding and blast the place into pieces. He had to restrain himself; even for him, attacking the place like that would be dangerous. Voldemort was no problem, but all of his Death Eaters working against him at the same time would be enough to at least test him, and he knew he would need all of his power to defeat Morgana. Her power rivalled his own just enough to pose a serious threat. If he let his guard down for even a moment she might win an advantage. He couldn't afford to be distracted. He had to bide his time for the opportune moment, despite how much he detested the idea.

Finally, after what seemed like hours after Merlin had made the discovery, the last Order member took a seat, and not long afterwards, Kingsley strode in with purpose. He took his seat at the head of the table, a quizzical frown on his brow. He glanced at Merlin.

"My Aurors and I were in the middle of a very serious meeting about how to improve protection over Muggle dwellings when your Patronus arrived," he said to Merlin. "I trust that whatever it was that prompted such an immediate summoning must be serious indeed if it could not wait until tonight's meeting."

"Oh, it is," muttered Ginny. Kingsley ignored her and kept staring at Merlin expectantly. Merlin noticed his hands were clenched on the table in front of him.

"I know where Voldemort is hiding," Merlin announced.
The effect was instantaneous. The room as a whole gasped in shock, incredulity and excitement. A buzzing chattering noise broke out and every face looked alert and eager.

Kingsley held up a hand for silence which immediately fell. He looked at Merlin intensely.

"Are you certain?" he asked. His voice as calm and collected as ever, but Merlin could detect a subtle hint of excitement there.

Merlin nodded. "I am."

More frantic whispers broke out.

"How did you discover it?" Remus asked, all hint of weariness gone from his features.

"I traced the history of the Gaunt family," Merlin explained quickly. "I found a mention of one of their old residences, one that had been passed down from Slytherin himself. I knew that if Voldemort, a man as arrogant and self-assuming as he is, had ever learned of this place he would immediately have sought to set himself up in it. My suspicions were confirmed when the portrait of Salazar Slytherin in Hogwarts told me he had told a young Voldemort where to find it."

"That's impossible," said Draco from a corner, frowning. "The place doesn't exist."

"You knew about it?" Bill frowned. "Why didn't you mention it as a place where You-Know-Who might be hiding?"

"It was a silly myth!" Draco protested as people turned on him. "Some stupid story we used to tell in the Slytherin Common Room. No one really thought it was a real place!"

"Well, it is," said Merlin. "You'd be surprised how many times I've come across something that's supposed to be a myth and turns out to be true. I don't think I've ever come across any myth that didn't have at least some basis in fact. The Slytherin estate is real."

"But won't the place be hidden by a Fidelius Charm?" Neville asked.

Merlin smiled, still clutching on to Fawkes' feathers. "Yes, but Fidelius Charms are Modern Magic, and I'm sure that if I tried I'd be able to break it without too much effort. I'm almost certain it can be broken if I know the general area that it's in."

"But according to the legend," said Draco, "the only person that can find the place is an Heir of Slytherin. There was a silly story about how only a Parselmouth could find it because the snakes would lead them to it or something. You won't be able to break the Fidelius Charm if you can't get near it in the first place!"

"That does pose a significant problem," said Kingsley, frowning.

"You mean we're back to the beginning again?" Fred asked, slumping back in his chair.

"Great," grumbled George. "We know where it is, just not where it is."

Merlin cleared his throat loudly, and everyone turned to stare at him, breaking off their whispered discussions. Merlin smiled again.

"You're all forgetting one thing," he said, keeping them all in his gaze. "I knew Salazar Slytherin personally. He built this estate on the site of an earlier one. I've been there before. I know exactly where it is."
The excitement in the room reignited and people leaned forward to hear his next few words.

"What were you doing in Slytherin's house?" Charlie asked suspiciously.

Merlin frowned. "Salazar wasn't an entirely evil man, you know. He had his good points as well as his bad."

"Salazar?" George said shaking his head. "I can't believe you were on first name terms with him."

"Look," Merlin said, annoyed. "This isn't about any friendship I had with Salazar Slytherin. That's not important."

"So, what did the two of you talk about when he invited you around for dinner?" Fred asked casually.

"He never invited me around for dinner."

"Then how do you know where his house is?"

Merlin sighed. This really wasn't important, but he knew their curiosity must be satiated.

"Because I used to live nearby," he explained. "Big estates like that in those days usually had a village attached, or very close by. I lived in the village. He was the landlord and we his tenants."

"Landlord? You used to pay him taxes?"

"Yes," sighed Merlin.

"What sort of a friend charges his friend money?" Ginny asked frowning.

"We weren't friends back then," said Merlin. "I was the village healer and he lived with his family up in the castle. We had nothing to do with each other. I didn't know him at all."

"What changed?" Hermione asked, looking interested. Merlin had to refrain from rolling his eyes— even in a situation like this she was still pressing for historical details.

"The villagers knew about the Slytherins' magic," Merlin explained. "They didn't really bother about it, and the Slytherins and the villagers were mostly just happy to live and let live."

He sighed heavily. "But then, a girl died from a strange disease. I was unable to treat her. It was something I had never seen before: smallpox, which was then quite rare in that part of the world and often fatal. I left the village after her death to go to another town to consult with the healer there about it. When I returned a couple of weeks later, everything had changed. Several more people had been infected and killed, and the town leaders had stirred up a crowd of people into anger and rebellion. They blamed the Slytherins, saying it was their evil influence that had brought the disease, that the disease was God's way of punishing them for tolerating witchcraft in their midst. When I returned, I discovered that they'd attacked the Slytherin estate in the middle of the night, catching them off guard. They destroyed the house and dragged the family outside without their wands and burned them all at the stake. I arrived back too late to stop them."

Merlin hung his head with sadness as he remembered the blacked pyres with the smell of charred flesh in the air. The family and servants had all suffered cruel and excruciating deaths. Some had been Muggles. Several of them had been mere children. He looked up again to find everyone staring at him with wide eyes. Mrs Weasley had her hand over her mouth in horror.
"But," said Ron, frowning. "How did he survive?"

"He wasn't there at the time," Merlin said quietly. "I saw him arrive back. He'd been absent for months, off with Godric and the others trying to get their school started. He'd returned at the first murmurings of trouble at home. In those days, Apparition wasn't as refined and perfected as it is now. It was safer to ride, and by the time he'd gotten back …"

He sighed again, dragging up yet more unpleasant memories. "I saw him ride up to the gates, and the look on his face as he saw what had happened to his family … well, Voldemort's anger's got nothing on his. He lashed out and tried desperately to save his family, despite the fact they were already dead. He killed the Muggles that were there, brutally. I've never seen anyone so torn up by anguish, pain and hatred. He was like a man possessed."

"He turned to the village then, and tried to attack it, to burn it down as well. He didn't care if he killed innocents or not, he was beyond reason at that point. That was when I noticed."

"Noticed what?" Ginny asked in a hushed voice. Everyone was hanging on his every word.

"That his magic was different," Merlin explained. "He was using a wand, and using Modern spells, but there was … something different about it. I sensed the Old Religion within him. Very faint, but it was there. He had that magic; there was a combination of the Old and the New there, even if he didn't know it himself."

"I stopped him from killing the villagers. I revealed myself to him, and stopped him from destroying the village and himself at the same time. He had such hatred in his eyes when he looked at me. He thought I had betrayed my own kind. But I couldn't let him kill innocent people, the ones who'd had nothing to do with the massacre of his family. It didn't do much good though. The ones who didn't die from smallpox fled the village anyway and never returned."

"Salazar left after he realised that I was there to protect the villagers. I thought about leaving as well, but something about him intrigued me. So I followed him back to Hogwarts, which was just half built at the time. I lived in Hogsmeade and watched from a distance and noticed the incredible power that the castle's four residents wielded. I knew that their magic was an amalgamation of the Old and New, and I realised then that I had to step in and help them, guide them."

"Salazar wasn't too happy when he saw me again. He tried to kill me actually. He thought I had helped the Muggles massacre his family. The other Founders didn't like me either at first. But then Fawkes intervened."

Merlin smiled down at the phoenix in his lap. "He was Godric's bird back then. And just like he did this time around, he flew over to me and convinced the others that I was to be trusted. Salazar didn't take too kindly to that at first, but after a while, after I explained to him my reasons and helped him come to terms with his loss, he came to trust me just as much as the others did. I never managed to get rid of his hatred of Muggles and suspicion of Muggle-Borns entirely though."

Merlin frowned. "Now will that satisfy you? How I know where Salazar lived isn't really important. Just know that after he left Hogwarts he went back to his old home and rebuilt it. And I remember where."

The room was silent. Everyone was exchanging looks that were a mixture of distress and eagerness.

"I never realised he'd suffered like that," Tonks said, shaking her head. "It explains quite a bit."

"Yes, well," said Merlin. "I could tell you dozens more things about Salazar and how he's really not
as bad as history paints him, but I don't have time right now."

"You're right," said Kingsley. "We need to formulate a plan of action. We cannot rush into anything. A full-on assault of the place is at present unfeasible. We are not ready. We must marshal our forces and prepare. This must be conducted under absolute secrecy. We must not give anything away; the enemy cannot know that we've discovered anything. We must continue to act the way we have been doing. Revealing this publicly by design or by accident could be disastrous. Let Voldemort keep thinking he is safe. When we are ready, when we have a plan, we will attack."

Merlin nodded. "I agree completely. As much as I hate to admit it, we have to take our time about this. We have to be careful. They could move their base easily if they knew they'd been discovered. We have to plan everything down to the very last detail."

"Wait!" said Harry, speaking for the first time, having remained uncharacteristically quiet. "You mean to tell me we're just going to sit here and talk when we know exactly where he's hiding?"

Merlin groaned inwardly. He could have guessed this would happen.

"Harry," he said soothingly. "The Order needs time to prepare. We can't rush anything. The situation is far too delicate."

Harry just looked at him. "This is our chance! We have to do something!"

"We will, Harry," said Kingsley. "But we cannot just now."

"But he could move again!" Harry protested. "We have to act before something goes wrong!"

"Harry, if we act now something will go wrong!" Merlin said. "Storming in there without proper preparation is akin to suicide. Did you immediately run off to the Ministry or Gringotts when you knew where the Horcruxes were, or did you wait and plan? We've got a better chance at success if we wait. A better chance that more of us will survive! Or do you want their deaths on your conscience? Have you learned nothing from the Forbidden Forest?"

Harry flinched, and Merlin inwardly berated himself. That had been a low blow.

"Harry," Merlin said, more gently. "You're not ready. We're not ready."

"I don't want to waste any more time!" Harry said, his hands shaking. "What about that girl today? How many more people are going to die before we're ready?"

Merlin felt this was a very good point, but he didn't let this show on his face. He had to look at the bigger picture.

"If we try and fail," he said slowly, "we'll never have another chance. We'll be in a worse situation than we are now. It's a risk we have to take. Better to wait and gather our full strength than let ourselves be easily crushed and end all hope of future resistance."

Harry scowled, but he didn't say anything further. He stared resolutely down at the table in front of him. Ginny watched him worriedly.

"What should we do, Kingsley?" Mr Weasley asked him, his face grim. "What's our next move?"

Kingsley glanced at Merlin, but when he saw that nothing was forthcoming he spoke.

"Myself, Arthur, Tonks and the rest of you at the Ministry will help me to prepare the Aurors and
formulate a plan of attack in absolute secrecy. Nothing should be seen to be amiss at the Ministry. Remus, you coordinate the other Order members and our allies and do likewise, you and Tonks can liaise and join the two forces. Minerva, I want you to prepare Hogwarts. Arrange extra security and get the castle ready in case another all-out battle is coming. Get the teachers on board and ready to defend the students if need be. Merlin-

Here he paused, and looked uncertain. "I don't presume to give you orders," he said. "But you should make yourself useful where you see fit. You're probably more accustomed to this sort of thing than any of us. We'll be grateful of your expertise in any capacity."

Merlin nodded brusquely. He was already thinking back to the many, many castles he and Arthur had stormed in the past and managed to infiltrate trying to remember anything that might be useful. It had been an age since he had done something like this. An age since he had actively sought a fight with Morgana on her own ground. He had to be careful.

Kingsley continued issuing more orders but Merlin barely listened further than to note whether they were of any good. He was too lost in thought. How would he accomplish this? He felt an exhilaration building inside of him. He was taking the fight to Morgana. Soon, he would fight her, and the fate of the Old Religion and this modern age would be decided. He could finally be rid of her, or rid of his own lingering immortality.

Finally.

"Where is this place?" Bill asked suddenly. He looked around at the table. Everyone looked blank. He looked at Merlin. "You say you know where this place is? Then where? What part of the country?"

Merlin opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He shook his head.

"I don't think I should say."

Shouts of protest rang out.

"Why not? Tonks asked. "Don't we have a right to know?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "But like Kingsley said, this has to be absolutely secret. I don't want to risk anyone else finding out, least of all Morgana. I think it's wisest for me to keep that information to myself for now."

Everyone looked disappointed but nodded their agreement. Harry however, frowned.

"You sure it's not so that I don't go running off there on my own?" he asked almost accusingly.

Merlin fixed him with a beady stare. "Partly," he admitted. "But it's my decision. I think it's best that as few people know as possible."

Harry's frown deepened.

"What about us?" Neville asked of Kingsley suddenly, interrupting anything Harry had been about to say.

"What do you mean?" Kingsley asked.

"The DA!" Neville said, eagerly. "What can we do?"
Kingsley froze for a second, before exchanging glances with Remus and Mr Weasley.

"I don't think it's best to get them involved-"

"Why not?" Ginny objected fiercely. "We've been teaching them how to defend themselves! They've got as much right to help defend the world they love as all of you! We need as much help as we can get."

"I don't think we should be involving children," said McGonagall. "The DA was only ever meant to help the children defend themselves if caught in a dangerous situation, not to actively seek them out."

"But-"

"They're too young," said Mrs Weasley firmly. "This is war, not some classroom duel."

"And I was too young when I got the Philosopher's Stone!" objected Harry. "And when I killed the Basilisk, fought those Dementors, competed in the Triwizard, fought at the Ministry and went after all those Horcruxes! But I did it anyway because I knew I had to, that it was my duty to the people I care about."

"And you suffered for it," Mrs Weasley retorted. "I don't want any other children scarred the way you've been, Harry dear."

"They'll be scarred anyway," said Harry. "This war is going on everywhere, not just outside of the school. They won't be protected from it just by not allowing them to fight."

"We deserve the chance to help," Luna said simply, smiling serenely.

Kingsley looked from Harry to Mrs Weasley, a frown on his brow. He looked to Merlin.

"What do you think?"

Merlin looked at them all, his face expressionless as he thought it over.

"Children should be children, not warriors in battle," he said. "But," he began, after seeing Harry's outraged expression, "that is no longer an option that is available to us. They are involved now whether we wish it or not. They deserve the right to do what they can to help. I know from experience. I fought in many battles and killed many people when I was not much older than the students in the DA are now. It is not a fate I would wish on anyone, but it is necessary."

Mrs Weasley looked furious and Merlin tried to calm her.

"This is not an ideal world we are living in," he said sadly. "Unfortunately, we must do things that would normally be abhorrent. This is one of those things. I would recommend however," he said, looking at Kingsley and Harry, "that no student below sixth year be allowed to fight in actual battle. Aside from the fact that they're the ones with the greatest experience, I wish to spare the rest from as much horror as I can. I know what you've done over the years, Harry, but not everyone is as strong, as able or as hardy as you are. If we can save them, than we will."

Harry and Kingsley both thought for a moment, and then nodded, Harry looked slightly appeased.

"Well, Merlin has spoken," said Fred dramatically. His mother glared at him.

"I think we've gone over as much as we can today," said Kingsley, standing up. "I recommend we all depart to work on our strategy. We'll have meetings here every night to discuss the way forward."
Hopefully, we won't have to wait too long before we can finally end this all. Voldemort will be defeated before the end of the month!"

There were a few strangled cheers, but no one looked particularly optimistic, they had had an expression of grim acceptance on their faces.

As soon as Kingsley left the room, Harry stood up immediately. Without speaking to anyone, he strode purposefully across the room and out through the door and thundered up the stairs. Merlin watched him go in concern.

They were so close now to ending everything. What was going through his mind now?

Harry had raced up the staircase straight out of the meeting. A furious rushing sound was in his ears and he was literally shaking in anticipation.

They knew where he was.

He emerged into the drawing room and began pacing up and down furiously trying to calm himself. His heart was pounding loudly.

He wanted nothing more than to just do something. Every fibre of his being was urging him to race out of here and force Merlin to tell him where to go so he could finally end this all. The thought of that Ravenclaw girl fueled his eagerness. He wasn't going to let that happen to anyone else.

But he knew it was futile. Even if Merlin told him where to go, he'd never be able to break through the Fidelius Charm on his own. He wouldn't stand a chance against any of them by himself. He was trapped where he was for the time being. There was nothing he could do.

He wanted to scream in frustration. Merlin knew! He knew! And still they were sitting here talking!

He was desperate to just end this all. To finally stop his fighting, to end the nightmare he'd been in since he was eleven years old and found out what really happened to his parents. Voldemort had always been there. Always shadowing his every footstep. Looming over his life like some great menace. It was his fault he'd never had the love of his parents, his fault that the people who cared about him ended up dead, the reason he couldn't be with Ginny …

The thought that they were so close now exhilarated him, yet frightened him at the same time. What if he failed? What then? So much depended on him! In no time at all it seemed he would be meeting his destiny. And what was going to happen, he had no idea.

While he was pacing, the door opened slightly, and Merlin slipped in and watched Harry silently, no expression on his face.

Harry ignored him. How could he look so calm? How could he stand there so composed? Didn't he understand what this meant to him?

"Harry."

Despite himself, Harry wheeled around to face him.

"I'm not interested, Merlin," he said. "I don't want to hear your words of wisdom. You can't understand what this means."
"Can't I?" Merlin asked, a sad smile on his lips. "I think I understand better than you think."

"How can you?" Harry retorted angrily. "All my life has been spent leading up to this moment! I've been marked for this ever since I was one year old. I've never had a choice, never the chance to just be normal. All my life I've been a pawn in someone else's game, Dumbledore's, Voldemort's, yours! It's like this great big crushing destiny that I can't escape. Literally millions of people are depending on me, relying on me to make the right choices, to save them all. Their lives are in my hands. If I fail … I don't think I can wait until the Order is ready. I have to finish this."

He stormed over to the cupboard in the corner of the room, and wrenched out Excalibur which lay there. He pulled the coverings from it and let his eyes slide along the length of the magnificent blade.

He slashed it through the air without much purpose, relishing the way the lamplight reflected off the blade and shone in the darkened room. He swept at an invisible enemy again with as much force as he could muster. He took the sword in both hands and sliced it through the air again and jabbed it forward as though skewering someone. He imagined driving the blade through Voldemort's chest, of seeing the blood spilling from the wound, the look in his eyes when he realised that he wasn't mortal, that Harry had just killed him. He imagined the joy he would feel as Voldemort fell to his feet lifeless, and the world was saved.

He slashed the sword through the air again and again, imagining himself hitting as many parts of Voldemort's body as he could. He went on for so long that his arms began to ache, but Harry didn't stop, instead, the weariness seemed to drive him on. He felt sweat begin beading on his forehead and run over his scar. He had to do this. Voldemort would die. Harry had to do this.

The entire time, Merlin stood by the doorway, watching Harry with a strange expression on his face. He made no move to stop him.

Eventually Harry lowered his arms, and the sword lay loosely in his right hand. The adrenaline still pumped through his veins and he shook.

Now, Merlin moved.

He slowly walked over to where Harry was. He placed his hand over the one Harry had the sword in.

"This is how you hold it," he said, demonstrating, moving Harry's fingers and his hand into the proper position. "You'll never get anywhere like that."

He moved Harry's other hand onto the hilt. "This is a defensive stance," he said showing him. "Adopt this whenever you're not attacking. Move like this when you are. Don't be so rigid. Your movements have to be fluid. Don't attack so violently, you'll wear yourself out. Pace yourself, conserve your energy, be nimble, not brutal. Feel the sword as if it's an extension of your own arm, not a weapon."

Merlin moved to in front of Harry and watched him silently. Harry lowered the sword which he just realised had been pointed at Merlin.

