Merlin's Destiny Continues

by XeirMerrick

Summary

It's been over 1500 years and Merlin's destiny now lies at Hogwarts. The Old Religion has been abused by The Dark Lord, and Merlin must intervene to help restore the balance. He enters the school as a student on a mission. Arthur will rise again and Merlin will be there with him as Albion's time of need draws nearer.

translation of this work into Español by DSara22:
https://archiveofourown.org/works/14774286/chapters/34169454

Notes

I might change the ratings as I go on, as I'm not sure if this will end up being Mature, or Teen and Up. The violence has not yet been written, so keep that in mind.

All artwork was created by me
*feel free to check out my deviantart https://xeirmerrick.deviantart.com/
He feels a familiar tingle as his body fills out into what he refers to as his 'Young Camelot Form'. He hasn’t appeared as a 17 year old, or any age under 50, in over 1500 years. Merlin holds a strong preference to appearing elderly, or at least greying, a preference that many modern retired folk would fight him on. Strongly.

Merlin finds that people treat him better this way. That, and he can get away with more, both socially and magically. Sometimes he just needs to vent his snark. It is a lot weirder seeing an young man mumbling to himself in a seemingly nonsensical language than it is to see an old man doing what his neighbour’s children refer to as “crazy man ramblings”.

He stretches out slowly, enjoying the feel of strong muscles holding him up. He had forgotten what it feels like to be young again, relying at times on the aching muscles to ground him and remind him he’s alive. He quickly pushes out the thought of his typical aching 90 year old form as being a suitable punishment for his failures. That thought never leads to fun places and he is too busy to get caught up in the endless months of miserable reminiscing that would be sure to follow.

He looks down at himself and laughs, abruptly cutting off as the feel of his voice leaving his body is different. He had forgotten how his voice had changed with age. He tests it out more, making several
nonsense syllables and reciting his favourite poem. Something about knights and donkeys. Yes, it is quite nice to be youthful again.

He pulls himself out of his recitations to remember why he had laughed in the first place. His clothes look hilarious. He had decided some 5 years ago to roll with the name calling of his neighbours’ children and buy himself some ridiculous sweaters to match the ‘crazy old man’ persona he had going for him. The current piece is fluorescent orange with a bright blue dragon print. It is also a knitted button down. He has paired it with dark blue paisley corduroy pants. It looks completely absurd. The neighbours’ kid had found his dressing a constant source of amusement and he had even overheard the mothers’ gossiping about whether or not he was visually impaired in his old age. Eavesdropping on their conversations and mutterings were one of his favourite sources of entertainment. You can get away with a lot more radical fashion choices in the 21st century and he has plans to push it to the fullest extent.

Of course if he is to make a respectable first impression in the modern wizarding world, he is going to have to go shopping. Not only are the colours and material combinations startling, but they loosely drape over his body in a way that makes him appear like a coat hanger with a head. Pretty hard to be taken seriously like that.

Sneaking out the back door of his modest townhome, Merlin takes one final glance back at what has been his home for the past 10 years. It is time, yet again, to move on. If anything, he will miss the garden. Blooming lilac trees, white snowball bushes and purple lilies wave at him in the breeze, his only departing farwell.

Taking his first step into an over crowded retail store, Merlin squints his eyes at the florescent lights. He is going to have to take some time getting used to his improved younger body’s eyesight. The bright light is almost unbearable.

Darting past the front greeter, he approaches the first rack of clothes he deems interesting enough to be graced the privilege of clothing the body of ‘The Great and Powerful Merlin’. He snickers to himself at the thought of the modern wizarding world becoming aware of their hero and god clothed in brightly coloured second hand muggle clothing. Perhaps he should purchase a blue and silver starred cloak to complete the ensemble.

After 15 minutes of rummaging through a random scattering of clothing roughly in his size, he settles on a selection of shirts, pants, and sweaters of different shades of green, black, and grey. As the Slytherin head of house in year 1750, he is fully prepared to get sorted back into the house of his old friend and student Salazar.

The door rattles on his way out and he darts past a group of teenagers as they stare at him in a way he is unaccustomed. Spending the past thousand and more years as a middle aged man or older, he had forgotten what it was like to be sized up by teenagers. The look one of them gives him makes him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

A Starbucks on the plaza corner calls out to him and he rushes in, squeezing past the line to get to the washroom. He promptly leans against the closed door and re-assess what is to be his situation. His presence at Hogwarts is mandatory, but now he is second guessing his decision to attend as a student. He initially thought that it would be a refreshing change on the boring routine his life had fallen into. Something exciting and new to stave off his boredom while he completes his mission. Of course, he had also been to Hogwarts as a teacher and they would have record of him as well as a painted likeness probably somewhere in the dungeons. It would be a lot easier to de-age himself and attend as a student as to not arouse suspicion. He had just forgotten what it was like to be a teenager.
To be treated as a teenager. By not only adults, but other teenagers themselves. It was bad enough being significantly older than any other living sentient being, but to be assumed a child again will clearly be grating.

Merlin stops himself when he realizes that his breathing has become fast and laboured. He has worked himself into a panic. It is not often he gets to go through a new experience. He likes to think that after over 1500 years he has seen and done it all, but he has never attended school as a child. Of course he thinks of all humans a children, still so young, fresh, and most of all inexperienced, but he had completely overlooked some details of this adventure. *Oh goddess, what am I going to be subjected to?*

Glancing at himself in the mirror he is spooked to see his own reflection. It is like stepping back in time. Perhaps if he is to open the bathroom door, Camelot will be on the other side. But it is just a delusion. He slaps cold water on his face from the sink to bring himself back into the present.

Changing into his new clothes feels like the start to a new chapter in his life. He has peeled away the old bitter man and stepped into a new version of himself. *My old self* he corrects.

Feeling mentally shaken and ready to get moving, he leaves the café and apparates to the train station.

Loud is the first and only thing he can process for the first minute of appearing at the station. The train is squealing, parents are shouting for their children, kids are running around yelling things at their parents’ and each other. Heartfelt goodbyes are shouted from a distance as the students are filling into the train. He realizes belatedly that no one else seems to be apparating into the station and are instead materializing as they run out of a wall. He gets a startled look from the small child closest to him. *Oops.* Thankfully it appears that only the one kid has witnessed his impossible act. The child seems to be about 6 or 7 years old so thankfully his cover has not been blown. *Not even five seconds in, and you nearly blow it Merlin. Get a grip.* He makes a mental note to be more careful and observant.

Still taking time adjusting to his new surroundings, he makes a break for the train when he realizes that almost every student has already boarded. He had stood frozen for a full 10 min as the presence of so many magic folk in one area is something he has forgotten the feel of. The air is almost buzzing with magic.

His luggage containing his new bags of clothes are grossly heavy and he realizes that he forgot to put a featherweight spell on them in his haste to escape his reflection in the Starbucks bathroom. Good thing his younger body has more strength. Of course he can always push his magic through his limbs to give them an inhuman level of power, but he was always prone to clumsiness and doesn’t want another incident. He had broken through a brick wall when stumbling trying to regain his balance, he had leaned into it too much. That had been difficult to explain away.

He bumps one of his bags into a girl in the narrow hallway while lost in thought. She glares at him, sticking her nose in the air and storming off. Now that was a reaction he is used to. Her behaviour and posture reminds him of the stuck up noble women at court. Weirdly enough, it gives him a boost of confidence.

Thinking that perhaps it might be possible to forge a new persona for himself, one that is, as his neighbours’ kids say ‘cool’, he stubs his toe on air and realizes that is unlikely. As much as it would be refreshing to be seen as someone intelligent and sure of themself, he is still far too clumsy. It is not as if his long life has not afforded him comfortability in his own body, but more like the universe is angry that his immortality and immense power defy all the rules of nature, and thus is punishing him. ‘Solid patches of air’ as he likes to call it. He is still not quite sure why it happens, but although it can
be terribly frustrating, it also provides him with a sort of excitement in his life. Some element of unpredictability. ‘What will Marvin trip over next’ had even become a game for his past colleagues at one of the schools he taught at. Some of the students had gotten involved, and initially thinking they might take fate into their own hands and cause him to trip on purpose, they quickly realized that it was unnecessary. He stumbled at least once every single day without fail. In the early 1930’s he decided to test the theory and kept a tally. The accuracy was uncanny.

Finding an empty compartment, he quickly closes the door and sits down. He sorts through his bag looking for the second hand Hogwarts robes he stashed in there after their hasty purchase from a wizarding family he had run into at the food market a week ago. That had been an unexpected encounter after he had just finalized his plans to attend the school. Destiny in action again, or just chance? Merlin has given up questioning the coincidences of his life. He hastily changes into them, rolling up the sleeves slightly as to hide the fact they don’t quite cover the length of his long arms. No need to mess with the material when simply moving it farther up his arm will do.

Now he is ready to face the castle again.

He doses for a while staring out of the window as the train takes off with a painfully loud screech. The sky is clear and bright today, reminding him of the blank canvas that is his new life.

Should he be the bumbling idiot he was pegged as in Camelot, or should he be a star pupil? Perhaps he could make himself to be a role model for the impressionable students and try to help them to a good path? Merlin thinks his options over and settles for just seeing how things play out on their own. Of course he will have to dumb himself down and act as much a teenager as he can manage as to not arouse suspicion and blow his cover. He needs to fully assimilate. One of the many setbacks to immortality is having to stay hidden. Disaster would strike if he were discovered to be the real Merlin, a god among the wizarding world thought to be either dead or just a myth. He is almost a religious figure at this point. He would never be able to go anywhere or do anything without being bombarded with questions, expectations, and accusations for the rest of his painfully long and indefinite existence. Not to mention when Arthur rises, if Arthur rises, it would make life very difficult for him. Merlin is very intelligent, both naturally, and because of his long life, but Arthur is the one who should make the decision about the revelation. He was the strategic thinker between the two of them. Besides, once outed, he can no longer roam freely. He prefers to remain a shadow of himself, and be perceived as a normal human to others. Truth be told, leaving it up to future Arthur is his way of putting it off.

Startled out of his ponderings, he looks up to see the door slide open to reveal a student peering into the compartment.

“Hey, uh, mind if we sit with you? The other compartments around here are full of giggling 11 year olds”. A tall redhead boy absolutely covered in freckles walks in without waiting for an answer and sits down across from him followed by an excited looking girl with voluminous brown hair who looks to be about the same age.

Before Merlin can wonder if they are in his year, the girl speaks up.

“Are you the new student?” When she asks, Merlin notices the boy was looking at him with a surprised expression.

“New student?! Is that even possible?” He shouts at the girl, Merlin’s presence momentarily forgotten.

“Well, seeing as I’m sitting here on a one-way trip, I should hope so.” Merlin speaks up for the first time. The boy turns to him as if surprised he is sitting there.
“Well it’s never happened before that I know of.” The boy squeezes his eyebrows together clearly pondering something.

The girl addresses the redhead, giving him a stern look, “People do transfer sometimes Ronald, it’s uncommon, yes, but not impossible.” She turns back to look a Merlin. “Sorry about that, please excuse his lack of introduction. I’m Hermione Granger, and this is Ronald Weasley-”

“Ron.” The boy, Ron, quickly corrects.

Merlin takes a moment to adjust to the sudden onslaught of having company. “I’m Maldin Ambrose, pleasure to meet you.” Merlin gives the name of the alias he chose to put on his Hogwarts transfer papers. Going by a fake name is more natural to him at this point than using his real name.

“So where were you before Hogwarts?” Ron leans forwards in anticipation of tales from other secretive wizarding schools.

“Oh, I was homeschooled. I just moved to the UK and figured I might as well experience what going to a school is like for my final year.” Merlin has thought about every possible question he could be asked and has plotted out a very in-depth backstory for himself. This is his standard procedure for starting a new life and he has had plenty of practice lying.

“Oh! You’re in your final year as well! Ron and I are both seventh years, so we’ll be classmates!” Hermione seems excited about the idea, as the prospect of a new student means new information and a possible friendship.

“What house do you think you’ll be sorted in?” Ron acts like this is the most important question in existence. Merlin looks at their ties and just now notices the Gryffindor colours. They might have classes together, but they certainly won’t share a dorm. Merlin wonders whether or not the house rivalries have died out since he taught at Hogwarts. It wasn’t so bad then, just rather annoying, and by the time he left that it was almost gone.

“Oh I’m not sure really.” Merlin isn’t quite ready for any possible confrontations and the way Ron had asked the question makes him suspicious. He still needs time to adjust.

“Well Gryffindor is the best house, obviously. But Ravenclaw is alright I guess. No one really thinks great things of Hufflepuff-”

“That’s not true, Hufflepuff is as fine a house as any. The students are kind and very supportive. They have many traits to be proud of Ronald, just because-”

Ron interrupts Hermione this time with an exasperated sound.

Before their argument can fully take off, Merlin decides to figure some things out. “What about Slytherin? I’ve read that they are a good house.”

Ron Shoots him a horrified look. “…Not sure those are the words I would use mate.” Hermione looks uncertain. Merlin isn’t sure if it is uncertainty about Slytherin being a good house in agreeance with Ron, or uncertainty at what Ron was implying. “Slytherin's are nasty gits. Prejudiced deatheaters-in-training if you ask me.” Hermione is silent.

Merlin is saddened and alarmed at the venom in Ron’s voice. It seems the house rivalries are severe indeed. He wonders if it was the rise of this new dark wizard that spurred the old hate to come raging back in stronger than ever before. He will certainly have his work cut out for him. He hopes this won’t cause too much a problem for his future. Not that he isn’t used to being hated and feared. He
contemplates whether striking a friendship with these two would be worth it at the moment, if they will just turn around and hate him the moment he gets sorted. Perhaps they will realize that the house is not all bad once someone they know gets sorted there? Is it worth the hassle?

“I don’t really see how an entire house of students can all be evil.” Merlin wonders if they will pick up the bone he threw them.

“The world is full of bad people. It’s lucky for us that the school sorts them all into one contained house though. Keeps it easier for the rest of us to live in peace in our own dorms. Very fitting that their dorms are in the dungeons. It’s like old Salazar Slytherin knew that’s where they all deserved to be.” The redhead seems pleased by this declaration.

“I’m sure they’re not all bad people.” Ron shoots Hermione a look, “I mean, there are a lot of mean ones though. And they are the loudest.”

“It doesn’t make sense for an entire house to be like that.” Merlin doesn’t think anything he says at this point will make a difference.

“You’re right, nothing about Slytherin makes sense.” Ron’s proclamation is the deciding factor for Merlin to keep his mouth shut on the topic for the time being.

Hermione does a quick topic change sensing a possible conflict. “So, where are you from, and what’s it like being homeschooled?”

“I was born here, but my family moved to Canada 7 years ago,” He does a lot of traveling, forging a new identity in each place. Canada was the place he had lived last. “When my uncle passed away, I moved back here and decided to attend school to finish my education. Although I’m not sure how necessary it is considering Gaius, my uncle, was a very strict teacher. I probably know enough about everything to not have to attend any school, but I want the experience. And to get my official NEWTS. Might be a bit tricky to find work here without it.” Of course the real reason he is at Hogwarts is because he had seen himself there in a vision in his last stay at the crystal cave. The cave only ever shows him visions of the future that are very important and tie in with his destiny, so here he is.

“Are there not any wizarding schools in Canada?” Ron looks dumbfounded.

“Oh, there are! I just lived up north and it’s not very densely populated so I would have had to go to school very far away from home.”

“What’s it like over there?” Hermione seems very interested.

“Cold. Very very cold. But pretty, and the people are nice.” He thinks of his neighbours’ kids. Perhaps nice was the wrong word. Merlin was never bothered by them, quite the opposite in fact, but nice is a bit of a stretch. At least for them.

“I’d like to travel when I’m done school. Do research and study abroad.” Hermione pulls out a heavy looking book from her bag. “Historical Places of Magic explains all of the major wizarding world historical sites and I think I could learn a lot from visiting them. Have you traveled to anywhere outside of Canada or the UK?”

“A couple places, yeah.” Merlin is intentionally vague. The conversation flows similarly for the remainder of the trip and Merlin slowly works up his excitement the closer they get to Hogwarts. It has been too long since he was last here. So many great memories. He looks forward to making more.
By the time they reach the school grounds Merlin is completely hyped up. Noticing this, Hermione and Ron tell him some of the fun things that go on at Hogwarts. Ron rambles on about quidditch right up until the point when they exit the train and Merlin get his first glimpse of the castle in centuries.

With Ron and Hermione momentarily forgotten, Merlin gazes up at the structure. The castle never fails to amaze him. There has never been a place Merlin feels more at home than here behind the walls of Camelot’s grand castle.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to my first ever fanfic! It has been nice writing something for enjoyment for a change instead of the seemingly endless piles of analytical writing thrust upon all uni students. Hopefully you guys enjoy reading this as much as I enjoy writing it.

So, chapter one is a bit, ah, rough I guess would be a good word. Not to worry though, as the chapters continue I fall into the rhythm of writing and things start to flow better. Please keep that in mind.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I figure I should give a bit of backstory now as the plot differs from the HP cannon. Harry Potter does not exist. All of the other students in the book do though. Dumbledore is still alive and the Horcruxes have been left up to him to battle alone as Harry was not there to destroy any. Voldemort is still a very real threat (and is corporeal) and Malfoy is a fresh deatheater. Ron and Hermione are friends, but they have not had any of the crazy adventures that happened in the hp cannon. It is fully up to Merlin to handle the Dark Lord.

The sight takes Merlin’s breath away. The combination of the familiar castle and the sensations of having a younger body momentarily trick his mind into thinking he’s home in Camelot again. The lake is the same, the trees are just as imposing, and the Castle looks untouched by the cruel grasp of time. Merlin is coming home again.

“Hey, hurry up, you don’t want to miss boarding the carriages. I wouldn’t fancy a swim across the lake at this time of night. Or ever really.” Merlin is startled out the illusion and his eyes go wide as he spots the thestral pulled carriage.

Ron and Hermione’s eyebrows threaten to leave their face as Merlin reaches his hand out to seemingly stroke at the air. “Hello Beautiful, have they been taking good care of you?” Merlin directs his best soft and doting voice at the skeletal horse-like creature.

“You can see the thestrals?” Hermione’s face attempts to hide her alarm.

Merlin is reminded yet again of how different this century is. Through all of the public executions, wars, and famine that have taken place in predictable frequency, it was more uncommon for people to not see the terrestrials in the past centuries.

“Yes. They are wonderful creatures. Completely harmless.” Ron gives a suspicious and disbelieving glance in the general direction of the creatures and promptly scampers into the carriage. Hermione and Merlin follow after him.

The Gryffindors continue conversation throughout the flight to the castle, but Merlin is lost in the scenery.

The closer he inspects the castle, the more he notices the slight differences from his last visit. For countless years the exterior remains of Camelot stood strong and seemingly unchangeable. Merlin often thought of the castle as a reflection of himself. The outside appearance is unchanging and absolute, but the inside constantly gets scrambled and rearranged. To notice that the grounds are in fact slowly changing with age forms a pit in his stomach. He is alone. Not even his home will remain forever, yet he is cursed with an eternal existence. He will lose absolutely all ties to his past, and Merlin wonders, perhaps his sanity with it.

He has had several of what he thinks of as ‘close calls’. The worst was sometime in the renaissance
when he fell into a vast pit of despair. After spending too many centuries with no sign of Arthur’s return and all of his loved ones dead or dying around him in a constant cycle, Merlin gave up his grip on life. For the first time, he tried to end it. Given up on his destiny, certain that his prolonged life was a punishment for his failures and Arthur’s fated return just the invisible lock on his prison to keep him willingly trapped, he had had enough. He stopped eating, gradually stopped moving, and tried his best to stop thinking. Over 50 years he spent in an unresponsive state but his body would not let his soul leave. He withered away and rotted in the ground but was not released from his hell. Eventually the physical pain was forgotten and he became beyond bored. His sanity in a crumbled mess around him, he gradually pulled the pieces of himself back together and fit himself back into society.

Hogwarts castle now proudly displays the occasional crack and chip. There is a new glass attachment and he can spot plant life inside. Small differences here and their stand out like a shining beacon to Merlin. He is as familiar with the castle as he is with his own body.

They land in a clearing by the front gates and the chattering crowd of adolescence make a slow stampede to the front doors. The main hall, to Merlin’s relief, looks exactly as it had in the 1750’s. Soft candle light illuminates the corridor as hundreds of candles are suspended in the air above them. The magic is radiating off of every surface, giving the atmosphere a sense of warmth that relaxes Merlin.

The great hall is bursting with noise as children and teenagers all file in and grab a seat at their table. Merlin stops at the entranceway, unsure of where to sit. He glances over at the Slytherin table but suspects it would be odd to park there as he has not yet been publicly sorted. A professor spots his distress and strides over to him. She is a kind but stern looking woman with a pointed and feathered hat Arthur would have appreciated.

“Mr. Ambrose I presume?” Merlin nods his head. “Come this way please, I’ll have you stand over here and you can be sorted before the first years.” Merlin walks over next to the teachers’ tables and tries to blend in. He feels very out of place.

Looking over at the teachers’ table he gets his first glimpse at who will be his instructors. Merlin is curious as to who the new Slytherin head of house is. He spots a short and happy looking witch with a soft hat and an abundance of disorganized curly brown hair. She has dirt caked under her fingernails and seems very friendly and welcoming with her greetings towards the other teachers. Merlin hopes that is her. She is certainty the closest seeming professor to him in how she conducts herself. Next to her is an angry looking man with a sharp nose and dark hair in need of a shower. If it wasn’t for his cold expression, Merlin would have pegged him as a knight of sorts. His hairstyle and lack of hygiene are well suited.

Merlin’s attention is drawn to the head of the table as an elderly man, closely resembling Merlin’s own appearance one week ago, stands up and the Hall falls silent.

Merlin has entertained himself in the past by attending costume parties, balls, and even a cosplay event (one of his fondest 21st century memories). He is accustomed to the muggle’s games of dress up as they act out and give off the aesthetic of their favourite characters and heroes. Yet even his past costumed endeavours did not suitably prepare him for the shock of seeing Professor Dumbledore. He is the spitting image of Merlin himself. If Merlin had had children at any point in his life, he would have sworn he was looking at one of his descendants. His eyes are a familiar shade of blue with a distinct twinkle. His build is tall and thin, skin pale, beard white, long and glorious. In his expression is wisdom, kindness and humour.

A loud squeak squeezes out behind Merlin’s hand as he clamps them over his mouth in a failed
attempt to smother his hysterical laughter. His reaction burst out of him without warning as he had been caught off guard with the revelation. *I have found my doppelganger.* Merlin always assumed the myth of the doppelganger was purely for muggle amusement, but now he is not sure. He has a strong urge to get to know the Professor and find out if the similarities are just merely physical, or if he has any of his personality quirks as well. *I wonder if he also resembled me in his youth?*

Merlin stumps on his giggles and straightens his back. He is here for a purpose.

While Dumbledore and the sorting hat give their speech, Merlin’s eyes water in the effort to hold back his cackling.

“And now, I would like to introduce Hogwarts’ new 7th year student Maldin Ambrose.” The teacher closest to Merlin gives him a gentle nudge towards the front. “He will be sorted before the first years. Please make him feel welcome and at home here at Hogwarts.” Dumbledore turns his head and makes eye contact with Merlin. His eyebrow twitches in surprise and Merlin concludes that his thoughts about their similarities are not merely limited to their elder form.

Merlin carefully steps up to the front of the teachers’ tables in front of the podium and sits on the stool. He feels very exposed. All of the students’ eyes are locked on him but there are too many for him to gauge any telling expressions. He is thankful for his lack of stumbling on his way over. It is too soon still to make a public spectacle of himself.

The old grimy hat Merlin recognizes as Godric’s chatty sorting hat is placed ceremoniously on his head. Relief immediately flows through him as his vision is cut off by the rim of the hat and he is no longer subjected to the piercing stares of his soon to be peers.

*Well this is unexpected.* A worn and graveled voice projects into his head. *Merlin the Great alive and in the flesh. It’s been a while.*

*Yes, hello. I’m here as a student this time.*

*Yes, I can see that. I have never had the pleasure of sorting you as a student before. Although I assume I still won’t seeing as I can hardly place the past head of Slytherin in any other house. Salazar would be livid.*

*Yeah, your job is easy this time.* Merlin smiles in his head. It’s not often he is addressed as his true self.

*What brings you here as a student?*

*The Old Religion is being abused, I’m here to put a stop to it.*

*Right yes, Tom Riddle. I sorted him when he was a child. He had a very dark mind.*

*I’m going to be dealing with him. Could you please refrain from mentioning anything about myself to the faculty? I need to go unnoticed.*

*My seam is sealed.*

*Thank you.*

*“SLYHERIN!”* Merlin nearly jumps out of his skin at the sudden transition from mind speak to the verbal shout.

The Slytherin table erupts in cheers and whistles. Merlin feels his face grow hot at the attention.
Ron’s expression is outraged and unblinking as Merlin hurries to sit down in an empty seat next to his new house mates. Hermione looks surprised and disappointed, but not angry.

Merlin tries not to feel hurt by their reactions. He should really be used to it by now.

Happy and proud faces greet him at his new table as the students shuffle around to make room for him. “Welcome to the best house in the school!” a thin pale blond greets him.

“Happy to be here!” Merlin throws him his best dimpled smile.

“My name is Draco Malfoy, and this here is Blaise Zabani.” The blond gestures to the dark skinned boy across from them. He looks over at Merlin and grins.

“Hello, nice to have you here.” Merlin is relieved at the warm welcome. He always discreetly harboured paternal feelings towards the Slytherin students and on occasion would think of them as his adopted children. His past students kept in contact post-graduation and even introduced their children to him when they started their own family. He felt like a grandfather. Perhaps his time here would not be so different. Although he is certain the other students would not view him as a parental figure in his current body.

While the first years are sorted he quietly explains to them his transfer story and it follows similarly to his conversation with the Gryffindors on the train.

“We’ve not had a transfer student here in all the time I’ve attended.”

“If your education is more advanced, why come to Hogwarts?” Draco’s eyes settled on Dumbledore with a sour expression. Merlin wonders what sort of drama has been going on to make the student and teacher relations so tense.

As Draco and Blaise continue to make small talk with Merlin and update each other on their summer adventures, Merlin gazes around the hall at his peers. Many mouths are stuffed with food, muffled talking and hand gesturing are common sights. His eyes stop at the Gryffindor table as he catches sight of Ron.

His freckled face has turned a startling shade of red, his brown eyes glistening with heated intensity. The hate in his expression brings to mind that of Uther. His gaze shifts between drilling holes in the back of Draco’s head and resting on Merlin himself. He gives a shudder at the raw hate directed at him, wondering if it would even be possible to achieve peace between the houses.

“Oh, I see you’ve caught the attention of the filthy blood traitor already.” Merlin whips his head around to face Draco. Perhaps I misjudged Ron in relating him to Uther.

“He seemed nice enough on the train ride over.” Merlin felt the need to stand up for the boy despite the steam coming out of his ears. Merlin has been on the receiving end of that particular term and he feels pity towards the blond for reiterating such blinding nonsense. Still sensing it to be too soon to try to change the Slytherin’s prejudice views he doesn’t bring up the absurdity of the claim ‘blood traitor’.

“Heh, yeah, nice isn’t the problem with their lot.” Merlin hopes that Draco’s age will make him more susceptible to change. He realizes how hard it can be to re-evaluate your beliefs and choices at a later age. One can hope.

Draco continues on about the atrocities of the Gryffindor students and Merlin takes the opportunity to join the rest of the school and stuff his face with food. Merlin has impeccable table manners and is versed enough to out-poise even the current muggle queen herself, but he never truly understood the
point. Everyone eats and there is nothing private about it. The food tastes delicious and Merlin has full intentions to eat enough to put himself into a food coma to help get him through the night. That might be the only way he could sleep otherwise.

The first night back in Camelot Merlin predicted to be difficult. Too many memories. Camelot with King Arthur was his happiest years despite all the hardships. The years have smoothened out the rough edges and Merlin is left with a memory of feeling at home and among family. Those are the hardest memories. The memories of the love and passion of his young adult life always leave him feeling empty, abandoned and drowning in despair. He had never lived more full a life than when he thought he was mortal. The experience of losing not only all your family and friends, but everyone you ever knew makes it nearly impossible to form new bonds and move on.

He tries to drown the memories of Arthur’s lopsided smile in several mouthfuls of rice pudding with mixed success. He manages to get most of it on his chin and the muffled giggles of the two Hufflepuff girls who have spotted his impressive food beard pull him the rest of the way out of his head. This is why he never used a pensive. He’d probably lose himself.

Merlin absorbs food for the entire duration of the feast, the food and plates vanishing while he has his fork poised over a generous slice of pie. Blaise chuckles to himself at the sight of Merlin bringing an empty hand to his mouth and staring at it in confusion.

Dumbledore gives his parting words and the students stand up in almost perfect unison to start the march into their dorms. Merlin is amazed that they don’t all manage to get stuck in a jam at the doorway, but there seems to be some type of system in place that he is unaware of.

Draco leads him down the hall and into the dungeons that serve as the Slytherin common room. Merlin keeps his eyes forward the entire way as to not get distracted or recognized by any of the paintings on the walls. After all, he did add quite a number of them there himself.
“Welcome to the Slytherin common room.” Draco gestures around to the vast expanse of the dungeon remodeled living room. The once Queen Anne styled furnishings in all of their ornate curves have been replaced by sleek and shiny modern couches and desks. The sturdy wooden chairs are now a comfortable black leather. Heavy green and silver panelled curtains liven up the space in a way the black lace drapery never did. Merlin is thankful for the shift from an aesthetic focus to comfortability in the current century, those couches certainly appeared to be more comfortable than the solid and unforgiving surface that passed as a couch when he was here last. He can still recall the loud and incessant sobs of his students mourning their backsides. 

Draco and Blaise lead the way through a swarm of students to the back and up the stairs. Merlin is surprised to note that the dorm rooms are completely unchanged. Dark and heavy gracefully arched wood make up the bed posts and the thick velvet privacy curtains remain. Blaise and Draco stride towards the middle beds where large and complex looking luggage rests at the foot of the bed. Merlin spots his battered travel bags in a disorganized heap by the bed in the corner. The lopsided shape of them seem to have given the house elves a hard time.

Merlin is thankful to be momentarily forgotten as the two boys gossip loudly about the impressive feats they claim to have achieved over their summer break. Yanking back the curtains, he is flooded with relief as he confirms that the bedding has been indeed updated to suit modern sensibilities. A rich emerald duvet is pulled back to reveal black silk sheets softer than even Morgana’s best feast dress. Biting his lip slightly, Merlin eagerly strips down and slides between the sheets. He reaches to pull them up past his chin but as they untuck from the bottom, they projectile completely off the bed. Taken aback at this affront to his person, he rolls to the edge of the bed to retrieve his coverings, skids across the silken sheets, and joins the blankets in a heap on the floor. 

I defeated evil sorcerers, high priestesses, countless bandits, soldiers, and creatures of dark magic just to be taken down by bed sheets. If Morgana could see me now.

Stumbling and collapsing back down several more times, he climbs red faced back into bed. He might just wake up on the floor tomorrow.

Re-settled in and now cautious of even the slightest bit of movement, Merlin closes his eyes. Immediately his mind assaults him with images of Arthur striding through the halls of the castle. He squeezes his eyes shut harder and focuses on an image of his old students’ faces. Slowly they morph into the face of the king and he presses his hands to his face. Arthur walks through the dungeons with his crimson cape blowing gracefully. Hands press harder into his eye sockets. Arthur glances back at him and their eyes meet. Merlin is completely unaware of the soft whimper that was muffled by his hands. Arthur gives a fond laugh that tears open the heavily bolted doors of Merlin’s most destructive memories.

A flood of indecipherable images crash through and leave Merlin in a state of shock and despair. I cannot do this right now. There is simply too much at stake for him to fall apart now. Arthur is dead, but these children are not. People need him. Arthur needed me and I failed him. His mind counters that thought, reminding him of the last words of the great dragon Killgarra. Desperately attempting to feed him even the smallest scrap of hope.

That was a lie to punish me for my failure to keep him safe. His actions had lead to the acceptance of magic and the creation of the ministry, but he had failed his most important task. Arthur. Merlin screams in his head. He is never coming back. He’s gone. Dead. Yet, some part miniscule of his subconscious still desperate clings to the sliver of a chance that he will return. Perhaps if he had be told straight that Arthur is lost to him forever he’d have been able to move on. To grieve properly. His mind shoots that down as impossible. Arthur is his purpose. His
life. His everything.

Without Arthur he would simply cease to exist. The sliver of a chance that Arthur is ‘fated’ to rise from the dead is what blocks him from moving on. Yet it is the only thing keeping him functional. At least what passes for functional.

Shaking hands grasp soft pillows and he shoves them against his wet face in an unsuccessful attempt to smother his thoughts. Unable to breathe through the plush fluff that is the pillow, Merlin focuses on the burning of his lungs. His magic involuntarily lashes out to fling the pillow into the top canopy of the bed. He takes his first shaking breath forcing his mind to study the softly glowing stars magicked to the canopy bed covering.

His mind desperately clings onto the distraction and supplies him instead with the memory of his chambers as a professor at Hogwarts. He certainly didn’t have luminescent stars on his bed roof then. The fake night sky makes for a pleasant addition to the otherwise claustrophobic sleeping space.

With his gaze glued to the little dots of light, Merlin gradually drifts off into a fitful sleep.

The bubbling sounds of laughter yank Merlin out of his sweaty sleep and he cracks one eye open. Draco, Blaise, and two large and ridiculously well-muscled boys tower over him, faces split open in identical mad grins. He doesn’t recall Draco and Blaise as being this tall. Merlin opens his other eye and moves to sit up. Tries to sit up. He is quickly becoming aware of a restrictive force holding him in place and a painfully sharp surface jabbing into his side. Alarmed and now fully awake, his sight adjusts properly to his surroundings and he notices with embarrassment that his is no longer on his bed. It seems that in his sleep he launched himself yet again off the bed, this time succeeding on getting his limbs and torso fully and tightly tangled in the blankets. Completely defeated by bed coverings. Again.

With a slight wisp of magic, the blankets are nudged off his body and he scrambles to an upright position.

“Those… silk sheets are… a menace...” Blaise stammers out between wheezes, his face scrunched up and eyes watering. Merlin assumes that to be an attempt at lessening his growing embarrassment, but the delivery only succeeds in making it worse.

“I’m uh, just not used to silk.” Merlin tries to act casual.

“Falling out of bed like a child.” Draco gives a good humoured scoff. “At least we’ll never have to suffer the cruel fate of boredom with you around Maldin.” He snickers and grabs a heavy looking text.

“You’d best hurry to the hall or you’ll miss the first class. Breakfast was hours ago and we’ve got our timetables already. Double potions.” They stride out of the dorm room not waiting for a response.

Scampering into his Hogwarts robes, Merlin gives a quick look at himself in the mirror. His hair is arrogantly defying gravity and he will not tolerate it. Pausing a moment to scan his eyes around the room, content that he is alone, he pushes his magic through his hair to tame it into a more agreeable shape. Accepting that he is now suitably prepared to make a good first impression, he runs a cleaning brush over his teeth and darts out the door.