"I thought you said you were always hopeless with a sword?" Harry asked, his voice suddenly a whole lot quieter after the shouting he'd done earlier.

Merlin smiled. "I was. But I knew enough to get by. That's all you'll need to know. You won't have to use this sword."

Harry frowned. "Then how am I supposed to defeat him?"
"Not like this, Harry," Merlin said, shaking his head slightly. "Not out of revenge, or hatred, or anger. That'll destroy you, like killing those Muggle villagers would have destroyed Salazar. Don't attack in anger. You're going to fight Voldemort because you need to, not because you want to. The minute someone wants to fight, is the minute they lose who they are. Sometimes forever."

Harry just stared blankly at him, trying to make him out. His anger had evaporated. Merlin looked directly at Harry, and Harry saw the ancient man in his eyes.

"You're not meant for a sword, Harry," he said softly. "I am. I've been fighting all my life. In one way or another."

Harry frowned. Merlin sighed and looked down.

"I understand better than anyone what you're feeling, Harry," he said. "I know what it's like to have such a crushing destiny. All my childhood I spent living in fear, thinking I was a monster, that there was something wrong with me, all the while my mother insisting that I was meant for better things. When I was about the same age as you are now I discovered my destiny. I was told that it was my destiny to protect the Once and Future King, that he and I would unite the Five Kingdoms and create Albion, a land of peace and prosperity and restore magic to the realm. Imagine how I felt then, Harry. A simple peasant boy who's spent his entire life hiding in the shadows to have such a destiny thrust upon him. And I had no idea how to accomplish it, or even if I wanted to. How was I supposed to bring magic back when I would get my head chopped off for even suggesting it? I was afraid, Harry. I lived in constant fear, constant pain as I struggled with fulfilling my destiny while every day I continued hurting the ones I loved."

Merlin looked back up at him and fixed him with an intense stare. "I had that destiny then, and I have a new one now, one that looks just as impossible to fulfill as that one did to me then. I know exactly what's it like to feel like your entire life is mapped out for you. I know what it's like to have so many people depend on you. How could I not? We are united in this, Harry."

"I'll repeat what Kilgharrah said to me once when I was much younger: 'None of us can choose our destiny, and none of us can escape it.' That's as true now as it was all those years ago. It's unfair, of course it is. Neither of us deserved to have such crushing destinies given to us when we were so young. But we didn't have a choice. What we have to do, Harry, is accept it. The Old Religion has chosen both of us for a reason. We have to have faith in that reason, Harry. We are the only ones who can do it. We have to know deep down that we can do this. Do you trust me?"

Harry blinked rapidly, trying to control the raging emotions within him. He nodded, unable to speak.

Merlin smiled at him. "Good."

He made to leave, but Harry, called out to him suddenly.

"But what am I supposed to do now?" he asked, and was shocked to hear how desperate he sounded.

Merlin turned.

"Go back to school, Harry," he said calmly. "Keep up the appearance of normality. Get ready. Prepare the DA. We will be facing this danger, our destiny, sooner than you think. You must have faith in yourself. Don't feel that you're alone, Harry. Even if you can't see that the others are in this as much as you are, know that I am. I know, Harry, believe me, I know."

He left.
Harry stood there, breathing heavily, feeling at a complete loss. He looked down at Excalibur in his hand.

He covered up the shining blade and placed it carefully back in the cupboard. He closed the door and stood looking at it for a few moments.

Merlin was right. His destiny was approaching, and he had to be ready to face it. Like Hagrid had said once: "What's comin' will come, and we'll be ready for it when it does."

He would be ready. He and Merlin, they'd do it together. They'd end this.

Merlin strolled casually through the Muggle town trying not to look suspicious. Muggles roamed here and there on the busy main street greeting each other without a care in the world. Merlin watched them carefully; none of them seemed to comprehend the danger that was so close to him.

He found himself standing on a small bridge over a tiny stream. On the opposite banks there lay an ancient ruined church and some other buildings, weeds growing up between the massive stones. They lay there, sad and silent.

This was all that remained of the ancient town that Merlin had once lived in. The place had been abandoned after the slaughter of the Slytherins but eventually the area had been repopulated after the Norman conquest and a new town had sprung up around the ruins. At least, that was what the little blue tourist plaque had told him.

He hadn't known the place had been settled in again; he'd always assumed it had lain empty after those fateful events all those years ago. He was wrong.

He sighed and turned and looked back down the main street, a heaviness growing in his heart. So much had changed since then. The very streets these people were walking on so casually had once ran with blood and mobs of madmen with flaming torches. He wondered how many of them knew their town's grisly past.

His eyes drifted unconsciously to approximately the spot where his old house had once stood, now a greengrocer’s shop. It was all just one long cycle. The Old Religion had brought him here one thousand years ago so that he would meet Salazar Slytherin, and now it had brought him back again, to defeat Salazar’s descendent, who was spouting off as much hatred and prejudice as the Muggles living here had once also done. The Old Religion must appreciate the dramatic irony. Merlin certainly did not.

He looked beyond the street and saw what he'd come here for. A massive hill looming over the town, artificially created and lined with earthen ramparts as many elite settlements had in those days. When Merlin had last stood on this spot, the Slytherin castle had stood on top of that hill, dominating the landscape. Now it was gone.

The entire top of the hill was empty. It was flat, and looked to Merlin as if it was covered in green fields and hedges. But he knew that was a misconception.

That was where Voldemort and Morgana were.

His hands clenched into fists as he thought about it. They were there, just up on that hill, so close, yet he could do nothing.
He could see no sign of any building on the hill but it didn't surprise him. The Fidelius Charm was doing its work well, and any other enchantments the Gaunts had placed on it centuries earlier were concealing it from view. But Merlin knew it was there. He knew it, even if he couldn't see it.

The village was about three miles away from the castle, but Merlin didn't dare get any closer. He could feel the magic radiating from it even from this distance. He knew that if he got any closer either Morgana or Voldemort would sense him. He couldn't risk that.

He kicked a stray can in frustration. He wanted nothing more than to just head up there right now and …

He stopped himself from getting carried away. This was a scouting mission. He was here to gather information, not recklessly attack the place. The others were counting on him.

With great effort, he forced himself to once again stroll casually through the town. He looked at the hill from every angle, assessing it, wondering how best to try and infiltrate it.

Muggles stared at him curiously as he stood in the street seemingly gazing intently at nothing. Merlin paid them no heed.

He couldn't quite comprehend how these Muggles had managed to survive living in the shadow of the residence of such an evil place unscathed. None of them knew what danger lurked so close by.

They would have to leave, Merlin decided. Once he broke the enchantments the castle would be there for everyone to see. It would cause panic, and the Muggles would be in danger as the Death Eaters would no longer have to remain inconspicuous. He'd have to get Kingsley to arrange that somehow. He didn't want to risk their lives.

After another hour or so of reconnaissance, Merlin, with great effort, left the small town and reappeared in Grimmauld Place.

"Well?" Ron demanded of him immediately, as soon as Merlin had fully rematerialised in the drawing room in the midst of half the Order.

"They're there," he said, sinking into a chair. "I could feel their presence."

"Your hunch was right then?"

Merlin nodded. "Salazar's castle was completely invisible, but I could tell it was there hidden out of sight. The enchantments are strong, Morgana's enhanced them, but I don't believe I'll have much difficulty breaking them. The real issue is how we're to get in."

"What do you mean?" Remus asked.

"It's heavily defended," Merlin explained. "Settlements like that often were in those days. It's on a steep hill and practically unassailable, which was of course the entire point of building it. Even with magic, it'll be hard to gain access."

Kingsley nodded. "We'll have to discuss this in greater detail. Draw me up some plans of the immediate area and what you remember of the original building. We'll have to proceed carefully."

Merlin agreed. "There's one other issue however," he said. "The town I used to live in, it's been resettled. About five thousand people now live within sight of the place. If there's to be an all-out confrontation they'll have to be evacuated."
Kingsley sighed. "That'll be difficult, but I'm sure I'll manage something."

"What town is it?" Harry asked, trying to sound casual. Merlin smiled wryly.

"You're not getting it out of me that easily, Harry. I'm not telling anyone where the place is until absolutely necessary. Kingsley will have to be an exception however if he's to get this place emptied."

Kingsley smiled. "I'll pull some strings with the Muggle Prime Minister."

Harry scowled and Ron shrugged. "It was worth a go, mate."

Harry avoided Merlin's gaze. Merlin could tell he was still railing against Merlin's insistence that the place remain secret. Merlin had sneaked off early on Sunday morning to go back to the place; he'd gone on a long roundabout route just in case Harry or one of the others tried to follow him.

Harry and the others were heading back to school tomorrow and Merlin could tell none of them were particularly thrilled about it, even less so than they'd been back in the summer. Merlin silently urged them all to be patient. He could tell the final moment was looming closer and closer, and that this last little while they spent at Hogwarts would prove vital in determining the outcome.

*Just be patient, Harry. Just a little longer.*

"Where did Slytherin live?" Ron asked Hermione almost the exact moment they'd entered the Common Room on Sunday evening. "Where?"

"I don't know!" Hermione said frowning. "I don't know everything, you know!"

"Yes you do!"

Hermione's frown deepened. "Stop it, Ron. You heard Merlin: we can't go after him yet. We're not ready."

Ron shook his head. "I know that, but I just want to know where he is!"

"What difference will that make?"

"Because it'll make it easier," said Harry in a low voice, sinking into an armchair beside the fire with the others- Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville. "Knowing where he is, it'll make it easier for me to bide my time if I can just know."

"It won't make any difference, Harry," said Hermione. "You can't do anything yet."

"I know," said Harry sighing. He did know, but it was still driving him crazy. Didn't Hermione understand? Didn't Merlin?

"Come on, Hermione," urged Ron. "You must know *something* about Slytherin!"

She frowned. "Actually, there's not much written about the personal lives of the Founders. I'm honestly not sure."

She thought for a moment. "Do you remember that song the Sorting Hat sang? You know how it always mentions things about the Founders? Didn't it once say where each of them had come from?"
Harry had to smile. "You remember each of the Sorting Hat's songs?"

She shrugged. "I liked them." She stood up and started pacing. "Let me think …"

"He came from a fen," said Neville suddenly, blushing as everyone turned to stare at him. "I remember the songs too … anyway, it said Slytherin was from a fen."

Hermione grinned. "Well, that narrows it down. The fens are in Eastern England. That must be where his home was!"

"Eastern England?" Ron asked sceptically. "That really narrows it down. We must have something more to go on than that!"

But Hermione shook her head. "I can't think of anything. I'll just have to go to the-

"Library," Harry and Ron echoed in unison. Ron frowned. "You honestly think there'll be anything there? Didn't Malfoy say that the place was hidden and only a Parselmouth could find it?"

"That was after the Gaunt's spells," said Hermione, still pacing. "They stopped people finding it, but didn't erase its location, otherwise Merlin wouldn't be able to remember where it was. If the location was written down beforehand …"

"None of this makes any sense," Ron said frowning.

"I'll check Hufflepuff's book," said Harry. "She and him were obviously friends, she must have written something about him in there that could be useful."

Hermione and Ron nodded their assent, but Ginny looked unconvinced.

"I don't think we should do this," she said, ignoring the incredulous glances she was receiving. "Merlin didn't want us to know where it was. I think we should trust him."

Harry stared at her. "I think we have the right to know where he is!"

Ginny scowled at him, looking fierce. "Merlin has his reasons. I don't think we should go behind his back like this."

"Since when have you been so defensive of him?" Harry asked. "I thought you'd be all for taking some action!"

"Yeah, well I've changed!" she said. "When you were taken by Morgana I was all for ripping apart the entire country in order to find you but Merlin stopped me. I hated him for not letting me go out after you. I thought he was wasting time and that he didn't care. But he was right. Rushing out after you would have got loads of us killed, Merlin's plan worked perfectly. I trust him, Harry! Why don't you?"

She leapt up from her seat and stormed away and up the girl's staircase leaving an awkward silence behind her.

Harry woke up the next day trying not to think of his fight with Ginny. She was right, he hated to admit; he should trust him.

He sighed and closed his eyes and leaned further into his pillow. It seemed like such an age ago now
that Harry hadn't even known of Merlin's true identity. He'd trusted him implicitly then, even when he was still just Martin Emrys, when he knew he was being lied to. There was nothing different about it now.

He pushed himself up and started getting dressed. He just couldn't help what he was feeling. It was a constant anticipation that seemed to hum through his veins. He was waiting on the edge of something he couldn't escape. He just wanted it over with as soon as possible. The waiting was the worst part.

He'd scoured Hufflepuff's book well into the night but hadn't come up with anything useful. He hadn't really expected to; according to Merlin, Slytherin had built the house after leaving Hogwarts. She didn't mention anything about their lives previous to the school.

He picked up the book once more and flicked through it absentmindedly, before stopping at random. 'Using the magic of the Old Religion,' he read, 'is rather like taming an unruly animal. Like with a horse, or a hippogriff, one must always be on alert and in control of one's emotions. Only then can success be achieved.'

He sighed and pushed the book away. Easier said than done.

It was still early and not time for lessons yet, so Harry made his way silently out of the dormitory and out through the portrait hole, determined to clear his head.

He strolled through the corridors at a bit of a loss, feeling hollow. He thought wildly about going to McGonagall's office to question Slytherin's portrait, but though that might be courting disaster if McGonagall caught him.

He leaned against a wall and breathed in deeply. He lifted his wand from the pocket and pointed it directly in front of him.

"Byrne frīcian," he muttered, and he felt his eyes turn golden. The torch in the bracket in front of him burned fiercely into life. The flames grew larger and larger and fiery creatures danced in the air as sparks and tendrils of flame extended from the wall. The figures swam through the air leaving tiny trails of smoke with them and crisscrossed in the corridor, burning so brightly it made his eyes hurt.

Harry watched them sadly. Merlin was right, this magic was amazing. He loved the feeling of the magic flowing through him like this. It was exhilarating. But what use would it possibly be in the long run. What could he really do in the end?

"Well, that's interesting."

Harry jumped as a hoarse voice sounded right by his side and turned to see the Bloody Baron floating there next to him, leering at him in a rather sinister way. The fire creatures vanished.

"Don't act the fool, Mr Potter," the Baron drawled. "I know what that was. I saw the Founders use it many a time."

Harry blinked. "You know about Old Magic?"

"Of course," the Baron said rather condescendingly. "I've known Merlin for the last thousand years after all."

Harry stood up properly and leaned away from the ghost, slightly unnerved by his proximity.
"Will you tell anyone?"

"Why would I do that?" the Baron asked looking genuinely confused. "I've kept Merlin's secret for centuries and told no one of the Founder's unusual abilities. It benefits me in no way."

Harry scowled. "Typical Slytherin. Only concerned about what you'll get out of it."

The Baron's eyes flashed and Harry immediately regretted his words.

"I don't know why you're so concerned with keeping it a secret," the Baron continued, his voice betraying a subtle anger. "I thought the Old Religion was public knowledge now that Merlin has finally revealed himself?"

"It is," said Harry. "But we don't want everyone know I'm learning it. It's best if no one knows."

"Even if your enemy knows?"

Harry scowled again. "What do you want?"

The Baron raised his eyebrows. "Absolutely nothing."

"Well then, can you leave me alone?" Harry said, wishing the conversation would just end. He wasn't in the mood for this.

The Baron said nothing and started drifting off down the corridor looking thoroughly unconcerned.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Encountering the Bloody Baron was always thoroughly unpleasant. Just the sight of all that blood on his robes was enough to …

The blood. It had belonged to …

Harry gasped as he realised something. He ran down the corridor after the silvery figure. "Hey, wait!"

The Bloody Baron came to a halt several inches above the ground and looked back around at Harry frowning.

"What?" he asked rudely.

"You knew the Founders!" Harry said, grinning.

The Baron nodded, looking at Harry as though he was insane. "Yes. I was among the first students of Hogwarts. I was taught by the Founders themselves."

"And afterwards," Harry said, rushing his words. "You wanted to marry Ravenclaw's daughter didn't you?"

The Baron's jaw tightened and there was an aura of danger emanating from him.

"Helena told you then? Unusual. She prefers to keep it quiet. As do I as a matter of fact."

"But you were close to the Founders?" Harry asked, waving this away. He wasn't interested in discussing Helena Ravenclaw with her murderer. "Close enough to have Ravenclaw send you to bring her daughter back to her?"

"What of it?" the Baron asked, looking menacing.
"You must have known Slytherin well as well," Harry said. "He must have chosen you to be in his House."

"Yes," the Baron said looking impatient.

"Where did he live?"

The Baron frowned. "Where did he live? What sort of a question is that? He lived here in the castle!"

"No," said Harry impatiently. "I mean after he left Hogwarts. Where did he live then?"

The Baron’s face took on a look of sudden comprehension.

"Ah," he said. "You're referring to the old Slytherin estate? Do you honestly think you're the first student to come asking about that?"

"Just tell me where it is," Harry said, his heart beating faster. "It's really important."

The Baron smiled, but this just made him look more sinister. "I've never been there," he said casually. "I lived in Hogsmeade after I left Hogwarts in order to remain close to Helena. I had no dealings with Lord Salazar after he left the school."

"But you must know where it is!"

"I do," the Baron said, his smile widening. "The Slytherin estate was very famous in its day."

"So tell me!" Harry said, frustrated. He didn't know why he was getting worked up about it. He just had to know. Why, he wasn't sure.

The Baron smirked. "Why don't you ask Merlin? He was also friendly with Lord Salazar. I'm sure he knows where it is,"

"He does," said Harry, "but he won't tell us."

The Baron smiled again. "He won't? Well in that case … neither will I."

"What?" Harry asked furiously. "All of that and you're not going to tell me? Why?"

"Because, Mr Potter," the Baron said as though he were talking to a child. "Merlin is the greatest sorcerer who has ever lived and someone I have come to know very well over the years, even if he's never liked me much. If he won't tell you, there must be a good reason. I will hold to that."

With another smirk, the Baron turned and drifted off away again. Harry kicked the wall in frustration.

He sighed and sank to the floor defeated. He was right. The Baron, and Ginny they were right. He should trust Merlin.

There was no point to what he was trying to accomplish. He had to be patient. As hard as that may be.

He closed his eyes and began the meditation technique Merlin had taught him. He sensed the magic of the Old Religion within him, he felt it rushing throughout his body in a powerful torrent; he felt it simmering just beneath his skin ready to be called forth.

He opened his eyes again. He would be ready.
"So," said Fred Weasley to Merlin on Tuesday evening in Grimmauld Place. "What was old Slytherin really like then?"

Merlin smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Well now, that's a question."

He, Fred, George, Draco and Remus were all sitting in the kitchen, Remus just having given Merlin a status report on their plans. Things were slowly but surely coming together. Kingsley was gathering as many witches and wizards together that he trusted to prepare for their eventual attack on Slytherin's house. Merlin had been trusted with the attack plan itself, but everyone was eager to get going and the Order was trying desperately to keep everyone quiet about their plans.

"Salazar," Merlin mused. "He was … well, I suppose we were friends. I wasn't as close to him as I was to the others though."

"Well, considering the way the two of you met …" Remus said, but Merlin shook his head.

"No, it wasn't because of that. He was just always more … reserved than the others. Godric and Helga were so open and cheerful all the time, and even Rowena who was more serious had a mischievous streak to her, when she felt like showing it. But Salazar, he was quieter, and not as sociable. We got on well and I enjoyed his company, but he was always more of an outsider, if you know what I mean. He and Godric had been friends since childhood, and it was a strange sort of friendship. Salazar just never seemed to fit in as well."

"I know you keep saying that Slytherin wasn't as bad as everyone says he was," said George slowly, "and I get that you knew him better than any of us. But I just can't understand how you could be friends with someone who hated Muggle-Borns and tried to kill them."

"He didn't," sighed Merlin, resigning himself to explaining Salazar's true motives again; he'd already had to tell Harry and the others before. "He hated Muggles, not Muggle-Borns."

"But-" Fred began, looking confused.

"He hated Muggles because of the evil that they did," Merlin said, interrupting. "He can hardly be blamed for that- in those days it did seem that there were more evil Muggles than good ones. But he didn't hate Muggle-Borns, he didn't see them as inferior. They had magic, and he didn't think them any less worthy."

Everyone just looked at him incredulously, and Merlin sighed again.

"He didn't trust Muggle-Borns," he said. "Some of them were terrified of their own magic, and believed that they were possessed by the Devil. Some of them betrayed their fellow wizards because they thought that by doing it they'd be releasing themselves from the evil within. It happened pretty often, and Salazar didn't want Muggle-Borns in the school because of it."

"These Muggle-Borns were just so afraid," Merlin said ruefully. "They didn't know what they had was magic, they just saw it as evil. That was one of the main reasons the Founders wanted to build a school; to show them that magic wasn't evil, and that they weren't alone and didn't have to be afraid. Some of the time, these Muggle-Borns were thrown out of their homes and left to fend for themselves as soon as they started showing signs of magic, at least, if they weren't killed for it. Helga started a campaign to rescue them; some of them were only about seven. She brought them all to Hogsmeade, which was being built around the same time as the castle as a safe haven. She let them live there with wizarding families until they were old enough to come to the school. Salazar didn't
mind those Muggle-Borns— they had no loyalty to Muggles. But the ones who still lived with their families, even the families who didn't hate magic, he didn't trust. He was never cruel to them, just more suspicious."

"Helena— that is, the Grey Lady— told me that after I left Hogwarts, Salazar grew slowly more and more paranoid about Muggle-Borns, something that had already begun just before I left. At that point, he was adamant that they couldn't be trusted and would betray the school. So that's apparently why he built the Chamber; it was just supposed to be a warning to Muggle-Borns of what would happen to them if they betrayed Hogwarts, and to put them off coming. Of course, the others were horrified and asked him to leave. They hushed the whole thing up, obviously not too well, as the entire world believed that he left because he thought Muggle-Borns were scum. He never wanted them killed, he just didn't want them in the school."

Remus blinked a couple of times, looking astonished. "Well, that's … that's … illuminating."

"He really didn't hate Muggle-Borns?" Draco asked him, looking curious.

"No," said Merlin, shaking his head. "And from what his portrait in McGonagall's office tells me, he hates the fact that he's gotten a reputation as a Pure-Blood supremacist."

"But he still hated Muggles?" Fred asked him.

"Yes," said Merlin heavily. "I tried to convince him otherwise many times. But he was too fixed in his ways. He would always hate them, hate them because of what they'd done. But he never thought they were inferior because of their blood. It was because of their beliefs. Because of what they did."

"This is making my head hurt," said George, rubbing his forehead. "I'm not sure whether or not to think he was a good guy or a bad guy!"

Merlin mused for a moment. "Neither am I," he said finally. "He was a riddle. We shared some good times, but on the whole, I think he was just a very confused, misguided and tortured man. He made some bad decisions. But he wasn't all bad; remember, if it hadn't been for him, Hogwarts would never have been founded."

"Yeah, tell that to Moaning Myrtle," Fred whispered to George.

"This isn't important," Merlin said. "Salazar is long dead."

He didn't want to carry this conversation on any longer. He missed the Founders, and still felt a little bit guilty that he had left Hogwarts right when Salazar’s paranoia had begun to grow. The awful heart-wrenching feeling he had gotten when he had heard what had happened in his absence remained with him to this day. He had been haunted for years by the choices Salazar had made. It was partly because of Salazar’s departure (and Merlin’s several years earlier) that Helena had become so estranged from her mother, feeling abandoned by everyone she loved, since Rowena’s grief was also greatly affecting her. It had ended with the tragic circumstances of Helena’s murder and Rowena’s succumb to her grief. With the departure of two of the Founders, the Wizards’ Council, through the Board of Governors, had muscled in to the running of the school, and after Godric and Helga had died it had remained a profound influence on the school, controlling it thoroughly until Dumbledore’s reign, something the Founders had always tried to prevent. And, Fred was right, Salazar’s decision had also led indirectly to the death of Moaning Myrtle.

Though, Merlin reminded himself, if Salazar hadn’t built the chamber, Godric’s sword would never have become imbued with Basilisk venom that could be used to destroy Horcruxes. The Old Religion was a funny thing. Perhaps it had been supposed to happen, even though many awful
things would occur as a result. It and it alone could see the wider picture.

In any case, Merlin didn’t like to think about Salazar’s decisions, rather, liked to focus on the fun memories, such as the time with the dragon down by the lake. He didn’t want to think of Salazar’s downward spiral. It reminded him too much of the circumstances of Morgana's fall into evil.

A bad feeling grew in his stomach as he thought of her. His body shook with anticipation as he thought of the fact that he would soon be able to face her again, that he would soon be able to end everything. He thought of Excalibur upstairs in the cupboard and relished the thought of driving it through her and finally finishing what he should have done all those years ago. She'd never hurt anyone again.

The bad feeling grew. Although he was the one who was advocating patience and being properly prepared, he had to admit, he was rapidly tiring of it. If the Order wasn't ready for the attack in the next few days, he wasn't sure if he would be able to prevent himself from taking her on his own.

The bad feeling grew so much that it spread throughout his entire body and his magic seemed to boil up within him. Merlin frowned. The room felt different. An unsettling feeling grew and seemed to fill him with dread.

He leapt suddenly to his feet, alert, and cast out with his magic in all directions, looking for something that was amiss. The others looked at him in alarm and also jumped to their feet, pulling their wands from the pockets.

"Merlin?" Fred asked urgently. "What is it?"

But Merlin didn't answer. A new sense of horror was creeping over him. The Old Religion was overwhelmingly trying to tell him something. There was something wrong, something very wrong.

"Merlin?"

"No!" Merlin gasped in horror as he suddenly realised what was happening. The familiar hum of magic that permeated Grimmauld Place was faltering and flickering out of existence. The protective spells around the house had been broken. They were exposed.

A familiar presence seemed to intrude upon his consciousness, a magic more powerful than anyone else in this century possessed. His magic recoiled in revulsion even as it surged ever more powerfully through his veins.

"Hello, Merlin."

Merlin froze as he heard the voice, her voice in his head. She was here.

"Merlin!" Remus shouted, as the house itself seemed to shake.

A popping noise brought Merlin back to reality and he whirled around to see a hooded and masked Death Eater Apparate into the kitchen, furiously brandishing a wand.

"Stupefy!" Draco cried immediately and the Death Eater crumpled, but in vain, as more and more Death Eaters appeared all around them, each of them pointing their wands at the people gathered there.

Merlin's eyes blazed with anger as he prepared to fight back. All this time they'd spent trying to find Morgana's base and prepare to attack it, Morgana had been doing the exact same thing to them. And she had made her move first.
Fawkes squawked loudly and vanished with a spurt of flame as Merlin and the others prepared their counterattack.

Merlin almost smiled. She was here. Perhaps he wouldn't have to wait until they brought the fight to her before he could kill her. He raised his palm:

"Acwellan!"

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and Ginny wandered around the Room of Requirement observing the duels that were going on. Harry couldn't help but grin as he watched. As useless as he might feel being able to do nothing against Voldemort until Merlin said so, at least here, he had a purpose. They were fighting back.

Merlin wasn't here, which was unusual. He was supposed to come to help Harry with the DA, and he was also supposed to be teaching Harry some more Old Magic after the lesson before they headed to Grimmauld Place for the nightly meeting. He should be here by now.

"Bloody idiot," Ron muttered darkly, gesturing to a younger student as he came up to Harry. "Doesn't he know how to aim properly? I won't be able to sit down for a week!"

Harry opened his mouth to offer a teasing remark, when suddenly, there was a great flash of fire in the room which caused many to cry out in alarm.

Harry frowned and then he saw Fawkes sitting in the middle of the room, calling out urgently and looking rather agitated.

Harry glanced at the others in momentary confusion. A feeling of dread came over him then, and his heart seemed to go cold. Something was wrong.

He leapt forwards with many of the others towards Fawkes who was brandishing his tail feathers frantically, spurring them on. They had to leave this place.

"Harry! What about us?" Dean Thomas yelled back to him, gesturing to the DA, who were watching the bird with unconcealed fear.

Harry hesitated for a moment before making his decision. "All of you in sixth year and over come with me! The rest of you, let McGonagall and the other teachers know!"

There were many protests, but Harry didn't heed them, he didn't have time.

He grabbed hastily on to Fawkes' tail feathers with Ron, Hermione and Neville, and Ginny, Luna, Dean, Seamus, Parvati, Lavender, Terry, Anthony, Michael, Ernie, Susan, Hannah and many others grabbed on to their other hands, and a second later they were all vanishing in another flash of fire.

Before he was whisked away, Harry had one last thought.

*Is this finally it?*
Merlin let loose his spell and the kitchen of Grimmauld Place filled with a bright light. When it subsided the four Death Eaters who'd Apparated into the room were laying on the floor, horrible burns covering their bodies.

Fred whistled. "You nearly singed my eyebrows off there, mate!"

"No time for jokes!" Merlin yelled and ran out of the kitchen with Fred, George, Draco and Remus thundering after him. They emerged into the hall and Merlin stopped dead, trying desperately to sense her.

Where was she?

The protective enchantments that had surrounded the house had completely vanished, dismantled by incredibly powerful magic. The house was completely exposed. She was near, he could feel it. She was here.

"Are there any others in the house?" Remus asked urgently, holding his wand firmly in front of his face, casting his eyes around the room warily.

Merlin paused. There was no one there except themselves, no enemies in the house except the four dead Death Eaters. So where was Morgana? Where were the rest of her cronies?

Screams sounded on the street outside, awful screams of pure terror. Merlin didn't hesitate.

Running past the also screaming portrait of Mrs Black he wrenched open the front door and threw himself out into the night air.

Death and destruction was all about him. Scores of hooded figures were running in the square. Almost every house in the street was aflame. Terrified Muggles ran around, screaming as lethal spells came soaring their way from the laughing Death Eaters. Several already lay dead. Chaos prevailed in the dark and confused night; the only light came from the torched buildings. A stench of burning permeated the air.

For a moment, Merlin was lost in memory. He remembered many a scene like this. Wizards and Muggles fighting, burning buildings, hatred and fear side-by-side. He'd seen this far too often.

But he wouldn't let it end the same way this time.

His face set in a grim determination, he bolted down the front steps of Grimmauld Place, the others hot on his heels. He had to find her.

His eyes flashed and three Death Eaters were blasted backwards and away from the Muggle child they'd just been torturing. They scrambled to their feet and pointed their wands directly at Merlin-

"Reducto!" cried Fred and George cried together, and the three Death Eaters were thrown back again. This time they didn't rise.

"Draco!" shouted Merlin, turning around to the young man, who was pale in the light of the flames. "Get that Muggle out of here. Get the rest as well, and check there's no one in the buildings. Get them all out of here!"
Draco nodded, and ran off looking slightly disappointed he wasn't getting involved in the fight. Merlin didn't want him fighting unless he needed to; many of the Death Eaters held grudges against him for changing sides and Merlin didn't want him made even more of a target. Besides, they needed to get the Muggles out of here as soon as possible. The battle that was about to take place would be far too dangerous for them.

"Remus," he shouted, "send Patronuses to-

"Already done," Remus shouted back, after taking down another Death Eater. "The Order's been informed. Some are here already."

He pointed, and Merlin turned to see that Tonks, Kingsley, Bill, Charlie, Mr Weasley, Percy, Fleur, Dedalus and several others were popping up all over the place and immediately throwing themselves into battle.

*Good,* Merlin thought, *that's the Muggles and Death Eaters taken care of. Now I can focus.*

He closed his eyes and cast out his magic in all directions sensing for what he knew he must find. The Old Religion was everywhere, in all directions; Morgana had given many of the Death Eaters here enhanced wands and shields. They were making it far more difficult to sense anything for certain.

A wailing sound reached Merlin's ears and he groaned. He opened his eyes and through the battle and fighting couples he saw what he had dreaded. Flashing blue lights came into view even as a red fire engine came screaming around the corner. The engine stopped dead, and a line of men in black and yellow uniforms came streaming out. They stood in silence, gaping at the scene before them.

*Perfect,* Merlin thought, *this is all we need.*

He ignored them however, hoping against hope that Draco would be able to get rid of them somehow, and began to concentrate again. He had to find her!

He blocked out the sound of the surrounding battle, trying to find the calm within him. *Where are you, Morgana?*

He sensed something, but not what he'd wished. He opened his eyes again and they flashed golden:

"*Hilderand!*" he shouted, and repelled the spell that had been soaring towards him. It bounced harmlessly off his shield and went flying back to the perpetrator who fell back with a yelp.

*How was he to find her in all this chaos?*

The battle was furious. There were at least fifty Death Eaters running here and there around the burning houses, which were roaring in an inferno unmatched by anything else. Glass shattered, people screamed, smoke billowed up into the air. Around the same number of Order members had been rustled up and were putting up a good fight, throwing curses at the Death Eaters with a fierce glint in their eyes. The fire engine stood abandoned- the Muggles that had arrived in it were nowhere to be seen.

A spark of Old Magic caught his attention and Merlin turned his head slightly to see Harry fighting two Death Eaters at once, his eyes burning golden. To his left Hermione and Ron were also fighting.

Merlin's heart hammered. They were all here. If only they'd attacked Morgana first, at least then they would have had a chance at actually killing her, of getting to the Cup of Life. All they could do now was force her back.
Nevertheless …

He ran through the fighting crowd, still trying desperately to find some sign of Morgana. He ducked as spells soared overhead.

"Looking for me, Merlin?"

Merlin stopped as he heard her voice echo in his mind. He cast about with his mind searching for her.

"Oh, you won't find me like that, Merlin. I'm not going to make it that easy."

Merlin felt the anger boil up inside of him. He sent out his magic once more, searching for any sign of her.

He struggled to control the immense hatred and anger that was running through him. He had to stay calm. She wanted him like this. She was toying with him.

He stopped, and made no further move to search for her. Two could play at this game.

"Come and find me then," he sent out. "If you're so powerful, then why do you hide away? Are you afraid to face me?"

He felt her anger through their connection. He himself was barely managing to stay calm.

"I fear no man," she said. "I am here to crush you and your pathetic Order."

"Then do it," Merlin said, breathing heavily as his hands shook. "Come to me, and we'll end this."

"It will be your end, my old friend," she said, a smug tone in her mental voice. "I am immortal, Merlin."

Merlin knew this only too well. He couldn't kill her, not now. Not without emptying the Cup of Life or …

Merlin froze, amazed that it had taken this long to think of it. Excalibur!

He turned to summon the sword from the house but when he did, he went cold at what he saw before him.

Not ten feet behind him, seemingly unconcerned with the chaos that was going on all around her, was Morgana, dressed from head-to-toe in black, her usual smirk on her face.

"Looking for this?" she asked, and pulled a familiar looking sword out from beneath her cloak. "You really should have been more careful about where you hide this, Merlin."

All else seemed to vanish as Merlin stared straight at Morgana, hatred filling every inch of his body. The word seemed tinged in red.

"Did you really think you could use this to defeat me?" Morgana asked, still smirking, running her eyes along the edge of the blade. "A mere sword against someone as powerful as I? You seem to be stuck in the seventh century, Merlin!"

She grinned, and the darkness in her eyes seemed to sparkle. "Haven't you yet discovered the wonders of the modern world? I have, though I've been here for much less time. All the Muggles don't even believe in magic anymore! How much easier then it will be to subdue them. None shall
ever match my power, not your pathetic Order, and not you, not once I'm through with you."

"I thought you couldn't get any madder," Merlin said, his voice low, even as the anger surged through him. "World domination? That's new."

"Camelot is long gone," Morgana answered, her eyes still flashing. "Who else have I to take my revenge on?"

"Revenge," Merlin said, a small smile crossing his features. "Revenge … it'll be the ruin of us all."

"What philosophy do you preach now?" Morgana spat. "Going to give me the same old tirade about how revenge will be my destruction? The destruction of us all? You have not learned! Revenge gives pleasure above all else. Or do you honestly believe that you would derive no satisfaction from killing me?"

Merlin regarded her coolly for one moment. "No," he said simply. "Revenge will give me no pleasure, just relief. Killing you will not bring back the countless that you have massacred. Killing will not erase the past. It was my desire for revenge that prevented me from killing you all those years ago, what made me trap you in the Crystal Cave instead. And look how that turned out. I hate you, Morgana, I want you dead. But not for revenge. What use does revenge serve in the end?"

Morgana stood silent for a moment, a fire raging in her eyes. "You fool," she said quietly. "Self-righteous fool. We shall see what shall triumph in the end."

With a flash of fire, her eyes burned and all else was blocked from Merlin's vision as she sent a great searing ball of energy at him. He laughed even as he raised a shield to repel it.

"It'll take more than that to kill me, Morgana."

Harry's eyes flashed as he forced back another Death Eater with Old Magic. He felt exhilarated. The feeling of this magic flowing through him in battle, it was like liquid fire rushing through his veins, ever driving him onwards. He was careful not to get complacent though, like Merlin had taught him. He knew now just how easy it was to get carried away in the heat of battle. He had to constantly be aware of his limitations in this magic. He couldn't afford to be reckless.

He and the others had arrived only a few moments ago to find the entire street in disarray. The row of houses was on fire. It became apparent that somehow, the enchantments that had been around Number 12 had disappeared if the terrified Muggles were anything to go by; they now stood gawping at the sudden appearance of a new house on their street.

Harry's heart had gone cold. He wasn't entirely sure what had happened, only that it appeared Voldemort and Morgana had made their move first. Why had they waited?

He'd dismissed this though almost immediately. He couldn't think about that at the moment. He witnessed Malfoy and Hestia Jones evacuating the screaming Muggles from their homes, shielding them against awry spells from the Death Eaters. What they planned to do with them he had no idea. How could they keep this situation contained? Stop them from telling everyone what they'd seen? The presence of a large scale magical duel in central London would be hard to conceal, even with Memory Charms.

But this wasn't important. There were dozens of Death Eaters here he had to deal with first. He made his way through them, casting spell after spell from the Old Religion, his eyes more gold than green.
Many of them possessed enhanced wands and Old Religion shields, and were overpowering the Order. Harry was the only one able to outmatch them. He was using the Old Religion; they were just using shadows of it.

One thought pressed heavily on his mind. Where was Voldemort?

Harry was by far not as accomplished as Merlin at being able to sense magical presences with the Old Religion, but he was sure that if Voldemort was here, he would feel it. Why wasn't he here?

Another presence grew on his mind however, one that was familiar, yet not so familiar as Voldemort's. It was powerful, and angry. Harry knew that it could only be Morgana.

He thought of running into Grimmauld Place to get Excalibur, but he was too far away, and on the wrong side of the dueling. He considered Summoning it, but wondered whether, like with the Horcruxes, the Summoning Charm would work on a magical object like that. And he wasn't sure of the incantation for Summoning in Old Magic; somehow they'd always only focused on the defensive spells and curses rather than the mundane ones.

He just had to hope that Merlin had it, that at least one of their enemies would be vanquished tonight.

"Harry!"

Harry spun around at the sound of his name, to see Percy, Fleur and Neville hemmed into a corner by three Death Eaters, each of whom was protected by Old Magic; the magic coming from the wands of the Order members was having no effect against them.

"Berstan hlēo!" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at them, and one by one their three shields flickered out of existence. They turned to him, vengeance in their eyes.

"Abēatan!" Harry shouted before they could raise their enhanced wands, and all three of them were forced backwards several feet and fell in a crumpled heap on the pavement.

"Wow!" Neville said, wide-eyed. "Three of them in one go? What's Merlin been teaching you?"

Harry smiled grimly. "Enough."

Neville nodded, and the two of them went after yet more Death Eaters as Percy and Fleur headed off in opposite directions. Each time they took one down, another seemed to replace him immediately.

"How many of them are there?" Neville hissed, nursing a lacerated arm. "How can there possibly be so many Death Eaters? Where are they coming from?"

"I bet half of them are Imperised," said Charlie, stumbling into view, his sleeve smoking. "Or had that Mandrake thing done to them. I just spotted Thomas Callaghan over there. I was at Hogwarts with him. I'm willing to bet all the Firebolts in the world that he's been enchanted. He's just not the type."

"Well, it doesn't matter right now," said Harry as several more Death Eaters came running towards them. "They're all trying to kill us anyway."

Harry fought, throwing as many spells as he could. He felt fatigue seep into him, but he pushed on regardless. Finally, after all these weeks of training with Merlin he was actually making use of this magic. They had to win this.