He pauses upon exiting the Slytherin’s domain realizing that as a ‘new student’ he should not know his way around the castle grounds yet. Sudden inspiration strikes and he approaches the nearest painted portrait on the wall.
Merlin pitches his voice loud enough for any passing students to easily overhear. “Excuse me, would you know how to get to the positions classroom? I’m new here and don’t want to be late for my first class.” He completes the act with a hopeful and convincingly nervous expression.

“Oh hello there dear,” The portrait is an ambiguous and curly haired figure with a kind face. “Just turn left, make a second right and walk through the fourth door. You’d best hurry though, Professor Snape does not tolerate tardiness.”

“Thank you so much!” Merlin takes off at a run, sliding on the polished floors as he tries to stop at the classroom door.

Opening the single rather small door leading into the underground chamber that is the potions room, Merlin assumes his best timid expression and slouches into the nearest empty desk. A medium sized cauldron sits next to every desk with most of the students already riffling through their thick texts.

Draco gives a friendly and amused wave from where he sits several desks over and Merlin responds with a thumbs up.

He hears an angry snort from the seat immediately to his left. Merlin belatedly notices where his haste for a seat has placed him. Completely surrounded by hostile Gryffindors. Ron is his new desk mate.

Fuming, Ron gestures with his hand in a sweeping motion, clearly intending Merlin to uproot himself and situate elsewhere. Merlin responds with his best Guias eyebrow.

The possibility of any verbal interactions are quickly smothered out as a bored looking man Merlin assumes must be Professor Snape glides to the center of the lecture stage. He clearly forewent showering this morning, his hair shiny and glistening under the dim lights of the candles.

“I trust I won’t have to remind anyone of the class rules. You are not children, any poor behaviour or stupid actions will result in your immediate removal from the class. For the remainder of the year. I will put up with zero transgressions, this is not a strike system.

“Turn to page 87 in your text, the first assignment is the brewing of the strengthening solution. You have this full class time to prepare it, I will accept no late submission, if yours is incomplete I mark what you have.” His voice is low and dry and his eyes shift around the room to land accusatory glares upon the students as if they have already broken his rules. The moment his back is turned to the students, the class slam open their books in unison and riffle through their bags for the ingredients listed.

Of course this potion should be simple enough for Merlin to make. Although he has never actually had the need to brew such a solution. His magic can easily accomplish almost all feats performed by any potion, in this case providing his limbs with an unimaginable amount of force. His face heats with the recollection of the demolished wall.

Yanking out the salamander blood which is listed as the first ingredient, Merlin gets started on the concoction. He makes a conscious effort to slow his chopping and occasionally stare in fainted confusion at the text. Wouldn’t do to appear too knowledgeable.

Ron pointedly avoids looking in his general direction while sloppily crushing his griffin claw. The result of his efforts are a light dusting of powder over every surface in a meter radius around him and a clumpy substance stuck to the mortar. Merlin sees this as his opening and attempts to get Ron’s attention.
He clears his throat and looks at him with an open and friendly expression, tilting his mortar towards Ron to make it more visible to the struggling boy. “You’ve got to grind it in a circular motion, like this,” Merlin makes an exaggerated motion with the pestle “else it just clumps together and dust gets everywhere.” He directs a pointed look towards Ron’s robe front where the light powder turned the material from black to a light grey.

Ron looks at Merlin’s demonstration discreetly and with suspicion written in the scrunch of his eyebrows. He says nothing in acknowledgement, but does change the movements of the pestle in a bumbling imitation of Merlin.

Counting the interaction as a success, Merlin senses a potential opportunity to fully clear the air with the freckled boy and asks about their professor’s apparent bad mood.

“Pfft, you should know shouldn’t you? He’s your head of house after all.” Ron’s lip quirks up in a way that has no resemblance to a smile.

Merlin is completely taken aback at this new information and remains silent for a while to digest. “Oh.” The small sound just loud enough to make it to Ron and the boy finally looks him in the eye.

After Merlin hints at several more potion corrections and even saves Ron from blowing his face off he notices the attention his interactions has gained him. Draco has a mixture of confused sympathy fixed on him, which he responds to with a reassuring wave. Seated at Ron’s other side, achieving significantly more success with their solution preparations, Merlin recognizes the girl from the train. Hermione is studiously adding potion ingredients to her mixture while sparing frequent surprised glances in Merlin’s direction.

Merlin notices Ron’s hands start to shake as Professor Snape, the newly discovered Slytherin head, makes his rounds by their desks. His mouth lifts in a sneer while passing Hermione that confuses Merlin. Hermione’s potion, although still largely unfinished, is happily bubbling away and is quickly approaching the desired colour. Hers is certainly an improvements on the burly Slytherin boy’s sitting at the front Merlin recalls gleaning Snape’s approval. Ron refuses to look up as the teacher stands by his cauldron peering in. Snape’s eyes widen and immediately dart to Merlin’s cauldron where he stills completely, squints, and the proceeds onwards without a second glance in Merlin’s direction throughout the rest of the class. Merlin is thankful for his decision to copy the common errors he recalls his old colleague, the past potions master, complain students would frequently make. Not enough to spoil the results of the solution, but just enough as to not arouse suspicion or stand out from the mass of students.

Class ends with Ron packing his bag and darting out of the room, his lack of scowl towards Merlin leads him to think he is making progress. Hermione surprises him when she offers him a small smile which he gladly returns. Draco slams his text closed and saunters over after the Gryffindors make their leave.

“There’s really no need to make an effort with those sorts. A complete waste of time if you ask me.” Draco had clearly spotted Merlin’s pointed stares and silent yet helpful communications with Ron.

“I prefer to leave my impression of people up to their behaviour instead of taking the word of others. Not that I won’t consider your concerns.” Merlin gives him an open look.

“In that case, have fun wasting your time. You’ll find out soon enough just how worthless and inept that blood traitor is.” He notices amusement displayed on the blonde’s face, in full belief that Merlin will indeed discover just how bad the Gryffindors truly are. Merlin also notices the distinct lack of fire in Draco’s words once the Gryffindor’s are out of earshot.
He finishes packing up his supplies, scrutinizing every angle of professor Snape in his newfound knowledge. His shoulders had relaxed the moment the last Gryffindor left the confines of the dungeon. Draco notices the source of his attention and smiles.

“Severus there,” Merlin notes the lack of title as well as the use of his first name in curiosity, “is one of the only professors here worth their salt. You follow his instruction and if you are in a tight spot, his office is just back there.” He points to the far end of the dungeon where a thick metal door hides behind a desk piled with vials of brightly coloured liquids. Merlin is relieved to hear that the new hostile looking head of Slytherin is at least well thought of by his students. And on first name bases no less. This certainly comes as a surprise, although the less than fond look the burly student is directing at him makes Merlin consider the possibility of Draco being alone in his beliefs.

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.” They proceed out of the room, dragging their heavy packs with them.

“This is Crabbe by the way.” Draco gestures at the large teen Merlin now remembers being part of his wake up party that morning.

“Hello Crabbe.” Merlin sticks out his hand, hoping to amend the terrible first impression he must have left as an utter buffoon. Crabbe takes his hand with only a slightly amused grin and Merlin is thankful for the effort Crabbe is making in suppressing his laughter.

As they continue down the hall headed to the common room to pass the time before dinner, he spots the moving stairs. Possibly one of his top two favorite contributions to the alterations of Camelot. The familiar shift of moving marble floods him with memories of Salazar sliding down the stairs on a pillow as a child. Although, not his intended use for the moving stairs, it had certainly been the most amusing. Delighted cries echo through the large space as young Salazar projectiles through the air after launching himself off the stairs in Merlin’s mind’s eye. He cannot help the large grin that stretches across his face.

His walking slows to a complete stop as memories overlap with reality. Draco nudges him to continue, but Merlin gestures for him to go on without him.

“Well it’s not my fault if you get lost then.” The blonde rolls his eyes at the look of wonder in Merlin’s eyes as he stares transfixed at the stairs.

“I know the castle is impressive and all, but they’re just bloody stairs.” Merlin hears Draco whisper to Crabbe as the walk up the steps without him.

Merlin replays his memories of the young child monkeying around the steps and he feels a pang of sorrow. He has outlived everyone he has ever cared about and will continue to outlive everyone in this school currently. He is a fixed point in the universe, more a part of the landscape than an inhabitant upon it, he thinks drearily.

A graveled voice startles him out of his reverence and he flinches while casting his eyes around for the source.
Thank you everyone who left kudos and/or comments! I love hearing what you have to say (and it is especially nice to hear that people like what they are reading).

“Are you well child?” Merlin squints his eyes at the deep and scratchy voice seeming to materialize from the wall behind him. His instinct is to turn around and face the man behind him who managed the near impossible feat of sneaking up on him unaware, but something stops him. The hairs on the back of his neck bristle and a shiver plants itself firmly in the center of his back. That voice is somehow familiar. His initial panic sends his mind reeling to place the voice to a face of someone in this lifetime, but a deep part of his mind whispers that impossible. He knows that voice. He knows it well. Although Merlin has only heard a single sentence uttered, somehow it registers an intense feeling of wrongness.

His foot shifts in an aborted attempt at turning around. What if they recognize me? He cannot risk his cover being blown. He reminds himself that his current appearance is that of a teenager and that no one alive currently could possibly recognize him. And even the ghosts only knew him or of him as an old man. With a strained exhale he slowly turns around, bracing himself for a possible awkward confrontation between someone he knows that does not know him.

A confused squint takes over his face as his mind registers the empty corridor. There is no one in sight and no sound of fleeing footsteps to indicate anyone had even spoken.

“Oh pardon me, I didn’t realize. Makes sense really. Standing there eyes glazed over and all.” Merlin casts his gaze around for the source. The disembodied voice raising goosebumps so powerful he’s certain his hair must be spiked around his head.

“I’m sorry, what?” All other possible responses die in his throat as he spots a painting hanging on the wall which he cannot recall ever being there in his past stay at Hogwarts. Must have added more portraits since then. Relief spreads through him flattening out the goose bumps. He hadn’t been recognized by anyone then. Just a conversational portrait trying to ease off boredom on the closest student target. Probably a painting of a past co-worker for Merlin to recognize the voice. “You’re a simpleton.” The painting’s voice states smugly. Merlin’s conclusion of the portrait being of a past co-worker is immediately stomped out and trampled on when he gets a good look at the painting’s subject as he walks closer.

A bucket of ice cold stable water is unceremoniously tossed over his head when his eyes meet those of the paintings. A bright blue and twinkly gaze bores holes into his head and Merlin feels the stairs drop out from under his feet. He quickly reaches out to steady himself on the railing before keeling over in shock.

His mind scratches frantically for an alternative, scrambling to hold onto the possibility of the painting being Dumbledore rendered with artistic liberty. The old pale and wrinkled face framed by a glorious white beard rings several more alarm bells in his head. He knows that face. Knows that face better than his current one. That’s the face he wore for countless centuries. The same knowing smirk,
the same age spots and the same bushy white eyebrows. That’s his face.

“Oh come now, it’s just the beginning of the term, classes can’t be that hard yet. Do I need to fetch Pomphrey? Perhaps she can sort out what’s going on with your brain.” Merlin is taken aback by the sound of his aged voice coming from a source other than his own throat.

“I’m fine. Just a little tired is all. Just tired.” His eyebrows are threatening to conjoin into one entity on his face.

“Huh.” His old face raises an eyebrow in a cheap imitation of Guias. He never could perfect that look.

Merlin slowly emerges from his shock to belatedly realize that the painting doesn’t seem to recognize him.

“What’s your name then boy? I haven’t seen you around before and it’s rare we get any new students not in first year. Or are you content to just stare at me like you’ve never seen a painting before?”

“Mer-Maldin. My name is Maldin.” Merlin feels his face redden as if he really was the child he appears to be. He chalks his near slip up to his surprise at seeing a painting of himself in the hall. If his painting doesn’t recognize himself then he’ll leave that cat in the bag.

“Mermaldin eh?” He receives a scrutinizing look. “Suits you. Good name for a dunderhead.”

Merlin feels a frown take over his features. He was never that rude to students. “It’s Maldin. Just Maldin. What’s your name exactly then?”

“You can call me Professor Emryl. Head of Slytherin ’til year 1750.” He gives a proud nod of his head and stares Merlin in the eye in a way Merlin assumes is supposed to intimidate.

The painting seems to be completely unaware that he is The Merlin. Merlin looks at the corner of the painting to find the artist’s signature. Immediately he recognizes the name.

Hilfred Kenny was a spoilt little brat of a child. A student Merlin thankfully only had the pleasure of teaching for one year before his ‘retirement’. Hilfred was a first year Slytherin with an attitude problem worse than teenage Arthur, only without any sense of duty or care. He had not once turned in homework, gotten in multiple fights with other students, and just generally stirred up trouble. Merlin had monitored only two of his many detentions, blessedly Hilfred acted out more around students of other houses. It seems as though little Hilfred had grown up to be an artist. And had painted Merlin. Their limited interactions explains the bizarre caricature of a personality reflected back at him. Clearly Hilfred did not have a very fond impression of him.

“Well, can’t say it’s been nice to meet you. See you later.” Merlin makes an escape before any student can walk past and make any sort of connection between them. Being recognized as the subject of the painting is near impossible, but as they are the same person, there is still a distinct similarity in appearance.

In his speed walk past the hall, Merlin feels his face split open. Eyes watering, he lets out a hysterical laugh. Oh if Arthur ever saw that painting. Or worse, Gwaine. He would never hear the end of it. How weird it is to see himself in a painting, as snarky and grumpy as Dragoon the Great.

On a new quest for any paintings of people he might recognize, Merlin scans his eyes across every wall as he walks by. Nameless faces stare back at him, none of them standing out.
Rounding a sharp corner, he spots it. The only painting not moving. He walks closer to inspect the occupant, noticing that the paint is older than the others, chipped and yellowed in the corners despite the obvious magical intervention. The frame is of pure gold and decorated with tiny red jewels.

Queen Guinevere stares forward unmoving, her regal gaze fixed above Merlin’s head. Her face is the old and wrinkled one he remembers with deep smile lines and warm eyes. The engraved label on the frame names her as Queen of Camelot, founder of the Ministry of Magic.

Merlin’s good humour dies in his throat at the sight of her. His hand unconsciously reaches up to touch her cheek. His best friend. He had almost forgotten what she looked like. Tears threaten to fall from his eyes in an unstoppable and blinding torrent. He quickly and sharply turns away, placing back the firm wall shutting off his memories of Camelot behind a solid mental fortress. He has too much work to do to lose himself again.

Looking for portraits of past loved ones was a terrible idea. He vows not give into any future moment of weakness.

Picking up speed, Merlin changes direction to head to the great hall. He figures he has been long enough and dinner will be starting soon. He hastily wipes at his face. Any distraction from his wallowing despair is a welcome one.

He enters the great hall to discover his assumption correct. The tables are packs with students hungrily attacking the food in front of them. A couple heads look up as he passes, but none linger too long. The lure of dinner is more exciting than that of the mysterious new student.

Merlin’s foot catches on a particularly dense pocket of nothing and launches into the Slytherin table, narrowly missing a bowl of mashed potatoes with his face. If there was any suspicion of the unassuming student Maldin being discovered as The Great and All-Powerful Merlin, it would be surely dismissed now.

Greeted by a sputter of food muffled laughter, Merlin plunks down in the nearest available chair. “Classy.” The second burly teen Merlin was greeted with that morning snickers into his drink, a couple bubbles threaten to burst over the side of the cup.

Merlin nods politely at him in greeting. “Fit for court, I am” his cheeky smile unleashes in full force. Draco’s mouth opens to showcase his chewed potatoes but is cut off from saying anything as a flock of owls suddenly fly down to the tables. A proud looking barn owl perches itself in front of Draco, narrowly missing his bowl of mystery soup.

The blond teen put his fork down and takes the small note secured to the owl’s leg. The parchment is an immaculate white, crisply folded and sealed with shiny silver wax stamped with what Merlin assumes is a family crest of some sort. Draco quickly darts his eyes around the hall before tearing the wax off the paper and unfolding it in his lap below table level. Any remaining colour in his face quickly scampers away leaving the boy paler than the ghost hovering by the Gryffindor table. He looks up, face frozen in a mockery of calmness to meet eyes with Blaise on the other side of the table. The other boy’s lips make a thin line and Draco snaps out of his apparent panic when he remembers Merlin sitting next to him. Merlin had been careful to avoid looking at Draco’s display while battling the nagging urge to rip the letter from his hands and read whatever was in that letter. Best not to startle the boy into an early retreat and lose the opportunity to befriend him and gather information.

Merlin is very aware of his ignorance of the modern wizarding world and their struggles with this
new “Dark Lord”. After spending the last while in a remote muggle village in northern Canada, Merlin knows next to nothing about the quest the Old Religion has set him on. Draco’s behaviour has peaked his curiosity and Merlin makes it his new goal to figure out what the boy is involved with.

The crumple of paper is muffled under Draco’s outer robe but the mumbling of his lips as he casts the vanishing spell is audible to Merlin in their close proximity.

Merlin’s eyes close and he makes a rather loud slurping sound around his soup spoon in an attempt to ease Draco away from any suspicion that he had been paying attention to his little display. “I don’t know what this is, but it’s bloody delicious.” Another over the top slurp causes soup to splatter onto his nose and he makes an attempt to catch it with his tongue.

Crabbe’s lip curls up in the corner in disgust at Merlin’s enjoyment. Apparently the soup is not favoured amongst this crowd. Merlin’s long life and poor living habits has afforded him quite the unusual pallet. He doesn’t, after all, require food to stay alive.

Draco moves both his bowl and Blaise’s over to Merlin in one smooth gesture. “Here mate, take ours too.” His face is scrunched up to match the look half the Slytherin table within ear shot is giving Merlin. All thoughts of the letter and any possible eavesdropping now successfully purged from the boy’s mind.

Merlin smiles at Draco gratefully and pulls the bowls closer.

“I know double potions had us skipping lunch and all, but I’ve never seen anyone hungry enough to eat that slop.” Draco articulates his point with a vague gesture to the soup bowls now surrounding Merlin.

“‘S delicious.” Soup pours down Merlin’s chin and Draco’s eyebrows raise.

“So, where’d you ditch to earlier? Don’t tell me you were meeting a girl,” Crabbe leans forward and Blaise’s face perks up in interest.

“No way he’s coerced anyone this early on. He just bloody got here,” Blaise shoots Merlin a disbelieving look, “right?”

Soup shot from Merlin’s mouth, narrowly missing the other muscle teen’s head. “Gods no. No. Deff-” he aborts and shakes his head, “no.” He feels heat shoot up into his now reddened face and ears, no doubt bright enough to stop traffic.

Draco’s laughter cuts off any further comment Blaise might have made. “After that display? Really Blaise?” He shakes his head.

Merlin schools his face into that of embarrassment, stomping out his real and rather horrified reaction to the thought of going out with a teenage girl.

“Was just exploring the grounds a bit. Getting my bearings in the new place and all. This castle is like a maze.” He widens his eyes for effect.

“Goyle, why don’t you take Maldin here on a tour of Hogwarts after dinner today?” Draco assigns the task to the muscled teen Merlin mentally corrects in his head as being ‘Goyle’. He wonders at what Draco will be doing that requires privacy from ‘the new kid’ this evening.

“Uh, yeah, sure. I’ll do that.” Goyle stammers out looking up to meet Draco’s eye. Merlin makes a mental note not to entrust Goyle with anything that might require subtly.
“Oh that would be great, thanks! I’ll bring my class schedule along and you can show me where they’re all located.” He directs his disarmingly friendly smile at the large boy and is rewarded with a look of relief.

He quickly wolfs down the rest of this soup collection, takes a generous scoop of potatoes fitting entirely in his mouth in one heaping spoonful, and takes a swig of pumpkin juice as if it were cold beer at the end of a cheering toast. “Shall we?”

Merlin follows Goyle’s lead as they leave the great hall a little earlier than most, students still dejectedly sipping away at their mystery soup. He has a suspicion that amongst the small group of boys he’s managed to fit in with, Goyle is the loose lipped one. He wears his face like the open book Merlin was often accused of wearing in Camelot.

To Merlin’s horror, Goyle directs him to the moving stairwell. He faces to the side in hopes that the painting of “Professor Emryl” doesn’t notice him and say anything. Of course Merlin has never been the lucky sort.

“Oh I see you have an escort now! Best to keep an eye on that one. Wouldn’t want him to hurt himself or anything.” His old graveled voice greets them with a cheeky grin.

Goyle’s eyes widen and he blessedly speeds his pace. “Batty old man. Just ignore whatever nonsense he spouts. He’s just a dusty old painting.” He states loud enough for the painting to easily overhear.

“Had a run in with him in my second year.” Goyle continues, suppressing a shudder. “His insults make no sense, yet still manage to make me feel like a four year old being swatted by my ma’s dust broom.” Merlin exhales a sigh of relief at the confession, apparently the painting had not awarded him any special treatment. He spares a moment to feel irritated for being depicted like that, but his relief at not being under suspicion wins out.

“Yeah, he was convinced I was some sort of simpleton.” Merlin confesses, making a try for bonding through shared experience. His attempt proves successful when he is rewarded with a small smile from Goyle.

Their conversation quickly turns friendly and he is reminded of one of the younger guards stationed outside The King’s door. He had the same awkward manner paired with a rather unfortunate gullibility and simple mindedness. The kind of sort who would follow blindly into danger, not out of a sense of bravery, but simply because he trusted those in charge to know better than him. He and Merlin had became quick friends, Merlin finding it easy to trust him due to his unshakable loyalty to Arthur and his open and friendly smile. Goyle seems to have latched onto Draco in much the same way the guard had to The King. Merlin spares a moment of disappointment that the students’ are not yet legal drinking age as he would doubtless be more inclined to share any potentially sensitive information under the influence of alcohol.

Merlin goes for his second tactic, slathering on charm strong enough to flatter even the most ill tempered of noble women and Goyle quickly succumbs. He has Goyle rambling on about all sorts of topics ranging from classmate gossip, hero worshipping Draco, and even some mildly touchy family drama before Merlin senses the moment ripen.

“So I haven’t really been around to know much of any of the going ons, what’s up with all this I hear regarding a Dark Lord?” Merlin opts for Voldemort’s more formal title, what little information he has managed to gleam so far pointing a bright and gleaming sign towards the Slytherin students being sympathizers.
Goyle squints at Merlin as if he had grown a second head. “You mean you don’t know about-” he quickly scans his eyes around the empty hall and lowers his voice, “Lord Voldemort?”

Merlin follows Goyle’s lead, shaking his head and confirming in a softer voice.

Goyle sputters in disbelief, but before he can get a word in Merlin pipes up. “Well, I mean, I’ve heard of him in passing. But I grew up homeschooled remember? And, ah, rather far away from other wizarding communities. I take it he’s starting some sort of revolution?”

At Merlin’s question the other boy’s face lights up and he takes an excited step closer. “Oh yes, he’s a hero!” his whisper escalates in volume, “He’s going to restore the world order. Put those muggles back in their place, those with power will no longer have to hide or be oppressed.” The boy’s eyes glisten at the mere thought.

“Wizards over here are oppressed?” Merlin is well aware of the dynamic between the magical community and the non-magical, the tension had been several centuries in the making. Merlin had long ago given up his attempt at smoothing over the unrest.

The burly boy’s eyes widen. “We have to hide from them, reduced to dwelling in small communities. They’ve taken over the planet! They are pathetic and weak and yet we cower away in a corner. The Dark Lord will liberate us, putting the muggles in their place. We will-” Merlin’s mind tunes out the rest of the rant. This delusion is nothing new. Merlin has lived through the rule of countless dictator’s rise to power spewing hate speech disguised as a need for equality. Goyle acts like an excited puppy and Merlin concludes that he is a follower but not particularly high ranking. He’ll have to gather intel from other sources. Perhaps join the ranks himself.

He wonders at how powerful this Dark Lord must be for the crystals to show him after countless centuries of silence. Hope tries to claw its way into the forefront of Merlin’s consciousness, they had not shown him visions since Arthur was alive. But that is ridiculous. Merlin mentally scolds himself. It’s been over 1500 years. He’s lived through battle after battle, evil dictators, plagues, world wars, and dying civilizations. Albion no longer exists. Camelot is long gone. Why would Arthur return for this new threat and not any of the others in the past? Merlin knows the answer. Because he’s not coming back. He never was. The dead don’t return.

Goyle continues his second hand propaganda speech and Merlin starts to realize that the destruction of this Voldemort will only solve the surface issue. If he eliminates the big boss, another will simply take his place. The ideas he stand for will not simply go away with him.

Resisting the strong urge to dig his palms into his eye sockets, Merlin plasters a fake smile on his face which he hopes with all his might looks to be convincing. “Sounds brilliant.” If his voice sounds hollow, Goyle doesn’t notice.

“Right?” Goyle’s grin is genuine as he proceeds to show Merlin where his classes are located. Merlin decides to play along with it, building the students’ trust to find out what they are planning. Any attempt to change the student’s mind would be futile and merely place him firmly in their bad books. He’s a suspicious stranger and he is well aware that his word holds no weight.

Of course they would probably take him seriously if they know he is Merlin, but that would cause more problems for him than it would solve. No matter how long his life or vast his experiences are, he does not have Arthur’s charisma or leadership. He firmly believes that as an immortal, he has no
right to rule as he could stunt the development of civilization. He is not a god to be worshipped.

They head down towards the dungeons chatting about their upcoming classes. Merlin finds himself fond of the boy despite his obvious misconceptions.

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Back in the dorm, Merlin carefully snuggles himself into bed, his curtains pulled tightly leaving him in a comfortable darkness. He hears the hushed sounds of Draco and the other boy’s whispers and figures they are catching Goyle up on whatever he missed while entertaining Merlin. Something about the mysterious letter no doubt.

Merlin’s eyes flash gold as he casts a silent hearing enhancement charm. He rolls onto the side facing the other slytherins and the amplified sound of his head sliding across the silk pillow is momentarily deafening. He stills and closes his eyes in focus.

“-but father says it’s a great honor.” Draco’s soft voice catches on the last word and he gives a shaky exhale. “Letter didn’t mention mother.”

Crabbe’s voice sounds concerned, “They can’t really expect you to-”

“It has to be done.” Draco firmly interjects.

“But I mean it’s-“

“I have to do it.”

“You don’t sta-“

“I have no choice!” Draco’s anguished voice breaks out of the whisper, silencing any further protests. Merlin can make out the sound of muffled sniffling and the sound of a bed creaking and covers shifting.

“I’ll help you.”

“Me too.”

“You know we will, mate.” The three solemn yet determined voices of Draco’s friends mark the end of their conversation and Merlin waits several long minutes before breaking the charm and drifting to sleep wondering what Draco is being forced to do.

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Merlin looks at his class schedule to see that his next class is History of Magic. He lets out a quiet groan and resigns himself to spending the next three hours trying not to pull his hair out over all of the censored and blatantly inaccurate history he will be subjected to. Having lived through most of the accounts sure to be repeated to him, he is in no mood to relive those memories nor is he prepared to hear all of the false embellishments.

He hopes that they have changed their curriculum since his last stay at Hogwarts when he was subjected to his students complaints of the boring tales of the goblin revolution. He is in no hurry to relive those events.

A soft pressure appears on his shoulder as Goyle’s hand gives him a reassuring pat. “Ready for our scheduled nap time?”
Draco shoots Goyle a scowl.

“Oh please, you can’t tell me you find that class interesting.”

“Well how could you possibly know that it isn’t if you’re always sleeping through it?”

The boys file into the classroom, finding seats at the farthest reaches from the front, much to Draco’s dismay.

Merlin looks around the classroom, assessing the professor’s choice of decor. A thick layer of dust covers the bookshelves lining most of the wall space, obscuring titles on volumes that appear to be about half Merlin’s age. Thick curtains covering the length of the ceiling to the floor smother out all sunlight from the windows, leaving the room to be illuminated by dim torch light and candles. A shame wizards are too proud to learn from the muggles and employ the use of electric lighting. Merlin is endlessly baffled by the sheer self-impeding stubbornness of the modern wizarding community.

The ghost of an old disheveled man supporting round metal rimmed glasses and a scraggly and tangled mop of white hair floated into the classroom and settled himself at the front.

“Welcome back to History of Magic everyone, in courtesy of our new student,” his gaze settles on Merlin, his stomach dropping in fear of discovery, “I will re-introduce myself. I am Professor Binns, I’ve been teaching this class since before your great grand parents’ parents were born.” Merlin suppresses his eyes roll with difficulty, feeling suddenly relieved.

“For our first unit, we will be covering the start of the ministry of magic.” The sea of Slytherin and Gryffindor students open their textbooks to the first chapter in anticipation. Goyle settles his face comfortably in the pages, closing his eyes after directing a pointed stare at Draco.

“Discovered in 1798 in the tomb of Sir Frances the Fourth, A Complete Account of Camelot 496-543 ACE details the rise of what we today call ‘The Ministry of Magic’. This text, paired with Thomas Malory’s Le Morte D'Arthur, and the accounts written by Geoffrey of Monmouth, give us a clear understanding of the events that set the wizarding community onto the path of independence.”

Heart beating fast, Merlin scours his memory for a Sir Francis the Fourth. None by that name were in service to Arthur or Guinevere, but perhaps a neighbouring kingdom? Clearly they had changed the curriculum to encompass the newly discovered information as Merlin has no recollection of Camelot being a study topic before beyond a mere mention in passing. Sweat drips down the back of his neck. I can’t do this. He’s not ready to face those memories. Even worse is the public setting.

“We’ll start today’s lesson off with King Arthur. Widely known as the fair and just king that started the movement for class equality, King Arthur himself was born a mere commoner.”

Merlin chokes on his own spit, sputtering and coughing wildly. Crabb leads over and smacks him hard in the center of his back giving him a concerned look.

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The sound of sobbing echoes distantly. A painful pleading shout carries across the growing void. His heart breaks at the sound and he desperately tries claw his way through the darkness. His grip slips through the black fog and the screams are gradually muffled, choked out by a deafening silence.

Nothing.

Absolute silence.
No feeling of warmth or cold.

The pain in his chest is gone, replaced by the tear in his heart. Then even that fades to nothing. His thoughts scramble together in a panic but eventually they scatter too. First his coherent thoughts glisten out, followed by his sense of self. His memories slip away into the dark expanse leaving him with nothing but the clear image of a familiar face. Than that too flickers out and he is gone.

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Sound. Lots of it. Pressing in on him. A never ending crash, thunder reverberating through every fiber of his soul.

It’s too loud, he tries to squirm away, back into the blanket of comfortable nothingness, but he is surrounded. Instantly he becomes aware of a pressure. It’s breaking him, it’s too strong. Touching him and compressing him at every available surface. He tries to scream, but the pressure enters him and burns. Everything is on fire, his throat tears open and his lungs are filled with lead.

Opening his eyes provide him with a biting sting and continued blindness.

He feels a tug on his leg and the additional pain causes him to thrash around in hopes of escape. The pressure tightens and he feels a sudden yank upwards. He continues to flail frantically to no avail.

Suddenly his vision explodes with searing light, bright and inescapable. His body feels heavy, the pulling on his leg escalated to unbearable amounts.

His body hits a solid mass, jarring something in his lungs and he finds his chest spasming painfully. Terrible and uncontrollable coughs rip through him and he sputters out the weight in his lungs, taking his first rattling breath of air. His throat screams in protest but he feels his head slowly start to clear. The blinding light slowly abates and his vision clears to make out vague colours and shapes. The thundering sounds transition into a high pitched ringing. He continues to flail his now heavy limbs in another desperate attempt at escape.

A sharp sting erupts on the left side of his face and he feels his head move back from the impact. He stills his body as his vision continues to clear. He can make out blurry figures close to his face and the squealing dies down revealing the sound of voices.

It takes all of his concentration to make out the sound of two distinct voices. The foggy haze over his vision finally lifts and the figures sharpen into the form of two men peering at him in concern.

“Where am I?” His voice comes out shaking and rough, scratching up his throat, forcing up another strained and wet cough.

The two men look at each other in confusion and turn back to him to speak an illegible pile of syllables. “I’m sorry, what?” Arthur squints up at the men and registers the lack of chainmail and armour. Relief seeps through him, not enemy soldiers. He focuses his eyes again and notices that although they are not Saxon knights, their clothing is still quite bizarre. Richly dyed dark blue robes in a cut he had never seen before in any of the seven kingdoms. Visiting royals?

They repeat themselves in that strange language Arthur had never heard before. One of them grabs a stick out of their robes and points it at Arthur’s chest. He says something else Arthur can’t understand and his bloodied chain mail unlinks down the centre seemingly of it’s own volition. Panic flairs up uncontrollably and Arthur stumbles back, scrambling to climb to his feet.

The second man raises his hands in a peaceful gesture Arthur’s brain is too alarmed to register and
Arthur reaches for his sword.

_Sorcerers. Morgana’s followers._ The only thing his mind registers is danger and he swings his sword out to point at the two men. “Stay away from me. Don’t try anything.” He knows that if they did try anything there is nothing he could do to stop it. He’s out numbered and in pain. His limbs barely responding to his command.

A distant part of him recalls that not all sorcerers are evil, but the adrenalin pounding through his body smothers out the thought completely.

The second sorcerer reaches into his robe and Arthur takes a step back. His foot collides with a rock nearly sending him head first into the lake behind him.

The stranger’s hand pulls out of his robes revealing another small stick to match the one the other man is pointing at him. Arthur’s face scrunches up in confusion. Do they really think they can intimidate him with twigs? He hefts his sword towards the second man. “Who are you?”

His question fails to elicit any response but furrowed brows and he feels his limbs bound by an invisible source as the sorcerer’s eye his sword with concern. It drops with a clatter to the ground and Arthur struggles pointlessly against a force he cannot see.

His breathing becomes jagged and forced, panic taking over his body and mind. The sorcerers commune with each other, gesturing and talking heatedly in that foreign tongue. They seem to come to some sort of agreement and the first one approaches Arthur, talking in a soothing voice as if he is a spooked horse.

He raises his stick and incants a single word. “Obliviate”

Arthur notes the distinct lack of glow in his eyes and stares again in confusion at the stick. He feels his mind go curiously blank and his terror eases into a quieter part of his mind. The man looks at him with a mixture of satisfaction and pity while Arthur’s body slumps and his eyes glaze over.

The second man approaches him and moves his now ruined chainmail away from his chest. There is caked blood in his shirt, soaking wet with lake water tinged red. The man’s eyes widen and he tears Arthur’s shirt off to reveal his curiously unmarked chest. A look of relief washer over the men’s faces and they talk quietly amongst each other. With a wave of a twig, Arthur’s clothes mend themselves and he finds himself suddenly and blessedly dry.

The drowsy complacency remains and Arthur obediently walks forward, joining the two sorcerers in their descent away from the lake. He feels a gentle probing in his mind, small fingers combing through his thoughts, tugging at certain ones until Arthur irritatedly slaps it away. The probing continues despite his internal struggle, getting a firm grasp on parts of his memory. A shimmering warmth wells up from places unknown and pries the grasping fingers away. Arthur is completely unaware of his surroundings as the internal battle takes place.

Finally the warmth wins out and the haze over his mind lifts. He blinks slowly, taking in his new surroundings.
Chapter 6

“Growing up an orphan, as you can imagine in year 496, was no easy task. After 12 years of surviving as a homeless peasant child in the streets of Camelot, young Arthur Pendragon was adopted by none other than The Great Merlin himself.”