Just as it seemed that the Death Eaters were finally beginning to disperse, a huge resounding
rumbling sound reached them, and the ground itself seemed to shake as a great shockwave reached the duellers. Harry and all the others near him were thrown to the earth, knocking the wind out of him. The trembling seemed only to worsen and the noise increase.

The dueling had stopped, Death Eaters and Order alike struggled to sit up and blinked in confusion, each wondering what had happened.

Harry pulled himself into a sitting position, clutching his bruised ribs and coughing. He peered through the dust and rubble to see what was happening. His jaw dropped open.

It was Merlin and Morgana, but not as he'd ever seen them before. Their duel in Hogsmeade was nothing compared to this.

A giant crater had been blasted into the street, exposing the pipes below, yet Merlin and Morgana still stood there, seemingly floating above the ruins. Spell after spell issued from their outstretched hands, each pummeling the others shields causing fantastic displays of light to illuminate the night sky, neither once gaining an inch. The hatred on their faces was almost inhuman, and their eyes were permanently gold. The rapidity of the spells going back and forth was dizzying to watch. Even from this distance Harry could sense their immense power.

He couldn't tear his eyes away. The very air seemed to hum with magical intensity, crackling with the power that was being directed with such vehemence. Harry's heart almost stopped. He'd never witnessed power like this before.

Merlin's face ... it was almost terrifying. Harry had gotten so used to him now he had almost forgotten ... he was Merlin.

"Bærnet!" Merlin screamed, and a blazing fireball engulfed Morgana and burned brighter than the sun.

But a second later, she emerged from it unscathed. "Hweorfan!" she yelled, and the flames that had a second previously surrounded her went screaming back to Merlin in the shapes of hideous monsters and began to eat away at his shield.

"Beorgan!" Merlin retaliated, and the creatures morphed into white fire which surrounded his shield and seemed to strengthen it. He glowed with a fierce white light.

Harry was transfixed. He ran the words of Kilgharrah through his mind again and again; Kilgharrah had said that Merlin was more powerful than Morgana. Harry knew Merlin was more powerful.

But did that mean he was going to win?

He told himself yes, but watching Morgana's magic …

Everyone else seemed to have stopped dead in their tracks. No one could take their eyes away from the couple.

Harry watched Morgana carefully. There was something about her that seemed different …

Then he saw it. Glinting gold, just beneath her cloak … it was Excalibur! She had it!

Harry leapt fully to his feet at this revelation. Merlin had to get the sword! It was the only way to kill her! How had she even gotten it in the first place?

Watching the fight seemed to have an even heavier anxiety resting on it now. Harry didn't even
blink; the dueling was so fast he'd be sure to miss something.

Each one of their spells seemed to collide in mid-air with the force of a small bomb. Neither seemed in the least tired. The lights of the spells were so bright it seemed to sear right into his eyes. How could two human beings possess such power? For the first time, Harry saw just how powerful the Old Religion was. It made the magic he'd been using the last few weeks look like child's play.

Harry took a few steps forward, taking him closer to the duel. The ground cracked beneath his very feet. He could feel a terrible heat upon his face. It was literally too dangerous to go any closer.

Then, Harry noticed something change. The stalemate ended. Morgana's face contorted in some new expression, and her spells became more erratic. She seemed to be being pushed backwards, and her shield began to flicker.

Harry's heart leapt; was this the moment?

Merlin pressed his advantage, hammering more and more spells against her weakening shield. Eventually, Morgana gave a cry and was thrown backwards. Whatever magic it was keeping her in the air faltered and she fell into the crater below her and out of sight.

Harry and the others leapt forward to the edge of the crater as Merlin descended to stand just a few feet away, looking down at her, stony faced.

The entire watching crowd drew a collective breath as Merlin raised his hand over Morgana, who lay on the ground struggling to stand.

Harry's heart was in his throat. This was it.

Merlin opened his mouth to utter the fatal curse-

But, he hesitated.

He looked down at Morgana, a curious expression on his face. He gazed at her with a strange look in his eyes, as though he'd seen something there that no one else had. The hatred drained away from his face and was replaced with something that seemed almost like confusion. A quiet acceptance of something.

That second that he hesitated was all that Morgana needed. With a scowl, she uttered a hurried spell and she disappeared in a gust of wind, the Death Eaters and Excalibur with her.

But Merlin made no move. Unlike when Morgana had gotten away from him in Hogsmeade and in Camelot, he didn't cry out in anger or frustration. He just stared at the spot she'd vanished from, a small frown on his brow, thinking hard. He didn't seem to care in the slightest.

Harry was numb with disbelief. He had been winning! He'd overpowered her! Why hadn't he finished it?

"What the hell were you thinking?" George demanded, his face angry. "Why didn't you do anything?"

Merlin didn't answer.

He slowly turned and climbed out of the crater, not seeing anyone, not even acknowledging their presence.
The Order watched him with outraged expressions.

"Merlin!" Kingsley called, looking astonished. "What happened? Why didn't you kill her?"

"You had the perfect opportunity!" George insisted.

"After everything that's happened and you let her live?" Malfoy asked in disbelief, having returned to the battle after evacuating the Muggles. "Why did you-"

"I couldn't do it," said Merlin, looking up at the night sky, a confused frown still on his face.

"Couldn't do it?" Harry asked, feeling the anger boil up within him. "Do you really think she can be redeemed? She isn't the person that you used to know! She's evil!"

"That's not what I meant," Merlin said, frowning, looking at his hands. "I … couldn't. It didn't feel right. The Old Religion-"

"Damn the Old Religion!" Ron yelled, looking outraged. "What was it telling you this time? More rubbish?"

"I couldn't kill her," said Merlin. "Not there, not then. It wasn't the way it was supposed to be."

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could he stand there and justify willingly letting an evil sorceress get away from him because of a feeling?

"Merlin, are you insane?" Harry asked. "She was right there! It's what you've been waiting for all these years! You could have ended it right there!"

"But it wouldn't have ended," Merlin said quietly. "I couldn't have killed her there, she's immortal."

"Then why didn't you take the sword off her and kill her with it?"

Merlin smiled, and looked upwards. "I wanted to," he said. "Right up to that moment, all I could think about was killing her. But when I finally had the opportunity-"

"You chickened out?" George asked, glowering.

"No," said Merlin, and he looked confused again. "I felt the Old Religion telling me … that this wasn't the way. And for the first time in my entire life, I didn't question it in my heart of hearts."

He looked around at them all. "Every time over the years when the Old Religion has told me to do something, or not to do something, I've questioned it. Every time I wanted to tell all of you my real identity, it held me back. And I hated it, I hated it so much. I obeyed it, but although I knew it was right, there was always something in me that wanted to fight it. But now …"

He frowned. "This time … I knew this was the right thing. It felt right, in all senses of the word. I didn't hold back because the Old Religion told me to, I held back because I suddenly realised that this wasn't the right way to go about it."

"You expect us to believe that?" Ron asked furiously. "I can't believe you!"

"I can hardly believe it myself," Merlin admitted, and again, he looked confused. "But I know this is right. I don't question it in the slightest."

"Well I do!" Harry said. "Why don't you? Can't you see how crazy this is? I thought you hated the fact that the Old Religion had such a hold over you?"
"I did," said Merlin. "But now, I trust it more than I've ever trusted anything in my life. It's had this path laid out for me my entire life. I trust in it."

"Why?" Harry demanded, now aware that everyone was looking between Merlin and Harry with an almost fearful expression. "Why are you willing to trust your life to this? How do you know that the 'Old Religion' wasn’t giving you the opportunity to kill her just now and you blew it? How do you know you're not misinterpreting it?"

"I know," said Merlin firmly. "I've doubted the Old Religion my entire life. I don't now. This is the route I'm supposed to take. Why, I'm not sure yet."

"But-

"What was I telling you about just the other day?" Merlin asked, now looking directly at Harry. "Have faith in your destiny. This is mine, the destiny the Old Religion set out for me. And I trust that I will fulfill it with the help of the Old Religion."

"Well, I wish I had your faith," Harry spat, turning away in a barely controlled anger. "She got away! And what's more, she took Excalibur! What are we supposed to do now?"

Merlin smiled. "I told you, Harry, you don't need that sword. That isn't your destiny."

Harry felt like screaming in frustration. "I'm sick of destiny!" he shouted. "What makes you so sure?"

Merlin shrugged. "Honestly? I don't know."

Harry just stared at him in complete bewilderment. He could hardly believe what was going on.

"Well, isn't that reassuring," said Fred, deadpanning. He offered a weak smile.

"How can you be so calm about it?" Neville asked, frowning. "She's your mortal enemy! And she got away. I thought you'd be annoyed at the very least."

"I'm not," said Merlin, and he seemed genuine. "I don't know why. But, it doesn't seem like a defeat to me. There was some purpose to this. And I know without doubt that this was the right thing. I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

"Well, I'm convinced," said Fred, smiling. "You're Merlin, and most of all, you're my friend. I trust you."

"So do I," said Luna, stepping forwards. "You could have done it. You could have killed her. But you chose not to. There's something greater at work here. And if someone as great as you feels that was the right thing to do, then so do I."

"There are many things we don't understand in this world," said Mr Weasley, looking nervous. "And I believe you when you say that this … was the right thing."

"The paths to what we want often take a strange and winding route," said Kingsley, also stepping forwards. "Sometimes what at first seems to be a bad decision turns out to be the one that seals the victory. We can never know the consequences of our actions."

He looked around at everyone, his face firm. "There's many who questioned the wisdom of allowing Mr Malfoy to join the Order, and yet he's just almost single-handedly saved the lives of over fifty Muggles." Malfoy seemed to flush at these words and look awkward. Kingsley continued: "Merlin
was the one who truly advocated that turn of events, and I for one, will trust him in this also. Despite how uncomfortable I am with the thought of it, I am willing to place my faith in him and his instincts."

"I still think you're mental, mate," said Ron, shaking his head. "I just don't get it."

"You don't need to, Ron," said Merlin, smiling. "It isn't meant to be fully understood. No man can understand the workings of the world. All he can do is surrender himself to it."

"Blind trust?" Harry asked, deflated. "How can you say that? What was the point in learning all that Old Magic, or even trying at all if what'll happen is inevitable? What's the point in anything?"

Merlin smiled again. "My point precisely."

Harry just shook his head. His head was pounding and he felt physically sick. Was this all really happening?

"But," he said, "How am I supposed to defeat Voldemort without the sword? That was our guarantee!"

"You won't need it," Merlin said firmly. "Like I said Harry: you're not meant for a sword. Morgana thinks she's won a victory, but she hasn't."

"You mean we have to find the Cup of Life?" Charlie asked. "What was the point in getting Excalibur at all if that was always our plan?"

Merlin's eyes seemed to glaze over and he looked into the distance. "Because, that was just another step in the journey. Nothing will make sense until its conclusion."

Here, he looked at Harry again.

"Don't you feel it, Harry?" he asked him quietly. "All those feelings when we first met when you knew deep down that you trusted me despite your head telling you otherwise? You had faith in it then, why not now?"

Harry had no answer. He still felt it; he still felt that infuriating feeling deep down that trusted Merlin. He'd questioned it many a time, detested himself for having such blind faith, but it always prevailed.

He turned away from Merlin, determined not to let him see that he'd won. It was true; Harry still trusted him. But his mind wouldn't stop screaming that this was a huge mistake.

"Where's Ginny?" Hermione asked suddenly.

Harry spun around, and to his horror, could see no familiar face there in the crowd of gathered Order members. Where was she? What had happened?

"Ginny!"

"Ginny! Where are you?"

Her brothers and father called after her, but no answer was forthcoming. Harry's heart seemed to stop dead. Why hadn't he checked that she was okay first before he started laying into Merlin? What an idiot!

He raced off into the destruction that was Grimmauld Place, Ron and Hermione keeping pace. There were massive craters, fires burning here and there, bodies …
No, Harry pleaded desperately, no, you can't be …

The Weasleys spread out, running frantically, seizing limp figures and calling out for their sister, their voices sounding more and more afraid. Harry felt a trembling all over. Where was she? She couldn't be …

He stopped suddenly, his breath catching in his throat as he caught sight of some fiery red hair-

"GINNY!"

He bolted, leaping over lumps of rubble and huddled masses of Death Eaters to where he'd seen her.

"Please … no … no …"

He reached the small figure, still in her school uniform, lying face down in a large crater surrounded by hooded and cloaked enemies. He turned her over. She was pale, and her eyes were closed. He thought wildly of when he'd found her in the Chamber of Secrets.

He shook her slightly. "Ginny … Ginny …"

She didn't respond.

Harry seemed to go cold all over. She couldn't be …

"Ginny!" Ron moaned, falling to his knees beside her and grabbing her hand. "Ginny …"

Harry felt like he was falling, falling in some never-ending nightmare. This couldn't be happening …

"But … there's not a mark on her …" Hermione whispered in horror, tears spilling from her brown eyes.

Harry felt tears coming to his own eyes and he blinked them away furiously. No, this wasn't happening. It couldn't be.

Was this Merlin's precious Old Religion? Was this the balance of the world? Was this what was right?

Harry felt the horror seep through every inch of his body as he looked at her face. It was still, and deathly pale. A growing realisation came over him.

"No!" he yelled, tears now spilling freely from his eyes. What had he done? Why had he always pushed her away? Why had he let this happen?

One by one, Ginny's brothers and her father sank down next to Harry, staring at the prone figure in Harry's arms with an awful expression of silent grief that pierced Harry's heart. This really was happening.

He hung his head, feeling a burning sensation in his throat as the tears came pouring down his face. No! It wasn't supposed to happen like this!

A presence came into view at the edge of the crater and Harry looked up to see Merlin standing above him. He looked at Ginny. He didn't look sad. He didn't even look bothered. A fiery fury ignited within Harry.

"When we were all arguing with you about whether or not you should have killed Morgana we could have been here!" Harry shouted. "We could have saved her! But no! You wasted our time!
She could have been dying, and you chose to save Morgana instead!"

Merlin didn't even blink, and Harry's fury only increased. Didn't he care? Didn't he give a damn? Didn't he care that the world was empty and all hope of a happy future had now been cruelly snatched from him forever?

He looked away from him, unable to contain his anger any longer if he kept him in his gaze, and instead focused on Ginny's face. It looked so calm, so uncaring … not knowing that her loved ones were here with her and pleading for her to come back to them.

Merlin moved. He stepped around Ginny and moved over to the other side of the small hollow she was resting in. A Death Eater was lying there.

"He's still alive, but only just," murmured Merlin, looking at him curiously. "He cannot recover."

"I DON'T CARE!" yelled Harry, more tears spilling down his cheeks in his anger and grief. "I don't give a damn if he's okay or not. I don't want him to live! He's probably the one who … who … "

He broke off, unable to finish his sentence, the grief overwhelming him once more.

But Merlin stayed where he was. He crouched down next to the Death Eater. He closed his eyes.

"I never thought I'd do this again," he said, almost to himself. "But this is what the Old Religion wants of me … I have to trust it."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked wildly, clutching onto Ginny's body ever more tightly. "Do what again?"

But Ron had gasped and choked through his tears, looking in incredulity at Merlin.

"A-Aithusa told us ages ago! She- she told us you could- you could … but we didn't know it was you at the time! We didn't know you were Merlin! We forgot! We forgot what you could do! What she said you could do!"

Harry frowned at Ron; what was he talking about? How could he ramble on like that at a time like this?

Merlin had nodded in response to Ron. He closed his eyes again, and laid his hand across the brow of the dying Death Eater, and reached out his other hand to do the same to Ginny. Harry pulled back automatically and moved Ginny out of his way, determined not to let her be taken from him, but Ron shook his head desperately, and laid his hands over Harry's, his eyes filled with tears.

"Let him, Harry," he practically begged. "Let him try …"

"Try what?" Harry all but whispered. He looked around at all the others, who were all silently crying. They looked just as confused as he felt. What was going on? Ginny was dead! That was all that mattered! Why were Ron and Merlin acting like this?

"Please …" Ron said, and Harry looked into his eyes. There was nothing there but grief, and a quiet hope. "Give him a chance. Give Ginny a chance."

Harry blinked rapidly, and looked from Ron's pleading face down to Ginny's motionless one. All feeling seemed to have left his body. With what seemed like great effort, he nodded.

Merlin, who had stayed motionless throughout this, reached out his hand again and laid it gently on
Ginny's brow.

Then, Merlin used magic, but not like any magic that Harry had thus far seen. It wasn't the mundane but impressive magic he saw Merlin use on a daily basis, nor was it the powerfully destructive kind that he'd used only a few minutes previously against Morgana. There was no incantation, no glowing eyes. This was elemental. This was natural. This was Harry's very life force. This was pure Old Magic.

Harry watched, not in transfixed amazement as he had done earlier, but with a quiet desperation. For what, he wasn't sure. But this magic … there was something …

There was no outward sign of the magic. Nothing that indicated a spell was even taken place. But Harry felt it in every fibre of his being. It was life itself.

How long they all crouched there in the rubble of Grimmauld Place, Harry didn't know. All he knew was that he held Ginny's hand tightly in his the entire time, eyes stuck on her face, waiting for he knew not what.

Then suddenly, the Death Eater gave a great shuddering gasp and lay still. He was dead.

Merlin moved slightly, and his power seemed to grow. The whole world seemed to tremble with suppressed excitement.

Then, Merlin opened his eyes. He fixed them straight ahead, gazing into apparent nothingness. He breathed out in apparent exertion.

"It is done."

"What is done?" Harry asked, staring at him desperately.

He received no reply, but the next sound he heard was by far more gratifying.

Ginny, who had lain prone and still, already growing cold, suddenly took a great gasping breath.

Harry and the others crowded around her, each pressing forward, hardly daring to believe what had happened.

Harry's heart hammered painfully. Had he really just heard …

As if to reassure him, something happened. Ginny opened her eyes and blinked a few times. Her eyes shifted and she looked up at the crowd of people now gazing at her in amazement. She frowned as she focused her eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Ginny!" Everyone seemed to cry at once, Harry by no means the quietest amongst them. There was hysterical laughter and many joyful tears. Luna threw her arms around an alarmed Neville, Tonks burst into even louder sobs and fell into the arms of her husband, Hermione did likewise with Ron, and Mr Weasley and the other Weasley men let their tears of wonder and happiness drop unashamedly from their eyes as they witnessed the miracle before them.

Harry for his part was just content to sit and look at her, hardly daring to believe it. Ginny sat up slowly and frowned.

"What on earth happened?"
"You were dead!" Harry got out, letting his eyes drink in her face, now restoring to colour. "You were dead!"

"Dead?" she asked, looking bewildered. "But how-

"Merlin did it!" said Ron thickly, hugging Hermione and crying at the same time. "He brought you back! He did it!"

Ginny's eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open. "I came back from the dead? But how is that even possible?"

"The Old Religion," laughed Harry, feeling like he was floating. "It saved you. It saved me as well. You're not the first one of us to come back from the dead!"

Ginny looked seriously at Harry, and she looked distressed as she took in the tear tracks on his face.

"You mean you thought … you went through what I did when … oh Harry!"

And with that she threw herself on him and this time, Harry did not resist. He threw his own arms around her and pulled her close, clutching at her like if he didn't hold her tight enough she'd slip away again. He buried his face in her hair and felt the tears coming again.

"I'm so sorry!" he said. "I was so stupid! I should never have pushed you away! Why did I think that it would keep you safer? I was such an idiot! I almost lost you. I'm never going to push you away again."

She pulled back, and looked into his eyes, their faces only inches apart. Her own eyes filled with tears.

"What took you so long?" she whispered.

The next thing Harry knew, she'd launched herself at him, and their lips met. For ten blissful seconds, there was nothing else in the world but her.

Then, he was dragged away from her by the collar and he saw Ron's angry face next to his own.

"Oi! My sister's just came back from the dead! Can't you leave off for five minutes?"

Harry looked back at Ginny, and they both grinned.

"Nope," they said in unison.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Well, tough!"

The next few minutes were a complete confusion as Ron, Hermione, Harry, Luna, Neville, Charlie, Bill, Fred, George, Percy, Mr Weasley, Fleur, Tonks and half of the DA all attempted to throw themselves on Ginny at the same time, all sobbing unrestrainedly. Harry felt himself get bruised all over, but to be honest, he didn't care.

"Careful now!" Merlin called, his tone amused. "You'll end up killing her again!"

They immediately desisted, and all began staring at Merlin in a new light.

Mr Weasley stood up and walked over to him, his eyes watery.

He seized Merlin's hand in his and wrung it vigourously.
"You returned my daughter to me," he said to him, his voice shaking. "You saved her. How can I ever thank you enough?"

Merlin didn't answer; he looked like he was lost for words.

Ginny extracted herself from the mob surrounding her and picked her way through to stand beside her father. Harry followed her immediately, not letting her get more than three feet away from him. She gazed up at Merlin with wonder.

"You brought me back," she said, "And you brought Harry back to me. Thank you."

She threw her arms around Merlin's neck and hugged him tightly, and Merlin returned the hug, looking rather awkward as he did so.

When Ginny had stepped away from him, he looked over at Harry.

"The Old Religion," said Harry, looking at Merlin.

"The Old Religion," agreed Merlin.

Harry nodded. He looked at Ginny, and then back at Merlin. "I owe my life to it, and so does Ginny," he said. "Maybe … maybe it isn't so bad after all."

Merlin smiled. "Maybe."

Nothing more needed to be said between them.

Ginny was once again enveloped by hugs from her family. As she pulled herself from another bone-crushing hug from the twins, she suddenly looked worried and bit her lip.

"What is it?" her father asked anxiously. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Ginny said hastily. "It's just that … well, I was dead wasn't I? Do I have to tell mum about this?"

Half an hour later Merlin and the others picked their way through the ruins of the street and settled themselves in the kitchen of number 12, the only building in the street that hadn't been set alight, possibly because of the magic in its foundations.

Merlin felt an odd sense of calm. He was surprised. He thought he would be furious, dismayed, feel something at Morgana escaping and taking Excalibur with her.

But he didn't. When he had looked down at her, ready to seize the sword and destroy her, something had held him back. Something far stronger than he had ever experienced before.

It wasn't like when the Old Religion had told him not to interfere in the lives of wizards over the centuries, not like when it had told him to enter into the Battle of Hogwarts, not like when it had told him not to reveal his identity … it was far more than that.

It wasn't a simple urging, not a feeling that this is the right thing to do. It was as if the Old Religion was speaking into his mind, whispering into his ear. He hardly knew what he was doing any more; he was literally being ruled by the magic within him. And for once in his very long life, he wasn't angry.
This was his destiny, the one he'd been given all those years ago when Arthur died; to kill Morgana, and right her wrong, and to help Harry destroy Voldemort and return the Old Religion to the world. Everything now made perfect sense.

Even when he had seen Ginny lying there dead, he hadn't panicked. He had known that this was not what the Old Religion had intended. He hadn't even been distressed, nor felt the slightest sense of grief or loss. Everything had been glaringly simple.

The Old Religion was no longer operating in simple hints and urgings; it was finally doing so openly. He no longer doubted himself or his interpretations of it.

He knew what he had to do so clearly it was almost as if he had known all along.

The Order began filing into the kitchen, with Mrs Weasley who'd turned up five minutes previously clutching to her daughter with a fierce loving look in her watery eyes. Merlin began to follow them, determined to say what he knew he had to, when he felt a tugging on his arm.

He turned to see Ron standing there looking awkward, his face still tear-stained. He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it, apparently at a loss.

He looked in through the kitchen door to see Ginny who was locked in her mother and father's arms with no hope of escape.

"I-uh …I want to … uh …"

"You don't have to," said Merlin quietly, smiling.

Ron shook his head looked distressed. "You saved her, Merlin. You brought her back from the dead! We owe you so much-"

"You don't," said Merlin firmly. "Ginny was never in any real danger. I knew that. I was only following what the Old Religion told me to do. And even if it hadn't, I would have tried anyway. You don't owe me a thing. It's a testament to Ginny's character and the love you and your family have for her that the Old Religion chose to spare her."

Ron looked down. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "All the time you talk about the Old Religion, I … I … well, I don't really believe you. I've been angry at you, I've suspected you and accused you. Like when you wouldn't tell us who you were, and when you said we should trust Malfoy. I always questioned you and … well, thought you were insane. I'm sorry."

He looked up. "I'm sorry, Merlin," he said. "I should never have doubted you. Harry and Hermione never have, I'm sorry I didn't have as much faith."

"It's alright, Ron," said Merlin. "I understand."

Ron smiled weakly. "Thanks for bringing her back," he said, looking fondly into the kitchen at his sister. He looked back at Merlin and he looked him up and down, a strange expression in his eyes. "You know," he said slowly. "When I found out you were Merlin, I couldn't believe it, and I was a bit overwhelmed. But after a bit, it faded away and I stopped thinking of you as the Merlin, and just as our friend. And then you go and do something like that …" he stopped and took a deep breath. "It just reminds me … you're Merlin. And all the legends that I'd forgotten just came rushing back. And they're not exaggerated. They really aren't."

Ron smiled again, and suddenly flushed with embarrassment. He sidled around Merlin and headed into the kitchen quickly, avoiding his gaze.
Merlin stood smiling to himself for a moment before also heading into the kitchen.

Three Order members had been killed in the attack, and many others wounded. A couple of people were moving around the room trying to heal the injured. Everyone was chattering noisily and taking turns in hugging Ginny. They all fell silent as Merlin entered the room. Harry sat at the table, his eyes fixed on Merlin.

Merlin looked around at them all, knowing what he had to say to them now. He caught Kingsley's eye. He was watching him with the same sense of awe that he had when he'd first learned of Merlin's identity.

Merlin took a deep breath, feeling the Old Religion spurring him onward.

"We have to leave," he said firmly. "Almost immediately."

Kingsley nodded. "I agree. We should leave this house now before they return. I've already set people to attend to the Muggles that are swarming around-"

"No," interrupted Merlin. "That's not what I mean. We have to go now. We have to go to Slytherin's house and face down Morgana and Voldemort for the final time. Tonight."

Everyone cried out in surprise and looked at Merlin as if he'd gone insane. Merlin noted that Harry, Ron Hermione and the rest of the DA looked eager and determined.

"But," said Kingsley, his eyes wide. "I thought you said that we needed to prepare? To marshal our forces? We're nowhere near ready now!"

"Yes, we are," said Merlin. "We're more ready than we've ever been. We've all been brought here together for a purpose. This is finally it."

"They won't be expecting us," he continued. "Morgana thinks she's won this round, that we'll be scattered and afraid. She won't anticipate an attack. She has no idea that we know where she is."

"But she has Excalibur!" Charlie said. "How's Harry supposed to defeat You-Know-Who without it?"

"Trust me," said Merlin. "I know that this is what he's supposed to do."

"And you can decide that for him?" Mrs Weasley asked, sitting with Ginny's hand clenched tightly in hers. She was very pale. "Are you really going to send him out there alone and without a weapon?"

"He has the Old Religion," said Merlin. "And he won't be alone."

A heavy silence hung over the room. Merlin stood his ground.

"I'm going there, tonight," he said to them. "I'm going to defeat Morgana tonight. Who will come with me?"

"I will," said Harry immediately, leaping to his feet. He glanced at Merlin. "I trust you. Now more than ever."

"We're coming," said Ron and Hermione, also standing up. Ron nodded to Merlin.

"We'll all come," said Remus, standing up, with Tonks, Daedalus, Hestia, Neville, Luna and several other Order members. "We'll all follow your lead."
"Yeah," said Fred, standing up and grinning. "What's the point of having the world's most powerful sorcerer on our side if we don't listen to his advice?"

All the other Weasleys also stood up.

"I'm coming too," said Ginny taking her place at Harry's side.

"No," Mrs Weasley said firmly, her eyes blazing. "You just died, Ginny! You're not going anywhere!"

"You can't stop me," said Ginny fiercely.

"I can't risk losing you!" Mrs Weasley said, her voice thick with emotion. "We came so close …"

Ginny's expression softened slightly. "Mum," she said softly. "I have to do this. I can't stay here when everyone else goes. We need all the help we can get."

Mrs Weasley looked conflicted and she shook her head sadly. "I don't want all my children going off to war," she said. "But …"

"Let her come," said Harry suddenly. He looked down at Ginny and something passed between them. "She deserves to fight for what she believes in. I wouldn't expect anything else from her."

Merlin grinned. The Old Religion had been right. It had brought them together at exactly the right moment.

Kingsley now stood up. He looked long and hard at Merlin.

He smiled. "We'd best get started then."

Harry's heart thumped wildly as he and the others all followed Merlin out onto the street outside. The place was in ruins, fires still burned and Ministry wizards were rushing here and there trying to extinguish them and restore order. The entire thing seemed surreal.

Ginny walked by his side. He had her hand in his. He didn't want her out of his sight. After almost losing her he thought he'd have become even more protective than normal, but strangely, he wasn't. All he knew was what Merlin had told him ages ago. He didn't know how much time he had left, and he knew that if he died, or Ginny died, he wouldn't want it to be when the two of them were estranged. Whatever happened, he was no longer going to push her away. Even when they weren't together, his feelings for her hadn't diminished, and he now knew it was entirely pointless to try and keep her safe. She wouldn't let him.

And Harry wouldn't have it any other way.

Merlin, who they'd all been following in silence stopped in the street. He motioned for them to gather around.

"We'll head to the town just outside of the castle," he said to them. "And then I'll break the enchantment and we can all get in."

"Is this really wise?" Bill asked him. "I mean, I'm not trying to back out or anything, but it seems a
bit sudden."

"I've been waiting thirteen hundred years for this moment," said Merlin. "I'm not waiting even another night."

No one spoke.

Merlin looked at Harry and the others.

"The town is called Yarlowe," he said. "A few miles east of Peterborough. Kingsley's evacuated the Muggles that live there already. We should hurry."

Harry nodded, and together, he and Ginny twisted and found themselves in crushing darkness.

When he emerged, he found himself in an average looking small town. The streets were deserted. The stars shone overhead.

Harry and the fifty other Order and DA members who'd Apparated shivered in the cold night air. His breath misted before his face.

"This is where You-Know-Who's hiding?" asked Ron, his teeth chattering.

"No," said Merlin, who didn't even look like he was cold, despite the thin t-shirt he was wearing. "Up there."

Harry and the others turned and looked up at where Merlin was pointing. It was a large hill a few miles outside of the town. It had a large flattened top. There was nothing visible, but as Harry looked at it, he seemed to tingle all over. The Old Religion seemed to spike within him.

He was there.

"Wow," said Ginny softly, looking up at the hill. "This really is it."

Harry didn't answer her.

"Merlin?" Neville called, sounding alarmed.

Harry wheeled around to see Merlin standing alone in the street with his eyes closed. He seemed to glow with some magical energy.

He opened his eyes, and they blazed golden.

"Lǣtan mec besēon min andsaca! Lǣtan min metod ālimpan!" he said in a harsh tone, his voice growing ever louder.

His eyes glowed even brighter, and the air seemed to hum with magic. The very earth seemed to tremble as Merlin cast his spell and Harry felt a monumental shift in the magic around him.

Then, Hermione gasped.

Harry looked back up at the hill, and saw that there was a shimmering mist hanging over it, flickering in and out of existence. A second later and on top of the previously bare hill there now stood an ancient and magnificent castle.

It was made of dark stone, and had many turrets and towers. Red lights glowed in the slit-like windows and it loomed over the town like some crooked and evil guardian. It seemed permeated
with evil, or was that only because Harry knew what lay within?

Merlin breathed in relief as he finished his spell.

He gestured to the others.

"She'll already have noticed the spells being undone," he said quickly. "We need to move fast. If this castle is anything like the one that came before, the dungeons will be on the eastern side. Half of you need to get in there and make your way through the castle, dealing with the Death Eaters as you find them."

"The other half, come with me. I'll take you into the courtyard and we'll fight our way to the Great Hall which is where I'm guessing Voldemort, Morgana and the Cup will be. Are you all ready?"

He was looking directly at Harry as he said this. Fawkes appeared in a flash of fire and settled himself on Merlin's shoulder. He crooned one long soft note.

Harry looked away and back up at the castle. He looked around at his friends who were gathered around, each of them with their wands drawn, ready. Lastly, he looked at Ginny, who still stood by his side, a fire blazing in her eyes.

Was he ready? Was he finally ready to face up to the destiny he'd been carrying around since he was one year old?

"Yes," he said finally. Merlin nodded and motioned for everyone to join hands and hold on to him.

"Then let's end this."
The Final Confrontation

Merlin watched with an odd sense of calm as Order members began Apparating into the dungeons of Slytherin's castle, the little 'pops' sounding loud in the silent night. He was not shaking with anticipation, nor was he feeling a growing sense of excitement. It was as if there was a great and ferocious animal resting inside of him, just waiting to be awakened.

Soon, the only people left with him for the assault on the courtyard were Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny, the rest of the Weasley family, Kingsley, Draco, Tonks, Remus and several members of the DA, Ernie, Susan, Hannah, Dean and Seamus among them - the rest had already Apparated inside with the first group.

Kingsley moved over to Merlin. "Hadn't we better hurry? We don't want the others left on their own."

Merlin nodded. "Just one moment."

Then, he threw his head back and let a great roar tear from his throat. "O drakon, e male so ftengometta tes'd'hup'anankes!"

When he looked back, he saw most of the gathered people looking rather bewildered and a little shocked. He realised that most of them had never seen him do this before.

"I thought Kilgharrah and Aithusa deserved the opportunity to do some damage of their own," he said, smiling wryly. *Morgana won't know what's hit her.*

They all nodded and some began looking up into the night sky as though expecting them to swoop down right away. Fawkes gave an impatient squawk and Merlin nodded.

"You're right, Fawkes, we shouldn't waste any more time."

He gestured to the others to take hold again. He himself grabbed some of Fawkes' feathers. "Here we go."

With another squawk, Fawkes disappeared in a flash of fire taking everyone along with him.

Merlin then found himself standing in a courtyard of stone, looming walls of black stone with darkened windows on every side. Merlin sensed it before he saw it.

"*Hilderand!*" he shouted, and only just in time, as dozens of jets of green light came rushing towards them out of the dark recesses of the courtyard. Merlin's shield quivered slightly at the force of so many Killing Curses, some performed by enhanced wands, but the shield held fast.

Then, scores of hooded and cloaked Death Eaters came streaming towards them, brandishing their wands fiercely.

The combined forces of the Order of the Phoenix and Dumbledore's Army leapt into action. The twins raced after a particularly large Death Eater, Ernie began dueling another with a look of fierce concentration on his face, Draco lashed out left and right with powerful Stunners, Fawkes swopped here and there distracting the enemy, Remus, Tonks and Kingsley took three Death Eaters at once and Percy let out a war cry so fierce as he began fighting that in any other situation it would be almost comical.
Merlin himself launched himself into the fight with no less fervour. The Death Eaters here were all shielded with Old Magic and if the others were to have a chance to defeat them, he'd have to first get rid of the shields.

"Berstan hlēo!" he shouted, sending his spell towards the Death Eaters fighting Neville and Luna. It struck their shields with a resounding crash and their shields flickered out of existence. Their eyes widened, and for a moment they let down their guard. Neville and Luna finished them off nicely.

Merlin sent spell after spell at the Death Eaters and destroying as many shields as he could, trusting to everyone else's spellwork to deal with them afterwards. He had to even the playing field. The spells of the Order and the DA wouldn't penetrate those shields easily.

The fighting was fast and furious. The dark courtyard was aglow with multi-coloured lights as spells rebounded off stone walls and reduced bricks to dust. The DA members had formed a circle in which each fired spells at Death Eaters constantly without worrying about protecting their own backs, just as Tonks had taught them a few weeks earlier. Bill and Fleur dueled side-by-side, Tonks and Remus moved through the crowd of Death Eaters, their wands never resting for an instant, Dean and Seamus were doing likewise. Molly Weasley was dueling just as ferociously as she had done during the Battle of Hogwarts, practically snarling at the oncoming onslaught. She'd placed herself protectively in front of Ginny, though Ginny hardly needed the protection; she was taking down plenty of Death Eaters on her own. Harry was also near her, and he, like Merlin, was focusing on destroying the Old Religion shields of the Death Eaters. Merlin could see the glow of his eyes from the other end of the courtyard,

More and more Death Eaters began to drop, and others fled when they realised their shielding was gone. Merlin grinned in triumph; they had no real loyalty. They followed Morgana in fear of her alone.

Merlin noticed the rapid decline of the Old Religion in the courtyard and realised all of the shielding had vanished. Morgana obviously didn't care about replenishing it.

"Hleap on bæc!" he yelled, and brought down two Death Eaters about to overwhelm Hannah Abbot. She smiled gratefully, and rushed off to the aid of Susan Bones who was also bravely dueling two at once.

Merlin frowned. They couldn't waste time here in the courtyard, they had to get moving, find Morgana before she realised she was beaten and left. He could feel her presence in the castle, a glowering evil skulking just out of plain sight. The lesser presence he could sense at her side must be Voldemort.

He had to finish this fight now if they were to have a chance. They couldn't tarry here any longer.

"Beweorpan se mānfull!" he incanted, lifting both hands up into the air. His eyes glowed.

A great flash of white light engulfed the courtyard, and screams filled the air from both sides. When the light subsided, all the Death Eaters were lying on the ground, unconscious. Merlin could just have easily killed them, but he wanted to save his energy for Morgana. And besides, he'd heard what Charlie Weasley had said earlier; some of them were innocent and just Imperised.

The Order and DA stood there blinking in surprise.

George huffed. "You take all the fun out of it, Merlin."

"Why couldn't you have done that right at the beginning?" Percy asked indignantly, his glasses
Merlin shrugged. "Why's it fair I should do all the work?"

Percy opened his mouth to retaliate, but Merlin held up a hand to silence him.

He cast out with his magic, searching for Morgana, searching for the route to take now. At last-

"This way," he said, but he wasn't alone. Harry had also spoken, and pointed in the same direction as Merlin.

Merlin raised an eyebrow, and Harry looked uncomfortable as everyone turned to him.

"I can sense him," he explained, looking at Merlin. "I can sense where Voldemort is."

Merlin nodded slowly. "The Old Religion is growing stronger with each passing minute," he observed. "It's a good sign that we will be successful tonight."

Then, before anyone could say anything else, Merlin rushed off up a staircase and hurtled down a dark corridor, Fawkes on his shoulder, not even waiting to see if the others were following. Harry ran by his side.

Merlin heard the sound of many people coming towards him. He stopped and raised his hand ready even as Harry raised his wand. Death Eaters came pouring around the corner.

"Mægenþise!" Harry and Merlin yelled together, and a mass of blue light came from them and combined in the air to form a large ball of energy which they sent speeding towards the advancing Death Eaters. They barely had time to cry out in surprise before it struck them, and sent them flying through the air until they hit the back wall and crumpled to the floor.

Merlin and Harry exchanged a glance before resuming their run down the corridor. Footsteps from behind let him know the Order and DA were following.

Merlin was immersed in memory as he and the others navigated their way through the winding corridors led by Merlin and Harry's instincts. How many times had he done this before with Arthur? How many times had they stormed a castle trying to kill or capture Morgana? And how many times had she escaped them?

But he hadn't had an army of sorcerers with him then.

The corridors were now eerily empty. Merlin reached out with his magic trying to sense any oncoming attack, but his instincts were being thrown off by their proximity to Morgana; her presence was overwhelming and made it impossible to sense anything else.

They raced down corridor after corridor with no end, and no sense of where they were going. Merlin's unease grew. Where were the other Death Eaters? How could they get to Morgana? Her presence loomed over all else, almost goading him. He had to reach her!

He stopped suddenly in the corridor, and breathing heavily, he tried to get his bearings. The others stopped with him and looked at him questioningly. Merlin looked around the corridor but was completely lost. He had never been here before, and only once been inside its predecessor. The Great Hall had to be around here! Where would Salazar have located it?

"Merlin?" Kingsley asked, watching him. "Where now?"
Merlin hesitated for a moment. He looked around the corridor again, and something caught his eye. It was a tapestry, showing a grand castle with many turrets and towers. It was Hogwarts. Apparently, Salazar hadn't completely broken all ties with the school when he'd left. But there was something else about the tapestry that intrigued him. It was fluttering slightly.

Comprehension dawning, Merlin darted forwards and wrenched the tapestry aside to reveal a large wooden door. He pulled on the great brass handle and plunged himself into the darkness beyond, everyone following without question. He found himself in a small winding spiral staircase. He bounded up the stairs with great energy, much like he'd done as a young man when realising he was late with Arthur's breakfast, and pulled open another door that he found at the top. Morgana's presence was almost overwhelming.