A muffled squeak is heard from the back of the class, Merlin’s eyes make perfect circles and his hand is firmly plastered over his open mouth. Draco leans over to him. “Exciting isn’t it? History is always my favourite class. I can’t believe we’re learning about Merlin!” His excited whisper carries to the front of the classroom and Professor Bins looks up at them, eyebrows raised, before continuing on.

“Referred to by those who knew him as Wart, young Arthur was trained in swordsmanship and the ways of the court by Merlin, who at this time was guessed to be around 87 years of age. It is speculated how such a feat was accomplished by one so old, but of course as we ourselves know, Merlin’s magic takes credit for some quite astounding accomplishments much greater than that.

“Merlin was a retired court sorcerer, who foretold the coming of the Once and Future King Arthur Pendragon, and of course, immediately knew of the child’s true nature and groomed him accordingly.”

Merlin wouldn’t be able to protest at this point, even if he wanted to. Rendered completely speechless, he shifts in his seat with a look of confused horror frozen on his face.

“It is said that it was Arthur’s foster cousin Kay who lead him into the knight’s tournament at Camelot. Not much was documented about Sir Kay, so I’ll save you all from my speculations. It was at this tournament where the now teenaged Arthur completed the act that would secure his reign as king. Pulling the sword famously named ‘Excalibur’ from the stone.”

The professor wisely pauses his lecture at that moment to allow the students to let out their excitement. Crabbe stares wide eyed at Draco. “I had no idea they were including the tales of Camelot in the curriculum change! I might actually enjoy this class for once. At least this unit anyways.”

Draco’s expression is smug when he turns to Merlin to ask his opinion, but Merlin’s mouth is not yet ready to function properly.

Professor Bins continues the lesson outlining how the wise and all powerful Merlin helped to advise the new king. He explains of two heroic battles which left the brave King Arthur victorious before the class is ended, leaving promise for an equally horrifying experience for Merlin next week.

The boys stumble out of the classroom in a daze, although not altogether for the same reasons. Draco seems to have found his happy place, while Crabbe and Goyle are wearing expressions of pleasant surprise. Merlin’s face is left curiously blank.

*I’m his father figure. No. His grandfather figure. I’m an old man. I mean, I was an old man. Back then. What?*

*What?*

*The hell?*

His face decides on an expression in that moment, and it is not one of pleasure. An angry scowl takes over and his vision clouds with red.
Bad enough to be seen as a god, but as Arthur’s grandfather! Who wrote those books? They better hope they’re not still alive, because oh man will they ever regret that decision. How have I not known this before? Merlin realizes of course that he had avoided all mention or whisper of the Camelot times as to not fall back into his desperate brooding. He had clearly allowed this to happen.

Do they think that I just magically poofed into existence as an elderly man?

Suddenly his brain overwhelms him with the image of Arthur as a peasant. Not just pretending to be one, or magically reduced to a simpleton, but as an actual peasant. His mind supplies him with a picture of Arthur cleaning dishes and sleeping on hay, Arthur working on a farm, and mucking out stables. He snickers despite himself. To think Arthur’s legacy would include his origins as a peasant! Oh he would be so mad.

“What are you laughing about Mal din?” Draco looks at him in contempt for the sounds of laughter have morphed into an unflattering combination of wheezing and snorting. The utterance of his fake name in such a manner so closely resembling Arthur’s reduces Merlin even farther into a teary pile of disjointed sounds, his legs barely keeping pace with the other boys. He has many conflicting feelings about the fake history lesson, anger at himself, disgust at being remembered as an old man I was younger than Arthur for crying out loud, horror at having to hear the familiar names again, pride at Arthur being remembered as the glorious king he was, but the combination of it all leaves him overwhelmed with amusement. How could they have gotten it so mixed up?

All of a sudden his initial dread at the thought of hearing about Morgana and Mordred again morphs into a feeling of curiosity. Obviously just simply being reminded of the worst day of his life might be too much for him to handle in a classroom setting, or any setting really, but what has changed about them through the game of broken telephone that time has wrought upon the story of their lives?

“I’ll be doing some reading ahead in the library if any of you care to join me.” Draco makes his way to the second floor without waiting for a response and Merlin quickly makes up his mind and scampers off to join him.

Merlin notices the absence of Crabbe and Goyle as they approach the entrance to the library, still caught up in his thoughts. Draco notices his glance behind him and smirks. “Yeah, not much for studying those two. I don’t know what jobs they plan on getting after school, but if they plan on being hired by me, they can think again.”

They walk by stacks of books to the back of the library on a quest for the perfect seats. Merlin looks around starry eyed at how the library has expanded over the years. Entire shelves filled with new books, the library magically expanded to fit it all in. Draco plucks himself down on one of the only tall backed chairs in sight, back straight and posture regal enough for a life in court. His books are then summoned from his bag with a lazy wave of his wand and stacked in a perfectly neat pile in front of him.

Merlin chooses the chair with the thickest padding across from him and sets his books down in a loud heap. Draco’s pristine pile skitters slightly to the side, off centering one of the top books. He’s rewarded with a patronizing glare as Draco shifts it back into place.

“So I was thinking of doing more reading on the subject of Merlin.” Merlin feels his face redden. This is going to be weird.

“Getting ahead of the class?”

“More like extracurricular readings. I want to be as prepared as I can for our first assignment.
“Sounds smart.” Oh thank god that’s it.

“Well, that and I find the topic of Merlin fascinating. This book here,” He points down to a passage in the book now open in front of him, “Points out that there is not actually any documentation of Merlin’s death. He just disappeared.” Merlin’s stomach sinks to the bottom, settling by his toes.

“ Weird. Yes. That’s uh, certainly odd.”

Draco fixes his attention back onto the text and becomes fully engrossed in his readings.

Merlin takes one fleeting look at his own stack of books and pushes his chair back to stand. “I’m going to go check out some of the, ah, newer books.” He gets a grunt in reply.

The impressive tower of new and pristine books loom over him and he scans around for a topic of something of interest. ‘A Look into the Minds of Dark Wizards’ catch his eyes and he reaches up to grab it from the shelf, hoping it might have something on Voldemort or his followers.

A student bumps into him on their way by, and as Merlin’s body is stretched out to reach the higher shelf, he topples forwards into the shelves in front of him. The book in his hand slides out of his grasp, hits his head, and disappears behind him. He turns around, bending over to pick it up while rubbing his head, his assailant long gone into the depths of the library. Due to his arm being in front of his face he doesn’t notice the other student that has already reached down to pick up his book from the floor, and elbows them square in their unsuspecting face.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” Merlin peers up at the figure massaging their face. “I didn’t see you there, are you alright?” His brain registers the fluffy brown cloud of hair, but struggles to bring a name to mind. Their hand lowers from their face and he smiles in recognition. “Hermione!”

“Oh. Hello.” Her face is red on the left side as she gingerly rubs small circles into her cheek.

“I really am quite sorry for that. Dropped my book. Thanks for picking it up for me.” She lifts her hand towards him, brandishing the book as a shield. He takes it from her with a small smile and angles his body to look non-threatening.

“You here to research more into today’s history topic as well?” Damn. He mentally scolds his mouth for getting the better of him and firing off without his brain’s permission. Discussing Camelot is really the last thing he wants to do.

“Um, yes actually. King Arthur has always been a point of interest for me. I loved the movie as a child and I’m curious to know the real accounts behind the fairy tale.”

“Right.” Merlin’s mind reeling at the revelation of there being movies about them. He’s immediately torn between a dire need to watch them, and being appalled at his life being turned into entertainment.

“That and how two muggles have had such a huge impact on the wizarding world we know today.” Her chin juts out defiantly, as if challenging him to fight her on it.

“Arthur was always my favourite too.” Merlin’s mouth has now completely taken over. His face flares up a bright red as his brain catches up to what just he said.

“Really?!” The suspicion melts from Hermione’s face. “I mean, I just thought that, what with Merlin and all… and you being a slytherin. And Arthur being a muggle…” her voice fades away into awkward silence.
“I’ve got nothing against muggles.” Merlin makes his point firmly.

Hermione’s eyebrows venture higher onto her forehead. “Oh. I mean, of course. There’s nothing wrong with muggles. Muggles are great. My parents are muggles.” The challenge slowly seeps back into her voice.

“That’s nice,” Merlin leans forward and drops his voice to a low whisper, “so was my mum.”

“Oh!” Hermione’s startled exclamation is a little louder than suitable for a library and she quickly covers her mouth with her hand. “I had no idea.” The sound was muffled, but still audible to Merlin in his closer proximity.

“I mean, I don’t hide it or anything. Just never really comes up in the Slytherin headquarters. What with them being… well.” Hermione gives him a look of understanding and whatever grudge she has formed over his house sorting quickly dissolves.

Another student squeezes by while pointedly glaring at them and Merlin realizes belatedly that they are blocking the pathway. He quickly takes her hand and leads her to a desk where he pulls out a chair for her. She gives him a surprised yet shy look as she sits down. Merlin grabs the chair next to her and plunks down in an excited heap of gangly limbs, feeling relieved that she is talking to him again instead of glaring at him.

Seizing this opportunity before it disappears, he dives right in. “So. As you know, I’m new here.”

Hermione looks at him side eyed “yes?”

“Well I’ve been hearing a rather lot about this supposed ‘Dark Lord’,” Hermione’s face instantly pales and she backs away from him slightly, “and it all seems kind of. Bad. I really don’t know much about this bloke or anything, but he seems dangerous.”

“He is.”

“Well it’s been kind of concerning me lately and I was wondering if you might be able to tell me more about it. I mean, the people in slytherin are willing to talk, but they’re not very, ah…” Merlin bites his lip. “Helpful? Forthcoming? Uh…”

“Blinded by their prejudices and gross hero worship?” Her face quickly morphs into a scowl of seething rage, words spoken through clenched teeth.

“Yeah.”

“He’s a monster and a murderer. And the slytherins are ignorant and cowardly.”

“…Pretty much.” Merlin’s voice is quite. He agrees, but it is definitely too soon to start stirring that bubbling cauldron.

“Thankfully we don’t have to deal with him here. Some of his death eaters sure, but he’d dare not show his face in the school himself.” Merlin raise his eyebrow. “Well He Who Must Not Be Named is scared of Dumbledore. He’s the most the most powerful wizard alive today.” Merlin secretly doubts that. Although it would be a nice change.

“I didn’t know that. I mean, I knew Dumbledore is powerful and all, but not to that extent. So the ‘Dark Lord’ is scared of him?”

“Yes.”
“Then why hasn’t Dumbledore dealt with him? If he’s supposed to be super powerful and all that. And he’s clearly influential.”

“Well, it’s not as simple as that. He runs a school. Keeps students safe, rallies against him when he can.” Her face takes on a hint of uncertainty. “He’s a bit old I guess. And You Know Who has many followers and death eaters. It’s not as if he can just have a single face off and then all problems will just disappear. He’s doing what he can.”

“Oh. Yeah, makes sense.” Seems like Dumbledore will be his next source of information. Perhaps an ally? Of course he doesn’t really question why Dumbledore hasn’t had a showdown with Voldemort yet. That’s always been rather obvious. Still, he has a role to play.

Hermione takes on a funny expression. “So how exactly were you sorted into slytherin?”

Merlin throws on a mock offended look. “I’ll have you know, I’m cunning, sharp witted, loyal and brilliantly ruthless.” His hand gestures are wildly exaggerated and the corner of his mouth twitches up.

Hermione laughs and covers her mouth to stifle the sound. “I’m sorry. Of course. Right.”

“It’s true!” His mouth freezes in the smile. It really is. He briefly closes his eyes against the sight of the faces and bodies of the people who had the misfortune of fighting for the wrong side, struggling to not sink into a guilt ridden stupor.

“So you must be enjoying yourself over there.” She gives him a look of uncertainty.

“They’re not so bad. Misguided yes, but they’re not bad people. Just need a little helping hand in the right direction.”

“You’re quite the idealist Maldin.” Merlin hopes this is not the case. He really does. “Well I’ve seen you hanging around Malfoy and that gang. What do you see in them?”

“They’re loyal and they care for each other. And they think they’re doing what’s right. No one actually ever thinks of themselves as being the ‘bad guy’. They’re young.”

Hermione snorts. “They must be pretty daft if they honestly think they’re helping people.”

“Everyone has a reason behind their actions. Doesn’t excuse them, no. But hopefully they will learn.” They’re just children. But he doesn’t say that. Of course not. He’s supposed to be a child himself. Uther started this bloody mess. Turned the magical community to mistrust and eventually hate the non-magicals. Not to mention the insanity that was the witch burnings that came after. Merlin suppresses a shudder at the memory of being burned alive. That wasn’t on his top list of favourite experiences. Yet he can go through that and still come out of it without any prejudices. What has this Voldemort suffered that has lead him down that path? He will get his answers from Dumbledore next opportunity he gets.

“You think you’re going to change their minds? Are you going to try?” Hermione looks at him as if he were insane and about to attempt something dangerous.

“We’ll see. If I think I can make a difference I have to try.” The honest truth for once. Feels good to say it. Merlin savours the rare moment realizing it might be a while before he gets another one.

Hermione gives him an impressed look as well as one mixed with disbelief. As if she thinks he might just be shooting off his mouth. Which, to be fair, he does have a tendency to do.
“I’ve completely forgotten my books!” Merlin looks down at the table in front of him, empty but for the new book he had flung from the shelf. “I’ve got to go and get them before they attach themselves to a pair of legs and wander off. Thanks by the way,” he stands up and picks up his singular book after patting down his slightly rumpled hair, “I hope to chat again soon?”

“Yes, I’d like that. Um, perhaps we can meet in the library and study for History of Magic together? I mean, actually study it this time?” She looks up at him with a friendly smile and a glint in her eye.

“Ah, yes. Right, we can definitely focus on our proper studies next time. Well, see you later then!” And with a little wave and a slight fumble, he walks back to where he had left Draco.

As he retreats, he hears Ron coming up behind him to take his place at his old seat. “Oh my god, was that just that guy Maldin talking to you? He’s a slytherin! What did he say? Do you need me to get Seamus to blow him up for you?”
Hey guys! Thank you for the kudos and comments! I'm not sure if I'll be able to post another chapter within the next few days (but I'll try too) so I'm posting this now. Enjoy!

The rest of the week treats Merlin to a comfortable pattern. After a dinner worthy of a feast every night Merlin heads off to the library with Draco where he excuses himself for an hour to study and chat with Hermione. She has proven to be a particularly brilliant young person and reminds Merlin fondly of Gwen.

He is slowly learning more about Voldemort’s influence as well as how he came about rising to power. It seems most of the students are so frightened of him they will not even utter his name. Not that Merlin suspects Voldemort is his real name. If anything, the more he hears the more questions are brought to the surface.

After forming a friendship with Hermione and Goyle, and a tentative one with Draco, Merlin finds himself at a loss of where to sit in Potions class. He pauses at the entranceway in uncertainty until he receives a tap on the shoulder. He hurries forwards, realizing he had become an accidental road block and made the quick and implosive decision to sit next to Ron again. Better to try to settle things with the boy than possibly offend one of his new friends by making a visible choice in favouritism.

Ron pointedly ignores him as he pulls out the chair and it makes an appallingly loud screech as the metal drags along the floor. Professor Snape at the front of the class shoots him a look that could curdle wine and Merlin has the grace to look embarrassed. At least he didn’t trip and fall into the cauldron. That would have made for an eventful morning.

“Good morning Ron.” Merlin flashes him his best dimpled smile that he is certain would have won him over if it isn’t for the fact that Ron is looking anywhere but at Merlin.

Snape starts off the class and when he instructs them all to start on their potions, Merlin is already poised with his hand over his cauldron ready to add in the first ingredient. He scolds himself in reminder that he is supposed to be just another normal student. He can be smart, he was homeschooled after all, but not prodigy level smart. Blending in . I need to blend . He is already dreading his next week of school where they will be learning to apply spells in their Defence Against the Dark Arts class. He will really have to be careful to monitor his power levels. Herbology so far seems to be the easiest for him to fake and he finds himself actually looking forward to it. The smell of dirt and plants reminds him of home.

After his initial near slip up the class goes smoothly. Unfortunately for Ron, this does not seem to be the case for him. Merlin’s spirits lift as he spots his second moment to make amends with the boy.

“Don’t add that!” His whisper is soft but urgent. Ron’s hand freezes over his cauldron with a fist full of sliced cherry root. “You have to add that last, or your potion will solidify and you’ll have a right foul time scraping it out of your cauldron. Might never get the stink out either.” His face scrunches in sympathy to the potential smell. “Trust me.”

Rob lowers his hand, his face red and his eyes wide. For the first time that class he turns his head and
actually looks Merlin in the eye. “Thank you,”

“Of course! I’m really just saving myself from being exposed to that stench though.”

“Why are you helping me?” Ron’s question sounds more like a statement, coming out in a harsh tone interrupting Merlin mid ramble. “You know you won’t be able to get to Hermione through me. I don’t know what you’re up to or what your planning, but leave her out of it.” He continues before Merlin can properly reply to his first question.

“I’m not trying to use you to get to Hermione. We’re friends. Not ulterior motives I swear.” Merlin raises his hands. “I’d never hurt her, she’s great. I just wanted to help you, Snape doesn’t give a lot of direction with these assignments, and it looked like you could use a helping hand. I’d really like it if we could get along. I get it if you don’t want to be friends, but maybe we could have a sort of classmate truce?”

Ron stares at him unblinking for a while with his mouth pulled tight in a straight line. “We’ll see.”

“Sounds like a good start! Here, let me show you how to slice those a bit finer,” Merlin leans over and demonstrates to Ron.

The rest of the class involves Ron making an embarrassing number of errors with his potion and Merlin managing to catch him in time before making any more grave mistakes. By the time class is over, Hermione is shooting him sun beams with her face, Draco death glares, and Goyle is too intent upon his congealed mass of goo he calls a potion to pay much attention to anything else, while Ron has begrudgingly accepted Merlin’s offers of help. He no longer is given the cold shoulder treatment, but it would be too soon to say the brief eye contact he shares with Ron is friendly.

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The weekend leaves Merlin, unlike the rest of his classmates, homework free. He has decided that it would be the best time to confront Dumbledore and find out more about Voldemort.

Merlin finds himself spending all day Saturday fretting over how he should confront the old man. Would he really be able to get any information out of him as a student? Would he raise Dumbledore’s suspicions and get himself into trouble? He decides that the headmaster would most likely brush off his questions with reassurances, if their roles were reversed that would be Merlin’s response.

Perhaps he should confront Dumbledore in disguise? But then why would he trust him as a random stranger? Of course he could always disguise himself as one of his Hogwarts professors, he already knows their mannerisms pretty well. But then he could get them into trouble with some of the questions he needs to ask. That or give himself away, as surely some professors already know more about it than him and he may ask something of common knowledge without knowing.

Merlin knows the answer to this dilemma. It always seemed rather obvious, he is stalling. No one has known of his true identity in over a century and Merlin had fully intended to keep it that way. He spends an hour Sunday morning just lying in bed panicking.

What if Dumbledore doesn’t believe him? The only reason he wouldn’t is if you don’t want him to. He scolds himself, realizing a part of him wishes to self-sabotage. His self-preservation instincts are very deeply ingrained. He has, after all, spent over a century perfecting them. What if he hero worships me? To be treated as the god-like entity he is viewed as would be horrifying. Being shown respect is well and all, but he is not a supreme being. At least that’s what he has been telling himself.
As Merlin stares up at the stars above his bed his breathing starts to quicken into short gasps. His body turns into a cold and sweaty pile and the stars above him appear to dim. What if he’s scared of me? What if he looks at me like I’m not human? Some sort of monster? One of Merlin’s deepest buried fears finally breaks into the light and leaves him shaking. He would be right.

People fear Voldemort for his power and corruption, they fear Dumbledore for his power, the Hogwarts founders were feared for their power and influence. And none of them as much as hold a candle to him. Merlin could squash them all like a bug underfoot with as much effort as it takes to breathe. Dumbledore would be right to fear him. He’d be right to be terrified of him. I am a monster.

Merlin tries to calm his breathing. Panicking now will change nothing. Pull yourself together. He counts the stars. He listens to the faint underwater sounds coming from the window next to his bed. He counts the stars again. When he feels adequate control over himself he sits up. The world spins around him slightly but he pays no mind as he pulls his bed coverings back and steps out into the room.

He pulls his favourite green knitted sweater out of his dresser and yanks it over his head taking comfort in the familiar thick material as it drapes over his form like a potato sack. He drags his sleeve over his face to scratch an itch and discovers his sleeve coming back wet. Stalking over to the washroom to deal with the mess that is his face, he avoids making eye contact with himself in the mirror.

As he finally glances up to see if he is presentable enough, the look of his own face only serves to make him lonelier. When it comes down to it, that’s what it is. What it always has been. Loneliness. He refuses to let himself hope that today will go well for him. All he can expect is to get the information and nothing more. And if it goes too badly, he can wipe the headmasters memory. He sniffs and feels a bit better at that thought.

As it is now quite late into the day and Merlin has missed all chances of eating breakfast, he makes his trip up to the headmaster’s office in a terrified silence with his stomach loudly grumbling the entire way.

The gargoyle entrance to Dumbledore’s office stares at Merlin in defiance as he comes to the belated realization that he does not know the password. He quickly darts his head around to check that he is alone and reaches out with his magic, his eyes blazing bright gold as it expands past the confines of his flesh. He prods at the enchantments cast on the stone sculpture and gives it a gentle nudge. The gargoyle springs to the side and the staircase spirals up to the door without hesitation.

Merlin slowly makes his way up the stairs, hardening his resolve with every step. I can do this. It’s going to be fine. Just get the information I need and get out of there. Easy peasy. His brain continues its rambles right up until the sound of the door knocker interrupts the silence.

“Come in.” Dumbledore’s voice is muffled through the door, but still clearly audible.

Merlin opens the door with a shaking inhale of breath and walks into the familiar room. He blinks as he spots his old boss in a painting on the wall in front of him. Of course he is not recognized. The room looks surprisingly unchanged from the last time he was in here. The furniture much the same, although clearly updated for comfort. New and richly coloured pillows generously cover every seating area. Merlin finds himself smiling at the changes. Strange metal instruments are on a table but he ignores those and seats himself in the chair facing the headmaster’s desk without waiting for an invite.

“Hello Maldin. Glad to see you seem to be faring well on your first week at Hogwarts.” Merlin smiles up at that. It has been a pleasant stay so far all things considered. “What can I do for you?”
Dumbledore gives him a polite head tilt and clasps his hands in front of him in invitation. A teapot in the corner of the room fills two cups that proceed to float over on their own, landing gently in front of them. Merlin looks up at the man in surprise, but doesn’t notice any gold in his eyes. The students were right in the claim that Dumbledore is powerful. Wandless magic is a very rare feat in this day and age.

“Um,” Merlin stops gnawing on is lip to talk, “I was hoping to get some information.” Dumbledore gestures for him to proceed before picking up his teacup to take a sip. “As you know, I have been away for a while,” *understatement,* “and I am not quite as up to date in regards to certain things as I would like to be.”

Merlin forces his hands to stop shaking as he reaches for his own teacup.

“I came this school to learn more,” Dumbledore smiles at him kindly. “and I don’t mean about magic.” The headmaster’s eyebrows raise slightly and Merlin braces himself. “It has been brought to my attention that a certain Dark wizard has been threatening the safety of both the magical and non-magical community alike. Now I realize this has been going on for a while, but I really was out of touch from the wizarding world for quite some time. I came as soon as I heard the severity. I’m here to help” *Not entirely true. The damn crystals are way more vague than that. Just went and shown me the image of a bloody school.*

At this point Dumbledore looks thoroughly confused, and trying to hide it. “Why would you leave your apparent safety to come here? You are young. There are plenty of capable and highly trained adults working together as a force of good. You should focus on your studies and not let it trouble you. When you are of age and graduated, you can join the efforts if you still wish, but right now your safety and schooling is important.”

“I am not exaggerating when I say I have no need of a magical education. I am here because I was directed here, and this form was the only way of not causing more trouble than necessary.”

At this point Dumbledore’s face took on an alarmed quality to add to that of confusion. “Who sent you?”

“I don’t really have an answer to that that you will understand right now.” Merlin stands up. “Let me show you.” He walks over to the pensive he had known to be sitting in the corner and stood next to it waiting. He feels surprised that his legs had carried him that far, the more he talks the more he trembles.

Dumbledore hesitantly joins him by the large ornate bowl. His eyes are locked on Merlin’s trying to read him. Merlin nods, and places his hand over the side of his head. He makes a pulling motion and extracts a shiny golden tendril. Dumbledore’s eyes widen dramatically and his gaze fixes on the shimmery substance as Merlin drops it into the bowl without the use of a wand.
Immediately the surface of the pensive shows the inside of Gaius’ chambers. Merlin stares at it transfix for a moment before reminding himself of where he is and why he’s here. He looks up at Dumbledore and motions for him to peer inside. “Unfortunately I will not be joining you in reminiscing scenes of my life. Living it once was enough for me.”

Dumbledore gives him a sceptical look but obliges as Merlin takes a step back from the bowl. He waits patiently while Dumbledore relives some of his most painful memories. Nothing too frightening or too personal, just short commercial-like glimpses of his past starting in Camelot and ending with tiny snippets of the past thousand and some odd years. Just enough to prove his identity and nothing more.

He had decided that the pensive would be the best way to out himself. A magical demonstration enough to prove he’s Merlin would be potentially startling and terrifying for his audience and it’s not his goal to scare. This way also seemed the easiest for him as it would answer a lot of their questions without things getting awkward for him. Of course he’s certain that Dumbledore will still have a ton of question when he’s done. Just not as many.

His palms grow more and more sweaty with each passing minute. He swallows, but his mouth is dry.

Finally, after what seemed to Merlin as another century passing, Dumbledore raises his head from the bowl.

He looks Merlin with a piercing stare, but doesn’t seem to be cowering in fear. Merlin’s breath hitches.

“So you mean to tell me that it is Merlin who sent you? That Merlin in real. And still alive. He had some sort of vision in a crystal and sent his…” he seizes Merlin up from head to toe, “his son?”
Merlin’s face freezes and then colours a bright red. WHAT!? My son? He opens his mouth to protest, but no sound comes out. He stands there mouth agape and eyes wide.

“Uh…” He squeaks out. This is unexpected. He remains frozen in shock for a moment longer.

Of course! I didn’t think to add the memory of de-aging myself! He thinks I’m an old man. Suddenly unable to contain himself, he bursts out into hysterical laughter. His adrenalin and nerves quickly translate over into sobs of mirth, his eyes squeezed closed and watering. He reaches over for the table surface, no longer able to support his own weight.

Merlin misses the expression on Dumbledore’s face as he cackles with abandon.

“This was a really inappropriate prank Mr. Ambrose. You will go back to your dorm and refrain from taking up any more of my time with your jokes.” The headmaster’s voice sounds very unimpressed as he commands Merlin to leave his office.

Merlin tries to pull himself together as much as possible to explain himself. He rubs his hands over his face and straightens out his sweater.

“This is not a prank sir, and I am not Merlin’s son.” He can’t help the grin his face splits into at uttering those words. “I am Merlin.” He straightens out his back and holds out his hand in offering.

“I think you’ve taken this quite far enough Mr. Ambrose. Although I must confess to being impressed by the extent you are able to fabricate memories. If you insist upon continuing this charade, I will be forced to deduct house points.” Merlin lets his hand drop to his side.

“This really isn’t a joke. This misunderstanding is my fault entirely, I overlooked a rather important detail. My apologies.” Making up his mind, he gives Dumbledore a blinding smile, allowing his eyes to flash golden as he transforms his body back into an old man. He learnt long ago how to make his body obey his mind, taking on whichever form he pleases without much effort.

Dumbledore takes a startled step back as Merlin’s youthful form grows taller, than hunches over, his skin starting to wrinkle. He lets his hair grow out white and long in the image of himself people associate with ‘The Great Merlin’. His nerves return slightly as he looks at Dumbledore’s gobsmacked face.

We really do look alike don’t we. Merlin feels his face as he stares at the other man. My beard is nicer though. Thicker.

Now it’s Dumbledore’s turn to be rendered speechless.
*ARTHUR’S POV*

His breath is stolen.

He is frozen on the spot.

A crisp evening breeze brushes past ruffling his damp hair, flapping his cape to the side, and he takes one slow blink.

And then another.

The image before him remains.

He squeezes his eyes shut and another strong gust of wind yanks the ends of his cape into the bushes. He opens his eyes and the world takes a sudden turn. He fumbles his foot out to the side to stabilize himself, but his toe is placed over a wet leaf and it slides out from under him.

The ground shoots up fast to meet his elbow and the impact reminds his lungs to fill. *Breathe Arthur.* Stinging pain races up his arm from where it hit the ground making his eyes water and he finally takes his first shuttering breath since laying eyes on it. *Just breathe.* He forces his body to take in more air as he scrambles to get his hands under him.

Struggling to his feet, his eyes remain locked on the view in front of him. *Sorcery. This is magic. Or I am dead. What a strange afterlife.* He wonders briefly if he will meet his father. *But I don’t feel dead.* He squints in concentration at the scene before him. It looks real enough. *And my elbow certainly feels alive.*

Massive gleaming structures are visible over the treetops. Harsh and jagged shapes pultruding into the air at impossible heights, shining as brightly as gemstones. His eyes wander downwards. Even the forest looks unusual. The floor is covered in a thick and even grass, unmarred by boulders, weeds, or dead branches. A perfect green carpet stretching out in every direction.

Something about the forest is uncanny. Arthur frowns as his eyes dart around trying to decipher why it looks so… *wrong.* The spacing between the trees are all the same. The heights are all the same. There is a distinct lack of saplings as well as the absence of decay. His mind wanders to the distant tales told to him as a child of fairies and forest spirits and alternate realities. *Nonsense. Fairies aren’t real.* But the scene before him defies explanation.

The sounds of birds chirping reassure him. Realizing that standing here will get him nowhere, he gathers up his confidence, holds his head up high and strides forward. Thrusting his foot down in his second step, a vicious grip takes hold of his neck and pulls him backwards. A garbled choking sound is squeezed out of his throat and he flails his arms out in surprise. Half a heartbeat later, he swings his sword around to point it at his attacker.

His eyes are wild and watering as he stares out into the empty thicket. His heart beats loud in his ears several times as he scans around himself for signs of movement. There is nothing.

On high alert, he slowly turns his body back to take another step, his eyes shifting around. He moves
his foot slowly and quietly into his first step to feel a pressure return to his neck. His hand instantly reaches up to feel his cape tight around his throat. His eyes follow the line of it into the shrubs next to him. He steps back and takes a relieved and slightly embarrassed breath, arm reaching over to grasp the material and give it a firm tug. It breaks free with a slight struggle leaving Arthur red faced and feeling ridiculous. The end of his cape is now not only dripping fishy smelling lake water, but covered in thistles. Arthur gives up trying to remove them after poking his finger for a third time.

Nerves now slightly more settled, Arthur resumes his march into the strange and unnatural forest.

After encountering two benches and a rather pathetic flower bed Arthur determines that this forest is some sort of garden. The occasional person sitting under a tree or seated in a bench glance up at him with a strange but amused expression. All of them oddly dressed in bright noble colours in a cut that leaves an inappropriate amount of leg exposed. On both men and women Arthur realizes. Remembering his earlier encounter with the foreign sorcerers, Arthur decides it best to try to blend in and avoid contact.

One of the bizarrely dressed people ran past him holding something small to their ear while babbling angrily in the same incomprehensible language. No one else seems to pay them any mind or even glance up at the blatant insane behaviour taking place. Arthur tries not to stare.

As he approaches the end of the tree garden his eyes widen in shock. The gleaming structures are truly massive. The entire village block is seemingly one giant and spiralling structure stretching out over a vast amount of ground. The top of it reaching out to different heights in random sections. The end of what he now thinks of as a castle juts out into the sky tall enough to reach the heavens. As his head moves back down he notices different signs, doorways, and windows lining the front of it. The signs all incomprehensible, but he concludes that this is some sort of village shop center.

He continues walking forwards, now looking around in every direction to take in his surroundings. Strange buildings like the one in front of him he now realizes are commonplace, stretching out in either direction until the roads intersects. He looks down at the road. Beautiful glimmering black streets extend between the buildings, not a trace of dirt, soil, or sand in sight. Curiosity overtakes him and he bends down to touch it. The surface is warm and strong. He runs his nails over it to find it to be one solid mass. A very strong mass.

Suddenly one of the metal contraptions he had chosen to ignore gives an angry rumble and lurches away, apparently gliding on smooth and silent wheels. His brain belatedly registers the lack of horses and he starts to panic. The metal carriage had pulled itself. Are they beasts in armour? This is definitely magic. Very powerful magic. His entire body tenses.

More metal carriages pull themselves down the road in either direction and he spots people through the glass windows seated calmly on the inside.

An angry looking sorcerer bumps into him, talking in the weird tongue. He takes a step backwards and changes his focus to the people around him. They are coming in and out of doors from the gleaming buildings, they are walking along the pale pathway next to the black road and they are seated inside the metal beasts. Several of them seem to be talking to themselves. Some of them are carrying peculiar shiny bags filled with food and brightly coloured boxes. All of them are dressed in richly dyed fabrics cut to expose more skin than is proper. And some are very ill fitted.

The reality of it sinks in and Arthur finds himself unable to form a completed thought. His clothing sticks to him and his chain mail hangs heavily off his shoulders. The glances the strangers give him make him very aware that he stands out.

He brushes his hand over his wet hair trying desperately not to fall apart or panic. I am a king.
cannot show weakness. I cannot show weakness. I am not weak. I am not... I am... I... His breathing accelerates and the sun is suddenly way too bright. He covers his face with his hands and tries to hold himself together.

This is not Camelot. This is not anywhere.

I am dead.

This thought seems to calm him and he clings to it. Nothing can hurt him if he is already dead.

But are these other people dead?

None of this makes sense.

Before he can make a plan of action, or melt into a puddle of terror, a happy looking person approaches him. Looking directly into his eyes, a polite smile on their face, the person holds out a piece of brightly coloured parchment and speaks several intelligible words. They seem to be asking him something while offering up the document. Arthur reaches out to take it.

“I know you probably don’t understand me, but could you tell me where this place is?” Arthur figures it wouldn’t hurt to try.

The person looks down at Arthur’s chainmail and seems to come to some sort of realization, They make an exclamation and tell him something in the same nonsense language. Arthur’s concern only grows. The person turns away and gestures to another holding parchment stacks like the first.

They talk briefly and then the second person walks over, standing next to their companion. He looks excitedly at Arthur and says something while motioning towards his armour.

“Uh, hello. Would you be able to tell me where I am?” He figures it’d be best to avoid mention of Camelot in this strange environment. You never know where a stranger’s alliances may lay.

“Oh! You kaeps Welsh?” The second stranger’s face lights up. Arthur feels his shoulders relax at the familiar words, some of his worry joins the water and drips off the end of his chin.

“I was hoping you would be able to tell me where I am exactly. And who are you?” He speaks slowly to insure the stranger understands.

The man scrunches up his faces. “That’s quite an accent. I’m not sure that’s etiuq the same egaugnal. Very strong. Erewh are you morf? This is Dnaltocs.” He gestures around to the building behind him. “You’re gnikaos wet. Come inside and yrd off.”

Arthur takes a moment to makes sense of what he just said, his accent is very strong and only some of the words are familiar. Still, he is relieved to be able to understand any at all. He takes another moment to scan the part of the building the man pointed at. There are no guards nearby, or in view of the windows. Best to be on high alert just in case though. The man doesn’t seem armed or particularly threatening, but with sorcerers looks can be deceiving.

He cautiously follows the two people inside. He pauses in the entranceway to take in the sight. The store is packed with rows of hanging clothing. Clothing of every colour and material imaginable is displayed on the many racks. The two shop keepers are certainly wealthy enough. They have a very lucky seamstress to work with such a selection.

He looks up to scan the unusual ceiling. Orbs of light are suspended over their heads illuminating the inside as effectively as daylight. Such an open display of magic. Arthur forces his breathing to
As they lead him to the back of the shop the second man looks over at him with a glint in his eye. “So, are you from some tros of fair?” Arthur looks at him in confusion. “Oh! You’re an rotca! What eivom are you gnimlif? What’s your name?”

He chooses to ignore the nonsense words. “I’m Arthur”. Best not to tell the sorcerer his rank. Magic users have proven to hate the Pendragon name.

“Arthur like King Arthur of Camelot! Oh that makes so much esnes now! Emostwa, can I get a otohp?” He pulls out a back shiny metal rectangle and holds it out.

Arthur takes a step back in alarm. “Damn he knows me, and what the hell is that?”

“Right, right, sorry! Forgot the whole laever thing. Can’t liops it on your ecneidua. No need to worry, my lips are delaes.” He winks and puts the device back into his pocket and Arthur takes yet another calming breath.

They finally emerge out the other side of the clothing maze and through a back door. Brown boxes made of parchment line the walls from floor to ceiling, another white orb of light illuminating the room. He is lead to one end of the room and through another door.

“Well, this is the moorhsaw,” he throws him what he assumes is a drying cloth. “feel free to dry off.” His partner hands him a folded heap of clothing. “Here’s a change of sehtolc, you can pay me back later. You shouldn’t damage your emutsoc. It looks evisnepxe.”

Arthur takes the bundle, bows slightly in thanks and closes the door of the small room behind him. Once alone, he drops to a heap on the floor. The weird shiny fake stone floor. He touches it with a finger. Smooth. The clothing is dropped next to him and he can feel his body shaking.

Magic is everywhere. Has Morgana won? He remembers Merlin stabbing her with the sword, but maybe she lived? He freezes. Merlin.

Is this his doing?

But then where is he?

This is not Camelot.

I’m dead.

Right.

Nothing makes any sense. He’s dead. Maybe it’s not supposed to make sense.

His jaw is clenched shut tightly around the rattling of his teeth.

What if I’m not dead? What if I just passed out and woke up somewhere far away? How long was I out for? Where is this place? His thoughts focus on his family. Guinevere must think I’m dead. Where’s Merlin? He recalls Merlin’s anguished face as the last sight before the darkness took him. Surely he wouldn’t have let him be taken away from him. This place has magic. He must be around.

The soft sound of water droplets hitting the floor bring him back into reality and he starts to peel off his wet armour. His chainmail lands with a heavy thud on the ground next to his now ruined red cape. He has to peel his breaches off and scrub at a patch of mud on his leg before he stands up to
survey his surroundings.

The small off white room has a perfect oval mirror on one wall. The glass is so smooth, his reflection is completely unwarped and crystal clear. There is a surprising lack of decoration on the frame of such a quality mirror. He looks closer and is startled by the look of fear in his own eyes. He inspects the red veins he can see in his eyes, the dark and puffy circles underneath, and his damp and unruly hair. He also seems to have managed to get a long scratch down his cheek although he cannot recall how. His hand finds his chest and his eyes immediately widen in shock. There is not even the slightest mark where the sword had ran him through. No proof of his injury or even his death. It is as if it had never happened at all. Magic. Did Merlin heal me? Did it work? Or maybe this is just my unmarked spirit… but my face certainly isn’t. No Merlin healed me. It worked.

Arthur’s panicked expression morphs into a smile at the thought. He places his other hand lovingly over his chest where the wound would be, as if he can still feel Merlin’s magic at work. He saved me. His body feels warmer and his breathing has slowed back to its normal rate.

Noticing the polished white bowl in front of him he leans over to peer into the hole in the center. That’s a pretty useless bowl to have a hole in it. Yet it is clearly intentional. A strange metal tube protrudes from the side and is bent to point back into the bowl. Two knobs on either end bare the engravings H and C. Curious, he feels the metal and notices the knobs seem loose somehow. He cautiously turns the right one in the direction it allows for. He lets out a shout of surprise as water pours from the metal tube into the bowl, and down the whole. It continues running. He tests the water with his hand to find it warm. Warmer than a lake in the summer time.

There’s bathwater pouring from the tube seeming to come out of nowhere. Of course there is. Why not.

He test out turning the other knob, curious to see if the flow will stop, but is even more surprised to note the pressure actually increases. His jaw slackens involuntarily.

But where does the drain lead? Where does the water go? It seems like such a waste to be just pouring the cleanest water he has ever seen down a whole into nowhere. He bends down to check under the bowl. Another metal tube leads away from the hole in the center and into the wall. Weird.

He spots another polished white shape fastened to the floor opposite and wonders at what that one is for.

Arthur scoops up the warm water in his hands and splashes his face, scrubbing at the mud smears. He cups some in his hands and cleans off his muddy legs properly. When finished, he tentatively approaches the knobs again. He test it by turning it in either direction until the flow of water decreases and then stops altogether. This would make a wonderful addition to the castle. It would save Merlin hours of time spent fetching bathwater. I wonder if he could magic up something like this? His appreciation for magic fully takes hold as he glances between the white water bowl and the reflection of his unmarked chest. His father was wrong.

Declaring himself sufficiently washed, he dries himself off with the fluffy cloth the man had handed him. The thick and surprisingly soft material makes short work of absorbing the water on his body, and in a moment of charity, he wipes up the pools of water he left on the floor as well.

The clothes given to him are odd. Odd enough for him to blend in with his new surroundings. He grabs the shirt from the pile and hold it up to himself. It seems to be way too small to fit his chest. Or to get his head through. How is he expected to move his arms in this? He routes through the heap in hopes of finding something more suitable, but only discovers a strange pair of breeches. He resigns himself to a tight and uncomfortable fit. It’s better than being soaked. He pushes his arms through
and surprisingly manages to fit his head through the hole as well. With no laces to tie up, it was actually easier than normal. The material stretches to fit over his chest and arms and feels soft like a second skin. He has never seen anything like it. *Gwen’s going to love this.* He looks at himself in the mirror and is pleased to note the red of the shirt is the same red of his cape when it is dry.

With a newfound curiosity, he reaches down for the black breeches and slips his legs through. The strange toothed metal at the front leaves him confused, but he makes short work of the button. He tests them by bending his legs and running his hands over the material covering his thighs. It’s coarser and thicker than the shirt, but stretchy and softer than any back in Camelot. Clothes fit for a king indeed.

Pleased with his reflection in the mirror, he smoothes down his hair and opens the door with a deep breath.

Chapter End Notes

*So for any of you who didn’t figure it out, the “nonsense” words that Arthur doesn’t understand are just spelled backwards. It’s not required that you read and understand them, but it might help to make sense of things. The man speaks modern Welsh, but the language changed so fast and dramatically over time that the Welsh Arthur knows is quite different.*
Dumbledore is frozen on the spot, both eyes fixed on Merlin’s elder form through his spectacles. Merlin is certain that his heart is pounding loud enough to be audible to the paintings at the other end of the room. The material of his sweater threatens to become completely overrun by sweat.

“It’s true.” The whisper barely escapes past the headmaster’s lips. “The memories…” Unable to form a completed thought, he tapers back off into silence.

“I’ve never told anyone this before, I’m not exactly well versed in dealing with this sort of situation, so please bear with me.” Merlin goes for a conversational tone to ease the startled man. “Yes, I am Merlin. I was born in the 6th century and have been living all this time.

“You might have record of me from my time as a Hogwarts professor actually. I was head of the Slytherin house in the 1750’s.” He chooses to leave out the bit about the ill mannered portrait.

“I have been directed here to this school by the forces of old. I am, as you’ve noticed, passing as a student. My current form,” he gestures to himself, “would be easily recognized. My goal is to righten the balance that has been threatened. Voldemort and his followers are causing damage greater than they can comprehend and I intend to put a stop to it.” Dumbledore looks at him bug eyed.

“I have been living the past while in remote muggle villages, so I am not familiar with the events leading up to this point. I realize I’m coming into this a bit late in the game, but it really hasn’t been brought to my attention until recently.

“I am here revealing myself to you now as I require information on the subject and think it would be beneficial to have an ally.”

Merlin bites his lip at the man’s continued despondent stare. “Um. As I said earlier, I haven’t done the whole ‘revealing myself’ thing before, so I imagine you have some questions. I’ve lived a long life,” *understatement*, “so it’s not really possible to cover everything. Frankly I don’t see how much of it is anyone’s business, but you are open to ask me anything to clarify your confusion, or worry,” Dumbledore still hasn’t blinked. “or doubt…”

Merlin is close to wringing his clammy hands. This is worse than telling people of his magic. He’s been keeping this secret longer. His eyes slide away from the cold blue gaze of the current headmaster and over to the familiar portraits on the wall across from him.

The eyebrows on the painting of his old boss have shot up into his hairline and his mouth is dangling open. The expression of extreme surprise looks out of place on the usually stoic man and some of Merlin’s nerves settle. He’s often daydreamed of revealing himself to his old boss, every time he was scolded for reckless or unprofessional behaviour he’d visualize in his head the look on the man’s face. And here it is. Very different from the current headmaster’s reaction in front of him.

The lights behind Dumbledore’s eyes appear to turn back on again and he takes a loud swallow. And blinks. Twice.

“I… yes. I do have questions. Several if you don’t mind.” His eyes remain wide behind his glasses, but he gestures for Merlin to take a seat as he settles himself trembling slightly onto a chair. "How have you lived this long?"
Merlin wipes his hands off on his pant legs and crumples into the chair offered to him. He takes a steadying breath to collect his thoughts and runs his fingers through his beard. “I’m not exactly… uh. Well, I’m not a wizard. I’m not like you. Or the others.” He braces himself. “I’m not even really human. To be honest, I’m not entirely sure. I’m… not. Uh.” His other hand involuntarily bunches in the material of his shirt. He should have been prepared for this. It’s an obvious question really. But Merlin spent so long of his life training himself to avoid thinking of certain topics that he had avoided preparing for the possibility of this coming up.

His eyes are stuck on the felt of Dumbledore’s gloved hand. He forces himself to make eye contact before continuing. The man had a valid question.

“I don’t use magic like the rest of the magical community. I don’t rely on a wand” He places his on the desk next to him. “I don’t require words. Well, not any more at least. Wizards use the magic around them and inside of them and channel it through a wand with the use of a spell. You are humans with an internal storage of accessible magic within you. Over time, the strength has decreased and the methods have changed, but the principal is the same.” Dumbledore nods his head at this. “I don’t just use magic. I don’t have a storage of magic to dip into. I am magic. Completely and entirely. Magic is a constant in this world, and because of this so am I. I am a part of it.” He scrunches up his face. “I’m not alive in the same way. I cannot die.” Merlin refuses the images and memories that try to push their way to the front of his mind.

Dumbledore seems to be withholding an expression. “Are there more like you?”

Merlin swallows past the lump in his throat and briefly squeezes his eyes shut. “No.” His voice is almost too quiet to hear.

Blue eyes are fixed on him and he feels trapped in their gaze. Slowly the neutral expression softens. “From what I glimpsed in the memories you shared with me, you are very powerful.” His voice is gentle and soft. “I admit, I am quite relieved to have you here. I’m sure you’ve noticed that defeating Voldemort will take more than simply killing him, as difficult as that alone has proven to be. His ideals have been spreading like a plague on the land.” His expression turns grim and hardens slightly. “I’m afraid my part in this battle is concluding. It is a comfort to know I will not be leaving the next generation undefended.

“Are the tales about you true?” Merlin’s face heats up in memory of his first history of magic class. “Can we expect a Once and Future King to pop up again in the future as the prophecies-”

“No.” Merlin cuts him off before he can continue on about his king. Now is not the time to go down that road. He is battling enough turbulent emotions right now to go and add thoughts of Arthur on top of it all. “He’s not coming back. People don’t come back from the dead.”

Sensing the ancient man’s inner turmoil increase exponentially at that question, Dumbledore leaves it for now. They are both clearly shaken up enough as it is. “No. I suppose they don’t.”

They sit in a moment of silence, both taking some time processing.

The headmaster offers Merlin an honest smile, although clearly still rattled. “It is an honour to have you here and have you trust me with this. I will aid you in any way I can, for as long as I can. Thank you for revealing yourself to me.”

Merlin’s vision blurs and his breath comes out in a shaking rattle. With his moment of terror over, his body decides now is the time to fall apart. Large drops of salty water track down his face and into his beard. He tries to take another breath only to discover that his nose is completely clogged. His chin wobbles dangerously and his body sags forwards.
Quiet broken sobs escape his mouth and his shoulders shake with the effort. His magic seeps through his skin as he loses control of keeping everything contained. He squeezes his eyes closed against the bright gold, not wanting to frighten or alarm Dumbledore more than he no doubtable already is. His usual tight hold on his magic is loosened as his grip on his emotions turns slick and more tears drip into his now damp beard.

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_Dumbledore’s POV:_

Albus is lost in what to do about the broken man in front of him. He reaches a hesitant hand forward, but stops just short of touching Merlin’s trembling knee. _Merlin. The Merlin. Here in front of me. And real._ He lets his hand close the short distance to rest gently on the man’s leg. He’s startled at the impact, a small part of his mind believing this a dream. Or a hallucination. But it’s not. The leg is solid under his touch. _Real. This is really happening._

He lets out his own shaky breath, feeling confused, numb, but overwhelmed with relief. He will not be leaving this world undefended in his passing. The mindless guilt and terror that had accumulated over the past month melts away all at once, leaving him breathless. For the first time since the fateful events of that summer, Albus allows himself to feel the grip around his heart loosen with hope. It feels like a weight has been lifted.

The impossible man takes a loud sniffle and jolts Albus out of his thoughts and back to the crumpled figure in front of him. He tries not to jump out of his skin when he feels a cold and sweaty hand placed over his on the man’s knee. His eyes shoot up to the tear streaked face.

Merlin gives his hand a gentle squeeze as he looks back into his face. The bright glow of his eyes take his breath away. The space around the man seems to sparkle and shimmer in the warm light emanating from his eyes. The entirety of them fully overtaken by the brilliant light of pure raw magic and Albus can’t look away.

Albus is struck then by the sudden realization of just how powerful this being is. This man’s immortality is nothing like his friend Nickolas’. Merlin is _made_ of magic. He is eternal. Looking into his face, he finds he fully believes the impossible story presented to him. This man is not human.

He was always very aware of his own power and responsibility, his spells hitting harder than almost anyone else in the wizarding community with few exceptions. With the extra boost of the elder wand he is certainly Voldemort’s equal, perhaps even stronger. He is intelligent and at times even wise. But nothing compares to this man. The knowledge accumulated over countless centuries of life and the power to rival a god.

Merlin’s shaky smile filters into his brain and he is reminded abruptly of the state of the man. And then it truly hits him. “Haven’t done the whole ‘revealing myself’ thing before.” _He has never revealed himself to another. He has been alone. For possibly over a thousand years._ His brain reels at the revelation. _Incomprehensible._ Suddenly understanding the man’s teary outburst he forces all of his own shock and questions to the back of his mind and offers his own small smile.

“You’re not alone.” _At least for now._ Albus’ own mortality and quickly deteriorating state is becoming even more apparent to him.

Merlin gives him a defeated smile, knowing full well he will always be alone. But for now at least, he is finally able to take comfort in the presence of another. He only hopes he will be able to move on again after.
Albus spends the rest of the afternoon explaining to Merlin the rise of Voldemort and his true identity as Tom Riddle. He discloses information about his spy Professor Snape and his theory about Voldemort’s apparent immortality. Merlin stares back at him with puffy eyes slowly fading back to blue as he takes in the information. When Albus describes the horcruxes, Merlin’s face scrunches up in a look of disgust and hate. He whispers to himself and Albus just picks out the name Cornelius.

“You know of a Horcrux?” Albus mentally kicks himself.

“Of course he does.”

“In my first lifetime, there was a practitioner of dark magic who saved a part of his soul in a stone. He was the sorcerer who built Camelot’s castle actually. His spirit possessed a man and I destroyed him.” Merlin’s eyes are hard. “It was very dark magic.”

Albus nods along, relieved to not have to go into further detail with his explanation. “I am under the belief that Voldemort created seven.”

Merlin’s eyes widen and his eyebrows crawl up his face, forehead folding into neat wrinkles. He doesn’t question him. “Do you know how to find them?”

“I believe I’ve already found one. And there is a second I suspect the location of.” His face goes blank as he slowly pulls off one of his felt gloves, the pale blue fabric sliding over papery and discoloured skin. The material catches slightly on something on one of his fingers and he takes them off the rest of the way revealing an antique ring.

He carefully slides it off his finger, but Merlin’s eyes are fixed on his hand. “Ah yes. Ran into a bit of a problem with it and got left with a particularly nasty curse.” He opens his mouth to continue, but Merlin cuts him off, grabbing at his shriveled limb.

“I’m afraid there’s no cure for it.” He leaves out the part about it killing him within the year, not wanting to upset the man farther.

Merlin turns Albus’ hand around in his own, inspecting the dry black veins crawling beneath the surface of the skin. His eyes move up to his face with an unvoiced question before darting back down to Albus’ hand. “Do you mind if I…?” He slowly pulls his sleeve up after Albus nods. The pain of it long ago died out.

Not knowing that the man is up to, but too curious to stop him, Albus relaxes and just watches him. Snape already tried everything there is to reverse the spreading damage, but they both knew it was futile. Merlin is powerful, inhumanely so, but there is no saving him and he has accepted his fate.

The ring now completely forgotten on the table, Merlin’s eyes blaze gold for a second time and Albus’ body tenses immediately.

An indescribable warmth makes its way from Merlin’s touch on his wrist, spreading from his arm into the rest of his body. The traveling warmth speeds up, seeming to give chase to something. All at once Albus’ body jolts backwards as his body alights with a searing fiery pain. He clamps down on his jaw, teeth grinding together helplessly as fear takes hold of him.

He had accepted the certainty of his looming death, but this is too soon. He cries out from behind closed teeth, body starting to shake as the sensation of something pulling his innards takes over. Glowing eyes stare unblinking into his.

The pulling sensations drags over his body and centers on the grip on his arm. Gradually the pain dies down and the muscles in his body slacken and release their tension. He slumps back into the chair panting hard.
His heart pounds in his ears as he looks back into now blue eyes. The skin around them crinkle as Merlin smiles, “There! It worked!”

Albus looks down at his exposed hand. He blinks. His brows crease. He blinks again.

He flexes his hand into a fist than relaxes it again, repeating this motion several times. The sickly dark grey pallor of his flesh is gone and the coarse texture re-hydrated and smooth. He brings it up to his face and is shocked at what he sees. Not only are all signs of the curse completely gone, but his hand looks distinctly more youthful. The skin on his normally wrinkled and aged spotted hand is tight and blemishless. The once dark and parched veins filled out and turned back to faded blue and purple under smooth flesh.

He quickly pulls off his other glove and holds both his hands in the air in front of his face. There looks to be a 60 year age difference between them. One hand old and clearly showing the signs of many years wear, the other hand fresh and new. Merlin did more than just remove the curse.

“Oh!” Merlin stares at Albus’ hands now realizing the change. “I’m sorry I should have asked. I didn’t realize my magic would have that effect on you. Are you ok?” He looks hesitant and concerned. A touch of guilt in his gaze.

“I’m more than alright now it seems.” Albus is flabbergasted. He leaves his inspection to look at Merlin. “You cured me. And… apparently rejuvenated me, well, part of me at least. I cannot thank you enough.” His entire world has turned on its head in one day. He has help defeating Voldemort, Merlin is real, and he is no longer dying. Well, not soon anyways. “This might take a while to digest.”

“I was never very good at healing magic, even now I still can’t get it quite right.” He looks sheepishly at the ring. “So you were telling me about the horcrux?”

“Right. Yes. Well,” Albus picks up the ring with his newly refurbished hand. “This here ring once held a piece of Tom’s soul. As you know, he cursed it to kill whoever touched it. I managed to destroy it.” He points to a crack in the ruby. “It’s harmless now. Took quite a bit to do so, but that leaves us with, if I’m correct, 6 left.” He passes the ring to Merlin.

Merlin’s magic tingles when he touches it and his eyes go wide. Albus, noticing this, gives a slight chuckle. “Yes, the ring’s no ordinary ring. I trust you’re familiar with the deathly hallows?” Merlin shakes his head no, eyes still glued to the ring. “Relics said to defy death himself.” That gets his attention and his head snaps up.

“There are three such objects. All different. This ring here is the resurrection stone.”

Merlin startles back, his fingers fumble and the ring drops to the floor. “WHAT?!”

Chapter End Notes

Gods I find it hard to write Dumbledore. My apologies if he seems out of character at all, I tried my best I really did.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Chapter 10 is upon us! I can’t believe I’ve written this much already, it is the longest thing I have ever created. Worry not, I have no plans of ditching this story unfinished, you have many more chapters to look forward to! (many many many…). Next chapter is back to Arthur just a heads up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is the what now?!” Merlin’s voice verges on hysterical.

“One of the three deathly hallows. The resurrection stone. Said to have the power to bring back loved ones.” Dumbledore tries to look unfazed at Merlin’s outburst.

Goddess above, why have I not heard of this before? “Resurrection as in raising the dead? Bringing people back to life?” He looks doubtfully down at the ring.

“In a sense.” Dumbledore’s face looks troubled and a little sad.

The memory of Lancelot round two comes to mind and Merlin is suddenly disgusted with himself. He cannot believe that he actually entertained the thought of trying to raise Arthur from the dead. That the thought actually popped into his head and even worse, he had felt hope for a moment. To think he could be selfish enough to desecrate Arthur’s memory like that. Has he learned nothing from his experiences?

He digs his fingers into his leg. “So you’ve tried it before?” He’s careful not to colour his voice with his quickly growing anger. He wants the truth.

Dumbledore looks away and takes a deep slow breath before letting it out in one short gust, “yes.”

The rage starts to bleed through Merlin’s eyes. This was a mistake. This man is not to be trusted.

Dumbledore senses a change in the man in front of him and quickly looks up to see the now seething rage directed at him. He quickly explains himself before Merlin can do more to react. “It doesn’t bring them back to life, but just to the land of the living. Like a shadow of a ghost, only visible to the bearer of the stone. It is not a full resurrection.”

“People don’t come back from the dead.” Merlin’s gaze is firm and cold.

“No. No they don’t. But this allows us to commune with them for a time. Seek closure, or just…” Dumbledore’s face twitches, but his focus is intent on Merlin.

Merlin relaxes back in his chair again, not even aware of assuming a battle ready stance. “But is it really them?” His brows knot. “It is against the balance of nature to toy with the veil.”

“Yes, I’m… I’m certain in this. Don’t ask me how it’s done,” He raises both his old and new hand in surrender, “I am as in the dark as you, but it does.”
Merlin rolls the ring around in his palm considering. He turns a sharp look to Dumbledore, assessing him. “You’ve spoken with someone. A loved one. The dead.” His words sound nothing like a question.

“I have.” Dumbledore does not elaborate and Merlin doesn’t push the matter.

“Alright then. I’ll trust you on this.” Merlin gives him a no-nonsense stare. “How does it work?”

“Hold the ring and focus your mind on those you wish to see. Center all of your being on that thought. That is all. I recommend that you wait until you are in a seclud-” Dumbledore doesn’t get the opportunity to finish his sentence before Merlin is squeezing the ring in his fist, his eyes are closed and a faint mumbling can be heard. Dumbledore gives up his warning and braces himself for whatever more this strange man will do.

Several minutes of awkward semi silence pass as they sit across from each other. Dumbledore is attentive of any change in Merlin’s face and Merlin is completely oblivious to his surroundings.

Merlin slowly opens his eyes and looks around the room. He cranes his neck to search behind himself. Nothing. He slumps back. Of course. This would never work. Suddenly he feels another spark of anger at himself. Why did I try it? To allow myself to wish it were true? I’m weak. After over 1500 years you’d figure I’d be over it. He hates himself as soon as he thought it. Arthur was never his weakness.

Two more salty tears trace down the already wet trails leading to his beard. He sets the ring down a bit harder than necessary on the table. Dumbledore flinches.

“It doesn’t work.” He wonders if perhaps the other man had been trying to fool him. But why? He had seemed honest and open and Merlin holds himself a good judge of character. Perhaps he joined the no magicals and did drugs? Hallucinated everything?

“… but it must have. Unless the person is not dead?”

Merlin scoffs at that. The day a human lives over a thousand years. Ridiculous.

“I burned his funeral pyre myself. Over a millennia ago.” Dumbledore is speechless at that and his eyes betray his shock. Of course he already told the other man his age, but something like that is always a bit of a dry swallow.

“I don’t know what to say. Perhaps it is the time past that makes it harder to connect with them? Perhaps their soul has moved on?” Merlin chooses not to think about that.

“I don’t know what you saw, but it wasn’t your loved one. This stone does nothing.” He cast his magic into it just to affirm his beliefs. He was right. Nothing.

Dumbledore looks troubled and stands up to take the ring from him. He looks it over with a frown. He comes to a sort of conclusion and reaches his wand to his head. Merlin stares at him in curiosity as he pulls out a shimmering silver memory.

He walks over to the pensive and casts it inside, quick to turn away.

“Since you have shared a part of yourself with me, I figured it’d be fitting to show you a part of myself.” He makes a grand gesture towards the swirling bowl and Merlin is impressed by the movement. He logs it away for later use and approaches the bowl.

Casting one more slightly apprehensive glance towards the headmaster, he tips his head down and
enters the memory.

Dumbledore is seated in a small dusty room one might have once called cozy. He’s holding the ring in a shaky hand while his face holds a look of pure sorrow and guilt. In front of him is the transparent image of a young girl. She seems sad as well, but her face is set in a smile as she looks down upon the crumpled man in front of her.

“I’m so sorry.” He’s crying so hard the words barely make it out. He reaches a hand out desperately trying to clasp hers. Her hand goes right through him and Dumbledore lets loose a single rattling sob.

“It’s ok-”

Merlin is thrown abruptly back into reality. He stands there, stunned, both hands grasped firmly on either side of the pensive. He turns towards Dumbledore.

“It works.”

He is met with a small smile. “Yes.”

Merlin wastes no time, scrambling back to the other man, plucking the stone from his hand and seating himself back in the chair. He closes his eyes.

He drops the walls in his mind for a second time that afternoon. He thinks of Arthur. He pictures his smile, perfect and bright. The way his blue eyes crinkle at the sides when he laughs. His golden hair lighting up like a halo around his head in the sunlight. The way he rolls his eyes at Merlin before he pats him on the head slightly rougher than necessary. The way their eyes meet across every crowd. The way the light dances upon his face next to the camp fire. His gleaming eyes as he looks out his bedroom window at the town below. His strong unwavering voice when giving a speech. The way he says his name. He can almost hear it. See it.

He opens his eyes.

Looks around.

Holds his breath.

Nothing.

Merlin bites his lip. Hard.

Of course the universe will not allow him this. No closure for Merlin. Never him. Eternal torment for his failures. He closes his eyes against the pain.

“You have not failed your king” Words once whispered to him by a friend in a time of comfort repeat themselves in his head. Oh, but I have. And this is my payment. Percival never would allow him to wallow alone after the weeks following Camlann. Words that he hasn’t allowed himself to think of in centuries. Surely this loneliness is payment.

He resigns himself and opens his eyes.

Hazy blue grey eyes stare back at him. His breath catches at the sight of sleeveless chainmail atop broad shoulders.

He launches to his feet, startling Dumbledore back a couple steps and plunges his arms in the air at an
attempted hug. His body glides right through nothing but air, but the smile doesn’t leave his face.

“Percival!” His hands fall to his sides as Percival tries to clap him on the shoulder, but his arm goes right through his body. Ok, so touching is out. He feels as if he can finally take his first breath in centuries.

“Hi Merlin.” His old friend looks him up and down, his eyebrows raising. “It’s been a while.”

“Oh it’s so good to see you!” He laughs at the look on the knight’s face. Percival appears in his late 50’s at the age of his passing. The last time Merlin had saw him Merlin had just turned 50 on the nose. His current appearance as an elderly man must be quite the shock. Of course he’s not exactly showing all his years.

“I’m glad to see you’ve been keeping busy. The circus Merlin? Really? You always were the jester of our group, but I never thought you’d admit to it! Came to terms with your true calling no doubt.”

Merlin’s eyes widen with shock. “You were watching? You saw me?” He completely bypasses the teasing, too surprised and curious to respond with his usual sarcasm.

“Oh we are all watching. Always. Gwaine had a real laugh at how you spent the 1970’s in the disco sce-”

“You guys really saw everything?” He interrupts, knowing full well where the rest of that sentence leads. His face is the colour of the knight’s cloak.

Percival laughs. “Oh yeah. There’s no better entertainment.” His knowing and playful smirk causes Merlin to squeak in embarrassment.

A thought hits him and the colour drains from his face. He suddenly cannot look his friend in the eye. “You mean…”

Catching onto what Merlin is referring to, Percival soberes up and gives him a level stare. “You have endured longer than any man should ever have to. No one blames you for what you did. Or how you spent your time. You are a better man than any of us and have a lifetime of goodness to prove it.”

Merlin feels shame. He doesn’t deserve Percival’s kind words. He never did. Yet in that moment he allows himself the relief in believing his friends don’t blame him. That they still love him. After all this time.

He looks into his friend’s eyes and feels an intense longing to join him. But he cannot. He never will. The universe will not allow his torment to end.

“We’re not going anywhere. I’m not going anywhere. You’re not alone Merlin, you never were.” Percival always had the uncanny ability to read his thoughts. After Gwaine and Arthur’s passing the two had bonded over their grief, forming a closer relationship than in the years previous. Percival always knew what to say to make him feel a bit better.

Merlin’s chin trembles but his tear ducts had already relieved themselves. His eyes hurt and itch. He rubs them with his sweaty palms and tugs on his beard, then tries to smile, Failing rather spectacularly. Percival smiles at him anyway.

Suddenly something occurs to Merlin. “You said everyone… is Arthur there?” Of course he is dollop-head, he’s dead too. But why won’t the stone work for him? Does the universe really hate me that much?
Percival looks away, his face frozen. His eyes dart back to Merlin but his head stays to the side. “…I cannot say.”

Merlin’s heart beats faster.

“What do you mean? Is Arthur with you? Why can I not see him?!” His voice takes on the frantic edge that Percival had grown accustomed to in his lifetime.

“Please do not ask this of me. I cannot say. It’s not that I don’t want to, but that I don’t know. And I cannot if I tried.” His answer makes no sense and Merlin presses his lips together.

Right. Arthur is forever gone from his side. His coin has been sliced in half and there is no repairing it. He needs to get over it. Get over it. Be happy you have Percival. And the other knights apparently.

“Gaius! Is he there too? How is he?” Stupid question. He’s dead.

Percival look next to him and Merlin notices the air start to thicken in that spot.

Suddenly Gaius is looking at him. He has tears in his eyes and his smile is stretched wide.

“Merlin my boy! Look at you!” He laughs through his tears. “You’ve grown up. I dare say you’ve aged more than I have!”

This is the last straw for Merlin, his emotions brimming and frothing wildly over the top. His legs crumble under him and he falls to the ground in a disorganized heap. His eyes are glued to the figures in front of him but he can no longer make them out as new tears pour from his swollen eyes. His bony shoulders shake with silent sobs, a horrid croaking noise the only thing audible as he cries helplessly up at his loved ones.

Merlin is almost too lost to register the soft hand on his shoulder as Dumbledore bends down to comfort the wreck of a man in front of him. He allows himself to be helped up and lead over to a side door in the headmaster’s office. The ghosts of Percival and Gaius follow him, never leaving his line of sight. His legs are shaking and weak as he leans heavily on Dumbledore.

They go through the door and he is walked over to a modest yet comfortable looking bed. Dumbledore pushes his shoulders down for him to sit on the edge and just looks at him.

Merlin is completely incapable of forming speech. He cries harder at the thought that he almost forgot what his mentor looked like. Yet here he is in front of him. He almost doesn’t believe it to be real. I’m dreaming. No. I’ve lost it. I’ve snapped again. I’ve gone mad. They’re in my head.

“We’re right here with you Merlin” Gaius’ soothing voice is perfect. Exactly as he remembers. Too perfect even. There’s no way I could think something up this realistic. Right?

…..

* Albus’s POV*


He hadn’t the time yet to even absorb his new reality, and here the legend is sobbing in his quarters. He makes a decision with himself. Merlin is clearly not the unfathomable god he is pegged to be.
Powerful certainly, but his broken cries are not the threatening war cry of a god.

The man in front of him looks defenceless. He looks lost. Albus runs his hands over his face and gives his beard a firm tug. Before Voldemort is dealt with, or the deatheaters, or anyone, this man needs help.

He pushes Merlin back onto the bed and stretches out his limp and trembling legs. He grabs his quilt and pulls it up to cover the mess of limbs and white hair now stretched out on his bed.

Albus waves his wand to summon tissues and a glass of water, setting them on the table next to the bed. He then walks back out to his office and over to the chair in the corner of the room to think.

His mind races over the memories Merlin showed him in the pensive at the start of their conversation.

The image of a young man standing proud next to a king.

An old man calling lightning from the sky to defeat an entire army.

Carnage everywhere.

The stench of fresh blood.

Stabbing a beautiful yet terrible woman with a sword.

A small boat on fire floating down a lake.

Queen Guinevere on her throne with a tear in her eye.

A sheet of parchment declaring the Rule of the Ministry of Magic.

Witch burnings. Smoke and screams in the air.

The four Hogwarts founders sitting in a classroom shouting at each other.

A glimpse of a cave.

Something shiny and white.

A muggle village by the lake.

Teasing children. Muggles.

Small blurry images flashing between each short but coherent memory indicating the passing of an immense amount of time. No wonder Merlin is in the state he is. No one could survive that long. He needs a companion.

The image of Merlin’s devastated face at seeing who Albus assumes is his family for the first time in over a millennia comes to mind. He has lost everyone.

Albus’s eyes catch on his hand. He holds it up to his face again, almost not ready to believe it. He’s not dying. Not as quickly anyways, he amends. He struggles to come to terms with all of the changes. So much has happened in the past couple hours.

He needs a drink.

His feet itch to run to Hagrid, his faithful drinking buddy always ready with a monstrously oversized
glass of the strong stuff. No fire whisky will do tonight, this calls for more. But the sound of a hitched breath muffled through layers of bedding remind Albus of his new responsibilities.

He can drink with Hagrid later. It will feel fantastic to unburden himself with all these revelation and events, but that would be an unwise choice. He carefully reminds himself of Hagrid’s loose lipped habits. No, I’m alone in this. He immediately cringes at his choice of words.

Startled out of his thoughts by the screeching of the little bird shooting out of his grandfather clock, he looks at the time and jumps. Midnight already.

He had lost himself in his thoughts for quite some time. Missed dinner.

He looks towards his closed bedroom door and sighs. He is way too old to be sleeping in a chair, but he doesn’t want Merlin to wake and find himself alone in Albus’ chambers.