He then emerged into a small hall, an antechamber, great twisting serpents carved from stone adorning the walls, serpents that Merlin recognised, and guessed must have come from the ruins of the previous castle. The room was empty.

The Order and DA spilled out and stood by his side.

"What is it?" Fred asked, looking at Merlin.

Merlin just nodded to the far end of the room. There, running from the ground to the ceiling were massive oak doors. The entrance to the Great Hall.

"Let's go then," said Harry, tightening his hold on his wand and starting to move forwards. Merlin threw out a hand to stop him: "No, Harry! It's too easy."

But Harry had already moved. The moment he'd placed a foot on the flagstones, something happened.

Flashes of green light filled the room and out of nowhere, giant creatures began to appear, and scuttle dangerously towards them.

Merlin groaned. "Serkets? How did she get those?"

Morgana had used one in London a while back to cause panic, but Merlin had thought that had been a one off. These giant scorpion creatures had died out years ago; he'd thought the one she'd used had been one she'd summoned from the past. But that was incredibly difficult to do! How had she gotten so many?

Voldemort, thought Merlin grimly, the two of them together could easily have managed it.

The Order and DA began firing off curses towards the Serkets, but they bounced off harmlessly. They weren't going to work against creatures of the Old Religion; Merlin's own magic was barely powerful enough to do more than ward them away for a limited amount of time.

Nevertheless he raised a hand and tried. "Awendaþ eft wansæliga neat!" he yelled, and ten immediately were thrown back, stunned. But that wouldn't last for long.

They advanced ever closer, making horrid noises. Merlin raised his hand to try again-

He was stopped by a terrible roaring sound that originated from outside of the castle. The Serkets seemed to quail as they heard it, but Merlin's heart soared.

The next thing Merlin knew, the entire room seemed to be caving in. He hastily raised a shield and pulled the others back as timber beams and great chunks of masonry from the ceiling fell all around
them.

There was another roar, and quick glimpses of scaly flesh as great fires filled the room. The Serkets squealed horribly, and then were silent.

The was a great trembling crash as something white and very large was deposited into the room with them. When the dust from the ceiling and smoke from the fires had abated, Merlin saw a very welcome sight. Aithusa stood in the antechamber with them, her mouth still smoking. There was a fiery glint in her eye. Up above, just visible through the massive hole in the ceiling was Kilgharrah, flapping his great wings in the air, too large to fit inside.

"That's the second time I've had to save you from those creatures, Merlin," Kilgharrah observed, his deep voice resounding through the entire castle. "You should not be so careless."


Aithusa turned her gaze on Merlin. She stood in the antechamber, almost too large to fit.

"She's through there," she said, gesturing with her massive head to the great doors on the other end. "You must go."

Merlin nodded. "Won't you come?"

Aithusa and Kilgharrah both shook their heads.

"That is not our destiny young warlock, that is yours," said Kilgharrah from above. "You and the Potter boy must face the final step alone."

"We've already taken care of the fleeing Death Eaters," sniffed Aithusa, "and all the ones that tried to curse us out of the sky are now piles of ash on the battlements. What else do you want of us?"

"Nothing," said Merlin, smiling. "Absolutely nothing. Thank you, thank both of you."

Aithusa bowed her great head. She leapt up into the air and spread her wings as she cleared the hall and hung there in the air beside Kilgharrah. Fawkes took off from Merlin's shoulder and joined the two dragons.

"I wish I could go with you, Merlin, and incinerate that evil witch," Aithusa said. "But Kilgharrah is right. This is your time."

Merlin nodded, and watched as the three of them flew away over the grounds. A peculiar feeling now lay over him. His heart began to race.

A crashing sound alerted him to a small door midway down the hall being burst open. Emerging into the ruined room was the rest of the Order and the DA, looking in amazement at the destruction before them.

"What happened?" McGonagall asked, being the apparent leader of the other group. "We fought our way through the dungeons and above trying to find the Great Hall when we heard all this commotion. Is it over?"

Merlin shook his head. "No, it hasn't even begun."

He took a steadying breath and felt the Old Religion run through his veins stronger than it had ever done in the previous thirteen hundred years. He took a step towards the opposite doors.
"Morgana is just on the other side of that door. She's waiting for me."

Harry rushed forwards and stood beside Merlin, also looking at the door. "And so is Voldemort."

Merlin turned to face him. "Then let's meet our destiny together, Harry."

Harry nodded. Together, they walked slowly towards the great wooden doors. Every step seemed to only increase the magic in Merlin's veins. The others followed silently behind them, solemn.

They reached the ornately carved doors and Harry and Merlin exchanged one final glance, before reaching out their hands and pushing them open.

They found themselves within a massive hall, several times larger than the one they'd just passed through. Huge columns supported the ceiling, carved in the likeness of serpents. Green and silver tapestries hung from the walls. Chandeliers also in the shape of serpents hung everywhere, their candles casting a gloomy light over the hall below. At the far end of the hall, below some magnificent windows stood a wooden pedestal. Placed on this was a plain golden cup. Before the cup, there were two ornately styled thrones in black stone.

Sitting in these thrones, with leering grins on their faces, were Morgana and Voldemort.

Upon fixing his eyes on Morgana, something seemed to change within Merlin. He no longer felt hate, or anger, just a quiet acceptance. The next few moments would change everything.

She sat lolling in her throne, showing no sign of the weariness she must be feeling after her earlier fight with Merlin. Across her lap sat Excalibur, glinting in the dim light.

Her grin widened as she saw Harry and Merlin enter, with the entire Order of the Phoenix and Dumbledore's Army following behind them. They'd put by their wands; they knew who would be deciding their fate.

"Finally got here, Merlin?" Morgana asked lazily. "Did you honestly think you would have the element of surprise with all the racket you were making?"

Merlin didn't answer. Morgana continued regardless.

"Of course, I expected you to come here," she said, smiling. "I knew that if I took back my dear brother's sword you'd risk everything to get it back, though I did not quite expect you so soon. Luckily, I keep the Death Eaters constantly on alert for attack. Sentimental old fool."

Merlin smiled. "You're the fool, Morgana. That sword has much more value than mere sentiment. It is a blade forged in the breath of a dragon, a product of the Old Religion."

She laughed. "The Old Religion! What do you really know of it?"

"More than you apparently," Merlin replied. "It would never condone the action you are taking. You betrayed it, Morgana, when you betrayed your family and friends. It set something in motion and it has taken me thirteen hundred years to fully understand it. I can complete what was begun all those years ago."

"What? And kill me?" Morgana asked, laughing. "You had the perfect opportunity this evening. But you're weak. You don't have the stomach to kill someone you used to call friend."

"Friend?" Voldemort asked, speaking for the first time, his red eyes gleaming. "You failed to mention that."
Morgana scowled. "There are many things I do not tell you. It is of no importance."

"No importance?" Voldemort hissed, looking furious. "You fail to tell me that one of my greatest enemies was once your friend? Where do your loyalties truly lie?"

She laughed. "Not with you in any case. Now, be quiet."

Harry laughed beside Merlin. "Going to let her talk to you like that, Tom? I thought the great Lord Voldemort was superior to everyone else?"

"I told you, Tom," said Merlin. "She cares about no one. She was only ever using you to get to me."

"What does that matter now?" said Morgana. "He's outlived his usefulness."

She stood up slowly and placed Excalibur carefully on the throne behind her. Voldemort stood also, a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"No one, no one, can presume to command me!" he hissed, glaring at her.

"Yeah, particularly a Muggle-Born," said Harry, smirking.

The look on Voldemort's face was priceless, and Merlin would have enjoyed himself if it was any other situation.

"You might have gotten yourself a powerful ally, Tom," said Harry fiercely, "but you're still alone. You're pathetic! You both are!"

"Silence!" screamed Morgana, glaring at Harry. "You disgust me, Potter." She looked him over. "I have no use for you, I care nothing about what happens to you." She looked back to Voldemort. "Do what you will with him. After I have dealt with Merlin."

Voldemort looked as though he was about to explode with anger, but he seemed to calm himself, with great effort. He took a step back and settled himself back in his chair, with such an evil and furious look on his face that if Merlin had been a lesser man he'd have run for the hills. At this point, Merlin wasn't sure who Voldemort wanted dead more: himself, or Morgana.

He withdrew the Elder Wand from within his robes and held it firmly in his hand. He was practically twitching with excitement as he glared at Harry, ready at any moment to deal the fatal blow. Harry glared back with equal vehemence, clutching his own wand tightly. But neither would make a move until Merlin and Morgana were done.

Merlin's eyes were fixed on Morgana's. He searched within them, looking for any sign of the kind and lively young woman he had once known, but saw only darkness. She had wrought her own doom.

Merlin raised his palm as Morgana raised hers. They both stood in silence, staring at the other. Merlin felt the weight of his thirteen hundred years bearing down on him, but instead of hindering him, it drove him onward. He still made no move.

Then, Morgana's eyes blazed. "Bærnett!" she screamed.

Harry took a step backwards as the force of Morgana's spell seemed to overwhelm the entire room. A blazing ball of energy engulfed Merlin, but apparently he had raised a shield because a second
later he emerged, entirely unscathed. He made no retaliatory move.

She screamed again and threw another powerful spell at him, but he raised a hand and the spell dissipated before it even reached him.

She threw curse after curse at him, and each time he got rid of them with a flash of his eyes before they could do any damage. He still made no move to attack her himself.

The Order and DA were watching in awe as destructive magic continued issuing from Morgana, increasing in power, Merlin not even batting an eyelid. Morgana’s face was contorted with anger and hate and effort as she threw all her magic into each spell, but Merlin's face remained calm and didn’t change expression even as he used more and more powerful magic in his attempts to repel her.

Harry was confused. Why wasn't he fighting back? Why didn't he just do one of his powerful spells and kill her? He was able to! Why was he just standing there and letting her attack him?

The power continued increasing and Harry felt the Old Religion strengthen with each passing minute. It was rushing through every inch of his body; it had never felt this powerful before. It seemed to be humming intensely, lurking just below his skin. He felt Voldemort's presence, just feet away from him, and he longed to do something, but knew he couldn't. Something was telling him to wait, wait for something.

The Cup of Life was just behind Voldemort, Harry could feel the magic radiating off of it. It reminded him intensely of the feeling he’d gotten in the Veil Room in the Ministry of Magic. It seemed to make the magic in his blood recoil.

Harry hurriedly fixed his eyes back on Merlin, awed at what he was seeing. Merlin wasn’t even putting up a fight, yet he was undoubtedly winning, despite not performing a single offensive move. Was this his plan? To look coldly at her without raising a finger until she tired herself out?

Morgana screamed again. "Fight back!" she said. "Are you afraid?"

"No," said Merlin, quietly. "I don't need to fight, Morgana. You've already lost. The Old Religion has decided your fate."

Then, with one almighty push, Merlin's eyes burned and Morgana was thrown several feet backwards crashing into a pillar, apparently too exhausted to raise a shield. She coughed and spluttered and tried to struggle to her feet. Voldemort watched with expressionless eyes, his hands whitening as they clutched the Elder Wand ever tighter.

Morgana's momentary distraction was all Merlin needed. He stretched out his hand and his eyes flashed. Excalibur soared from its place on Morgana's throne and flew into his hand. As his fingers closed over the hilt it seemed to glow with powerful energy, almost singing with the magic of the Old Religion.

He placed both hands over the hilt and held it up to his face.

Morgana leapt up and laughed hysterically. "A sword? I care not how powerful a blade it is, I will not be destroyed by a Muggle weapon!"

Merlin's eyes gleamed.

He stepped forward, the sword raised-

Before he could go any closer, Morgana raised her hand and screamed one final spell: "Gecyđan
Harry's heart stopped, expecting to see another powerful and dangerous spell coming from her towards Merlin, but was confused when all that happened was a slight shimmering mist appeared in the space between Merlin and Morgana.

Merlin froze and lowered the sword a little as the mist swirled and twisted into shapes of people and places, like reflections in a cloudy pool. Harry watched in amazement as the mist contorted to form two distinct figures, almost life-size, standing right between the two Old Religion sorcerers.

It was Morgana and Merlin. Although physically much the same as he was now, Merlin looked younger somehow, his face not so worn down by burden and worries, his smile carefree and joyful. His hair was different, and he wore ragged clothes. He was smiling at the figure of the woman before him. Morgana also looked young, and her face was beautiful, without any hint of evil in her soul. She smiled freely. They stood there simply looking at each other, nothing but friendship and laughter and caring between them. Although neither of the figures spoke, voices rang out through the room, echoing in the cavernous hall. Voices that Harry recognised to be that of Merlin and Morgana.

"You can trust me, Morgana. You know you can."

"You've always been such a good friend, Merlin."

"I'm your friend, Morgana."

"I trust Merlin."

"I can help you …"

"Be careful, Merlin."

"It's good to have you back, my Lady."

Harry listened in amazement as these thirteen-hundred year old conversations echoed loudly around the room. He could hardly believe he was hearing them.

Merlin seemed frozen, looking intensely at the image of his younger self. He couldn't seem to tear his eyes from it. His face went blank as he looked between the two images. Something like an ancient longing seemed to be reignited in his eyes.

Behind the images, Morgana grinned in triumph.

"Don't you remember the good times, Merlin?" she asked, her voice deceptively innocent. "How you used to blush whenever you saw me? Stumble over your words? Bring me flowers when I was upset? Swear to protect me? Don't you remember all the good times that we shared?"

Suddenly, Merlin's face hardened, and a glint came into his eyes.

"Yes," he said. "But I also remember the bad."

He raised Excalibur once more and swiped it through the air, right between the two images, and they dissipated into wisps of smoke. Morgana's eyes went wide and the sword came flying towards her.

The entire room gasped as one as Merlin lunged forwards with Excalibur, and with one mighty thrust, drove it straight through Morgana's abdomen.
Merlin felt the sword slide almost seamlessly through flesh and blood, but he felt no joy or relief, only a calm satisfaction. Morgana gasped and spluttered as she looked down at the sword protruding from her body. She and Merlin were now only inches apart.

She looked up, and her eyes met Merlin's. There was no evil or darkness there anymore. Only a quiet desperation, similar to the look Morgana had given him when she realised he had poisoned her in Camelot. He felt it pierce his heart in the same way the reminder of all that they'd shared had just a few moments previously.

He stepped back and withdrew the sword, oddly enough not even besmirched by blood, and she swayed on the spot for a moment, clutching at her wound.

Then, she fell to her knees and crumpled to the floor. Before she could fall completely, her body seemed to vanish in the way the immortal soldiers of Cenred had done all those years ago. Soon, there was not a trace of her left.

Merlin stood, looking down at the bare spot on the floor where she had been, willing himself to feel something other than grim satisfaction. He had done it. Finally, it was over.

Just as he realised this, a sharp pain began in his heart and seemed to send icy fire shooting through all his veins. He cried out and dropped Excalibur, where it clattered to the floor. He heard Voldemort scream with frustration.

Harry watched in horror as Merlin fell to his knees clutching his heart. He'd gone incredibly pale, and he swayed there, breathing heavily, seeming to be lost in some sort of pain or delirium.

Harry's heart froze. What was happening to him?

He heard Voldemort's scream of rage and anger and sensed rather than saw him raise the Elder Wand and point it directly at Merlin.

"Acwellan!"

"Hilderand!" Harry yelled, and with a flourish of his wand he deflected Voldemort's Old Religion Killing Curse away from Merlin, who seemed too weak to do anything himself.

Voldemort rounded on Harry, his awful eyes burning with fury.

"Potter!" he yelled.

"Leave him!" Harry yelled back. "I won't let you touch him!"

Voldemort sneered. "The great and powerful Merlin needs a mere teenager to protect him? If someone such as he could defeat Morgana than perhaps it is just as well she is no more. I don't need allies as weak as her."

Harry pointed his wand directly at Voldemort. He moved so he was standing directly in front of Merlin, who was still on the ground.
"He's more powerful than you'll ever be," Harry said, calmly. "In more ways than one."

Voldemort laughed. "Is this Dumbledore's legendary love? You are still as foolish as ever, Potter!"

"No, that's you," said Harry fiercely, staring without blinking. "You still don't understand it, you never will!"

"Perhaps not," said Voldemort. "But then, I never gave much care to studying that which is weaker than myself."

Harry shook his head. "And that's why you're going to lose."

"And what makes you think that?" Voldemort asked, sneering.

"Because of the Old Religion," Harry answered, simply. "It told me. I never used to believe in it properly, but now I do. Now I understand why it marked out me for this moment."

Voldemort laughed, an awful laugh that rang around the room.

"The Old Religion?" Voldemort repeated derisively. "You're living in the past, Potter! Just like those two! It is weak! I have combined it with the New and made it more powerful. It is nothing, Potter. Just a source of magic that can be taken and moulded into perfection!"

"That's where you're wrong," said Harry, feeling the magic growing ever stronger within him. "It is so much more than that. It is love, and goodness, and life. It's the greatest and most beautiful force in this world. It runs through every living thing and gives them power. You are nothing compared to it! It isn't something to be accessed and used, it's something that has to be embraced. You can't use it for your own selfish purposes without consequences. It isn't a source of power, it's a source of life."

Voldemort stood smiling, his red eyes still gleaming.

"So that is what Merlin has been teaching you? I needn't have worried. You don't appreciate the power that can be gained from using the Old Religion. You are too afraid to fully embrace the magic and use it properly. That was your mistake."

"No, Tom," said Harry, taking a step closer. "It's yours. You corrupted the Old Religion by making your Horcruxes, by using my blood to resurrect yourself and free Morgana and make yourself immortal. You've corrupted it so badly. But the Old Religion needs balance above everything else, and to do that, what you did has to be healed."

"The magic of the Old Religion is mine!" screeched Voldemort, looking insane. "I bend it to my will, and my will alone!"

"Really?" Harry asked, clutching his wand tighter, knowing the moment was coming ever closer. "Well we'll just have to see who's really the one in control: the one who seeks to conquer the Old Religion, or the one that serves it."

Voldemort's eyes flashed. "Bānwærc!" he screeched.

Harry felt the magic rise up within in more powerfully than it had ever done before. "Hilderand!"

Voldemort's spell rebounded off Harry's shield and struck the stone wall, bringing bricks and dust crashing down onto the gathered people.

"Abēatan!" yelled Harry, and he sent an equally powerful spell back at Voldemort. His eyes
widened in surprise and a quiet fear, but he also managed to raise a shield in time.

"Nied!"

"Sārnes!"

The both cast their spells at the same time, and a stream of red light and green light collided in mid-air creating a resounding crash and sparks so bright they seemed almost blinding.

"Scūfan!" Harry yelled and sent a continuous jet of energy from his wand towards Voldemort. Voldemort retaliated in kind and a similar jet of energy issued from his own wand. They met in the middle, and joined together with two balls of light, each trying to force the other back. Harry was reminded forcibly of the time when his and Voldemort's wands had connected in the graveyard.

Harry poured more magic into his spell and the light intensified. Voldemort did the same. His face was lit by a dangerous red light and he was leering at Harry, a slow grin spreading on his skull-like face.

Harry tried to keep calm, remembering everything Merlin had told him. *Don't let it all go at once. Don't waste your energy. A little at a time.*

So Harry did just that. He let loose small trickles of energy, building up and up slowly until the spell burned so fiercely he could feel the heat on his face. But Voldemort responded with an increase of his own, not showing the slightest bit of strain in his expression.

*This isn't working,* Harry thought desperately, *we're too evenly matched.*

He had to think of a new plan. He thought back to all of Tonks' training sessions. *It wasn't always the most powerful that won. It's the way you use the magic that counts.*

He changed tactics. He staggered backwards, feigning weariness, letting his magic falter a little. Voldemort pressed his advantage, looking triumphant.

He stepped forward, always increasing the power of the spell, apparently eager to finish Harry off. Harry tried not to smile. He was releasing it all too soon, depleting his reserves. Harry's were still intact.

Harry continued stepping backwards and adopted a fearful expression for good measure. Some of the DA called out in alarm, apparently also fooled. *Don't try and help,* Harry silently pleaded, *please, let me do this on my own.*

The light from the spells shone throughout the room, reflecting off the windows and the golden Cup, making it seem as though the very room was on fire.