He sneaks over to the door, opens it slightly and peers through. The poor man had cried himself to sleep. The form of Merlin is barely discernable, just a small bumpy hill under the covers, curled up with his white hair sticking out at odd angles from the top of the blankets. His face is completely hidden. He softly closes the door again.

Albus strides over to his couch and stretches out atop it. He summons his spare blanket and resigns himself for an uncomfortable night and a kink in his back in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for all of your lovely comments, reading them makes me feel happy (and motivated too, if I'm being honest).

Keep in mind, a good chunk of this is already written so I can post them regularly. When I catch up to what I have, the updates will slow down rather dramatically (I'm slow). It also takes time to do the illustrations (yes there will be more in later chapters).
Chapter 11

*ARTHUR’S POV*

He is in the middle of a strange magical city with nowhere to go. No idea how to get home. Completely and utterly lost.

The new clothes the kind strangers gave him feel much more comfortable in the blaring heat of the sun than his wet armour. More comfortable than his tunic and breeches back home even. He can’t help but to run his fingers appreciatively over the soft material of the shirt. He’ll have to send his knights back with payment when he finds his way home. He’s curious to hear what the knights would think about this city of magic. If they would find it frightening, like his father would, or wonderful and incredible. He can almost see the stars glistening in Merlin’s eyes as he takes in the city for a second time. Merlin would love it here.

He continues to wander around the pathway through the unusual town, eyes wide and trying desperately to take everything in. When more metal beasts race by frightfully close to his person he decides it best to take some time to safely process everything. A tavern! They must have some sort of tavern I can stay in. He casts his eyes around at the signs on the shop fronts. Nothing is in any language he can understand.

Reaching his hands into the bag filled with his own attire he searches for some coins. His hand comes back empty and damp. The thought of spending a night under the stars in this uncertain land is daunting. What if he is attacked? He’s alone and everyone here has magic. The druids are a peaceful people, but he doesn’t suspect this town of being a druid base. Surely he is farther away from Camelot than he has ever before ventured.

Realizing he has no other choice, he makes his way back to the uncanny forest with fond thoughts of a soft patch of grass. He’ll have to rest with his sword out, but at least no one seems threatening. He is doubly reassured at the sight of a small child playing with their parents a couple trees next to his parking spot. Privacy might not be an option with people in every direction he looks, but there appears to be no bandits or foreign knights.

He allows his eyes to unfocus and slows his breathing. Too dangerous to sleep alone in these conditions, a short meditative rest is all he is willing to do. A bird chirps to his left and he startles with a grunt. Without thought, his hand tightly clasps the hilt of his sword partly hidden underneath his bag. His nerves are frayed.

After exactly six more jump scares by unusually domesticated squirrels and birds, Arthur finally deems rest impossible. He straightens out his back against the tree and scans his surroundings.
Several hours pass by lost deep in thought over his predicament. *If I’m not dead, than how long was I out for? Where is in the name of Camelot is Merlin and how did I get here? Does Gwen think I’m dead? How do I get home?* His bottom lip is run haggard as he clamps down on it with his teeth. The only solace he finds is in the thought that at least his kingdom will be well tended in his absence. Queen Guinevere is the best choice of successor he could have chosen.

After contemplating his choices and hashing out an action plan, Arthur decides his top priority is to find Merlin. He cannot go back to Camelot without him. Not to mention he can then have him explain everything to him. His was the last face he saw, *unless I’m dead*, surely this place is where he took him to be healed. Merlin does have the tendency to disappear at the most random and inconvenient times. He pauses at that thought. *Merlin was off doing magic. All those times in a fight he vanished. All those times he snuck off shirking his duties.*

The sheer number of times Merlin disappeared or acted strangely suddenly hit Arthur square in the face. He did a *lot* of illegal magic. *How in the world did he manage to have time for everything? And frequent trips to the tavern on top of it all.* Well… I suppose if I had all of that stress from performing illegal magic and hiding it from everyone all the time I’d want to drown out my worries every night as well.

*If he really is the one who brought me here, why is he not here with me now? Why did I get tossed out of the lake by other sorcerers? Is he captured?* Arthur’s brows furrow in concern. He will find him if that is the case.

The soft shuffle of shoes on grass cause him to clench his sword tighter. He squints his eyes trying to make sense of the stooped figure approaching in the now darkened landscape.

His body tenses all over in the effort to restrain himself from standing up and brandishing his weapon. Best to stay seated in hopes to be avoided. If he looks like he belongs there he might be
As the figure nears, Arthur relaxes back again. The old woman smiles kindly at him, her clothing is layered in many scarves and her white hair curls madly in every direction. Her face is open and her eyes look honest. For reasons he cannot explain, Arthur cannot help but trust her. He glares in her direction, upset with himself for his body’s automatic response to be at ease in the woman’s presence.

The old woman rests her weight on her metal cane as she gazes down at him, her smile now slightly sad. “You must be new around here.” Her voice is soft and warm, like a steady hearth in the harsh winter.

Not knowing how to respond or what answer might give himself away, he simply nods his head, relieved that he can understand her.

“I get there are not many places ‘round, but they don’t allow anyone to sleep out here. The ecilop come by often to check.”

Wondering desperately who “they” are, Arthur settles with a simple “Oh”.

She tilts her head to the side and looks him over for a moment. Arthur wonders if he will be recognized. He’s still not entirely sure if he should start panicking yet or not when the old woman appears to have made up her mind about something and takes a step closer.

Arthur deliberately affirms his grip on his sword, concerned at his otherwise lack of military response to the stranger in front of him. Why do I trust her?

An old dark hand reaches out to him in an offering. “Well if you have no other place to go, I guess I can keep you up in my eraps bedroom a elpuoc days. Certainly safer than out here.” She casts a weary eye upward and Arthur finds himself tilting his head to see. Just the cloudy night sky. Weird.

Arthur finds himself taking her hand and standing without actually making the conscious decision to do so. At contact with her hand, he cannot help the inexplicable feeling of relief that courses through him. Purely out of habit, he squints his eyes trying to make out any sign of danger in their surroundings.

She guides him back out of the green and into the city. “I don’t get company very often. Especially strangers. But one does get bored in old age, and I cannot help but find myself trusting you.” Her eyes look black and clear under the magical city lights. So she feels it too. Huh.

Arthur offers her a small smile, still too uncertain about where he is being lead and what will come next. Yet the promise of a warm bed and the oddly comforting presence of the old woman push him forward.

“It’s really not safe to be out at night. Yllaicepse alone.” Her expression is serious.

Arthur is thankful she doesn’t ask any questions, just continues to lead him to where he assumes is her home, hand wrapped snugly around his. Nodding his head at when he assumes is the appropriate time in their conversation, he spares a moment to think of the last time he was lead somewhere by hand like this. He feels like a child.

As the occasional metal beast pass them by, Arthur tries his hardest to not stare or flinch. He keeps his eyes constantly scanning his surroundings, taking in all of the bizarre sights. Strangely coloured lights shine from inside windows. Colours Arthur has never seen in light before. Weird muffled sounds and a rumbling come from one of the buildings. The old lady spares that window a
disapproving look as they pass by.

He quickly closes his mouth when he realizes he left it dangling open for the bugs.

The old lady turns and leads him down one of the side streets and towards a menacing monstrosity of a building. *That is a truly impressive castle. Is she Nobility?* He assesses her again. *Doesn’t dress like it.* A huge fortress of shiny glass windows and finely polished metal jut out into the sky. He cranes his head back but still cannot make out the top of it in the darkness. His mouth is open again.

He jumps slightly as two massive glass windows move seemingly on their own, opening up like doors to grant them entry to the castle. Arthur spares the old woman another look. *More magic. Is everyone here a sorcerer? Just how many are there? Was everyone I knew secretly doing magic? Is it really that common?*

The woman meets his eyes with a knowing look and the corner of her mouth pulls up.

The inside of the building is equally as odd and impressive as the outside. Tall polished stone walls with several identical metal knobless doors line the hallway. She reaches her boney and wrinkled hand to push on a small magically lit circle between two doors. Arthur startles again at the sound of a high pitched metallic *beep.*

One of the doors slides into the wall of its own accord and he is lead into a tiny mirrored room. The doors close again behind them. Arthur’s shoulders tense. “We’re on the 30th floor. You’ll love the view.” She pushes on another round light on a wall covered in rows of them and the colour changes.

He looks at the reflection of himself and the old woman in the mirror. *Why do I trust this old Witch? Her eyes meet his and she gives his hand a reassuring squeeze, as if she can read his thoughts. Can she read my thoughts? Is that a thing? Why did she lead me to this mirror closet? It doesn’t feel like a trap.*

Abruptly he feels the floor beneath him shift upwards and he reaches an arm out to steady himself. The old lady doesn’t move or look the least bit concerned as the sensation continues and Arthur forces himself to relax and control his breathing. She must have noticed his eyes widen as she smiles again.

“Wonderful isn’t it? And suoiruc? How muggles can manage to create such wonderful things without the use of magic. Makes one wonder why we don’t *share* a little more, yeah?”

Arthur is completely baffled. *What is a muggle? And did she just insinuate that this moving room is without magic? Are they sliding down a hill? But it feels distinctly like going up. Is this a pulley like in the mines? Doesn’t seem like one.*

All of a sudden the movement stops and the beep sounds again. Arthur’s stomach flips repeatedly and he swallows down against the taste of bile. The doors open again and he stumbles out on unsteady feet. His mind is in a haze as he is lead down identical hall after hall illuminated by the same dim orbs on the wall. Finally the old woman stops at a door, pulls out a key and opens it. She gestures for him to step inside.

His hand tightly clutches his sword, bracing for the unknown as he takes his first step inside the sorcerer’s home. He’s met by vibrant colours in every direction. Pink and orange scream at his eyes from the wall in front of him. Multiple ornate frames with remarkably realistic paintings hang proudly from every wall. The floor is a dark polished wood, unmarred and gleaming. He scoots out of the way as the old lady squeezes in behind him.
“Take off your shoes before you come in dear. Don’t want smerg.” Arthur silently complies and places them next to hers on a weird looking grey mat. The floor feels warm under his feet.

The elder woman proceeds to usher Arthur around her home, announcing the title of each room as they enter. The colours and plush fabrics of her furniture, as well as the sheer size of her dwelling indicate that she belongs to nobility. Or at least a wealthy merchant. He pointedly ignores the mysterious contraptions placed throughout. And the room full of nothing but weird metal boxes and a humming noise. Definitely not thinking about that.

No servants, knights, or family members are in any of the rooms. Who is this old woman to bring a stranger into her home alone? His brain tells him he should be screaming danger about now, yet he feels nothing. Well, not nothing. He feels safe.

Is this magic? Is my mind being controlled? He flexes his hands discreetly. Doesn’t feel like it.

“And this here can be your room for now. Litnu we get you sorted at least.” The room is a truly spectacular assortment of blues and greens, the bed by the wall is modest, yet long enough for a grown man and the outer wall is entirely glass. The view is dizzying. The city below is a breathtaking assortment of tiny lights against the dark of night. Like the brightest stars, yet here on earth. How are we so high up?

“Thank you my kind lady.” He brings her hand up to his face for a polite kiss in thanks. He has nothing else to offer her.

“It’s always better to have ynapmoc. Friends can be hard to come by in times such as these. Please call me Ethel. What’s your name dear?” Her expression is kind and unguarded.

“Arthur.”

“Well Arthur, I suspect you’re hungry, but it’s rather late for me to be making food. Please help yourself to the leftovers in the egdirf, I’ll make selffaw for breakfast.” Arthur blinks in confusion, but nods when he realises she is waiting for confirmation. “Please make yourself at home. I should have a spare hsurbhtoot in the bathroom if you need.”

Having absolutely no clue as to what she is referring to Arthur nods yet again. “Thank you for your kindness my lady.” He adds a small bow for good measure.

“Of course dear. I’m off to bed now, so I’ll see you in the morn’n.” Ethel gives him a gentle pat on the shoulder and disappears around the corner.

Arthur sets his soggy bag in the corner next to the bed sparing a moment to consider the rust that is bound to accumulate on his armour. Merlin will have his work cut out for him when he finds him. If he even chooses to stay his manservant. Arthur scrunches up his face and expels those confusing and stressful thoughts. Now is not the time.

His stomach growls in protest at his long and foodless day. Ethel mentioned food, but he can’t even begin to guess where it is stored. He recalls the room dubbed “bathroom” and the wondrous running water and bowl he spotted in it. A nice long drink would be incredible.

He grabs a small dagger out of his bag, stuffing it between the top of his breaches and the soft flesh of his back. He pulls his shirt down to cover it. The notion of roaming a castle unarmed is a dangerous one. He had spotted no signs of another person in Ethel’s estate, but he will not be caught unprepared.

Taking a deep breath, he ventures out of his new chambers and down the hallway. He stops at the
door to the ‘bathroom’ and tentatively opens it. White orbs on the wall burst to life after several seconds upon entering the room and Arthur jumps out of his skin. On high alert, he spins around for the sorcerer behind him. *Damn they have silent feet.* But he is met with nothing. The hall is empty. Quickly he closes the door, barricading it with the bulk of his body.

His breathing is heavy as he strains his ears for the inevitable sound of someone stalking by outside the hall, but several moments pass and there is still nothing. Finally he allows himself to relax and step away from the door.

This bathroom is much nicer than the one at the tailors’. The perfect mirror is framed in sleek black, the white water bowl set inside of a polished and gleaming stone counter. He tries out the metal dials and is pleased to note that they work the same as the other he’s encountered.

He gulps down large mouthfuls of the remarkably clear water and turns off the stream.

The act of drinking water serve to remind him that he had not had the chance to relieve himself in the forest before Ethel brought him in. Not recalling the location or even existence of the latrines or chamberpots in this castle from the tour, he scratches his head in confusion. Surely they have a room where they go to relieve themselves. This town is the cleanest he has ever encountered, they must have a system other than just hiding behind local shrubbery.

He looks around the room for the off chance of discovering a clue, but the only other thing in there is a shiny white tub and a matching white seat. The tub looks different, yet not completely foreign. King Olaf had a similarly shaped one in his castle Arthur remembers from one of the times he had been sent on his father’s behalf to settle affairs. But the white chair is new.

Arthur approaches the chair and notices the seat is not attached at all sides. He carefully lifts it up, not wanting to break anything. Fastened to the chair at the back, the top lifts like a chest lid.

Arthur’s eyebrows disappear in his hair line when he discovers the seat is in fact a bowl filled with water. *Well that was unexpected.* He reaches down and tests it with his hand. *Cold. Very cold.*

He notices that the seat-bowl also has a whole in the bottom. An idea hits him and he looks around the seat for another metal knob. He discovers a metal handle and pulls it in either direction until something happens. He stares transfixed as the water empties down the hole with a *whoosh* and fills up again. He does this several times in wonder.

*But why would you need a seat with water in it?* And *changeable water at that? Why would you drink out of a chair?* He looks over at the water-bowl under the mirror and something clicks into place. *Oh.*
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for all the kudos and lovely comments <3 you're the best

*MERLIN’S POV*

The soft sound of bird song drifts in through the window. The thick curtains muffle most of the high and shrill sounds, leaving a melodic and soothing ensemble as Merlin’s waking up call. He rolls over, trying feebly to escape the sound.

“Mnmargh-” The pathetic noise leaves his crusted lips as he is greeted by the thin patch of sunlight shining between the curtain seams. His eyes flutter open for a brief moment before he quickly rolls back over with another moan. He rubs at the grime half sealing his eyes shut and wipes the dried drool from his mouth. Today does not feel like a fresh morning.

Merlin slowly sits up in bed with a hand in the air to block the sunlight from reaching his eyes again. The room spins angrily around him at the sudden movement and he takes a deep breath to steady himself. The smell of fresh coffee nearly puts a smile on his face, but it is interrupted by his own stench wafting back at him as he peels off the covers. Not as bad as the smell of rotting flesh, but unpleasant nonetheless.

Mindlessly following the scent of coffee he staggers over to the table at the foot of the bed, belatedly realizing that this is not his room in the dorms. Startled by this revelation, he scans the room trying to recall the events of the day before.

Adrenaline courses through him immediately snapping his body out of its fumbling groggy haze. Excitement, pain and grief, followed by embarrassment leave him red faced and sweaty yet again. He chugs the coffee in one go, grimacing.

He spots his school uniform in the chair of what he now knows must be Dumbledore’s bedroom. Double checking to make sure the room is empty but for him, Merlin strips out of his moist, yet stale clothes. He unceremoniously dumps them in a heap on the floor, scooting them into the corner with his foot while reaching for his folded uniform.

Now fully dressed and somewhat less smelly, he holds his breath and opens the door.

A beautiful phoenix is perched on the desk next to a hunched over Dumbledore, papers and artifacts strewn about the surface in a semi organized manner. The man’s dishevelled beard comes into full view as he turns his head towards Merlin still hovering in the doorway.

“Good morning Merlin. I hope you slept well. I took the liberty of having your uniform brought up,” his eyes roam down to his clothes.

“Yes, thank you. That was thoughtful. Thanks for the coffee too by the way, it was... needed.” He feels incapable of complementing the brew as he almost didn’t even taste the coffee through the teeth rattling and stomach clenching attack of sugar that had assaulted his senses. He swallows hard against the sudden urge to bring it up. He spots a cup of the stuff hidden amongst a heap of
contraptions on the man’s desk and suppresses a shudder.

“You’re very welcome.” Dumbledore pushes his chair back and stands up to face Merlin. “I will need a bit of time, but I would like us to meet up regularly for planning and sharing information. I have an associate in the battle against Voldemort here at the school and, with your consent of course, I think it to be beneficial for him to be included. He is a spy in Voldemort’s rank of deatheaters. There is a plot here in Hogwarts, several I suspect, that post a threat to the safety of the students and the wizarding world at large. It is important that my associate is made aware of some developments as they pertain to him personally.” At Merlin’s raised eyebrow Dumbledore continues, “I’m sure you’ve already met the potions professor Severus Snape?”

Merlin’s thankful that he is no longer holding the fancy china mug as surely it would have shattered against the floor at this revelation. Instead, his mouth is left open like a fish, his foul morning breath freely unleashed into the rest of the room.

“Professor Snape?! Now that guy knows how to fit into a roll. Out of all the Hogwarts staff, he is the last I’d peg to be on our side.

Dumbledore quietly chuckles at his surprise. “Yes, he is quite convincing isn’t he.” The headmaster’s blue eyes sparkle.

“I’d like to meet him, outside of the classroom, before deciding if it’d be wise to reveal myself to him. I am not comfortable with more people knowing.”

“Keeping him in the dark would pose several, ah, challenges, but I respect the decision is yours. I’ll arrange for him to join us in our first meeting this next weekend. Give us both some time to adjust. You can keep your appearance as a student and I’ll tell him something to explain your presence.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.” In the meantime, I’ll work on my cover as a student. Assimilate more. If I can get Draco to trust me, perhaps I can sway him to our side and his influence will help with the rest of the slytherins. I can disassemble Voldemort’s newest rank in his army before the war breaks out. I’ll dissolve his military before it’s even fully formed.

“Well, if you plan on retaining your cover as a student, as it is Monday, I do believe you have defence against the dark arts class in under an hour.”

That pulls Merlin out of his head and he looks up with surprise written all over his face. “Right. Yes. Class. Um, thanks for everything.” He smile is warm and genuine, “really.”

“Of course. And thank you. Apart from all of the help with Voldemort and his followers, you saved my life yesterday. If you ever require anything.” He leaves the rest unsaid, eyes fixed on his new hand as he wiggles his fingers.

Merlin squeezes the ring in his palm, mind silently reeling as he reaches for the doorknob to leave. He turns around one last time, looking at the man who just changed his life. “See you Saturday then.”

As he turns back to the exit, a hand reaches out quickly to stop him. His eyes meet with Dumbledore’s watering ones, but after the surprise wears off, Merlin notices his tears are from laughter. The headmaster takes a moment to compose himself, looking Merlin up and down in a way that makes him think he is wearing food sloped drown his front. He looks down to check, but finds the old uniform pristine. He scrunches his face in confusion.

The twinkle in his eyes back again at full force, Dumbledore manages to spit it out. “You might want
to, ah, change first.” He chuckles none too quietly.

Merlin, for the second time, looks down at himself wondering what is so funny about his uniform. He smooths it down his front. He turns his body and checks his backside. He pats down his hair. He straightens his beard. He runs his fingers through his beard. His beard. His beard.

Ears now flaming bright red, no doubt matching the rest of his face, Merlin straightens out, eyes glowing bright gold in the morning sunlight. His old form stretches out, fills out, and smoothens out. His white hair retreats back into his head and darkens to black, beard shrinking and then disappearing entirely. The clock turns backwards on his appearance, old age shifting through middle age, his prime and then settling on youth. In a full thirty seconds, a 17 year old Merlin stands in front of his headmaster, looking thoroughly embarrassed.

“Right. I’ll be off now then. Thanks. Again.” Looking every bit the awkward teenaged boy, he stumbles out of the office and quickly down the stairs, leaving a haggard breathing Dumbledore in his wake.

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Awkward morning now thankfully behind him, he firmly puts all thoughts of the resurrection stone and all that it entails out of his mind. He has all the time in the world, yet these students do not. Priorities, he reminds himself for what must be the millionth time. Blue eyes and shimmering blond hair keep worming their way to the front of his mind. That and his embarrassing sob session in front of his new friend.

What a way to make a first impression.

Rounding the corridor leading to the defence class, Merlin belatedly realizes that he had left his wand in the headmaster’s office. Growling in frustration, he closes his eyes and summons it into his pocket. Taking the opportunity to also remember that his eyes do in fact glow when he performs magic, he casts the usual glamour over his face. Feeling ridiculous over the countless close calls he had this morning alone, he opens the door to the classroom.

Slytherin and Hufflepuff students stand around the front of the class cleared of all desks. He joins the ranks of his fellow Slytherins between Draco and Goyle. Why do I not know his first name yet? Giving them a polite smile and nod in greeting, he takes out his useless stick in preparation to begin waving it around.

Professor Lupin strides into the classroom, warmly greeted by the students. Draco leans over to Merlin to whisper in his ear. “He’s a little weird, but actually quite insightful. You’ll like this class, trust me.”

Surprised to hear praise from the usually negative and smug student, Merlin perks up and looks over at his new professor.

Plain and worn black robes on a pale and balding middle aged man. Professor Lupin looks proudly out at the students, back straight and wand by his side. “Welcome back to Defence against the Darks Arts class. I’m glad to be teaching you lot again. With hard work and lots of practice let’s beat last year’s 7th year class’ average shall we? Today we will be diving right into paired duelling. Let’s use this as a bit of a refresher class before I teach you more complex curses and curse blockers. This year we’ll be touching on more of the dangerous stuff so I want you guys prepared.”

“Alright wands out and divide into groups of two. I want you all to pair up with someone in the opposite house. That way you’ll know what it’s like teaming with someone you’re less familiar with.
You have to work together on this, but you’ll only have 5 min to share with them your strengths and weaknesses before we get started. Ok, go!”

Students madly scrambled around, slytherins angrily grumbling about having to be paired with ‘the pathetic hufflepuffs. Merlin finds himself partnered with a short scared looking girl, her dark brown wide eyes peering up at him as she clutches her wand tightly to her chest like a shield.

“I’m Maldin, I’m pretty fast in a duel and know some more advanced spells so I’m good at the offensive.” I’m good at everything really, but here we go, “I’m not so great at blocking certain curses though. I find some hard to identify and counter in time.” Absolute rubbish.

“Uh, my name is Dani, and uh, I guess I can cover the defensive. I’m… pretty fast too I guess.” Her eyes are fixed on his shoes and her voice is quiet.

Merlin unleashes the dimples upon the small girl in hopes of providing comfort to her obviously jagged nerves. “This’ll be fun, not to worry, we’ve got each other’s back, yeah?”

She finally looks up at him and seems to relax slightly. “Yeah.”

Lupin pairs the teams up, across from Merlin and Dani stand Draco and a burly looking teen with a dangerous glint in his eyes. “Ready Maldin?” Draco snickers looking at his small partner. “We’ll go easy on you the first round.”

Merlin glances at his partner, her cheeks pink at Draco’s comment. “If you feel the need for a warm up round ‘cause you’re not ready, I’m sure Dani and I can oblige.” Draco’s jaw sets and he raises his chin in the air farther than it was already.

“Ok everyone, you should be standing 10 paces away from your opponents now. On the count of 5 you can start. No dangerous curses. Aim to knock out or un-arm, not to incapacitate. I won’t have any trips to the hospital wing tonight alright guys? Play nice.”

“One”

“Two”

“Three” By this time the entire class is counting along with him, faces set in excited concentration at their opponents across from them.

“Four” Draco rolls his shoulder in what Merlin assumes is an attempt at being intimidating. Merlin fights his smile.

“Five!” Not waiting a breath, Draco’s partner slashes his wand through the air, red sparks racing out towards Merlin. Dani swooshes her wand and with a clearly pronounced word, the sparks disappear. Merlin takes a moment to meet her eyes and smiles while he fires off a string of curses at a surprised looking Draco. He blocks them easily and fires off his own curse. The back and forth continues on for several minutes, Merlin careful to pull his punches, knowing full well even a small disarming spell cast from him could do these students serious damage.

He steps to the side to gracefully avoid a shot of yellow light from the Hufflepuff’s outstretched wand, but allows the second one to hit him. His body absorbs the magic in the spell and he forces himself to fall backwards to make it look convincing. With Draco cheering in triumph, Dani takes the opportunity to blast him with a binding jinx and he falls hard on the ground leaving the two hufflepuffs to duel each other while Merlin fumbles back to an upright position.

Deciding this one would be best lost, Merlin fires out several curses before taking a hit and blasting
against the wall behind him. He takes a second, blinking on the ground to pretend he is dazed before he scrambles back to his feat in time for Lupin to blow his whistle.

Draco’s robes are skewed to the side and he is favouring his left leg, but still standing. The large hufflepuff next to him is breathing heavily and resting on his knees, leaving Dani the only one standing fully, a proud smile on her face in contrast to the rage evident in Draco’s.

Merlin wipes himself off and at Professor Lupin’s word, offers his opponents a handshake. “Not so tough there eh Maldin? Perhaps you could learn something here after all.” Draco’s anger at losing turns to smugness in the face of Merlin’s apparent utter defeat.

“Yeah, you guys fought well! I’ll have to practice more to beat yous.” He smiles wide at his partner. “You were fantastic!”

She blushed up at him and mumbles a thanks before scurrying off to her fellow hufflepuffs slowly congregating to the other half of the classroom.

“Yeah, she was actually pretty good.” Draco looks surprised. “Certainly a lot better than you,” he bumps his shoulder against Merlin’s “You were completely out classed by the little hufflepuff girl.”

His smirk has returned.

“Yep! And so were you! We should ask her for tips…” Draco’s embarrassment seeps through and overpowers his smug face.

“Congratulations class!” Lupin’s loud voice cuts right through the chatter and the classroom falls silent. “Excellent job dueling. I’ve observed your techniques and for next class I will be talking and giving you all tips one on one as we continue with duels. So make sure you all get lots of rest. Our second class is bright and early tomorrow morning. You’re all dismissed” He waves his hand around at the students in a motion somewhere between a greeting and a dismissal.

Draco, Goyle, and Merlin walk out of the room together talking excitedly about the duel tomorrow.

“Maybe next time I can team with someone other than a mudblood. He was completely useless.” Goyle leans into Draco’s sympathetic ear.

“Gross. Yeah, good luck mate.”

Merlin drapes his arms over both the boys and says in a conspiratorial whisper, “My partner was muggle born and she whipped Draco’s ass with the floor. And she was certainly better than me.” He adds a giggle for effect and grins and Draco’s horrified expression.

“No way she is a muggle born.”

“Yep.” Merlin’s voice is pleased. “I heard her talking over dinner the other night to her friends about why we can’t use cell phones or ipods on the school grounds. Definitely muggle born.” Draco looks in blind disbelief at the hallway in front of them.

“Oh wow. You guys must really suck!” Goyle snickers to himself, ignoring Draco’s murderous glare.

“Maybe.” Merlin gives Draco a knowing look as he seems to be thing hard about something. Hopefully re-evaluating some of his opinions and life choices.

…..
Dinner that evening can not end fast enough. Merlin plows forkful after forkful of spaghetti into his mouth setting a record pace for the rest of the students in the hall. Hermione catches his eye from across the tables and gives him a look of disgust. He swipes his sleeve across his chin catching a stray noodle before chugging all of his pumpkin juice in one go. Draco and Goyle are trying hard to not look at him or hint that they are in any way associated with him.

Merlin has promised himself one night of self indulgence before he cracks down and fully assumes his duty to convert the future deatheaters away from the path of the Dark Lord. Tonight is his last night to himself. His one night to talk to his old friends, reminisce, and wonder at Arthur, before he puts it out of his mind for possibly the next several decades.

The resurrection stones sits heavily in his pocket. His hand slides over the surface for the hundredth time that day. Checking. Double checking.

The very moment the last of the dinner passes down his throat, he tears away from his classmates with a quick wave and a wink at the Gryffindor table.

Finally in the seclusion of the room of requirement, the walls fitted to look like Arthur’s round table room, he plants himself in one of the chairs and tugs the ring hastily onto his finger.

Immediately the seats around him fill up with the hazy ghosts of his friends. Knights sitting in their proper seats as well as fellow servants, Will, his mother, Gaius, and of course the queen herself. All of their faces turned to him. He gulps down against the very large lump in his throat.
Chapter 12.5 (bonus)

Chapter Summary

So I had actually left this scene un-written, fully intending on leaving it off screen and up to the readers’ imagination, but after reading you guys’ comments about how excited you are for the next chapter and all of its tear jerking glory I realized I better write it. So here is a bonus and completely unplanned mini-chapter written just for you! Enjoy!

“I still can’t believe you never told me you were a sorcerer! I mean honestly though, I probably should have been able to figure it out on my own. Perhaps if we hung out more when I was sober…” Gwaine strokes his beard scruff in thought.

“And when would that have been exactly?” Percival’s half laugh sends a stab of longing through Merlin.

Leon leans over and elbows Lancelot in the ribs. “You figured it out.”

Lancelot smiles and runs his hand through his hair. “Not really thou-”

“You pieced it together?!” Gwaine interrupts him with a generous helping of good humoured outrage.

“Well it wasn’t really like th-”

“God, man! Of course you out of all of us would be the one who managed to figure it out!”

“I didn’t figure it out myself, it wasn’t like that.”

“You told him?!” Gwaine’s head whips around to face Merlin, his eyebrows rising to hide behind his hair.


“He really didn’t. I saw him defeat a griffin with magic, he saved my life. It was before I was even a knight.” Lancelot props his faintly transparent head in his hands, elbows resting on the polished surface of the round table.

“You knew all that time?!” This time it is Leon’s turn to shout at Lancelot, the sharpness of his tone is defeated by the impressed look on his face.

“I did.” Lancelot gives a single nod, the smile never once leaving his face.

“I feel pathetic.” Gwaine’s dramatic sigh is accompanied by his hand smooshing half his face.

“Well I can hardly blame you, I was really good at hiding it. Lots of practice.” Merlin feels strange having this conversation so late. Not much has changed though really. People nowadays might know I have magic, but I’m still hiding. He sighs in a significantly more sincere fashion than Gwaine. Why must everything always remain like this?
Gazing at the faces of his long dead friends and family, Merlin is overwhelmed by the pressing need to join them. Peeling out of his fleshly imprisonment and being free.

“I knew. I figured it out I mean.” The table of knights’ turns in unison towards Gwen, sitting to Merlin’s left looking sheepish. “Not right away of course.”

Gwaine is left speechless. Percival nods in remembrance of Gwen’s rather lacklustre show of surprise at Merlin’s grand ‘outing’. Leon looks offended. Lancelot merely smiles larger, his eyes twinkling at Gwen.

Gaius interrupts their collective surprise, “Honestly boys, Genevieve probably knew more of Merlin’s life than any of you, having lived a good portion of her life a servant along-side him.”

“Hey, I was always careful!” Merlin puts in his token protest, anticipating Gaius’s response with fond nostalgia.

“Heh! Right. I always warned you about doing your chores with magic. Nearly gave me a heart attack several times. At one point I could have sworn you did it out of pure spite just for the sake of performing illegal magic right under Uther’s nose!” His typical disapproving raised eyebrow stare is foiled by the smile twitching at his lips.

“My god Merlin! With Uther as King?!” Leon’s hand lands flat on the table, hard, but makes not a sound.

“Were you not watching Merlin during the renewed witch trials? Or during the Nazi reign a little while ago? It’s like he gets a thrill out of dangling it right under their noses!” Merlin’s face colours at Percival’s mention of those events. He had indeed performed some rather risky magic out of sheer irritation and spite. Of course the view of what is risky and not risky gets a bit skewed when one never dies.

The table quiets as Merlin just takes a moment to absorb the faces of his lost loved ones. Their faces had grown foggy and distorted over the years and his eyes water at the thought of forgetting again.

“Oh! How about those pants of yours?” Gwaine’s flirty smile is back at full force, nearly strong enough to knock Merlin right out of his chair. “The sparkly colour-changing ones! What happened to them? And when that bloke with the—”

“Let’s not think too hard on Merlin’s 1970’s exploits. Please.” Gaius avoids eye contact with Merlin, his face red and stuck battling between a look of horror and laughter.

“Oh god yes, those were some fun times!” Percival sits up straighter in his seat.

Gaius’s eye twitches and Merlin takes pity on him and changes the topic, having zero desire to recount his disco exploits in front of his old mentor.

They spend the remainder of the evening, and a good portion of the night, regaling each other with accounts of their adventures in Camelot. Urging Merlin to share the details of some of his magical antics, he laughingly shares the tale of Arthur’s donkey ears. The room is filled with merry laughter and gleeful shouts.

After a while, Merlin has to take a moment to sit back away from the conversations and just take it all in. Although transparent and obviously dead, his friends look happy. They joke with each other with the same sense of kinship and familiarity as they did back in Camelot. It has been such a long time since Merlin has felt truly at home, and although having expected to feel further saddened by summoning his friend’s spirits, he was not expecting to feel so alone.
Always having to hide has provided Merlin with the distinct feeling of being set apart from the rest. Being different, being poor, being magical, being other. But those feelings did not prepare him for the overwhelming feeling of being abandoned. Left behind and pushed aside by the fates. His friends and family have lived their lives sharing their experiences with each other, have died and moved on, and he is just left here. At the end of the night, they will fade back to the after-world and he will remain forever bound to earth.

He feels like tearing at his skin in attempt to set himself free. To peel away his fleshly encasing and disappear off to Avalon with them.

Their laughter continues on in sharp contrast to Merlin’s rapidly increasing despair. His mother, mostly silent throughout their meeting, turns to him and rests an intangible hand on his shoulder. Her kind and warm smile shatters a piece of his heart and his shoulders shake with the force of a silent sob.
So, after a comment, I now realize I forgot to mention that Harry Potter does not in fact exist. The prophecy didn't happen and James and Lily were killed before Harry was born. If we were following book canon, it would be year 1997, but instead I’m writing this to take place in 2017. Just a heads up.
Sorry if things have been rather confusing so far without this clarification.

The cold floor under his bare feet is the only thing keeping him awake. The chilly night air wafts through the hallway rustling his cloak and causing gooseflesh to pop up on the exposed skin of his ankles.

The steady sound of footsteps ahead increase in volume as Merlin silently stalks closer. Light from the boy’s outstretch wand barely illuminates the space ahead, leaving him to wonder at how many times he has done this already to know his way around the castle so well in the dark of night. Merlin can navigate these hallways blindfolded and drunk out of his mind, a test that had been tried and proven one eventful night in 1754, yet the way Draco speeds down the winding hall could rival the late servant George himself.

After the final sharp turn leading thankfully well past the portrait of ‘Professor Emryl’ the sleep deprived teen stops in front of the entranceway of the room of requirement. Immediately a small wooden doorway appears along the blank stretch of wall space and Draco slips quietly inside.

Merlin’s curiosity tinges with a sense of dread when he catches sight of Draco’s face as he slips in through the door behind him. Not worrying at being spotted, Merlin creeps up behind him, following through the tall stacks of forgotten treasure piled high. The room’s appearance is in stark contrast to last evening’s round table. The sight of a familiar old staff propped up next to several heaps of junk catch his eye, but Draco’s attention never strays.

Wondering fiercely at what the boy has stored in here and certain he is up to something dangerous, he finally comes to a stop. Standing tall and imposing in front of Draco is a large dark cabinet. Merlin cranes his neck to see the inside when the door is opened, but there is nothing. The cabinet is empty.

Enhancing his vision with magic, Merlin squints at the empty space, convinced that he must be missing something.

Nothing.

Merlin continues to watch silently as Draco pulls out an apple from under his robes and places it inside. Deeming that satisfactory, Draco proceeds to close the doors, step several paces back, and point his wand at it. Muttering a few rather strange words quietly at the cabinet, a soft white light briefly erupts from his wand. Biting his lip, he opens the door again and Merlin is intrigued to note that the apple is gone.

Having several theories about the cabinet at this point, Merlin waits while Draco shuts the door again and repeats the spell. Opening the door for a second time, the apple has returned to its previous place inside. Looking extremely pleased with himself, Draco reaches out to grab the apple and inspect it under his wand light.
Now thoroughly concerned, Merlin’s mind spins around at the possibilities. Draco has managed to smuggle a vanishing cabinet inside the school grounds. Anyone can now enter Hogwarts uninvited and undetected. The boy’s unsavoury opinions make this cabinet an incredible danger to the other students. Merlin doesn’t have to think too hard to make the conclusion of what he plans on using this cabinet for and who he plans on bringing over.

With a clear line into Hogwarts, deatheaters can infiltrate the school, officially recruiting the sympathetic students and posing a threat to the others. Not to mention Dumbledore is the only strong force publicly opposing Voldemort, and now there is a direct line of access to him.

Merlin spares a moment to feel sorry for the young boy in front of him, brainwashed and manipulated by his parents and mentors. He’ll have to have a talk with him later. Try to help him out of whatever tangle has wrapped itself around him. Try to convince him that there is more than one path to take.

Not bothering to close his eyes, Merlin seeps his magic into the cabinet, following the link to its twin. Keeping the enchantments intact, he carefully lays out a spell for whoever decides to take this path into the school grounds. While lost in concentration, his consciousness somewhere between the linked cabinets, Draco bumps into Merlin’s side as he makes for the exit.

Eyes wide in alarm, Draco spins around with his wand out. Merlin inwardly curses himself for carelessly standing out in the open. His blood runs cold as the boy’s eyes gaze directly at him. Draco’s jaw is clenched and he lets out several profanities while, to Merlin’s relief, continuing to search around.

Merlin looks down at himself to double check that his invisibility spell is still holding while Draco makes demands at the dead air around them, voice shaking slightly. “If you know what’s good for you you’ll show yourself.” After waiting several long minutes, Draco’s rigid posture deflate and he let out a relieved exhale.

Merlin waits a moment longer before following Draco out of the room of requirement, not wanting to take any more unnecessary risks. Quickly lifting the staff from its admittedly rather poor hiding place, Merlin swears heatedly at the room before slipping through the door himself.

Racing through the corridor as if being chased by a horde of feral waverns, Merlin takes a detour through a secret passageway, leaving Draco behind him in the race to get back to his bed undetected. He could always sneak in after the boy in his invisible state, but knowing Merlin’s luck, he’d probably knock something over and reveal himself. Better safe than sorry.

Cursing that loud pop that follows apparating, he tears down the hallway panting hard. It’d been a while since he’d last had to run anywhere.

Startled out of his sprint, Merlin stops himself last minute from soaring down a set of stairs. At the end of the hallway through a doorway to his left there is a faint green light and the sound of smooth flesh sliding over stone. Backing up several paces, Merlin slowly approaches the light.

A girl of about sixteen stalks out of the doorway with a confident swagger. Her hair is a bright red even in the dark, and in her hand is clasped a small back book. Merlin feels his heart beat double in speed at the sight of her glazed over expression.

She strides past him unaware, footsteps echoing loudly down the hall as she disappears around a corner.

Merlin fights the urge to follow her, knowing the importance of maintaining his cover with Draco.
He needs to get back to the dorm before him. Fast.

Whatever this girl is up to he’ll find out later. He can ask about her amongst his classmates. Perhaps tail her on another midnight escapade. He takes a sharp turn and heads back to the slytherin commons as fast as his feet can silently carry him.

…..

The next morning Merlin feels the consequences of two terribly short nights of sleep. He goes through his morning routine in autopilot, sparing Draco several envious glances as the youth appears well rested and chipper in a morning following little sleep.

Plowing spoonfuls of porridge into his mouth, he scans the great hall for bright red hair. Spotting several raspberry blond heads, little mermaid dye jobs, and different shades of sandy orange, Merlin swallows his food and pushes his chair back. With no sign of the mystery girl from last night, he makes his way over to the only redhead that matches the shade of the girl’s.

The gryffindor table greets him with openly hostile faces and sideways glances. Hermione’s the only one with any sort of pleasant expression, Ron a close second with a curious yet apprehensive look on his face. Merlin plops himself down on the bench across from them, ignoring the protests of the students next to him.

“Hey Maldin. What are you doing at the gryffindor table?” Hermione directs a pointed look at Merlin’s unhappy seatmates and they slide over to give him breathing room.

“Hey Hermione, Ron. I’m here to talk to you guys actually.” He directs his question at Ron, “Is there a female student here with red hair like your’s?”

At Ron’s sharp glare at the mention of the girl, Merlin elaborates. “I don’t have any classes with her, yet I’ve been seeing her around often in the halls and figure it’d be best to get her name. Everyone here knows each other and asking for introductions from everyone can be a bit awkward.” Merlin hopes desperately that he sounds reasonable and not at all creepy.

“Well if the girl you’re referring to looks like Ron, that would be his sister Ginny.” Hermione ignores the strange look on Ron’s face and continues. “She’s a 6th year so you wouldn’t have any classes with her. She’s a gryffindor, like us, but tends to sleep in and miss breakfast.” She looks around as if to double check.

“What do you want with Ginny?” Ron’s question sounds more like a demand. Hermione gives him an exasperated look.

“Nothing really. I just wanted to know her name incase we ever talk. So it wouldn’t be weird, everyone already knowing my name and all.” Merlin is very aware of how strange he sounds and he finds his face slowly going red. Of course this only makes the matter worse, and the boy sitting next to him picks up on it immediately.

“Oh my god, does Maldin have a thing for Ron’s sister?”

Another voice is quick to follow, sounding excited yet scandalized, “A slytherin has a crush on Ginny?” Ron directs a scathing glare at both Merlin and the boy next to him. Hermione looks surprised.

Merlin raises his hands quickly stammering out a denial, but of course this only worsens it. Damn hormonal teenagers. The thought of him having a crush on a 16 year old girl is truly absurd. He fights to control his look of horror. This conversation has backfired rather spectacularly.
“I swear I’m not interested in your sister.” Merlin tries desperately to look and sound convincing. For some reason this only makes Ron more enraged.

“My sister is not going out with you.”

“Ron, that is not up to you.” Hermione looks at him again in exasperation.

“Like hell it isn’t”

“Do you expect her to have a say in who you date?”

“Well I’d never date a slytherin!”

“I’m not dating your sister! I don’t want to date your sister. That is really not my goal here. Trust me.”

“Right. Sure.” Ron’s angry stare attempts to penetrate deep into his soul.

Merlin desperately scours his mind for a way out of this. He really has no idea how to act or what to say amongst teenagers.

“Oh… I’m really not going for your sister. Honestly. There’s someone else. Really. I like someone else.” He swallows. Well that just sort of came out didn’t it.

“Oh.” Ron looks startled. Then suspicion sneaks back and his eyes narrow at him. “Who is it then?”

“You wouldn’t know him. He doesn’t go here.”

“Oh…” Ron chokes on nothing, sputtering and red faced, “oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Right then,” Ron coughs into his hand, “sorry ‘bout that.”

Merlin laughs, feeling relieved at the diffused tension and hoping with all his might that no one will ask him any questions about it. “No worries mate, I get it,” no I really don’t, “she’s your sister.”

Hermione gives Ron an amused look as the now beat red teen promptly stuffs his face with food to avoid embarrassing himself further.

Feeling like his best option is to flee before an uncomfortable game of 20 questions starts up, he gives Hermione a smile and thanks Ron before excusing himself back to the slytherin table where the rest of his porridge awaits.

“What were you doing over at the gryffindor table?” Draco shoots him look of suspicion tinged with amusement as he sees Ron’s horrified face being shoved full of food. “Putting the blood traitor back in his place?”

“Oh, no.” Merlin holds back his explanation about inquiring after the redhead girl, having firmly learnt that lesson. “Just talking about potions class.” He sticks to what he hopes is safer territory.

“Huh. Alright then.”

“We have history of magic class today! I’m excited, are you excited?” Goyle bounces slightly in his seat and Draco looks exceptionally pleased with himself.
“Told you history of magic is good.”

“Well it is now, yeah.” Crabbe nods in agreement and Blaise rolls his eyes at Goyle’s enthusiasm.

Merlin sinks lower in his chair, spoon clanging back against his half empty bowl. “Forgot that was today.”

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*ARTHUR’S POV*

There is a strange sound. A sort of rhythmic booming paired with several of the most bizarre sounding flutes Arthur has ever heard. He opens his eyes and searches for the source of the noise from his cocoon on the bed.

He appears to be alone in the room, the sound presumably coming from a couple rooms next to his. Strange to have a troupe performing so early in the morning. He sits up and reluctantly rolls out of the most comfortable bed he had ever slept in. *This Kingdom is truly remarkable.*

Arthur stalks over to the mirror to assess himself. He lifts up his shirt to peer at his unmarred chest, hand reaching up to press against where the sword went through. He peels off the shirt entirely and turns to view his back. *No exit wound either.* He wonders at how many mornings will be spent checking and double checking.

Searching through his bag on the floor, Arthur is disappointed to note that his clothes and armour are still wet. *Right. I should have hung it up to dry. Merlin usually does that.*

Resigned to the only dry clothes in his possession, he throws the wrinkled shirt back on and tries his best to smoothen it out. *It’ll have to do.*

Patting down his hair and replacing the dagger back onto his person, he opens the door and heads towards the source of the sound.

“Good morning dear. Your selffaw’s are on the table. If you want more, help yourself.” Ethel pours a glass cup with an orange liquid while she talks. Piles of dishes appear to be cleaning themselves in a metal bucket set into the countertop while an assortment of other odd things float about the room seemingly of their own violation. Arthur takes a moment to adjust to the blatant display of magic and fights himself not to react to it.

“Thank you. You’re guest bed was incredible. Never slept on anything so soft before. What is it stuffed with?” Arthur sets himself down into a wooden chair pulled up next to a matching table heaped with delicious looking mystery food with fresh fruit. He fixes his gaze on the food, determined not to freak out at the magically moving objects zooming about around him. He notices a stick in her hand like the ones the sorcerers had when they yanked him out of the lake.

“Oh it’s the new memory maof mattress the muggles came out with. Wonderful isn’t it? I’ve got one in my room too. Much better than the grassy ground I imagine.” She looks over at him with a smile and Arthur cannot find it in himself to regret following her here.

She places a delicate cup of the orange liquid in front of him and takes hers in hand after she sits down across from him. He eyes it with suspicion before picking it up and smelling it.

“I hope you like orange juice. You can’t call a meal breakfast without it.” She chugs half of it in one go. It smells sweet and tangy. He looks her in the eye while taking his first sip.
His taste buds are instantly met with the most wondrous flavour and before he is aware of even doing so, he swallows half of his as well.

He looks down at his plate full of strangely shaped bread covered in some sort of syrup. He sounds out the word slowly in his head trying to make sense of it. W-a-f-f-l-e-s. Waffles. Never heard of them before.

Ethel is in the process of cutting a slice from hers when Arthur belatedly realizes that they are alone. Yet the weird music remains. Where are the musicians? He looks around for signs of others, but cannot find any. The sound seems to be emanating from the back of the room. He tries to picture what instruments could possibly make the sound he is hearing but nothing comes to mind.

“Oh, I’ll turn down the music. Sorry ‘bout that. I like a little groov’n tunes in the morn’n.” Ethel stands up and walks over to a little black box at the other end of the room. She presses a blue dot on the surface and immediately the volume of the music decreases. Arthur’s brows pinch together in confusion. Is anything here even real?

Deeply unsettled, Arthur takes his first bite of The Waffle after watching Ethel swallow a few.

“This food is delicious! Please give my regards to the cooks.” He wastes no time in shovelling down the rest of his food, now realizing just how ravenous he is.

“My old neighbour gave me her waffle maker before she moved. I’ve been having quite a lot of fun with it.” She gestures to an unusual metal contraption sitting on the counter covered in flour.

Arthur is lost on how to respond to that, so he settles on a smile.

Realizing the opportunity will never be better, Arthur steels himself to ask Ethel his questions, fearing what the answers will be.

“If you don’t mind, Lady Ethel, I have some question I’d like to ask you.”

“Ask away dear. Please know you’re safe here. I don’t know what sort of trouble you’ve gotten into, but I have no intention of turning you away or feeding you to the ministry.”

Although Arthur’s certain Ethel’s words were means to sooth, they only serve to drive his concern deeper. Who are the Ministry? They certainly sound sinister.

“I’ll explain some things to you first, so my questions make a little more sense.” Arthur takes a deep breath before continuing. “I was unconscious for a while recovering from injuries. I really have no idea how long I was out for, my friend took me here but when I came to, he was nowhere to be found and I’m not entirely sure where ‘here’ is. I was hoping you’d be able to tell me what city this is and what day it is?”

“Oh goodness, are you ok, have your injuries healed? Are they still bothering you? Were you attacked?” Her questions cannot get out fast enough, a look of concern overcoming her features.

“I’m fine now, really. I was attacked, but it has been dealt with I assure you.” Yeah I have a vague recollection of Merlin stabbing Morgana. Never would have seen that coming.

“Damn they're getting bolder.” Ethel squints her eyes looking ominously out the window and Arthur wonders desperately who she’s referring to. “This is Glasgow City.” Upon Arthur’s blank stare she elaborates, “Scotland.”

Arthur sets his jaw. Scotland. Where in the seven kingdoms is that? I must really be far from
Camelot to be somewhere I’ve never even heard of. Damn. How do I get home?

Unless ‘Scotland’ is the afterlife…

Arthur scours his mind for any recollection of the name. Any at all.

Ethel seems unconcerned by his silence and continues. “As far as what day it is, it’s Monday.”

Arthur’s eyebrows rise into his hairline. “Monday?” Arthur is unfamiliar with the word, but somehow his brain provides an explanation. A strange and unsettling tingling sensation momentarily shoots through his head.  *Damn, a whole week?*

“Yes, Monday May the 17th.” She looks at Arthur with sympathy.

The floor disappears from under his feet. The sunlight coming in from the windows is too bright. The soft music morphs into a loud buzzing in his ears and his eyes freeze on the chair back across from him.

*Not a week, months. Nine months. I’ve been out most a year. They must think I’m dead.*

The only comfort Arthur finds is in the certainty that Guinevere will have assumed role as sore monarch and Camelot would not have been left undefended. *She must believe me dead.*

*Why am I hear? Where is Merlin? Why has he left me here?* He refuses to consider that something had happened to Merlin.

“Are you alright dear?” Arthur almost jumps out of his skin as Ethel’s soft voice interrupts his panicking.

“I’m fine.” His response is automatic, his voice sounding hollow and dead in his ears.

Looking outside the window to the city below, Arthur is struck by an absurd thought. He shoots it down, but it quickly claws its way back to the surface. “What year is it?” His eyes are perfect circles. He knows the question is ridiculous, but once the thought is there, it will not be banished.

Ethel’s thin white eyebrows are drawn together, her hands clasping another on the tabletop. “It’s year 2017.”

Arthur blinks several times. 2017.

2017?

*But it was 478.*

*There’s no way. That is impossible. Unthinkable even. Over 1500 years, there’s no way that’s right. I can accept several months, maybe a year. Maybe. But over a millennia? People don’t live that long.*

*That’s it.*

*I’m dead.*

Arthur breathes in and out in an increasingly faster pace. He is completely unaware of Ethel rising from her seat to kneel next to his chair. Her words don’t make it past his ears, sounds muffled and distorted.
I really don’t feel dead. He looks out at the city below again as if seeking answers in the landscape. He feels it deep down. He’s alive. This is real. I’m in the future. His mind reels. I came back in the future. The realization spins around in his head on a loop. The future.

The room rotates around him. His stomach flips in time with the motion.

1500 years. Camelot might not even exist. The small part of his brain still functioning regrets eating the waffles. They’re all dead. Everyone I know is dead. Guinevere, Leon, Percival, Gwaine, Merlin—his mind halts there. Merlin.

He’s not waiting for me. He didn’t take me here. He’s gone.

Long gone.

Dead. He feels sick.

What am I doing here? Why aren’t I dead?

He thinks frantically for a way for this to not to be true. To be a lie. Just another crazy magical plot to destroy him. But he knows. He can feel it. He can see it out the window, this city is too different.

This is insane… maybe I’ve went insane. Have I gone mad?

A warm hand touches his knee, “Are you alright?” No, nothing is alright. Nothing is real. You’re not real. This can’t be happening… this isn’t happening.

My father went insane. Have I followed suite? Am I at home in my chambers staring at nothing while this madness plays out in my head? He clings on desperately to that theory. If I’m hallucinating that means they’re still alive. Arthur dying in bed, but his family, his kingdom, alive and well. That must be it. Yes.

His breathing evens out and his eyes focus on the Lady now in front of him, kneeling on the ground with his shaking hands in hers. None of this is real. He almost laughs at the absurdity of it all. The towering metal castles, the strange language, luxurious latrines only Arthur could possibly dream up. Everything is spotlessly clean! The streets smell of flowers and the air holds not even the slightest hint of waste. The excessive yet wonderful use of practical magic. The lack of bandits, knights, homeless people and danger in general in the manicured forest was too good to be true. Not to mention the frolicking children. He almost laughs at that. A truly unrealistic utopia straight from Arthur’s deepest buried fantasies.

His unmarred body should have been the first tell really. Even Merlin said that his magic couldn’t heal a wound like that.

“Arthur? Honey, do you need me to call someone? A hospital?”

Arthur gives her hands a gentle squeeze. Leave it to him to dream up someone as ridiculously sweet as Ethel. People like that don’t exist in real life. Except Merlin apparently. “I’m… I’m ok.” He swallows past the sour taste in his mouth. “Just- it’s been I while. I was out for a… longer than I thought.” Doesn’t matter what I say really. It’s all in my head.

“I’m sorry dear.” The kind woman gives his hand a gentle pat and stands up. “We’ll get you caught up. Would you like a hot tea?”

Arthur nods, why not?
An idea hits him. “I just need to use your bathroom for a moment. Please excuse me, I’ll be right back.” Ethel turns her back to do whatever it is that poofs tea into existence in this strange world while Arthur stumbles his way on shaky legs to the restroom.

Both hands planted firmly on either side of the water-bowl, Arthur takes a moment to calm himself down. This isn’t real. Everyone is fine. I need to wake up.

He reaches behind himself, taking out the dagger from its place at the back of his breaches. He wipes off the edge on his shirt for good measure, than carefully slices into the skin on the back of his arm. The smooth blade slides easily through his flesh, not deep enough to severely damage, but enough to draw blood. And sting. Arthur is startled by the sharp pain that blooms as his blood wells up and drips down his arm. That felt real. He pokes the wound with his finger. Why am I not waking up?

He smacks himself in the face, feeling simple for not doing that first. A stinging pain causes his eyes to water, but the scene around him does not change. This feels very real.

He checks the back of his arm again. Still there. Several drops of blood drip onto his shirt, disappearing amongst the matching red fabric. He wipes at the trail of blood with the soft parchment in a thick scroll attached to the wall, having discovered its purpose last night.

The taps runs on full blast as Arthur splashes cold water on his face. His breathing is erratic and his legs unsteady. He braces his hands against the counter, leaning his weight against them.

This is really happening.

I’m in the future.
Chapter 14

Merlin yawns loudly on his way to Thursday’s potions class. This week has been a long one. Fruitless waiting and searching filled his sleepless nights, his future looking bleak at the prospect of more of the same. Merlin yawns again just thinking about it. *Old men need their sleep.* Salty water trickles down his face and he hastily wipes a sleeve across it, causing his eyes to become even more red and puffy.

Every night since spotting the girl Ginny in the hall Merlin has spent no more than three hours a night in sleep. Irritated that his own protection spells over the castle stop him from simply scrying the girl, Merlin now spends his nights stalking the empty corridors, casting his magic out in hopes of sensing her. Nothing. No sign of the girl, and only a whisper of something on the edge of his awareness. Almost tickling him.

Every time he got close enough to the strange presence, it would quickly fade to nothing. Almost as if it could sense him. *No student or teacher, except perhaps Dumbledore, has the capabilities of sensing my magic.* The new generations of magic users are less powerful than even the weakest druid of his era. *This must be something different.*

With the mysterious and elusive presence as well as the lack of the redheaded girl, Merlin is forced to continue his wait. *If I were in Ginny’s year, it would be so much easier. As it stands, I have little opportunity to seek her out during the day, and when I do, she is surrounded by other Gryffindors.* The very last thing Merlin wants is to have to confront her in front of her peers. A direct approach would be suspicious and counterproductive, and attempting to gain her private audience would easily result in yet again more suspicion. *By both her and everyone else. Or worse, they could think I’m pursuing her.* Merlin suppresses a wince. That would truly be the worst outcome of the selection.

Rubbing a hand over his face attempting to fully wake himself up, he wades into the dungeon classroom where he makes his way over to his usual seat next to Ron. In his haze, he misses the faces his classmates make at him at his continued choice of seating.

Finally on speaking terms with him, although perhaps not yet on full friendly terms, Ron greets him with a grunt as he slumps into the chair next to him and rests his head on the desk.

“Why are you so tried today? Don’t tell me you can hear Seamus’s snoring all the way in the Slytherin comms?”

Merlin lets out a muffled chuckle through the material of his shirt sleeves and gingerly lifts his face off its cushy arm pillow. “Is that why you’re so tired?”

Ron’s head doesn’t move from its slump on the back of his chair, but his eyes half open in response. “I don’t know how Seamus can sleep through it himself, being so close to the source and all. *Bloody hell* every year his snoring gets *louder.* It’s like he’s trying to beat his last record.”

A Gryffindor boy a seat back leans forward and whispers, “He’s winning.”

Merlin laughs as he attempts to straighten himself out and prepare his potion ingredients.

While Merlin flips through his thick text looking for the page of today’s assignment, Professor Snape waltzes into his classroom cloak billowing out behind him impressively. With a dramatic *whoosh* of fabric, he turns to face the class, sparing Ron’s stooped posture a lingering look of disapproval.
“Everyone should be aware of what today’s potion is. I expect you all to be finished by the end of class. You may start.” He punctuates his last word with a bang of a heavy text on his desk.

Merlin wastes no time in starting, his sleep deprived brain commands his trembling fingers to hastily dice up the first ingredient before Ron has even gotten out his book.

At that moment, Snape looks up from his desk, eyes resting on the slowly moving figure of Ron as he starts to gather potion materials. As if sensing the professor’s eyes drilling into his face, he looks up with a look of cornered fear.

“Mr. Weasley, do you or do you not have a purpose for being here today? Or do you simply expect your potion to make itself?” Ron’s hand starts to shake as he speeds up arranging everything on his desk, filing through his text book with his other hand. He drags his eyes up to meet Snape’s for a brief moment and all of the drowsiness appears to vanish from his person.

“Oh perhaps you expect Mr. Ambrose to take pity on you and complete it for you?” Merlin quickly pulls his hand back after rightening a bottle from Ron’s desk that had been about to fall. Irritation drifts through the haze of his mind, the fog slowly starting to settle.

“No, sorry.” Ron’s mumble is like a timid croak, barely reaching Merlin’s ears.

“No talking in class! 10 point from Gryffindor.”

Ron grimaces and keeps his eyes downcast. Merlin has no such inclination, and stares heatedly into the potions professors eyes while continuously preparing his potion.

“Is there a problem Mr. Ambrose?” Snape’s question sounds more like issuing a challenge. “One would think the lowering of Gryffindor’s house points would please a Slytherin as it brings you one step closer to the house cup. Or are you not a Slytherin Mr. Ambrose?” He can feel the eyes of all of his housemates staring intently at him.

Refusing to be baited, Merlin doesn’t address the house points or his standing on it. No, house points really are no concern of mine. “Ron was merely apologizing for his tardiness, he wasn’t chatting.”

“This is not up for discussion. Mr. Weasley was disrupting the class. As you are now too with your pointless defence. As a Slytherin, I expect better from you.” His voice is sharp and cold, every word uttered with distinction no doubt intended to shame the poor student Maldin. Merlin is having none of it. He opens his mouth to give Snape a piece of his mind, but he thinks better of it and quickly closes it again.

Spending the past countless centuries with the body of an old man, Merlin finds it easy to forget he cannot just line people up and say what is on his mind. He has a role to play. So does Snape.

That thought stalls him.

Is treating students so poorly really part of his cover? Merlin mulls it over as he mixes the thick purple liquid in his cauldron. No, it is not. It accomplishes nothing but losing the trust and respect of his students. There is never an excuse to treat children poorly. Merlin feels disappointment rolling off him in waves, followed by unease.

This is the man Dumbledore wants to tell. This is the man who has his trust. Merlin scowls at him while he continues to aggressively stir. I don’t like him.

After several more apparent student ‘mishaps’ and even more pointedly rude comments from professor Snape, class finally ends. Merlin hands his potion in and quickly packs up his things before darting out of the room and down the hall.
He managed to overhear the 6th year Gryffindors complaining about care for magical creatures class this morning over breakfast and if he hurries, he might be able to catch them before they scatter for their free period. This might be his only sighting of Ginny this week, goddess knows he has had no luck at night.

Sparing a brief moment to excuse his absence to his friends, he tears off down the rest of the corridor. Hands clutching his knees and panting hard, he spots a cluster of red and gold clad students entering the castle. He squints his eyes, trying to spot red hair over the crowd of students.

ha! He melts himself into the shadows of the wall and sneaks closer to the group of excited sounding girls. Closing his eyes, he casts out his magic in soft tendrils towards Ginny. Instantly his magic recoils, his face scrunching up in disgust. Almost *pungent* black magic oozes off her in droves. Very faint, yet easily sensed.

*She’s cursed. And it’s something really bad too.* The strongest dark magic Merlin has seen in centuries is emanating off of the young girl. Determined to help her, he carefully probes at the taint from his distance. He almost gets a strong hold on it, but it slithers out of his grasp.

*This is not the right place for this. This might hurt the girl.* His magic retracts back instantly and he scours his mind for a way to get her alone.

Desperately clinging onto the only excuse that hopefully won’t backfire on him, he sets his shoulders with confidence and strides over to the group.

“Hey, um, Ginny?” The girls stop talking amongst each other and turn to face him, posture on the defensive. Ginny takes a step towards him and he can see the girl next to her tense immediately.

“Yes, and you are?” Her face is a carefully neutral mask.

“I’m Maldin. Dumbledore asked me to bring you a message for him, I was just in his office.” I hope she doesn’t ask to hear it in front of everyone.

“Oh.” She seems to reassess him.

“Yes, and you are?” Her face is a carefully neutral mask.

“I’m Maldin. Dumbledore asked me to bring you a message for him, I was just in his office.” I hope she doesn’t ask to hear it in front of everyone.

“Oh.” She seems to reassess him.

“What’s the message?” The girl next to Ginny tries to block her from Maldin with a sneer at his green tie.

Merlin bites his lip with a grimace, and thankfully, Ginny seems to take that as some sort of sign. She gently guides the other girl, Merlin now thinks of as her body guard, to the side and walks forward. She assures the other girls that she’ll meet them in the common room and gestures for Merlin to follow her.

*Thank the triple goddess that worked.*

As she quickly stalks over to an empty corridor, she gives Merlin an accusing look. “What is it that Dumbledore couldn’t tell me himself? Or send a professor instead?”

“It’s urgent, and as I was just in his office, he sent me.”

“He trusts you with an important message?” Her face is doubtful.

“It’s rather pressing, and I was the only one there. I don’t mind.” He casts a frantic look around the hallway for signs of other students and, finding it to be way to out in the open, sends a desperate look at the doorway across from them, hoping Ginny picks up on it.
Thankfully she does, and stuck between an eye roll and a look of panic at the apparent seriousness of the message, she approaches the door, opens it to the empty classroom, and motions for Merlin to follow.

Once inside she closes the door leaving it part way open, for what Merlin assumes to be a chance for a quick escape. Deeming their accommodations adequate, Ginny turns to face him arms crossed and with a guarded expression.

“What is it?”

Merlin wastes no time. Eyes flashing gold behind their concealment charm, he freezes her body in place and forces her to sleep. He reaches his arm around her and quickly closes the door the rest of the way.

His lets his magic fully envelope her, trying to find the source of the curse. The dark magic is so strong, barely a moment passes before Merlin warps himself around the dark presence emanating from her mind.

Confident his hold is solely upon the dark magic and not entangled within the girl’s mind, he slowly attempts to draw it out. The days of requiring counter spells and potions well behind him, he simply shapes his magic in the form required and commands the elements to obey him.

Halfway through extracting the thick foul mass from her mind, it starts to move. Twitching quickly leads to flailing and soon the mass is writhing around in his grip, determined to break free. Eyes wide in surprise, Merlin clamps down on it harder, suppressing the dangerous thrashing within the girl’s fragile body.

Let go. The thought plants itself in his mind in a voice very unlike his own. Just let go.

Merlin’s mind instantly recoils away from the foreign presence, the dark magic rallying itself into a firm and solid mass visible behind the girl’s eyes. The darkness overtakes her features and she appears to wake up from his spell. Face muscles stretching into an unnatural scowl, the voice now talks outside of his head.

“Who are you?” Ginny’s alto is cold and ominous, the sound on metal scraping against hard ice. It is not her voice.

Merlin threateningly tightens his hold on the presence, but it merely elicits a slow grin from her face. Eyes now fully clouded over in black, she stares up at him in a challenge. Merlin squeezes harder, but if anything, the sickly dark mass only grows.
Careful not to damage Ginny in any way, Merlin casts around for where the presence is drawing its power from. Almost unconsciously, the girl’s hand tightens around her bag.

Upon probing, a thick oily dark mass spews out of her bag, empty but of one small black book. Understanding lights his eyes as the dark magic from the book meets up to join the second within the girl.

“Thank you for helping me boy. You have no idea how much effort you have saved me.” The high and unnatural voice sends shivers involuntarily down Merlin’s spine.

*It’s not a curse, it’s a spirit. Ginny’s possessed.* “Helping with what?” Merlin cautiously holds the dark mass in place from running freely throughout the defenceless girl.

“Putting her fully to sleep for me.” A slow and hungry grin splits open her face while the abyss of her eyes attempt to pierce into Merlin’s consciousness. It meets a solid impenetrable wall.

Suddenly stricken by an idea, Merlin smothers the small remaining presence lingering in the book and locks his grip in an unbreakable hold around the invading soul. Ginny’s eyes widen for only a moment as Merlin carefully but forcibly extracts the soul from within her body.

Now free of her burden, her face immediately slackens and her now green eyes slip closed again. Her body slumps forwards in his magical hold.

The angered and panicked dark spirit, whom Merlin now has a rather good guess as to it’s name, is compressed into a tight mass between Merlin and Ginny. The pathetic lashings no match for Merlin’s iron grip, he pulls the soul fragment towards himself.

Destroying it would be so easy. *That’s what I’m here for. To destroy Voldemort.* Merlin glares at the black mass, disgusted by the evil he sees within. *It violated a young girl.*

He desperately wants to destroy it, magic poised around it ready to smother and crush. His thoughts venture to Dumbledore. To all of the questions and the daunting and immense task in front of them.

Suddenly stricken with an idea, *probably a stupid one,* he relaxes his magic poised to kill. Face set in a look of determination mixed gross revulsion, he pulls the dark screaming mass within himself.
Immediately his mind is met with tearing claws and sharp spikes desperately trying to probe through and take hold. Almost effortlessly, he gathers together the invading force and cages it in the back of his mind.

Terrified at the glimpses it saw into Merlin’s mind, the soul screams out at him. “Who are you?” The high cold voice sounds feeble fully surrounded by Merlin’s immense power.

“I am Merlin.” The fragment of Voldemort recoils.

Realizing there are more efficient ways than simply questioning, he forcibly draws out the information he requires. Sifting through several of the fragment’s memories, he comes to several conclusions.

A portion of Tom Riddle had been possessing Ginny for years. Only strong enough to overtake her in her sleep, Voldemort was able to roam around in her body at night. But only at first. Gradually, her mind built walls, unconsciously fighting off the intrusive presence. Eventually Tom was limited to only several nights a year as Ginny’s defence strengthened over time.

Merlin realizes that when he put her body to sleep, she was left defenceless to the spirit which then overtook her. He looks sadly at the girl in front of him. *She must not have had a good night’s sleep in years.*

Suddenly aware of the lateness on the hour Merlin walls off the invading soul and snaps back to reality.

Ginny breaths softly in her sleep, suspended in an upright position in front of him. Gently, he sifts through her mind, guilty at being the second presence to do this, and alters her memories of their encounter. Satisfied his cover is safe, he releases her from his spell.

Bleary eyes stare up at him as Ginny blinks slowly to wakefulness. “Uhh…” Her voice is hoarse and raspy. “I’m sorry, I didn’t sleep well last night.” She lifts a trembling hand up to her face and wipes at her eyes.

“I’ve er… got to go now. Thanks for the message.” She shoots him a feeble smile and quickly slips out the door behind her.

Merlin runs a weary hand through his hair, spiking it up messily at the side. He’s come a long way since facing Cornelius Sigan. The tiny ripped off piece of soul stands no chance against him. He can barely feel it squirming around in its mental prison.

As troubled as he feels for Ginny and the torture she has endured for years, he cannot help but feel relieved. Finally he can get some answers. The pocket of contained human bile in his mind holds information ripe for the picking. He is one step closer to rightening this wrong and fixing the balance, he can feel it.

Wiping down his front in memory of the black stain now in his mind, he opens the door and heads to Dumbledore’s office. This news cannot wait for their weekend meeting.

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Bursting into the headmaster’s office unannounced, he pauses at the sight of Snape and Dumbledore deep in conversation. They freeze at the sound of the door hitting the wall and turn their heads to face him, lips now silent.