Struck with a new idea, Harry began stepping to the side, creating a circle around Voldemort.

*If only he could reach it …*

While Voldemort continued battering his spell against Harry's, Harry began searching for the words for a complex Shield Spell that Merlin had taught him a few weeks ago. Unlike normal Shield Spells, this one didn't deflect the offending spell, it absorbed it.

He would have to perform it non-verbally, not a particularly good idea; these spells were hard enough at the best of times. But what choice did he have?
He reached the spot he'd been aiming for. He took a deep breath.

Pretending to be overcome, Harry let out a cry and ceased his spell. In the split second before Voldemort's spell reached him, Harry's eyes flashed golden.

The spell hit him with the force of a sledgehammer and he felt himself fly backwards and hit the wall. He felt a massive bruise form on his back, but otherwise he was unharmed; the undetectable Shield Spell he'd performed had protected him. But, he wasn't about to let Voldemort know that.

He cried out in pain and let himself slump to the ground, and lie there, coughing, pretending to be defeated. He heard the horrified cries of the DA and the Order, but he tried not to respond, give any sign that he was alright. They too had to be a part of the illusion.

Harry lay as still as possible on the ground, forcing himself to give deep and apparently painful breaths. He looked to his right, and saw that his plan had worked. *He was close enough now ... *

Voldemort laughed in his high cold voice and walked towards him, evil in his gloating eyes.

"Has your precious Old Religion saved you now, Potter?" Voldemort sneered. "Or are you just as weak as Merlin? With him, Morgana and now you gone, who shall stand in my way? I will be in sole possession of this magic. None shall match my power!"

Harry bided his time, a rushing sound in his ears and his heart thumped erratically. The Old Religion seemed to be screaming at him. This was it …

"What shall stop me now?" Voldemort asked quietly, stopped just a few feet away from where Harry still lay on the floor. "What on this earth is now more powerful than I?"

"Just one thing," said Harry, looking calmly up at Voldemort, feeling something from within speaking with his voice. "The thing more powerful than anything else. The thing that you corrupted will be restored. The Old Religion."

And, acting on pure instinct, he leapt up and brandished his wand. "*Onbregdan!*

Excalibur, which had lain abandoned on the floor as Merlin had collapsed, now soared towards him, blazing with golden light.

Harry seized it and leapt to his side, swinging the sword as he did so. But he wasn't aiming at Voldemort.

The Cup of Life, which Harry had been slowly edging to during the duel was now only inches away on his right. Bringing the sword back from behind his head, Harry swung it towards the Cup with as much force as he could muster.

It struck the Cup on the stem, and it went flying. A mass of blood came spilling from the golden Cup as it soared through the air, splattering on the flagstones. The Cup fell to the ground with an almighty clang.

*Nooo0000!* Voldemort screamed.

A sudden stream of golden light from the dawn came spilling in through the high windows as the Cup fell. The light illuminated Voldemort's awful face which seemed to be crumbling into dust before Harry's very eyes.

Voldemort fell, his body seeming to disintegrate as it did so, until like Morgana, there was not a trace
of him left. Harry felt a sudden surge of magic within him, igniting in his veins as though the Old Religion was filling every inch of his body with power. *It is done,* it seemed to say to him.

Harry stood for a moment looking at the spot Voldemort had just been standing, hardly daring to believe it. It was over, it was finally over.

His head seemed to spin as ever more and more powerful magic seemed to pour into him from some external force. He shook violently, and Excalibur fell from his numb fingertips.

The Order and DA stood staring at him open-mouthed from across the room. They were looking at him like they had once stared at Merlin: in awe.

Harry looked down at his hands. He put his wand slowly into his pocket and outstretched his palm.

"*Byrne,*" he said firmly.

A second later, crackling flames sat in the palm of his hand.

"*Fugol,*" he said next, and the fire morphed into the shape of a bird, which then took flight and soared off through one of the high windows, now filled with light. Harry and the others watched it go.

Harry turned back to them. "I did it," he said softly. "The Old Religion is back. It's done."

As what had happened when Harry and Merlin had driven off Voldemort during the Battle of Hogwarts, the hall erupted into cheers and joyful shouts as they all rushed forwards to embrace Harry.

"You did it!"

"It's over!"

"You were amazing, Harry!"

"You showed him!"

But Harry didn't feel as exuberant as the others, despite the monumental relief he was feeling within. There was something more pressing on his mind.

He pushed through the mass of people trying to congratulate and rushed over to the edge of the room where a pale figure was sitting up against the wall. Merlin looked weak and shaken, but he smiled when Harry approached.

"Well done," he said, quietly, and his smiled widened. "You've fulfilled your destiny."

"Only thanks to you," said Harry, shaking his head. "I could never have done it without you."

"You underestimate yourself, Harry," said Merlin. "I never doubted you for an instant. The Old Religion runs through you, Harry, just as strongly now as it ever did for a sorcerer of Old. You brought the magic back, Harry."

Luna was crouched next to Merlin, and his hand was in hers. She was smiling at him. She turned to look at Harry.

"You did it, Harry," she smiled. "I knew you would."
"What happened, mate?" Fred asked. The rest of the Order and DA had crowded around and were looking down at the prone Merlin with concern. "Did she hurt you?"

Merlin shook his head, looking suddenly weary, but happy. "No, it's more than that."

"What?"

"He's mortal," Luna said suddenly, and squeezed Merlin's hand reassuringly. "He did what he needed to. He righted the wrong that Morgana caused on the world. He's fulfilled his purpose. He can now grow old and die like the rest of us."

Harry started. Everyone else gasped.

"Is this true?" Kingsley asked in amazement, looking from Luna to Merlin. "You're mortal?"

Slowly, Merlin nodded. He smiled, and as he did so, a great burden seemed to be lifted from him, the years and cares he carried seemed to vanish.

"Yes," he said. "It is."

Then, he laughed and sat up a little straighter, still trembling.

"I feel as weak as a new-born lamb," he explained, "but that'll pass. I'm just not used to a mortal body."

He grinned and closed his eyes. "Mortal," he repeated to himself. "How I've longed for this …"

"Longed for the chance to grow old and grey?" Tonks asked, winking.

Merlin nodded, and suddenly his voice seemed to shake a little with suppressed feeling. "The chance to grow old with the people I care about? To not have to stand by and watch as they pass onto the next world without me? To no longer have to watch the years pass me by? To no longer have to fear growing too close to people? Yes, I have longed for this moment. Longed for it ever since I watched my friends from Camelot pass on, and their descendants, and their descendants … I have longed for this my entire life."

He turned back to Harry, and he fixed his eyes on his. They were a tempest of emotion.

"You did this, Harry," said Merlin. "Only you could have done this. You've no idea what this means to me, Harry. Thank you."

Harry nodded dumbly, unable to say anything.

Then, it seemed to hit him all at once.

"You're mortal," he gasped. "Morgana is dead, the Old Religion is back … Voldemort is dead …"

Harry seemed to be numb all over. "Voldemort is dead …"

"Yes, and you did it!" smiled Ginny, and she sidled up to him and took his hand in hers. "The two of you, and the Old Religion. We'll never have to fear either of them again."

Harry turned to her, and a mounting excitement seemed to grow in his heart.

"It's really over?" he asked, a grin slowly growing on his face.
By response, Ginny threw her arms around him, and Harry hugged her back fiercely. *It was over.*

The others took this as a sign, and all rushed forwards again and tried to hug Harry simultaneously. Harry found himself having his hand shaken by many, being hugged by a tearful Mrs Weasley, thumped on the back by a laughing Ron, kissed on the cheek by a joyful Hermione, and generally being lost in a mad crush of happiness and joy.

Harry grinned openly. *It was over.*

He started laughing and found he couldn't stop.

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Merlin sat in the Great Hall of the Slytherin estate still trying to come to terms with what had happened. *Morgana is dead. Finally, she can never hurt anyone again.*

He couldn't stop smiling so much was his relief. No one would have to suffer at her hands again.

He didn't feel joy at her death, only satisfaction. The images she had conjured up before he had killed her, and the way she had looked as she died had saddened him greatly. They once again reminded him of the good woman she had once been. No, he could never feel joy or happiness at her death. She should never have turned out like that. In some twisted way, she too had been a victim. And all Merlin felt was gladness that she could do no more harm.

And the other part, the revelation that he was now mortal ... he couldn't even begin to describe. Although he was still physically weak, the absolute bliss that filled his mind as he thought of his mortality was enough to fill his heart with exhilaration. It was the greatest gift the Old Religion could ever have given him.

He had thought that when it came to the end, when Morgana was dead and the Old Religion returned, he'd perhaps feel a sense of anti-climax, a sudden emptiness with no more clear purposes in life. But that had not occurred. Instead, he found himself just reveling in the sheer relief and happiness of it all. He no longer cared. He was ready for his retirement. He felt more rested now than he ever had.

The hall was filled with Order and DA members who chatted and laughed as they sat at great tables that had been conjured by the Order. House-elves that had been brought in from Hogwarts by McGonagall were hurrying here and there carrying food for an impromptu morning victory feast. It was more than a little bizarre.

Kingsley and some Aurors had searched the castle for lurking Death Eaters and found several unconscious that were now being sent to Azkaban. All the others had been taken care of by Kilgharrah and Aithusa, who were now visible in the grounds, feasting on a large carcass of some unidentifiable animal Hagrid had managed to procure from somewhere.

Kingsley had now gone back to the Ministry to make the necessary announcements. He'd been gone several hours, and Merlin could only imagine he was stuck in the same sort of situation he had been when Merlin had revealed his identity: an endless press conference.

But Merlin was in no rush for him to return, in no rush to deal with all the jubilation and gratitude of the wizarding public. He was content to sit at the table between his friends and simply watch and laugh along with them. *He was mortal. He wouldn't have to watch these ones die. He was finally free from his burdens.*
Harry was sitting across from him, and would occasionally look up and smile at Merlin, which Merlin would immediately return. Nothing needed to be said between them. They now understood each other perfectly. Fawkes rested comfortably on Merlin’s shoulder again, his soft crooning stirring up even more happiness in Merlin's heart.

"So," said Bill, from further down the table, addressing Merlin, "does the fact You-Know-Who's dead mean that the Old Religion is back for good? That anyone can learn it?"

Everyone looked to Merlin in interest.

"Possibly," said Merlin, smiling. "But even in my day, not all magic users had the power to use the Old Religion to its full extent. It runs through us all, in some more strongly than others. But, in the long run, yes. I believe now that it is returned to its full power, people can begin to learn it again."

Merlin turned to his left and grinned. "And I think we may start with Mr Malfoy here."

Draco jumped as Merlin addressed him, and he flushed under everyone's gaze. "Me?"

"Yes," said Merlin, nodding. "You have Druidic ancestors don't you? The Old Religion is within you."

"But I thought you said it wasn't powerful enough inside of me to be able to use it?" Draco asked, his eyes wide.

"Before, no it wasn't," said Merlin. "But now it has returned to the world and can operate in the open once more, it will flow more strongly inside people, and will begin to manifest itself again. I think it entirely possible that you'll be able to learn it."

Draco gaped. "You mean- I could learn the magic of the Old Religion?"

"Yes," said Merlin. "Would you like to learn it?"

Draco spluttered. "Well, of course! To be taught Old Magic by Merlin himself … you really think I could use it?"

Ron stared. "Whoa," he said, looking at Draco. "I never thought I’d see the day when Draco Malfoy would be modest."

Draco glared at him, but the rest of the table erupted in laughter. Harry however looked thoughtful.

"I can feel it," he said suddenly, looking intensely at Merlin. "I felt it as soon as you killed Morgana. The magic inside me became a whole lot stronger, and I actually heard the Old Religion. I followed it, and I felt it work through me. I could always sense the magic, but never as strongly as this."

Merlin nodded. "Welcome to my world, Harry."

Everyone laughed again.

"You think we could learn it, Merlin?" Fred asked, and he and his twin grinned eagerly.

Merlin laughed. "Maybe. Who knows? Maybe one day Old Magic will be something taught at Hogwarts!"

"I can't believe it's all over," said Hermione, her eyes oddly watery. "We can all finally relax! And I can go to Australia and get mum and dad! I can finally see them again!" A single tear dropped from her eyes, and she giggled as she brushed it aside. "They'll be so mad when they find out what I've
been doing …"

"No," said Ron, putting his arm around her. "They'll be proud of you. Proud of raising such a brave, good and freakishly smart daughter."

"Hear, hear," said Merlin, smiling at Hermione who blushed furiously.

"There's one thing I still don't get," said Neville, frowning. "Why didn't you kill Morgana last night in Grimmauld Place? I mean what difference would it have made killing her a couple of hours earlier?"

"It made all the difference in the world," said Merlin. "We wouldn't have succeeded otherwise."

"I don't understand."

"Harry does," said Merlin, looking at him, and Harry nodded.

"I think I do," said Harry. "It seems to make sense now though it didn't before."

"Well we don't!" objected Bill. "Tell us."

Merlin sighed. "I couldn't have killed Morgana last night," he said. "When I killed her this morning, when I … was made mortal, I was weakened. If I had done it last night I couldn't have come with you here, I couldn't have helped you all and Harry get to this hall. And besides," Merlin smiled. "I would have been too weak to save Ginny."

Ginny flushed uncharacteristically, but she smiled and moved closer to Harry.

"But why let her take Excalibur?" Ron asked. "Why was that important?"

"Because," explained Merlin. "If Harry had taken Excalibur, if he had brought the sword with him here this morning he would not have defeated Voldemort. If he had been the one to attack first, he would have lost."

"The Old Religion never intended for Harry to kill Voldemort. It was vital that we were both here, at the right moment. When I killed Morgana, for a moment I was entirely defenceless. Harry saved me from Voldemort, the first move he made was that of one to protect a friend, not a blow in anger. That was absolutely crucial. He wasn't like Voldemort, deliberately trying to kill for his own pleasure, or for revenge. He was defending the ones he cared about."

"That's why I knew you wouldn't need the sword, Harry. You didn't need to kill him, you didn't need to tear your soul for evil such as him. I was a lost cause, I've killed hundreds of people in my life, but you're better than that. He killed himself. He signed his own death warrant when he dropped his blood into the Cup. At that moment, the Old Religion marked him out for death, seeing the goodness that he had corrupted. You were the means through which the Old Religion would right the wrong that he did. His death was inevitable, but without you, it would not have happened. The two of us, Harry, are linked with the Old Religion even more so than we already know."

Harry smiled, but everyone else at the table frowned in confusion.

"I don't get it," said Ron, but Hermione nudged him.

"You don't need to, Ron. All that matters is that both of them are gone. They're gone forever."

Yes, thought Merlin to himself. *Forever.*
"Hey!" Charlie yelled, noticing Kingsley walk in through the door. "Finally finished with the vultures at the Ministry then?"

Kingsley grinned. "Yes. I don't think I've ever been so thrilled at giving news before. You should have seen their faces."

"Surprised they let you get away," joked Mr Weasley.

"Oh, they didn't let me," said Kingsley. "I had to escape. Such celebration I have never known before, even after the last time Voldemort was defeated. Even the thought of dealing with all the Muggles who saw the fight last night doesn't worry me too much at the moment. We are truly entering a new era of wizarding history. There are some calling for Mr Potter here to become my second-in-command at the Ministry."

Harry's eyes widened. "What?"

"Oh, that would be a disaster," said Hermione, shaking her head.

"I take it that is a no then, Harry?" asked Kingsley, laughing at the look on Harry's face. He paused for a moment. "Though they are right in one respect; after everything you have done Harry, you deserve some recognition."

"I don't," said Harry hastily. He smiled at his friends. "It's enough to know that I won't ever have to worry about the people I love being torn from me again."

"Sure you don't want a nice big shiny medal, Harry?" George asked, innocently. "I'm sure if you asked nicely, you'd get an Order of Merlin, First Class no problem."

"Ha ha, George," said Harry, but Merlin sat up straighter.

"Yeah, why not?" he said, and everyone turned to look at him. Merlin grinned. "I started the Order of Merlin back in Camelot. It was designed to honour those sorcerers who had promoted tolerance between magical and non-magical peoples. It was disbanded after Camelot's fall, but the Founders managed to get it revived years later. I can't think of anyone who deserves it more."

Harry's jaw fell open. "You want to give me …"

"Not just you," said Merlin, barely suppressing his laughter. "All of you. Orders of Merlin, First Class all round, what do you think?"

Now, he could no longer contain himself and he laughed openly. The looks of awe and disbelief he was getting were priceless.

"I thought only the Minister for Magic could issue those," Percy spluttered. "I mean, he can't exactly give one to himself can he?"

Merlin kept on laughing. "I started the whole thing. Who's more authorised to decide who's worthy of one than me? It's literally my name on the label, you know!"

"And who's going to reward you?" Luna asked quietly, as everyone else at the table began to cheer and laugh. "What are you going to get out of all of this?"

Merlin smiled and looked around the table once more, catching the eyes of all his friends.

"A life."
The celebrations lasted for what seemed like forever. People gathered on street corners and rejoiced in groups at the victory; shooting stars soared over the British skies for weeks afterwards; Diagon Alley was fit to burst every evening as wizards and witches from all over the country gathered to eat drink and be merry, to laugh and celebrate with their loved ones. Those who were old enough to remember the celebrations after Voldemort's first downfall said there was just no comparison.

Muggles were beyond confused as people dressed in ridiculous outfits went racing down streets blasting firecrackers from strange polished sticks, owls soared overhead at all hours of the day and night and bouquets of flowers seemed to fall from the sky. The Muggle Prime Minister was answering questions from bewildered MPs as to why he was dancing up and down in joy in the House of Commons and had suddenly declared a national holiday for no reason, but all the answer they got was "We're safe! We're safe!" They were now seeking to have a doctor from a mental institution come and examine him, but, oddly enough, he didn't seem too bothered.

For Harry's part, he was just thrilled to be caught up in the exhilarating happiness of it all. For once in his life, he wasn't afraid to let people congratulate him, to thank him for what he'd done. As always, he knew he didn't deserve it, but for once he didn't care; he was only too happy to share in their jubilation- as long as they thanked Merlin as well.

Merlin had recovered quickly from the fight, and was soon as energetic as he'd ever been, perhaps even more so as he embraced his newfound mortality. He looked and acted as though the centuries had just dropped off of him, and Harry thought he was seeing the same young man that had befriended Prince Arthur all those years ago. At least now, after seeing the state Merlin was in after a night out with Fred and George at the Three Broomsticks he understood why Arthur had always called him an idiot.

He'd never seen him laugh this much.

It was now two weeks after the death of Voldemort and Morgana and, in a valiant attempt to bring some civility back to the celebrations, Professor McGonagall had organised a magnificent feast for the Hogwarts students and their families. But, as Harry looked around the glowing Great Hall, he noticed that there were far many more people than mere family members here. Everyone wanted a piece of the celebration, regardless of whether they had a Hogwarts-age child or not. McGonagall, who had gone a little pink-faced as she shared a bottle of sherry with Hagrid, didn't seem to care.

Harry smiled and looked down at the table in front of him and felt his grin broaden at the sight of the small velvet lined box in front of him containing his new Order of Merlin, First Class. He still couldn't quite believe it.

The ceremony had taken place that morning in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, and what seemed like the entirety of wizarding Britain had turned up to watch. Merlin himself had presented the medals, a wide grin on his face as he moved up the long line of recipients and announced to everyone gathered in the Ministry why each of them were being awarded with one as the journalists, photographers and adoring public roared their approval. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Luna, Neville, several members of the DA, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Bill, Charlie, Fleur, Percy, Fred, George, Kingsley, Lupin, Tonks, McGonagall, Hagrid, Dedalus, Hestia and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix had all been given Orders of Merlin, First Class, while the members of the DA who had not fought in the battle due to their youth were given Orders of Merlin, Third Class. Even the little first-years received one because, as Merlin had said: "They were willing to risk their lives to help others, even those many times their age and ability. Such a willing sacrifice given by ones so young
There had been a great deal of muttering when Merlin had given a First Class medal to Draco Malfoy, but Merlin had been firm, and his smile no less genuine. "I give this to Draco Malfoy in recognition of his bravery and willingness to risk his life for those he once considered his enemies. Unlike the Lady Morgana, he showed he was willing to turn aside from the path of destruction for the pursuit of good. Turning your back on everything you’ve ever believed in, recognising your own flawed decisions and trying to atone for them is one of the greatest forms of bravery there is."