Dumbledore’s eyes are wide and expectant, in sharp contrast to the outrage displayed on the potions
professor face.
“Mr. Ambrose! The headmaster and I are having a *private* meeting. How dare you interrupt without invitation. Or even *Knocking*. You can meet me in my office after dinner tonight for detention.” Snape’s mouth is peeled back into a snarl. “*Now go*. Whatever business you have with the headmaster can surely wait.” His face is the perfect picture of outrage and anger, Merlin can almost see the steam coming out his ears and a gleam of red in his eye.

He narrows his sight at the rude professor and turns his attention to Dumbledore. “I have news. It could not wait.” His eyes dart back to Snape at the last word.

“Certainly Maldin, your presence is always welcome here.” He gestures and a seat slides over to their table in invitation.

Snape’s eyes almost bulge out of his head as he looks back and forth between the headmaster and the scrawny student. His sputters as if to protest, but thinks better of it in Dumbledore’s presence. He settles for shooting Dumbledore an incredulous look.

Merlin avoids looking at Snape as he seats himself between them and places his hands carefully on the table. “My apologies if I was interrupting anything.” He gives a weighted look in Snape’s direction.

Dumbledore takes the hint and slowly rises from his seat. “Thank you Severus for keeping me updated, we shall resume our conversation this evening.” He gives him a pointed expression and raises his eyebrows as he glances at the door.

Surprise overcomes Snape’s face as he turns to look at Maldin, then back at Dumbledore. He doesn’t rise from his seat, but his face does slowly turn red. “I was not finished *Albus*. If what Maldin has to say is so urgent, I can wait until he finishes.” He makes no move to leave.

Merlin gives Snape an exhausted look and reaches for the steaming teacup now in front of him. He sips from it slowly, refusing to break eye contact with the professor. *If Snape didn’t hate the student Maldin before, he surely does now. Damn. This will prove an unnecessary challenge.*

Dumbledore looks uncertainly in his direction, clearly unsure of what to do.

*We have reached an impasse. If I insist Snape leaves, Dumbledore will force the matter, but Snape will be suspicious of me. And make trouble. If I tell my news with him here, it will just pose more questions and suspicion.*

*Dumbledore trusts him. But is that enough?*

*I don’t like him, but I’m stuck either way. I took a chance with Dumbledore, his word will have to be enough.* Merlin sighs aloud and prays that his precautions will be enough.

Merlin turns to Dumbledore, giving him a slight nod. The old man relaxes back into his chair.

He faces Snape with a fake, yet convincing smile plastered onto his face. “I believe a re-introduction
is in order then.” Snape eyes him with suspicion and thinly veiled dislike. “I’m Merlin, nice to meet you.”

The man’s eyebrows shoot up into his hairline and he looks at Dumbledore as if waiting for the punchline. “Merlin.” His voice is laced with mockery and disbelief.

Merlin rolls his eyes and stands up from his chair. “You will tell no one unless I allow it.” His eyes sparkle gold at the words and his magic settles over the professor. Snape blinks his eyes and squints up at him from his seated position.

“I am revealing myself to you only because Dumbledore deems it necessary.” Snape’s scowl slowly morphs into shock as Merlin’s voice deepens as he speaks and his body races through the years to land on elderly. No one ever wants to believe Merlin in a younger form.

He sighs in relief at assuming the body he is most accustomed to. His old bones protest as he lowers himself back into the chair. *Standing is always more dramatic.*

Snape looks to Dumbledore in disbelief. The headmaster nods his head once while looking at Merlin. “Merlin” Snape whispers his name like he’s seen a ghost.

Merlin is still not used to this. He squirms in his seat feeling exposed and uncomfortable. “Yes, that’s my name. I’m not the 17 year old Maldin Ambrose I go by in class. That’s my cover.”

Snape is at a loss for words, still staring at Merlin eyes as wide as they go.

Merlin takes it upon himself to clear some things up, aware of the questions bound to come up and not wanting to waste time. “Yes, I’m real, no, I never died, and no, no one else besides the two of you know of my existence.

“I’m here to help with the Voldemort problem. My cover is a student as my adult form would be recognized by some as I was a professor here in the mid 1700s. I had your job actually, head of the Slytherin house.” Snape still has not moved.

Merlin looks to Dumbledore, unsure of what to do or say to snap him out of it.

“Severus,” The headmaster says slowly and carefully, “He’s here to help us.”

Snape seems to come into himself, his eyes darting back to Dumbledore. “Albus, is this for real?”

“Yes, he is Merlin. *The* Merlin. Of this, I have zero doubt.” Merlin wrings his hands in discomfort.

Dumbledore’s words apparently relieve Snape as he blinks his no doubt dry eyes and turns to face Merlin. “You saved him.”

Merlin’s brain falters for a moment, confused at the sudden change of topic. Than it hits him. “Yes. I pulled the poison from his veins.” *I did more than just that* “He will live.”

“How did you-” His voice fades off as Merlin allows his eyes to glow a bright gold.

“Yes, I owe Merlin my life.” Dumbledore’s smile is warm as he places his hand on his shoulder. Snape looks at the contact and something awakens behind his eyes. He looks quickly between the two, eyes darting back and forth and eyebrows slowly raising up again.

Merlin chuckles to himself in sudden understanding. They really do look incredibly alike. “There’s no relation.”
Dumbledore looks sharply at him for a moment and then his eyes gleam with humour.

“Right. Of course.” Snape’s voice is unusually quiet.

“Well. I am here for a purpose. I didn’t lie when I said I had important news.” He levels Dumbledore with a serious look. “I found the other horcrux.”

That startles both Dumbledore and Snape as they both fix him with identical looks. “Where?”

Dumbledore beats the other man to the punch.

Merlin’s face darkens and he grinds his teeth before answering. “In the body of a student. A young 6th year girl by the name of Ginny Weasley.”

Dumbledore’s eyes widen in alarm, but Merlin puts his hand up to pause him. “I dealt with it. She’s fine. Hasn’t gotten a goodnight’s sleep in likely several years, but she’s surprisingly undamaged. She’s a tough one.”

Dumbledore breathes out in relief, but his face is set in anger. “You mean to tell me Voldemort placed a part of his soul in one of my students?”

“In a way, yes, but no. He placed it in a book.” He grabs it out of his robes and sets it on the table in front of them. “This book fell into her possession and the piece of Tom’s soul used the contact to slowly try to overtake the Ginny’s body. But as being only a fraction of a full soul, he was unsuccessful. Only managing to gain control while she was in a deep dreamless sleep. Her body fought off the attack.”

“You destroyed it?” Snape’s voice is hard again.

“No.” He gains an outraged look from the professor and a concerned one from the headmaster. “I considered it. Was about to, but had a better idea. We need information, what better way to gain it than from a piece of Voldemort’s soul?”

Snape quickly removes his hand from where he was about to touch the book. Dumbledore looks down at it with steel in his eyes.

“No, I didn’t put it back, it had too much power in there. I absorbed it. He’s being held prisoner in my mind.” He taps the side of his head for emphasis.

Snape’s face is an open book as fear, shock, and disgust battle for dominance. “You let him possess you?!”

Merlin scoffs. “Of course not! That measly scrap of dark magic has no hold over me. It’s trapped completely.”

He turns to Dumbledore. “Say we need information of Tom’s childhood? Instead of an interrogation, or having to dig around for scraps and clues, I just—” Merlin closes his eyes and reaches a hand to his head. He pulls on the air next to his temple and extracts a shimmering silvery substance. He opens his eyes to pull out a vile from his robes, placing the memory carefully inside it before stoppering it closed. It makes a gentle clink as he sets it on the table next to the book.

“You have Tom Riddle’s memories?” Dumbledore voice holds a hint of wonder.

“Up until when he made the horcrux, I can extract them from him. Yes.”

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*ARTHUR’S POV*

The door slams closed behind him and he stumbles his way back into the kitchen.

_The future-the future-the-_ the never ending mantra repeats on a loop in his head. The truth is inescapable. Unavoidable. _The future_

He desperately squeezes his eyes closed causing his shoulder to bang painfully against the doorway on his way.

His insides are in knots. His head pounds to the rhythm of his internal screaming. The voice is too loud. He squeezes his eyes shut again and almost trips. _The future-the_

Arthur’s eyes open but the world spins around him. _Where am I again?_ Only the one thought makes it through the hollering of his mind.

Somehow his eyes meet those of an old woman standing holding a steaming mug. _I have an audience. Pull yourself together. The future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future-the future._ She gestures for him to sit, her kind eyes peering at him in concern. _Pull yourself together._

He takes a steadying breath in and the mantra quietens marginally. He takes a shaking step forwards and then another. Somehow he makes it to a chair. He sits down. _tHeFuTuRe-

He clamps a sweaty and trembling hand over his mouth to stop from puking. _Panic accomplishes nothing. A King must be strong_ he reminds himself, his inner voice sounding in Uther’s harsh tones.

The teacup is placed in front of him and he brings it to his mouth on auto pilot. The old woman- _Ethel’s_ voice still doesn’t make it through the loud clattering in his head. The tea is scalding but he doesn’t notice. She guides his hand with the hot tea back down to the table and places both her hands over his cheeks.

Carefully and gently she moves his head to face her. “Is everything alright? Are you ok?”

Arthur opens his mouth to respond, but no words come out.

“We’ll find your friend. We’ll set you to rights, fill you in on what you missed. When was it that you last remember?”

Arthur’s mind continues to spiral out of control. _No friends. Dead. Merlin’s dead. They’re all dead._ The future mantra creeps up louder, threatening to overpower all else.

She looks at him expectantly. THE F- _Right. ThEfUtU-That was a question. He clears his burnt throat. “I-” He clears it again. “I was out for a while.” Understatement. “My memories are scattered and strange. C-can’t quite make things out.” Lies. But more believable than the truth. The truth. _THE TRUTH-THE FUTURE-THE FUTURE-THE FUTURE-THE FUTURE-THE FU-

He breathes in deeply again, eyes fluttering closed. _Get a hold of yourself Pendragon._

He drinks more hot tea and focuses on the burn as it sears down his raw throat. Somehow it settles his stomach.

“Well in that case,” Ethel sits down next to him, a bundle of papers in her hand “I guess I’m responsible for you now. Ethel will get you sorted.” She gives a comforting pat on his knee and places the papers in front of them.
She points a dark wrinkled finger on a moving image of a middle aged man. “This here is Rufus Scrimgeour, he’s the current minister of magic. Not a very nice fellow, but we’re stuck with him. YouKnowWho has pretty much complete control over the ministry now. The only one left standing up to him is Albus Dumbledore, but rumour has it, he’s getting- ah, old.

“As you noticed yesterday, this is a muggle city. I live here ‘cause it’s safer. Marginally. Wizarding towns are now crawling with deatheaters and I don’t have the strength in my old age to do anything about it. Not after the Mrs’ passed.” Her eyes lower momentarily before darting back up in determination.

“You don’t strike me as a deatheater. You’ll be safe from them here. I’m assuming it’s them that hurt you?” Arthur nods his head, not sure what other answer could possibly make sense. Not that he knows a thing about whatever a deatheater is. Sounds intimidating. Some type of magical beast of the future?thefuture-the

“Well. I hope you got them back good then. You can stay here with me until you get your bearings. Not like I’m doing anything with all this extra space.” She waves her arm around to make her point.

“Well you Lady Ethel for your kindness.” Well at least my manners haven’t deserted me with my wits. His panic pushed to the back of his mind, he sets his goal on figuring out why he’s here. Why, how, and what became of his kingdom.

I will not fall apart. He is firm with himself, desperately hoping his demand holds true.

I’m here now so I may as well make use of it. I died and now I’m back. Unless I wish to rectify that, there’s nothing I can do about it.

Arthur takes several deep breaths in and out, sets his shoulders, and directs his mind to the task at hand.

……

He lays in bed, eyes wide open and completely unable to sleep.

he future is insane.

His mind wanders over to the countless memories of Ethel looking at him as though his brain was truly scrambled in the attack. But she never questioned is ignorance. Arthur feels immensely relieved at that.

Dark magic.

A purge of non-magical people.

He pulls the blankets up. My father’s actions created countless wars. And insanity. Arthur’s mind boggles at the back and forth slaughter between both sides, over a thousand years of war all started by Uther.

I didn’t stop it. I let this happen. He closes his eyes as tears threaten to slide down his face. How could I let this happen?

He rolls over, fists bunched in the blankets. I have to help. Somehow.

But I don’t have magic. What can I do? Merlin is long gone- he passes over that thought quickly, not wanting to linger there- I am defenceless in this world.
His mind rebels at that. Arthur Pendragon is never defenceless. He will figure something out. He must. He owes it to the future. To these people. His people.

He’ll ask Ethel for more information in the morning, not caring if she thinks his questions obvious or insane. He’ll find out what happened to Camelot.

Arthur pushes back his despair. There will be time later to face the loss. To mourn. It feels like his whole body is holding its breath waiting for this to be revealed as untrue. That they are not gone.

Flashes of the last time he saw their faces fly through his mind. His loved ones, his subjects, his family. The last sobbing face he saw before he died.

The memory of being held. Of being warm but then freezing.

The tears that weren’t his own, splashing down his face. *I left him behind.* His body clutches the second pillow tightly.

If he thinks of it now, he will surely come undone. He’ll fall apart if he lets it sink in.

He forces his trembling chin to stop and focuses on the blue of the wall.

Exhaustion takes over his body slowly as he mulls over new information and starts to form the beginnings of an action plan, finally drifting off to sleep.

……

Arthur leans over her shoulder, peering in disbelieving wonder at the bright, flat surface in front of them. Colourful images flash on a surface made of light. Ethel is controlling it somehow.

*She says it’s not magic.*

Pictures of people and words appear and move around. Every colour imaginable shows on the surface and he in unable to look away.

The bright new day holds revelations and new wonders Arthur would never have guessed. The future is a very different place. Already he struggles to remember all that he has learned.

“Muggles invent the coolest things. They call this one a laptop. I absolutely adore it. You type in the words on the keyboard and they go into the system.” She pushes several of them faster than Arthur can keep track of and words appear on the screen. “And you slide your finger around on this here to direct the mouse where you want it to go” She drags her finger around on the metal surface and the image of an arrow moves around on the ‘screen’.

Arthur’s eyes are wide. “This is incredible.”

Ethel smiles over at him, pleased at his reaction. “I thought so too.

“You must be a pureblood to have never heard of computers before.” She smiles gently at him.

Arthur, now having a faint idea of what that means, finds his face colouring. *She really has no idea.* How can I keep up this act if she expects me to perform magic? He just nods along, not sure what else to say.

He feels a little bad for lying to her after showing him such kindness, but he feels trapped in the situation.
“Computers hook up to what they call the ‘internet’. It connects them to each other all over the world. You can find all sorts of information on it. Imagine the world’s largest library.”

Arthur’s eyes pop at that. This is exactly what he needs.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, I’m over 160 pages in my word doc! This is the longest thing I’ve ever written (expect about 100 000 words or more). Not bad for my first creative writing piece since that one class in highschool eh? I never thought I’d write a story, fanfiction or otherwise. I’m really glad I did. ‘Tis more fun than I expected. Thank you guys so much for your support and encouragement, it means a lot to me <3
Hermione sits down with a sigh as she drops her heavy stack of books on the table in front of them. “I searched through the entire medieval history section and this is all I could find on the topic.” Her accusatory stare is fixated in the direction of the stacks.

Merlin eyes the leaning pile wearily. “That’s it?”

Ron snorts. “Yeah, ‘cause that’s a small pile of books.”

“But it is Ron! There’s only 14 books! It’s the history of the ministry of magic, the entire foundation of our government!” Her voice is as loud as an urgent whisper, but the look on her face somehow makes it seem as if she were screaming at the top of her lungs.

Ron grimaces.

“It’s like someone raided the library. There’s no way this is all they had, I remember there being more.” Hermione’s outrage turns to concerned confusion.

Merlin bites his lip and scowls at the book titles. Shortly after his first history of magic class, he had raced to the library and read all he could find on the topic of Camelot, King Arthur, the knights of the round table, and himself. He was not impressed with what he had found.

He glares heatedly at the title reading An Analysis of The Life and Times of Great Wizards. He had wanted to vanish that one with the other supposed “missing books”. Truth be told, he wanted to do a lot more than just that. Gaius’s teachings had stuck with him over the long years and unfortunately Merlin had not been able to bring himself to do much worse than signing out all of the horrible bound up lies with the plan of never returning them. But somehow he had missed that one.

Mordred is Arthur’s son! I can see how they could be given the impression I was an old man, but that is just ridiculous. Merlin had tried to mentally block out some of what he read that night, but it keeps finding its way back. Absolutely absurd.

“Well there’s really not much information and primary sources on Medieval Camelot, so I’m not entirely surprised that this is all you found.” Merlin tries to reassure Hermione in hopes she lets it drop and doesn’t plan on doing any digging around.

“Makes sense.” Ron picks up the smallest looking volume and opens it to a page with illustrations.

“No, it doesn’t.” Hermione looks in tired exasperation between the two. “Last I was here, there was more books. Many more books. More analytical, speculative, conclusory, and comparative books.” More horribly and grossly inaccurate books, yeah. Good riddance. “Now it’s just,” She sweeps her hand around to finish her point.

“Should still be more than enough there to finish the assignment I should think.” Merlin brings out his notebook, moving Hermione’s pile over to make room on the table.

“How can this not bother you?” She directs her question at Merlin, deeming Ron a lost cause.
“All of these books,” he gestures to the small stack to her right, “are accurate first or second hand accounts.” He shudders a bit at the lie, but pushes on, “The rest are merely speculations and assumptions other people have drawn from them. You can’t rely on that material. Perhaps someone took them off the shelves to stop the spread of misinformation? I’m sure it hasn’t escaped the librarian’s notice, perhaps she took them herself and is planning on replacing them with more reliable sources.”

Hermione looks doubtful as she opens up one of the volumes. They start their study session off in silence filled by the occasional scratch of quill on parchment.

Merlin scans the book in front of him as quickly as he dares in front of Ron and Hermione. After spending every scrap of free time between meals and classes combing through and analysing Tom Riddle’s thoughts and memories, he has fallen painfully behind on his course work. Several unwritten essays loom over him following him around like a storm cloud. Finally, deeming himself satisfied with the mental interrogation, Merlin has time to catch up.

*This would be so much faster and easier if I could use my actual accounts to write this essay.* Merlin groans quietly in frustration, earning him a sympathetic look from Ron. Of course he had tried to correct the first insultingly false account of his first lifetime, writing his own book of the true events, but no one would believe it. Fallen into the gaps of history and ignored, Merlin had little say in how history remembers him or his friends.

Satisfied in his knowledge of this outrageously fictitious tale, Merlin puts his quill to parchment and sets to work. Hermione looks up from her studying and note taking to watch as the words form on his page faster than thought. Maldin is an advanced student and Merlin has no intention of lingering on this topic.

He sets his feather down in triumph, splattering a small drip on ink on the smooth table surface. The movement startles Ron from his scrutiny of a moving illustration in the text in front of him.

“*Merlin’s Beard* you’re fast.” Ron’s exclamation earns him a startled look from Merlin. *Oh goddess, not this again.* He feels his face heat up at the reference to his currently non-existent beard, his hand halfway to his chin as if expecting to find it there.

“I’ve got a lot of homework to do today.” Merlin swallows down his discomfort and rifflles through another pile of books for his next essay.

Ron and Hermione continue to stare at him while he wills his face back to its original colour. He makes a point of slowing his reading as to not bring up any more suspicion.

After several more minutes of intent reading, or in Ron’s case, daydreaming, Hermione’s head whips to the side and her shoulders stiffen. Merlin looks around for the source of her discomfort and spots Draco sauntering his way through the stacks headed for the left wing.

He appears not to notice them, but Hermione stays with her eyes glued to his back, face partially covered by her hand. Ron’s quill threatens to break in his clenched grip.

Merlin’s eyes narrow at the sight of the blond boy. Even from this distance, he can easily make out the dark circles under his eyes and the downwards turn of his lips. His normally bright and luscious hair is limp and lifeless. The usual arrogant set of his face is marred somewhat by the crease between his brows.

As he disappears around the corner of another tall shelf, Hermione’s glare fades and Ron relaxes significantly.
“Spoilt git walking around like he owns the place.” Ron’s angry mutter is for once not followed up by a scold from Hermione.

As if remembering suddenly that Merlin is a Slytherin, he turns his scowl at him.

“What am I done something?” Merlin challenges Ron without heat, still distracted by the alarming state of Draco.

Ron looks back to the page in front of him in silence. After a short while he talks without looking up. “I don’t know how you can stand to be in the same house as the likes of them.” His voice is quiet, but not without heat.

Merlin stares at Ron until he looks him in the eye. “Cruelty is not a prerequisite for being in Slytherin. I disagree with the prejudices of my housemates.” He looks off towards where Draco disappeared in concern there’s something more going on.

Ron’s eyes narrow at him. “Yet you can be friends with them.” Hermione appears to be biting her cheek but still says nothing.

Merlin levels them both a look. “Change will never happen unless someone puts in the effort. Shows them they’re wrong. Avoidance will accomplish nothing.”

Hermione looks surprised. “So you are standing up to them?”

Merlin snorts and his lip quarks up. “Nothing so direct. If I just stood tall and openly opposed them, I would be cast out, shunned, and ignored. That would solve nothing.” Ron looks about to say something, no doubt challenging his words. Merlin holds up his hands to stop him. “I am doing what I can. With the voice of someone they grow to trust, my word will hold more weight. That and these things take time. Their minds will not be changed overnight. They have to come to their own conclusion without it being forced upon them.”

“Or ever. You make them sound like decent people that have been simply misguided. Not the evil little pricks they are. They have brains and minds of their own. They made their choice. They picked wrong. Disgusting bullies.” Ron’s rage struggles to remain contained.

“They have acted terribly, yes.” Merlin’s voice is tired. “But they have been influenced by their parents’ and fellow peers. There is no excusing their actions, but if I have the power to change their minds, I have to try.” They are still so young. So easily influenced by the lies of others. Merlin is struck once again by the similarities of his youth. The countless people fearing and hating magic due to Uther’s demonizing campaign.

“I think what Maldin is trying to do is honorable.” Hermione’s calm voice soothes Ron, his anger simmering down.

“Stupid and dangerous is what it is.” Ron rubs his hand over his face, overcome by sudden weariness. Merlin’s eyebrows raise in surprise at Ron’s evident concern. I guess we’ve finally passed into the territory of friendship. He’s concerned for my wellbeing.

Well that took a turn. Merlin’s unable to contain his grin, a feeling of profound relief spreading over him. It feels so good to have friends again.

Mind flitting through the faces of all of his newly made friends Merlin finds it impossible to concentrate on his reading. Out of a strange sense of morbid curiosity, he leans over to Ron to see what image has captivated him for so long.
His eyes soak up the picture he had quickly passed over in his raid, the clear blue eyes piercing out of the page fierce and fiery. His hand quickly comes up to cover his mouth hiding his grin. Surprised yet relieved that no one made the connection between this likeness and the portrait in the hall, he studies the familiar features on the page.

“Kind of funny they made Merlin out to look like Dumbledore. Someone must have been a little obsessed.” Ron’s amusement is evident in his barely contained laughter. Merlin glares at him involuntarily. The painting of himself is remarkably accurate. Terrifyingly so even.

Hermione looks up from her book intrigued. “Let me see,” she leans over the stack of books to peer at the page as well. Her eyebrows raise in surprise, but quickly fall back down in contemplation. “No, that’s not right,” she holds out her hands and Ron passes her the book.

“See here?” She points to a small section of text on the page. Ron and Merlin scoot closer. “This portrait was painted before Dumbledore was born.”

Ron scrunches up his face. “That’s weird. Do you suppose they’re related in some way-”

Merlin quickly interrupts before his speculations can get any farther. “Merlin never had any children. There are no accounts. And Dumbledore’s line can be traced back very far. There’s no relation.” He realizes belatedly his voice was a little too loud for the library and casts his eyes around to insure no one heard.

Hermione agrees with Merlin and thankfully Ron drops it.

Ron turns the page in his book to the likeness of Morgana, blessedly an inaccurate one, and Merlin directs his attention back to his homework.

After several terribly redundant hours of essay writing and the occasional small conversation, Merlin, Ron and Hermione close their books with a satisfying thud and pack their bags.

“Thank god that’s over” Ron’s face is tired and strained, Merlin nods his head in agreement.

“Well if yous two hadn’t procrastinated your homework ‘til the last minute, you might have had more time for leisurely reading.” Hermione carefully places several large books in her bag, book marks poking out through the top.

Ron makes a horrified sound low in his throat. “Is that really what you think I’d be doing if I had free time?”

Hermione looks at him in exasperation and rolls her eyes. Merlin laughs quietly at their interaction, stretching his arms in the air and shaking his legs out to get blood flow back.

The corridor is dim at the late hour as they make their way down the hallway out of the library. They stop before parting ways and turn to face each other.

“Thanks for letting me study with you guys, it was a lot of fun.”

Ron’s eyebrow tries to copy Gaius. “Fun.” His voice is doubtful.

Hermione gives Ron a light smack on the arm. “Of course, you’re welcome to join us any time.” Her smile is infectious and he feels himself grinning openly back at her.

“Oh, actually, we’ve been meaning to ask,” Ron shoots Hermione a startled look and she checks her shoulder lightly against him without looking at him. “You are welcome to join us at The Hog’s Head
this weekend. We go there every trip to Hogsmeade. Unless you have plans already of course. I just figured, since you’re still new here and all, you might not… have any plans yet.”

Merlin feels his heart warm at being invited out. He had completely forgotten about Hogsmeade and the trips the students take into the little town. Deciding to push his meeting with Dumbledore and Snape to the morning, he nods his head in enthusiastic agreement. “I’d love to, yeah. Count me in.”

“Good.” Ron looks discreetly pleased as they part ways to their separate house locations.

Merlin feels giddy at the thought of going out with friends. The last time he’d went out with anyone had been several long years ago, with a co-worker out for coffee. Unless you count the time he babysat for his old neighbours. It was a last minute urgent house call, so he’s not sure he can count it.

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*ARTHUR’S POV*

Arthur’s head hurts.

His head hurts, his eyes hurt, and his stomach hurts. His stomach growls loudly to orchestrate the point.

He places his hand over it distractedly and continues without pause.

“When was the last time you ate dear?” Ethel’s voice echoes over to him from the kitchen, the gargle no doubt loud enough to reach her ears.

She walks into the room and places a bowl of soup next to him without waiting for a response.

His eyes flicker away from the screen for the first time in hours. He blinks several times to clear his vision. “Thank you Ethel.”

The old witch shakes her head as she leaves the room. “You have to take a break from that. Walk around and stretch your legs or someth’n, you’ve been at it all day.” Arthur misses her comment, already engrossed back into his research.

If the libraries at Camelot were this interesting and bountiful, he might have spent more time in them. His eyes flit quickly across the page, taking everything in. He types in several words, his single finger slowly hitting one key at a time. The video of an old news report comes on the screen and plays out twice before Arthur closes it and pulls up a new page.

Videos. What incredible inventions! He vows to himself to research how muggle’s mysterious and wonderful ‘technology’ works when he has the time. Arthur finds it hard to believe how people have invented such things without the use of magic. He never would have guessed the future would be like this.

After a little over a week of acquainting himself with the wonders of the modern age, Arthur finds he only has more questions. The more he finds out, the more questions sprout up in relation to the new discovery. He feels like a fresh mewling babe born into the world with wide eyes, bumbling around and putting his hands and mouth on everything. Everything is unknown and potentially dangerous.

Although he had been shown how to use the laptop and navigate the vast expanse of the ‘internet’, how the machine operates is still a complete mystery. Several times he has had to call Ethel for help when the ‘page’ he was looking at suddenly disappeared, or random noise bursts out of the thing screaming at him in a strange language. He cautiously drags his finger across the track in fear of
prompting it to yell at him again.

Arthur remembers he has food when his elbow almost knocks the bowl over. Regretfully tearing his face away from the screen, he starts on his meal. “Thank you for the food Ethel!” Forgetting if he thanked her yet or not.

Mind freed to wander while he eats, Arthur thinks of Camelot. *The ‘muggles’ say it is fiction. Some sort of bedtime story they tell their kids. A myth or legend. Something made-up and not real.* As much as being regarded as a work of fiction bothers Arthur, he cannot help but feel awed at being remembered at all. Camelot he can understand, it was a great city built to withstand the test of time, but King Arthur? Why would people remember just one man? One small and short-lived reign among a list of many. Yet they did. *They do.*

What had come as even more a shock had been the discovery that *Merlin* is famous. *Merlin the old sorcerer. Adviser to the king.* Artistic renderings of an angry old man in a silly hat are now saved onto the ‘desktop’. For some reason or other, history remembers Merlin as a wizened old man and Arthur a youth. Arthur couldn’t help the sound that escaped him at that discovery.

*Finding the remains of Camelot will be difficult if the people don’t even believe it to be real.* He set his mind on finding a way to help righting the wrongs started by his father *that I enabled and perpetrated,* but he has to see what became of his home. He has to know. More than that even, he feels a sort of nagging tug whenever thoughts of Camelot come up. Like a compulsion. *Urgent,* it screams at him when he rests and lies for sleep. Dreams of the castle plague his nights.

The muggles do not believe magic to be real but it is. They don’t think Camelot was real, but it was. *I wonder if the magical folk believe? I wonder if they know what really happened…* he lingers on that thought for a while.

Coming to a decision, he abandons the laptop, standing up for the first time in what feels like months. His legs protest at the sudden movement, blood rushing awkwardly through his body leaving him light headed. He bends his back and twists around, back cracking loudly.

“*Ethel,*” He calls out to the room he thinks she disappeared in. Peaking his head around the corner and softly knocking on the wall, he spots her seated in a rocking chair by a large window with a book.

“*Yes Arthur? Have you finally finished with the computer?*” She looks up at him through her large rectangular glasses, the beaded cords jingling from their place at the sides.

“For now yes, thank you. I have a question if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, not at all. Have a seat and ask away.” She sets her book down, gently closing it in her lap.

“I was wondering if you could tell me what you know of Camelot?”

She seems surprised at his choice of question, leaning back in her chair slightly. “*Camelot? Are you gaining back memories of school? I didn’t know the memory loss went that far back.*” She’s no doubt fighting herself against asking him for the fifth time if she can take him to a hospital.

Not knowing what else to say, he agrees with her.

“Well, assuming you went to Hogwarts, it makes sense that if you are just now regaining memories of childhood that Camelot it tied into it. You learn about it in history of magic class, Hogwarts was built in the remains of Camelot’s castle. The ministry relocated to a better facility and Hogwarts took over the remainder of the space. It’s no wonder you couldn’t find any information on it on the laptop,
the wizarding world likes their secrecy.

“Can you recall what house you were in?”

Arthur’s heartbeat thuds quickly and audibly. So Camelot still stands? Profound relief courses through him, leaving his hands shaking and his eyes threatening to water. The rest of what she said slowly sinks in and he finds himself terribly confused.

Why would they use the castle as a school? A magic school at that! How ironic. Father would be rolling in his grave if he knew. With all of his discoveries the past week he feels a sense of satisfaction at that. Camelot’s foundations at least helped out in some way.

Arthur feels taken aback by the weird name they changed it to. Hogwarts, doesn’t sound very pleasant. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised though, everything magical seems to have an unusual name. I should be thankful they didn’t call it something worse.

Having absolutely no idea what she is referring to, Arthur takes the easy out offered to him. “No, I don’t remember that yet.”

“That’s alright then. I was just curious’s all. I was in Hufflepuff myself.” Her eyes crinkle closed as she smiles at him.

Seizing the opportunity as it’s waved in his face, he leans forward in anticipation. “Do you remember where Hogwarts is located? How to get there?”

“Think going back might trigger more memories? Might work, but unfortunately it’s not possible. Yeah I remember how to get there, but only students’n faculty are allowed entrance. For safety reasons.”

Arthur refuses to give up, feeling the flame of excitement stir in his chest. “Could I get close?”

Ethel folds her hands in her lap on top of the book. “Yes, I could get you close. As a Hogwarts student you’re bound to have memories of time spend at Hogsmeade. It’s the small village just outside the school grounds. I wouldn’t mind taking a trip there myself, I’ve got old friends in the area.”

Arthur’s entire person lights up at the chance of going home. He tries to remind himself that it will be different, changed in some enormous and unknown way. Camelot might not even be recognizable. He keeps telling himself, trying to prepare for all of the changes, yet the stubborn part of his consciousness refuses to believe it. Desperately clinging onto the hope that if he could just get himself there, everything will be ok. Things will work themselves out. Go back to normal.

That will never happen. Camelot is gone and you have to face that fact. Perhaps seeing what came of his home will allow him to move on? He battles with himself while Ethel writes a letter to her friend at Hogsmeade.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas and Happy Yule to everyone who celebrates! Have fun and stay safe <3
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

So I was asked to post an extra chapter ’cause it's a holiday (you can thank Tiffany), so here you are!

Arthur feels his stomach clench as Ethel opens up a door leading inside the metal beast. His feet are glued to the floor unable to move.

“I know it’s nothing fancy, but I like to see the country side with a good ol’road trip. Take in more of the sights of the world. I find we’re always going so fast you miss out on life. Apperating, the floo network, port keys, it’s all fine and good if you’re in a rush to get to work, but why does an old woman like me need to get anywhere instantly? And my old bones aren’t what they used to be. Rattles me around too much. Hope you don’t mind taking the scenic route?”

Arthur is still frozen on the spot, eyes fixed on the beast in front of him. Although for some reason the language no longer baffles him, there is still much he is clueless about. “That’s fine really.” His mouth refuses to cooperate and form more than three words.

The gleaming monster shines dark green in the sunlight. Arthur had seen pictures and videos of ones similar to this on the internet, but he had honestly never considered riding one himself. Ethel has fondly named this one ‘Car’. Arthur figures it must be an endearing pet name or something. He misses horses.

Arthur struggles to come to terms with the notion that ‘Car’ is not in fact a living being. Or even magical apparently. No, instead it is a sort of cousin to the ‘laptop’, an invention of technology. Arthur studies it in a vain attempt to figure out how it works.

“Well come on then, I said we’ll take the slow way but we do still need to get there before dark.” Ethel slides into a seat inside Car, closing the misshapen door behind herself and looking at him expectantly.

“Would you rather walk?” Her tone is light and teasing.

Arthur steels his nerves, straightens his back and opens the door. He has to crouch his head down slightly to fit inside. The space is small yet comfortable, smelling faintly of pine and something burning.

Ethel reaches behind herself and brings over a strap that fits across her front, locking into place at her side. Arthur looks behind himself and battles with the belt as he attempts to copy her actions. After an embarrassing several minutes and a helping hand later, he faces forwards ready for the journey.

Ethel pushes a button on the surface in front of them, turns a small dial, than out of nowhere loud music bursts around them. She hums quietly to herself as she presses several more buttons, looks behind herself, than puts her hands on the wheel and Car bursts to life.

Arthur nearly jumps out of his skin at the strange and startling sound erupting out from under them. Their seats vibrate with the low rumble, distinctly like being in the belly of a monster. Arthur grips
the side of his seat hard when Car rolls forwards on the smooth road.