Malfoy had flushed pink when Merlin had said all this and had mumbled something about not deserving the medal, but Merlin had pinned it to his chest anyway. Harry had felt oddly touched by this. He remembered what Kilgharrah had said to him a few days previously; Merlin had always been able to see the good in those that couldn’t see it themselves. He’d obviously seen something in Malfoy that Harry never had.

In contrast to Malfoy’s lukewarm reception by the crowd, the roof was raised by the cheers when Merlin finally approached Harry who was standing at the end of this very long line of proud people. Merlin had winked as he had given Harry his own First Class medal. "No one in this room will fully understand the true reason Harry has been awarded this," Merlin had announced to the breathless crowd, "not a single one of you will ever know every detail, every sacrifice, every act of bravery. But that doesn't matter. What matters is, Harry did it. He's delivered you all from Voldemort's evil. And that will never be forgotten. I don’t have to live another thirteen hundred years to be certain of that."

Harry blushed slightly as he remembered Merlin's words. He opened the case and admired the medal for the hundredth time that day. It was different from the Order of Merlin that he and the others had come across in Grimmauld Place when clearing out Sirius’ ancestor's old belongings. That had had a small engraving of an old man with a beard on it. But Merlin had scoffed when he had seen that and commissioned a new design. Now it bore a simple representation of an ancient castle on it: Camelot.

He closed the lid and looked around at the table and saw most of the award recipients admiring their medals almost reverently. Percy had polished his at least a hundred times already and Mrs Weasley’s eyes went all watery whenever she looked at hers. Harry knew that all she would have asked for was just the knowledge that her children were safe and well. She deserved it.

Harry wasn't sure if he deserved his or not. He would have gotten nowhere without the help of all his friends, without Merlin. He didn't need some shiny medal to remind him that he was finally free of that monster. But he had to admit, it was very shiny.

The feast had been going on for about seven hours now but didn't show any sign of letting up anytime soon. Fred and George talked loudly about the new commemorative merchandise they were planning to sell in their shop (to be personally endorsed by Harry and Merlin themselves of course); Peeves swooped over the heads of the students, staff and families and dropped sweets on their heads in an uncharacteristic display of benevolence (although he did try and hit everyone as hard as he could); people poured over Daily Prophets, with those who had been at the battle in person loudly contradicting the newspaper's accounts and telling everyone else what had really happened; ordinary people crowded around Harry and Merlin begging to be taught Old Magic; the Hogwarts ghosts glided up to Merlin in turn to congratulate him and reminisce over past centuries; Charlie and Bill were in deep (but slightly inebriated) discussion with Kingsley about getting the Order of Merlin recipients put on Chocolate Frog Cards; Kilgharrah, Aithusa and Fawkes zoomed overhead occasionally on the enchanted ceiling; Lupin and Tonks sat laughing with baby Teddy whose hair was rapidly turning every shade of the rainbow every few seconds; Hermione sat huddled together with Ron making travel arrangements about heading to Australia the next week to find her parents.
who had now been located by Kingsley with the help of the Australian Minister for Magic.

Merlin sat across from Harry and there was not a single moment when his carefree smile left his lips. Even when Fred and George had pranked him earlier by feeding him a sneaky Canary Cream he had done nothing more than laugh wildly and turn their noses into plums. He hadn't restored them to normal for an entire hour.

He caught Harry's eye. "Alright?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, never better."

Merlin grinned. "I think this is one of those rare occasions when someone can use that phrase and be entirely sincere."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, I suppose."

"What are we talking about?" Fred interrupted suddenly, looking between them in suspicion. "You two think you're better than us now because you're Old Religion wizards?"

"Of course I do," joked Harry, and with a flash of his eyes the éclair Fred had just been about to eat sprouted legs, jumped up, ran off his plate and scurried out of the hall to raucous laughter from those close by. Fred gasped in mock devastation. Then he grinned. "You'll have to teach me that one, Merlin. Magic without a wand? Just imagine the pranks!"

Merlin laughed.

McGonagall, who had decided to sit amongst the students at the Gryffindor table leaned forwards hiccupping slightly. "Why don't you teach us all, Merlin? Do what you said you would do at Slytherin's castle. Make it a subject taught at Hogwarts! Teach it here yourself!"

Everyone nearby nodded eagerly and Merlin looked thoughtful.

"I used to take in apprentices in Camelot," he said, thinking. "And I taught at Hogwarts a couple of times many years ago, but I was never a great teacher. I'm not really sure I'm cut out for it."

"You taught me," said Harry, encouraging him. "I think it's a great idea! You're always going on about how sad it made you to see the magic of the Old Religion fade away and people stop learning it, so bring it back! Teach people like you used to in Camelot. Where better to start than at school? Make it as great as it used to be back then."

Merlin smiled. "You know, I might just consider it …"

As McGonagall looked ready to celebrate, Merlin began speaking once more. "But Harry, you'll have to play your part as well."

"Me? What can I do?"

"You're the only person in the entire world other than myself who can use it," said Merlin.

"But I'm not that good, I didn't learn it properly."

"We can remedy that," said Merlin, grinning. "How about, for the rest of your time at Hogwarts I'll continue with your training and everyone else from the DA who wants to can learn it as well. Then, once you've left school, I'll continue with teaching it permanently at the school."

"Sounds good to me," said Harry.
"Wait, what?" Ron asked, his eyes wide. "You-Know-Who's dead and you still want us back at school? We only came back so we could learn how to fight him!"

"Our education is important, Ron!" reprimanded Hermione.

"But-"

"Come on, Ron," said Harry, laughing. "The Gryffindor Quidditch team is doing so well this year, do you really want to leave now and miss the chance to win the Quidditch Cup one last time?"

Ron stopped mid-sentence and looked thoughtful for a moment. He glanced at Merlin. "Well …" He bit his lip for a moment and then grinned. "All right then, for the Cup."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Quidditch. Because that's what's important …"

"What about the rest of us?" Kingsley asked. "The Aurors and other witches and wizards who want to learn the magic? It could be useful to all of us."

"I'll run a couple of classes at the Ministry then," laughed Merlin. "Every week, whoever wants to learn and has the ability will learn it."

"That's a lot of work," said Mr Weasley. "Can you manage all of that?"

Merlin nodded. "I feel younger than I ever have. And besides, I sat around doing nothing for thirteen centuries. I have to make up for that don't I?"

Everyone laughed and the jubilant feasting resumed. Harry tucked into his third helping of treacle tart and laughed and talked with the others. It was now rapidly approaching midnight, but no one was tired. Harry doubted whether anyone would go to bed before dawn.

He looked to his left and saw Ginny engaged in a lively conversation with Charlie about something and Harry felt his heart expand with happiness as he looked at her. Finally, there was no barriers between them, neither Ron nor Voldemort (both equally formidable in this matter) would ever stand in their way again.

About a half an hour later, Harry saw Merlin stand up from the table out of the corner of his eye and leave the hall. No one seemed to notice him leave, whether as a result of their own happiness or some magic, Harry couldn't tell. After a few minutes, he murmured a few words to some of his friends and left the hall, letting Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Luna and Neville follow him, more than a little confused.

As though guided by some internal force, Harry found himself following a route through the Entrance Hall and out into the grounds. He saw a dark figure on the lawns in front of him and followed it, walking down to the lake with everyone in stride beside him.

Merlin stopped once he reached the lake and turned around and smiled.

"Can't a man get some fresh air on his own?"

"He doesn't need to be alone," said Neville, crossing his arms. "Why did you come down here?"

Merlin shrugged. "It just felt right. I'm supposed to be here for some reason."

"What-"

"Harry! Merlin!"
Shouts from behind alerted Harry and the others to the rest of the Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks and Kingsley running down the hill towards them.

"Don't do that!" Mrs Weasley breathed. "Not now! Don't leave without telling us anything-"

Hermione gasped, drowning out Mrs Weasley's reprimand and pointed, her face pale. Harry felt a sudden spike of the Old Religion and turned around with all the others to see something incredible.

A group of people were standing behind them by the lake, watching, moonlight reflecting off their heads and their silvery armour. Harry's heart beat faster as he recognised King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

Merlin didn't look at all surprised to see them and he grinned. "Trust you lot to show up late. Could've used you a couple of weeks ago!"

"Ah, but Merlin, you did so well on your own!" a Knight said, winking. "You muddled your way through somehow just like you always do!"

"Thanks, Gwaine," said Merlin sarcastically. "I see thirteen hundred years in Avalon haven't made you any less lazy."

Sir Gwaine broke out into a cheeky grin. "Of course not. You know me better than that, Merlin!"

"Unfortunately, I do," said Merlin, also grinning.

Harry watched in amazement. Unlike last time the Knights had appeared, Merlin didn't look sad, he didn't look pained or upset, he just looked happy. There wasn't a trace of guilt or sadness on his features. All the others who hadn't met the warriors from the past watched with disbelieving expressions.

Another Knight stepped forwards, and instead of looking at Merlin, addressed Harry, who froze in surprise. "Nice trick with the sword and the Cup a couple of weeks back, Harry," he said. "It reminds me of something. It's exactly what Merlin did the first time around. The two of you are more alike than you think."

Harry gasped. "Then you're-you're Lancelot?"

Sir Lancelot nodded as everyone else gasped in amazement. "I am. And it's nice to see that Merlin can finally be himself. I remember very well how he struggled with his secret in Camelot."

"Yes, yes, Lancelot," said another Knight rolling his eyes. "We all know you knew Merlin's secret before the rest of us. Do you always have to rub it in?"

"Why not, Elyan?" Sir Lancelot asked grinning. "I died before all of you, don't I deserve this? I didn't get the chance to live in a Camelot where magic was allowed."

Sir Elyan shook his head. "Believe me, it wasn't all it was cracked up to be."

"Only because you were completely unable to avoid all the magical traps Merlin set for you," Sir Gwaine laughed. "I'll never forget that time he turned your cloak pink and changed the dragon into a giant bunny just in time for the arrival of Princess Mithian and her father."

Sir Elyan scowled but all the other Knights and Merlin roared with laughter. Fred and George exchanged scheming glances.
"Or when he bewitched that sword of Percival's to turn into a giant flower every time he tried to use it," another Knight said, and there was more laughter.

The man who must be Sir Percival frowned. "That wasn't funny. What if I'd needed to use it?"

"Don't worry, Percival," said Merlin, his eyes glinting. "If anyone had tried to attack you, the sight of the flower would have made them laugh so much you could just have knocked them over with a feather."

"You're Sir Percival?" Percy Weasley asked, hurriedly taking off his glasses and polishing them. "I'm named after you!"

Sir Percival's eyebrows rose and he looked Percy up and down, taking in his rather weedy frame. "Really?"

Percy flushed pink while the others laughed.

"Don't take any notice of him," said another Knight. "Percival's brains were always in his biceps."

"Take that back, Leon!"

"Sir Leon?" Hermione asked, frowning. "I've never heard of you!"

Now it was Sir Leon's turn to scowl while the other Knights laughed. Merlin grinned.

"Yeah, Hermione," he said. "For some reason Leon's always left out of the legends. No idea why."

"He's just not as charming as the rest of us," winked Sir Gwaine and the Knights laughed again.

Harry found himself laughing as well. He felt almost at ease with them, as though, like Merlin, they were long lost friends of his. They didn't look like the last time Harry had seen them at the Lake of Avalon; they looked corporeal, though slightly fuzzy around the edges. Almost as if they were really here in person.

"But why are you all here?" Merlin asked, the first hint of sadness entering his eyes. "Why have you come?"

"What, aren't we allowed to congratulate you?" King Arthur said, speaking for the first time. He moved to the front of his group of Knights who stepped back to allow him space, his queen on his arm.

Arthur and Merlin stood staring at each other for a moment before they broke out in massive grins.

"Your sword's in perfect condition, Arthur," said Merlin. "I swear, not a scratch."

"You know, for once Merlin, I actually believe you," answered Arthur, "but I don't need it back. Oddly, there's not much call for fighting in Avalon."

Merlin raised his eyebrows. "Then whatever do you have to occupy yourself with?"

"I do a lot of things, Merlin."

"Really? You mean you're not just a walking talking weapon? I never knew you had so many talents!"

"Merlin?"
"Yes?"

"Shut up."

Merlin laughed. "How did I know you were going to say that?"

"Because I rarely say anything else to you, you idiot."

Merlin shook his head, but he was smiling. King Arthur smiled back.

"We can't stay for long, Merlin," Arthur said softly, now looking more serious. "We just came to see you again, to congratulate you on finally ceasing to be a complete idiot. I'm glad we won't have to keep watching you tear yourself up for no reason. And I admit, after all those years in Camelot while we all got old and grey and you stayed the same, it will be rather gratifying to finally watch the same thing happen to you."

Merlin sighed, but he grinned.

Queen Guinevere stepped forwards then and smiled at Merlin. She moved ever closer, and as Harry watched, she seemed to become more and more solid. Finally she stopped directly in front of Merlin. Most of the gathered men were watching her with wide eyes.

She smiled again. "Well done, Merlin. I'm so glad you've found a new family. Just remember you'll always have us. We're still waiting for you in Avalon, but don't hurry to meet us. Enjoy your life again, Merlin. For our sakes."

Merlin nodded. "I will, Gwen."

She laughed, and stepping forward threw her arms around him. Merlin hugged her back, also laughing as he did so.

"Oi! That's my wife, Merlin!"

Merlin released the queen and stepped back, winking at Guinevere. "I don't think he ever got over the fact that you used to have a crush on me Gwen, or that you kissed me before you ever kissed him."

Guinevere laughed and swatted playfully at Merlin, though this time her arm went right through his. "You're such a tease, Merlin."

She stepped back to join her husband, while everyone, Harry included, stared at her in shock. Merlin and Queen Guinevere had once been an item?

The queen linked her arm with the king's who was also laughing despite his angry words. He looked at Merlin once more.

"You're the greatest friend I ever had, Merlin," he said, sincerely. "I'm happy for you."

Merlin nodded. "Since when did you get all sentimental, Arthur?"

"Oh, around about the time you got a brain. Don't worry, neither will last long."

They exchanged one last smile before Arthur turned away.

"Well, we'd best be getting back. We're not really supposed to be here. Didn't Freya threaten me with dismemberment if I was any later back than midnight? I really don't know what you saw in her
"Merlin, she's ferocious!"

"Well," said Merlin, "you were the one who killed her."

Arthur grimaced even as everyone gasped. "Don't remind me, Merlin. She's never let me forget it. She doesn't blame me I think, but she's definitely not against using it as blackmail."

"It wasn't your fault," said Merlin. "She'd transformed into a bloodthirsty beast and killed people. You had to defend your city."

Arthur nodded distractedly. "I suppose. Still, I wouldn't put it past her to lock me out of Avalon and make me be a ghost for a couple of decades. For such a kind-hearted person she really can be cruel when she wants to."

"She's only trying to wind you up."

"I take it back, Merlin. I see exactly why you loved her. You're a perfect match."

He looked up at the moon and seemed to frown. He gestured to his companions. "Come on, we should go."

"Wait," murmured Guinevere. She took her arm out of Arthur's and walked over to Harry, who was once again frozen. She stopped in front of him and was once more almost entirely solid. She placed a hand on Harry's arm, and he shuddered as he felt the rippling effects of the Old Religion radiating off of her. She looked directly into his eyes.

"Thank you, Harry," she said. "Thank you for helping Merlin."

Harry blinked and was suddenly lost for words. "Um … yeah. It was … it was nothing …"

She smiled. "It was more than that." She paused for a moment. "Your parents are very proud of you."

Harry stared. "How do you know that?"

She smiled again. "It isn't only the people of Camelot who found their way to Avalon, you know."

Harry gasped and felt an exhilarated feeling rush through his body. He wanted to say something to her, but found himself at a loss. She seemed to understand and nodded, still smiling sweetly.

She stepped back to rejoin her. Arthur looked directly at Harry, and then back at Merlin.


"Ic willa. Ic āhātan." Merlin nodded in answer.

Harry frowned in confusion, but neither Merlin nor Arthur seemed willing to offer an explanation.

Arthur and the others gathered closer together and seemed to be getting ready to leave, but Merlin called out one last thing.

"Will this be the last time I see you?" he asked. "Will the next time we meet be in Avalon?"

Arthur grinned. "Most likely, but it's like you always said: this Old Religion of yours is very unpredictable. Who knows for certain?"
And the next second, a glowing light surrounded the medieval people and when it faded, they were gone.

Merlin smiled one last time. He didn't look the way he had the last time, upset and grief-stricken. He just looked content.

He turned back to the others and laughed when he saw their awestruck expressions.

"Well, that was King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and the Knights of the Round Table. What did you think?"

"They're not exactly what I imagined," said Mrs Weasley still staring wide-eyed at the spot where they'd disappeared.

Merlin smiled. "No, I don't think they would have been."

"Yeah," said Fred, open-mouthed. "The legends never said anything about you having dated Queen Guinevere!"

"We didn't date," laughed Merlin. "Really, she fancied me for a couple of weeks when we first met and that was it. We just liked to play it up to annoy Arthur."

"And what about what King Arthur said?" asked Bill, holding on to Fleur. "Did he do what you said? Did your best friend really kill your girlfriend?"

Everyone turned to stare at Merlin, but amazingly, he was smiling. "Yes," he said. "But like I said, I don't blame him. It was hard at first, but I forgave him. He was doing what he needed to to protect his subjects. And Freya forgave him as well; by killing her, Arthur actually released her from her curse."

Remus nodded. "I can understand that," he said, and he put his arm around Tonks. "I would hope none of you would hesitate to attack if I transformed and threatened any of you."

"What did he say there at the end?" Ginny asked. "What was that funny language?"

Merlin smiled. "That 'funny language', is my mother tongue. An early form of English, only slightly younger than the version Harry and I use in spells. Arthur and the others have watched over the world from Avalon and seen how language has changed and adapted their way of speaking. Still, it was nice to talk to Arthur in our own language once more."

"And what did he say?" Harry asked.

Merlin turned to Harry and looked at him very intensely here.

"He said," Merlin began, "he said, that you remind him of a younger version of myself, and that I should watch out for you and make sure you don't into the same trouble I did. And that's exactly what I intend to do."

Merlin grinned and set off in a brisk walk back up to the castle. Harry blinked as the weight of this hit him. He was like a younger version of Merlin? He grinned; he could live with that.

Merlin had already gone far ahead. "Well, come on, we've got a party waiting!"

"Merlin!" called Hermione. Merlin stopped and looked at her. Hermione looked back over at the spot where Arthur and the others had been. "You said once that one day you would tell us the truth about
Camelot, about the real stories and the real people. If anything tonight's just shown us how little we know about them really. Can you tell us now?"

Merlin looked at her in silence for a moment.

"You want me to tell you the real story of Camelot? You want to know the truth behind the legend?"

"Yes," everyone said in unison.

Merlin nodded and a small smile crept over his face.

"I think it's about time I educated you all. Well, for one thing, forget everything that's in all those ridiculous books you've read. Lancelot did not try and steal Guinevere, Mordred is not Arthur's son, I am not decades older than Arthur, Arthur didn't pull the sword out of the stone when he was a little boy, I didn't turn Arthur and myself into fish and squirrels like that awful Muggle film and."

Merlin and all the others headed on up to the castle, everyone listening intently to Merlin's reminisces, but for some reason, Harry stopped.

He couldn't help but smile to himself. Voldemort was dead, Morgana was dead, Merlin was mortal, he was finally free to be with Ginny … he could honestly say he'd never been happier in his life.

Except …

For some inexplicable reason, the magic within him seemed to awaken and whisper to him. Harry frowned, and he turned around, following the overwhelming instinct inside of him. He looked out over the lake.

There, standing with their feet in the waters, were four very familiar figures, almost ghost-like: James Potter, Lily Potter, Sirius Black, and Albus Dumbledore.

Harry stood watching them for the longest time. They smiled at him, and Harry smiled back. Now, he was at peace.

"Harry?"

Someone called him, and Harry turned back to the castle.

"I'm coming!"

He looked back to the lake and saw the four figures were now gone. He looked at the spot one last time.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Thank you for getting me through this."

And then, without another glance, he turned and headed back up to the castle.

A new era of his life was about to begin.

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