His stomach protesting as they turn a corner, his knuckles white. Ethel navigates the city as they race around at an alarming speed. Every stop is unexpected and serves to have Arthur regretting his breakfast.

Eventually they pull out of the town and glide down a wide road next to a bunch of other such metal carriages. He forgets to breathe when their speed reaches impossible feats. The world a blurry streak around them, Arthur focuses on the other carriages racing along the road instead. Their speed matches and gives off the allusion of moving slowly, if at all.

The music abruptly changes tempo and Ethel’s wobbly voice picks up in volume. Arthur finds her scratchy alto reassuring and relaxes his hands from their death grip on the seat.

After the first hour of being on the road Arthur has relaxed enough to speak. He asks Ethel questions about Car and how it works, finding out several different names for it and the realization that Car is a generic title and not a name. He’s fascinated by her descriptions of electricity and fuel power, staring at the vehicle around him in newfound wonder.

He listens as Ethel paints him stories of her life, winding fantastical tales of magic and adventure. Angry bosses, funny coworkers and dangerous strangers make appearances, Arthur soaking up all of the knowledge of the times that comes with her tale. Her eyes soften as she speaks of a beautiful female co-worker, her current story quickly taking a turn. When she tells him of her wedding, the nightmare that was the planning and the ridiculousness that was their honeymoon, Arthur realizes that more has changed than he had ever known. Arthur spends the next hour intently engrossed in her stories, relieved at the distraction from the road.

Two snacks, four stories, and an uncountable number of songs later, the car drives out of a forest path and a small village comes into view.

"Well here we are! I'll find a spot to park and then we'll get settled in at Aberforth's." Arthur's breath catches at the sight of the castle in the distance.

His eyes are glued to the sight before him, hungrily taking in all of the familiar details of his castle. Astounded at the unchanged peaks and turrets, he stumbles out of the car on wobbly legs. It feels like coming home. The thought nearly renders him to tears. The building might be there, but the people are gone. Suddenly it’s hard to breath and Arthur has to look away.

The small village, although a far cry from the looming glass structures of the city, are still nothing alike to what he remembers of the lower town. Sturdy looking shops and houses make for a display of wealth unheard for a simple village in his time.

He follows after Ethel, oblivious to the people around them as she leads them into one of the buildings.

A tall elderly man with a long and impressive beard and piercing blue eyes stands behind the bar with a large grin displaying all of his perfectly white and straight teeth.

“Ethel! It’s great to see you, it’s been too long!” Upon spotting them, he races from behind the polished wood and scoops her up into a tight bear hug. Ethel’s smile only gets larger as he lifts her into the air briefly.

“It has been, when are you going to come and visit me eh? I’ve got that new waffle maker I’ve been telling you about. Arthur here can testify.” She grabs his shoulder and brings him closer, making her
point with a pat on his head.

“Yes, you must be that Arthur fellow Ethel wrote me about. It’s nice to meet you, I’m Aberforth.” He offers Arthur his hand, looking slightly apologetic on behalf of his friend’s head pat as Arthur runs his fingers through his hair.

They shake hands, Arthur giving him a polite nod and thanking him for allowing him to stay the night. He gestures him up the stairs and Arthur lugs Ethel’s heavy bag up the steep steps. “It’s the second and third door to your left!” Aberforth’s voice carry’s up after him.

“Got it, thanks!” Arthur finds the room and drops her things in the chair on the corner. The room is small, but warm and cozy. A heavy and colourful quilt covers the soft bed and the curtains are drawn. His room looks much the same.

Deciding to give them the space for a moment to reacquaint themselves, Arthur goes to his window and looks around outside.

His room placement gives him the perfect view of the castle from his window and he gazes out at it fondly. Tomorrow he will hike through the forest and sneak in. Ethel made it clear he would not be welcome, but he has no intention of letting that stop him. He realizes it is no longer his castle, losing all claim to it in his death, but he needs to see it for himself. One last time. For my piece of mind.

This close to home, Arthur feels the tugging sensation intensify. For some reason he is supposed to be here. He can feel it. Perhaps it is the magic in the place calling me home? Whatever it is, he chooses not to let it unsettle him.

After a long enough time has passed, he regretfully tears his eyes away and makes his way back down the stairs.

Aberforth and Ethel are seated around an old but sturdy wooden table closest to the bar, a younger, but by no means youthful man is polishing cups and serving customers in his absence.

They stop talking and smile up at him as he approaches. “Come join us, pull up a chair!” Aberforth waves his hand around to indicate the empty seats.

Arthur turns to take the nearest one, but as he bends to grab it, someone bumps into his side.

“Oh, sorry ‘bout that mate.” The redhead youth calls back to him over his shoulder, claiming a table by the window with a girl holding drinks. Arthur freezes in place, chair clasped tightly in front of him.

Seated comfortably at the table the others just joined is a thin dark haired boy with a familiar face. He squeezes his eyes shut to expel the image from his mind. He’s dead, face up to it. Stop seeing people where there aren’t any. He evens out his breathing as he sets the chair down in place next to Ethel, trying desperately to expel the image of his friend from his mind. Not here. Don’t fall apart here.

“You alright dear?” Ethel’s voice is concerned as she looks at him with a knowing look, no doubt thinking he had a memory. I guess in a way though, I did.

“I’m fine thanks,” Arthur's touched at her concern. He takes the drink offered to him and sips on it cautiously.

Ethel and Aberforth resume their conversation, politely including Arthur.

As more patrons enter the pub, Arthur’s mind wanders and he tunes out the conversation allowing
the sounds to wash over him. He sips at his drink feeling content for the first time since his wake from death.

Talking and laughter mull together, the occasional voice poking out through the haze. Arthur’s stomach drops to his feet at the sound of one in particular. One voice he knows more than any other, a voice he had resigned himself to never hear again. Arthur closes his eyes again, trying to expel it from his mind. No sense going mad now, I’ve come this far already. The cadence of the voice drifts over to him and he feels as if he is drowning. He soaks in the sound, even if it is not real.

He opens his eyes and looks over to the group for some peace of mind, but his eyes lock onto an impossible sight.

Merlin! Arthur’s mind screams the name, that face is undeniable. He blinks several times and the image remains. His heart misses a beat and then seemingly stops for good. Standing on shaky legs, he excuses himself and then walks over to them as if in a dream.

Was he brought back too? He squints at his face as he approaches. He looks younger! How is that possible? Dread slowly seeps into his bones and his feet slow to a stop.

That’s not Merlin. There is no way. Perhaps he had a child before he passed and this is just- His mind cuts off abruptly as shiny blue eyes meet his.

…..

*MERLIN’S POV*

Merlin’s eyes are locked forward, trapped in the impossible man’s gaze. He knows those eyes. That face, that hair and those shoulders. Century after century passes by and the face is always the one in his dreams, the one he never forgets. Never could forget.

Mind in a state of frantically buzzing static, Merlin freezes mid conversation, stands up and floats over to him, not even aware of his feet on the ground.

The man’s face is a mixture of confused relief as Merlin quickly approaches, nearly impaling himself on a table corner in his haze. Hands flinging forwards, Merlin wraps his arms around the painfully familiar chest without warning.

“Arthur?” Merlin’s voice is broken and trembling, his face buried in Arthur’s shoulder.

Merlin can feel Arthur’s body relax at the sound of his voice, arms finally responding to the hug. “Merlin?”
Merlin’s voice refuses to work properly and he responds with the sound of a choked off sob. Completely unable to form a coherent thought, let alone sentence, he squeezes Arthur tighter, his body shaking with the force of Merlin’s trembling.

Arthur makes a move to dislodge himself, but Merlin only squeezes harder, tears streaming freely down his face and into the soft material of Arthur’s red shirt.

Arthur gives in and brings his hand up to tentatively stroke Merlin’s hair as he buries his face deeper. “I c-can’t believe it’s you, you’re h-you’re here and you’re real.” His voice is wrecked as he finally pulls back to look at Arthur’s face, hands still refusing to let go.

“I’m here it’s me. This is real.” Arthur’s voice is significantly steadier yet his eyes are suspiciously damp. “This is real.” His smile is blinding.

Merlin’s chin wobbles in warning and he nuzzles his face back into Arthur’s shoulder muffling the sob that breaks free.

“Are you ok Merlin?” Arthur tries to get a look at his face, leaning backwards slightly, but Merlin only locks his arms into place around him. I’m not ready to let go. I’ll never be ready to let go.

Merlin feels a gentle tap on his shoulder and begrudgingly lets go, hand wiping at his wet face.

Hermione glances up at Arthur and then settles on Merlin. “Is everything alright, are you ok?” She looks at him with concern as he drags his sleeve over his eyes. Merlin shoots her the largest smile to grace his face in years.

“More than fine.” For the first time since Arthur’s death the words ring true. He finds it impossible to peel his eyes away from Arthur, soaking in every feature he had missed for so long.
*ARTHUR’S POV*

“Hello, I’m Arthur.” Arthur reaches his hand out to Hermione to shake hers in what he understands is the polite modern greeting. He blinks his eyes as the unfamiliar syllables leave his lips. *That was a different language! How can I speak a different language-*

“Hermione. I’m a friend of Maldin’s.” Her words are different yet he understands their meaning. He files his confusion away for contemplation at a later time, turning to Merlin in a silent question.

The young face of his friend gives a quick and vigorous nod of his head. *Maldin? Why is he using an alias?* Arthur gives a short nod back to reassure him, they will have much to discuss in the future.

For once the prospect of the future doesn’t seem too bleak. *I’m not alone! Oh thank god I’m not alone!* His relief is immense and pouring through his features, eyes crinkling at the sides at the force of his smile. Merlin’s face matches his, face splitting in half and open glee in his eyes. His usually pale face is red and damp, fresh tears still coursing their way down at full force. He sniffs loudly and covers his hand over his mouth to muffle a cry.

The redhead boy from earlier walks up behind Hermione, eyebrows knotted together in confusion.

“I’ll get you a glass of water.” Hermione addresses Merlin before she grabs the wrist of the boy behind her and marches him through the growing crowed and up to the bar.

Arthur turns back to Merlin, startled at finding his hand inches from his face. He stills as Merlin cups his cheek in his hand, as if trying to reassure himself that he is really there. His younger face is startling, appearing to be even younger than when he had first met him. The adult Arthur knew is in the body of a child.

Arthur stares into his bleary eyes with a raging combination of emotions. *I could cry with relief!* *Merlin’s alive! He’s here!* A tension in his body he wasn’t even aware of harbouring slowly releases, leaving him lightheaded.

“How are we here? Merlin, this is the future!” His voice is quiet but desperate in Merlin’s ear.

Merlin just looks up at him, blinking away his tears as they continue their river down his face.

A crazy thought hits Arthur and he voices it without letting it fester. “Did you bring us here?”

Merlin’s hand flies to his mouth again, eyes squeezing shut. His head shakes back and forth, *no.* His shoulders tremble up and down with the force of his silent cries.

Arthur spots the two that were with Merlin earlier making their way back to them from the crowded. Coming to a quick decision, he grabs Merlin’s arm and steers him around tables and up stairs. Shutting the door to his room softly behind them, he gently guides a still hysterical Merlin to a seated position on the bed.

*I know Merlin has always been rather weepy, and this has been a very trying and stressful ordeal, but this concerning.* Merlin’s hands reach out for his as he stands in front of him. He squeezes them without mercy as if trying to stop Arthur from floating away.

“Merlin, are you alright?” He pulls one of his hands out of the death grip and rests it reassuringly on Merlin’s shoulder.
Merlin bites his lip with force enough to leave a mark, shaking his head in a nod, completely unable to respond with words. As if just now realizing their privacy, his breathing stutters and several wet sounding hiccups make their way out. He opens up his mouth as if to speak, but quickly closes it again, fresh new tears streaming down his face.

Arthur moves to sit next to him, Merlin shifting over to make room. *What happened to him? I get he’s relieved we’re alive just as I am, but this is something more. Something must have happened while I was with Ethel.* His mind shifts to his teenaged companions at the table. *They didn’t seem threatening.*

“What happened?” His voice is gentle.

Merlin takes several long and wobbly breaths, scrubbing his eyes and cheeks with the back of his hands. “I g-gave up.” Shinny blue eyes plead up at him. “I didn’t think you… didn’t think you’d come back. I gave up. I th-thought it was just a cruel lie.” He looks like he wants to say more, but Arthur makes a move to stop him.

“What do you mean gave up? Merlin this is year 2017, over a thousand years in the future! How did we get here? Why are we here? I was dead, I felt it.” Arthur’s confusion intensifies at Merlin’s blinding smile.

“A-Arthur-” he pauses to blow his nose with a thin white cloth, “I don’t know how you got here. If I knew how I’d have done it ages ago. I didn’t ‘get here’.”

At Arthur’s alarmed look he continues, “I’ve been here the whole time. You died, and I’ve been here. Living.” His chin wobbles threateningly again and Arthur places his hand on his knee.

“Merlin, it’s been over fifteen thousand years. I get that you arrived here before me, but there’s no way you never died. And why are you so young?”

An unexpected laugh bursts from Merlin and Arthur’s concern peeks.

“I never die.” His eyes are piercing and impossible in their brightness. Merlin’s youthful face is instantly serious, knocking the wind from Arthur with the intensity of his gaze. “Time moves on, but I do not. I remain here.” His voice breaks on the last word, eyes braking contact with Arthur’s.

“Merlin that’s crazy.” Merlin’s appearance suddenly screams *wrong*. Arthur has difficulty looking at the smooth planes of his face, thick black eyelashes clumped together with saltwater. He squints his eyes at him trying to figure him out.

Merlin nods his head slowly in agreeance. “It is.” His voice is scratchy and quiet. “You died 1500 years ago and now you’re here, you’re with me, you’re alive-” His hand clenches Arthur’s wrist, feeling the pulse pump frantically at Arthur’s distress.

Arthur’s heart and stomach have swapped places. His mind scrambles and claws inside his skull, desperately looking for a way out.

“You couldn’t ha-”

“Magic Arthur. I’m magic, I cannot die. I’ve been alive since the first breath I took as a poor village boy in Ealdor.”

Arthur doesn’t register Merlin’s pleading look. *That’s not possible. This is not Merlin. This is not the man I knew, it’s an imposter. A trick. This is fake.* He studies the features in front of him. The pale skin, sharp cheek bones and large ears all so familiar. His eyes. The same eyes that stared back at
him defiantly when Arthur was being stubborn, the same eyes that looked at him with trust and devotion in the moments he didn’t know Arthur was watching. Arthur’s head is shaking back and forth without his notice. No. It’s him.

His mind spinning at the meaning behind his sudden realization and Merlin’s words, he’s struck with a sense of horror. Arthur’s eyes widen and he takes in Merlin again as if it were the first time.

A sad and haunted look fills the corners of his features despite the smile he wears. Relief, happiness and disbelief war out on his face plain for Arthur to see. Tears course down without his notice, trickling into his green course knit sweater. *This man may look young but he is not.*

Arthur is suddenly struck by the full force of Merlin’s changed appearance. His youthful exterior not enough to hide the age behind his eyes. A sense of timelessness about him he had never had before. *How is this possible?*

Abruptly Arthur remembers the state of him. The tears and the trembling and the hugging. The desperate look in the man’s eye. *He’s been here the entire time. Alive for over 1500 years. Alone, watching everyone die around him.*

His heart shatters for him, his hand coming up to his mouth as his eyes overflow with his own tears.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

My god, this chapter was hard one to write. Like shredding plastic through a cheese grater.

Thank you guys for all of the wonderful comments and kudos! It means a lot and keeps me motivated to write faster! The fic would have crashed and burned without all of your support <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Merlin struggles to even out his breathing. His sweat slicked hand is clasped desperately within Arthur’s. He looks up into the other man’s eyes and a pit lodges itself into his throat. He must think I’m a monster. A gross perversion of what he knew as his friend ‘Merlin’. The look of horror on Arthur’s face forces out a new wave of tears from Merlin’s swollen red eyes.

Immediately, almost startling him back in alarm, strong warm arms wrap around him in a crushing embrace. Arthur’s body fully envelopes Merlin’s thin form. Stunned, he takes a moment to melt into the embrace. Confusion battles with the relief still running rampant.

Eventually Arthur pulls back to look at Merlin’s splotchy damp complexion, his eyes filled with sympathy and sorrow. “I’m so sorry Merlin.”

Merlin stares blankly back at Arthur’s own teary eyed face, having difficulty keeping up with everything. His confusion must have shown on his face, as Arthur elaborates. “I was nearly destroyed with the realization that everything and everyone I knew was gone-” Merlin flinches without realizing, “but you. You’ve lived through it all. You’ve watched it happen slowly knowing time is not a foe you can defeat.” His hand is a heavy weight on his shoulder.

“Tell me you weren’t alone. That you lived happily, with friends and-a-a- family. That you’ve moved on.” Arthur’s words serve to remind Merlin of how he’s lived his life. He wasn’t sure it was possible, but he feels as if he has failed him all over again. That he had wasted the life he had that was taken from Arthur.

Convinced that all oxygen has left the room, he takes a desperate and rattling inhale. “Everyone around me dies Arthur, I’m always alone.” At seeing the look on his face, he continues. “How could I marry knowing with certainty I would be watching them die? That I would outlive any children I might have? That anyone who knows this about me would-” he stumbles and skips over that thought, “I’m not like them Arthur.”

Despite his words all ringing true, he is uncomfortably aware of the one fact blatantly left out. The one point overshadowing the rest. The front and center reason behind his solitude. He tries to get it out, but chokes on the words.

Impossibly wide blue eyes stare in mounting horror, than his face sets into something determined. “Well you’re not alone any longer.” Arthur’s voice is strong despite the wet streaks down his face and the smothering stuffiness of the room.
Merlin cannot contain the smile that overtakes his features, pushing away the nagging voice in his head insisting that he will now get to watch Arthur die a second time. There is no room for that in his head. *Arthur is here, he came back!*

Before he can ask him how he found his way here, Arthur bites his lip and squints at him.

“What?”

“Why do you look so young?” Merlin almost laughs at that. He had completely forgotten. *I must seem so absurd to Arthur, claiming to be older than any other living being, yet with the face of a child.*

“That’s a rather long story. I have much to fill you in on, as you can imagine. Basically I can take whatever form I wish to. Again, it’s a bit of a tale as to why I’m,” he waves his hand at himself, “like *this.* We should figure some things out and get you sorted though, before I start into it.”

Before Merlin or Arthur can as much a blink, the door bursts open and a startled looking Hermione peeks her head in.

“Hey, um-” She tentatively crosses the threshold holding a glass of water. “Ron and I are just about to head back to the school. I didn’t want you to come back downstairs and wonder where we went. I’ve got your glass of water.” Hermione leaves it on the end table by the door, giving a confused glance at Arthur.

“Thanks Hermione.” Merlin wipes his already damp sleeve across his face, sniffling his nose before reaching over and chugging half the water in one go. “Arthur I are just-” he looks over to the man next to him, noticing his hand still being tightly squeezed, “catching up.”

Ron picks that moment to stumble into the room behind Hermione, grabbing her sleeve. “Luna’s started up about the magical benefits of radishes again, let’s go before it’s too late-” he cuts off upon noticing Merlin and Arthur seated on the bed.

His face colours as he takes in their puffy red faces, clasping hands and close proximity. He studies Arthur’s face with a look of mild alarm. Merlin’s emotional rollercoaster slows his understanding, and as Ron and Hermione turn to make an awkward leave their expressions belatedly click into place.

Giving Arthur’s hand one last squeeze, Merlin stands up and stumbles after them. “Thanks for the water Hermione. Arthur is family- we haven’t seen each other in years, I’ll see you back at Hogwarts after we get sorted. Sorry for taking off like that, I uh… had a really great time.” The half lie rolls easily off his tongue after lifetimes of practice, he flashes her an honest and brilliant smile, letting his dominant emotion show on his face.

Understanding lights up Hermione’s face as she returns his smile. “Curfew’s at 10:00, just make sure you’re back by then. Filch’s patrols are frequent and Ron swears he’s out for blood this term.” She takes off down the stairs into the bustle of the bar.

Arthur’s hand on his shoulder startles him and he jumps slightly before turning around. “Are you a student at Hogwarts?” His face is scrunched up, voice lined with disbelief and a touch of humour.

“Yes. I am.” His tone is defiant.

“Why would you need to study magic? Surely you know everything by now?” Arthur’s voice is confused yet still teasing.
Merlin feels his face itch with crusty dried tears. *Goddess how I’ve missed this.*

“I’m undercover.”

Arthur’s expression changes to something Merlin can’t place. *Right. Must be a touchy subject still.* Merlin berates himself for failing to realize that although it has been lifetimes since Camelot for him, to Arthur it must be like yesterday. Merlin’s lies and secrets still fresh and raw in his mind.

“There’s a lot to tell you.” Then Merlin realizes something. “How long have you been here? In this time I mean?” The sudden and terrifying image of a confused, lost and badly injured Arthur roaming around a magical city alone and scared overflows his mind. The danger of Arthur’s situation hits him at full force, knocking the breath from his lungs.

“Little over a week. It was—” Arthur’s face blanks and pales, “different.” He takes a moment to clear his head and Merlin gnaws his lip at not being there for him. *How could I have given up on him? I abandoned him. Anything could have happened, what if—*”

“I was taken in by an elderly witch by the name of Ethel. She was very kind, helped me to get oriented. She was the one that brought me here actually, trying to help me regain my memories.” At Merlin’s more than concerned face he continues on. “I didn’t know how to explain my situation to her. It’s not something a sane person would believe,” he gives a small and humourless chuckle. “She seems to think I’m some sort of wizard, I just went along with it, figured it was my best option. Memory loss explained why I have no idea of the modern world and as I had already let slip I had been injured, it well— it made sense. In a way.” He looks guiltily away from Merlin, hand slowly slipping off of his shoulder.

“You said what you had to to get by. There’s nothing wrong in that.”

“I was dishonest Merlin. She had shown me nothing but kindness- more than I deserved- and I replayed her with lies.” Merlin’s face gives the slightest twitch at that, his expression otherwise frozen in place.

Arthur is too caught up to notice and runs a shaking hand through his hair. “I want to help the magical community. I want to try to make it right. My father—” His face twinges dangerously and Merlin snaps out of it to take his turn placing his hands on Arthur shoulders, looking him in the eye. His heart gives a leap and flip at staring into the eyes he never thought he’d see again. So crisp and real in front of him. He’s distracted by their depths, dark blue flecks floating in the crystal blue of the tropical ocean. They blink and moisture fills at the bottom before being blinked away again. “He wasn’t right Merlin. I never fixed it. I caused so much pain and death and war and—” Merlin is left staring at golden hair as Arthur turns his head to look away, unable to continue.

“Arthur, none of what’s happened- happening- is your fault. None of it.” *How can he think that? Uther’s hate sent the world down this path, I tried to stop it, but I let Arthur die. If anyone’s to be held accountable, it’s me.*” His chin wobbles at the reminder of how he had failed the man before him. Let him march right to his death undefended. Albion’s last and only hope floating away on a boat into Avalon.

Unable to resist, Merlin clings tightly to Arthur in another crushing embrace. “Merlin, no. How can you say that?” Arthur’s voice is muffled against Merlin’s neck.

Taking in the hallway behind Arthur they are still standing in, right out in the public open space, he reluctantly pulls away. “We really do have a lot to talk about. We can’t stay here.” He pulls on Arthur’s arm trying to drag him away.

Arthur follows before digging his heels in at the top of the stairs. “Merlin, I have a room here.”
Merlin’s mind screams in protest at the thought of leaving Arthur behind while he stays at Hogwarts in his comfortable dorm. He tightens his grip on his arm. “I’m not- I can’t.” He breathes in trying to steady his heart. “It’s safer with me at Hogwarts. I have things I have to do there, so I can’t leave, but I’m not leaving you alone here. You’re not magical Arthur and it’s not safe.” Merlin refuses to even let Arthur out of his sight again. He will not let go of this man. Never again. Merlin narrows his eyes.

Arthur holds up his hand in a sign that means wait here and pries Merlin’s hand off him before disappearing back into the room. Merlin has a moment of blind panic at the loss of Arthur from his line of sight and has to make the conscious effort not to go running after him screaming.

Arthur returns after the longest 20 seconds of Merlin’s life, taking in the rigid posture and look of terror Merlin tries desperately to reel in. Arthur’s eyes soften and he hefts his bag up for him to see. “Just needed to get my things.”

Nodding and forcing himself to unclench his teeth, Merlin takes Arthur’s hand again and leads him down the stairs.

“I have to let Ethel know I’m going and thank her for everything. It’ll just be a moment.” Merlin refuses to loosen his grasp on him and Arthur’s forced to drag him along after him.

Ethel and Aberforth are deep in conversation, elbows perched on the table leaning towards each other. Ethel has an empty glass next to one still half full, Aberforth’s still untouched by his arm. Her cheeks are rosy and her laugh is unhindered. Arthur approaches them with a now composed Merlin in tow.

“Ethel, Aberforth.” Arthur greets them each with a nod of his head. “I have found someone from my past and will be heading to the castle together. I believe we will have accommodations there. I wanted to thank you both for your generosity and exceptional kindness. I will repay you as soon as I am able. If ever you require aid, my services are yours.” He bends down for a polite bow to Aberforth, the old man looking startled. He turns to Ethel, kneeling down and grabbing her hand gently in his, pressing a soft kiss to the back of her wrinkled knuckles.

Ethel’s gaze fixed on Merlin in a politely unvoiced question. Arthur hesitates for a moment and Merlin takes the opportunity to step forward himself. “Hello. I’m Maldin. Arthur and I have known each other for years, are families were very close. I’m going to show him around and fill in some of the blanks for him. I have a place he can stay. Thank you for looking after him.” His voice is soft and sincere, feeling genuinely grateful for all they have done for Arthur in his absence.

“I’m glad you’ve found someone that knows you dear.” Ethel’s smiles warmly at them both while taking Arthur’s hand in both of hers. “I’ll be staying here with Aberforth for the week,” she turns to the man in question who nods in agreement, “if anything happens, or if you need my help you know where to find me. Don’t be a stranger dear, you know how I putter around without someone to try my baking.”

Arthur looks at the grandmotherly figure who had shown him more warmth than his father ever had. Merlin assumes that he finds that the promise to visit come surprisingly easy.

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*ARTHUR’S POV*

For the past hour of walking up the path to the castle, Merlin has refused to let go of his hand. He feels his fingers grow cold and numb from the pressure and tries to wiggles them to get blood flow back. Merlin misreads the gesture and squeezes his hand harder as if to reassure him. He had tried
pulling his hand away, insisting that he is not a child, but Merlin simply pretended to ignore him.

Getting closer to the impressive structure of Arthur’s old home, he starts to find Merlin’s unwavering contact a relief. Not that he would ever tell Merlin that. He pries his eyes away from the breathtaking sight of the castle to the profile of his friend. They make eye contact and Arthur realizes now that he was being stared at. Merlin, of course, had been trying to keep it discreet, but Arthur caught his eyes flicker quickly away from him the moment he turned his way. Arthur opens his mouth to say something, possibly tease him or call him out on it when he is distracted.

Merlin’s face is impossibly smooth. His eyes are large in his face, doe-eyed and round. His cheeks are softer looking, rounded by adolescence. The worry lines and smile lines familiar to Arthur are erased completely. His hair is even a bit different. He lets his eyes wander down and notices the hidden lankiness of his form. More so than usual. His boney limbs are thin and fragile looking. Where his startlingly young appearance might have made it harder to accept the vastness of his true age, Arthur only finds it more unsettling, farther cementing the certainty that Merlin is different. Very different than the man he knew lifetimes ago. Different even than the man he thought he was. Arthur tries not to let himself mourn the memory of the man by his side, still alive and breathing, be he can’t help but feel that he will never see the man he knew again. In a way, he died in Camelot with everyone else. Or perhaps he was never who I thought he was at all? And the man I knew simply never existed. That thought chokes him and he forces himself to look away and back at the castle.

‘Never change’ I said, unknowing of just how impossible a feat that would be. Arthur berates himself for his thoughts. Merlin has lived through countless lifetimes and hardships, it would be unrealistic and selfish to expect him to remain as Arthur had known him, assuming still of course that I had known him at all. Yet Arthur feels no comfort from that. Merlin may have acted the same so far, excessive crying aside, yet there is no way that this Merlin is the same man he knew. Time changes everything. The Merlin shaped hole in his heart grows larger the longer he contemplates.

“You alright?” He notices he must have been staring, Merlin is giving him a concerned look. “If this is too overwhelming, we can rest somewhere and come back when you’re ready.”

Arthur finds himself unable to reply. He shakes his head, throat closed for business. The Merlin as I knew him or not, this man is still selfless and kind. After so many years he’s remained caring for others. And after centuries he still values our friendship. Still recognises me. Still remembers me even. God, after so long how does he even remember a thing about Camelot? Arthur is overwhelmed by a feeling of affection for the warlock. Gratitude and profound relief at having him by his side still after all this time. The same Merlin or not, he is a good man.

Arthur wants to ask him. Wants to uncover the secrets between them, clear the air and find out what went on and is going on. What did Merlin do as a sorcerer in Camelot? Why did he stay in Camelot? How could he have been friends with me? Why did he lie? He still has a hard time accepting the answer he got the first time. And why is he pretending to be a child? Does he know about HeWhoMustNotBeNamed? Is his current state related to that somehow? Arthur’s head spins from all of his confusion. He hates being left in the dark. He hates being defenceless.

It takes a great effort to be contented with Merlin’s word that he will be filled in later, mind whirling away at the possible answers. He turns his head back towards the castle and is startled by their proximity. How can it be so unchanged after all these years? He think back to the cities and towns he has seen of this new age so far and feels profound relief that his castle has not suffered a similar fate, no matter how impressive.

The nerves in his stomach settle slightly at the familiar sight. Merlin squeezes his unfortunate hand again but Arthur hardly notices. I’m coming home.
We are getting close to where I am currently writing, so please be warned that you only have a little bit of chapters left until you have to wait for me to finish writing as I'll be updating chapter by chapter as I complete them (I am currently writing ch.25). Unfortunately that means updates will turn weekly, or bi-weekly. The good news is that if you guys send in suggestions for the next chapter, as long as you catch me before I finish writing it, I might include your ideas :)}
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I just want to say thank you to everyone who left a comment so far, you guys are awesome and your words encourage me to continue and put a smile on my face. Although I have always had the intention of finishing this story, I’m not really sure if I’d have even managed to get as far as I am without your continued support.

His legs threaten to give way after their first step past the doorway. The discreet hallway leading to where Merlin has assured him is the direction of the headmaster’s office is painfully unfamiliar, but at least quiet and uncrowded. The glimpse he gets of the large hall beyond the door is absolutely bustling. Arthur had never seen so many people roaming the castle halls before outside of banquets, feasts, and preparations for war. Making use of the castle no kidding. Suddenly his home feels foreign to him. There is no place for me here. I’m the intruder. This is not my home. His feet freeze in place, refusing to move.

Merlin looks back at him from his short distance in front, alerted by the pull of his hand. This is not my home.

He casts his eyes around desperately attempting to lock onto a familiar sight. The walls look different. There are too many doorways. Too many turns and twists where there ‘aught to be straight narrow passageways. Arthur finds himself lost in the terrain he could navigate since he could first walk. The floor looks different, wrong pattern. Everything is changed. I expected this, I knew it would be like this. Too long has passed, it would be grossly unreasonable to expect it to remain the same. The thought is no comfort and his eyes remain casting around for the sight of anything. His gaze lands on Merlin and his heart skips a beat. Wrong wrong wrong. The face of the young man makes his head spin out of control. He tries to remind himself of what he knows, what Merlin has told him so far, but the strangeness around him is overwhelming. For a surreal moment Arthur wonders if he were to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror, if a stranger would be there to greet him.

The walls squeeze closer towards him and the ground turns to jelly. Arthur reaches his spare hand out to the wall to steady himself.

“Arthur are you ok? What’s going on?” Merlin’s voice is high and bordering on panic. Arthur has no words of comfort. He has no idea what’s going on. Where he is. This is not Camelot.

I knew this. It’s been over a thousand years, of course things have changed. He rationalizes with himself, but his mind refuses to communicate it with the rest of his body.

“Arthur, talk to me. Tell me what’s happening.” Arthur looks up at Merlin, startled by the shrill tones. Why am I looking up at him? Arthur blinks and takes stalk of his surroundings. He’s seated on the floor, legs sprawled awkwardly underneath him, his bag in a scattered mess next to him. When did I get down here?
Merlin’s kneeling in front of him, cold and sweaty hands on the sides of his face, piercing blue eyes threatening to overflow. “Arthur-” his voice breaks.

Why is he crying again?

Arthur tries to focus on the man in front of him, taking the distraction from his surroundings and the nagging wrongness about it all. He gently grabs the hands clutching at his head, ignoring how his own are shaking. *Merlin needs you, pull yourself together. Your people need you. You have things to do.*

The memory of his father’s voice drifts over to him, *‘Don’t make a mess of yourself Arthur. A king does not get scared, does not show weakness.’* 


Merlin takes a moment to visibly pull himself back together. “No, I’m sorry. This is your home, I should have told you about it first. Prepared you more. We can go back, do this slower, take our time with things-”

“No Merlin. This is fine,” wrong wrong wrong, “I was just a little overwhelmed. It’s been a while, of course things are different.”

Merlin’s eyes show no sign of drying any time soon, Arthur gives Merlin’s leg a pat before using the wall as a support to stand.

“The castle has been completely done over as a school. There’s not much left apart from the exterior, a couple guest chambers, and the throne room left relatively unchanged.” Merlin’s tone is soft and apologetic. Than a sparkle lights up in his eyes and a slight grin causes Arthur’s heart to start beating again. “You might actually like some of the changes Arthur. Modern plumbing is incredible.”

Arthur feels his face stretch into a grin to match, breaking through some of the mind numbing panic still battering away at him. He thinks he knows the sort of changes Merlin is referring to.

“I have to introduce you to someone first though, than we can get you settled and I can fill in some of the blanks for you. You won’t be able to stay in your old chambers, and this is a school so your presence will have to be explained to the students and faculty somehow, but I have an idea. First stop is for you to meet the headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. He knows who I am. He’s the only one, well, him and another. It would be rather alarming for them if you just showed up without warning or explanation.” Merlin’s old habit of rambling on to fill the silences between them is a comfort for once. The sound of the familiar voice soothes him and some of the worry ebbs away.

“You’ll like Albus. He’ll help get us sorted.” Merlin stops in front of a large bird-like statue, utters a nonsensical word and it springs to life. Arthur’s hand automatically reaches to his side, heart pounding in his ears. His sword is not where he keeps it. He looks on in horror as Merlin approaches the monster, arms relaxed by his sides.

The monster makes a strange motion and stairs appear, winding up towards a door he had not noticed before. Forcing his fists to unclench, Arthur follows after Merlin up the steps. *This is a magic school, of course there is going to be displays of magic more than simply floating objects. This is normal for them. This is normal for Merlin.* Arthur wonders if he will ever grow accustomed to Merlin and magic. He hopes, for the sake of his wildly beating heart, that he will.

Merlin gives him one last reassuring glance, eyes still suspiciously wet, before he opens the door.
without knocking.

Arthur doesn’t know where to look. Everything his eyes fall on is otherworldly, uncanny, unknown, and unfailingly magical. Bizarre contraptions litter countless surfaces, moving in unnatural and impossible ways. A large fiery bird is perched on the back of an empty chair, its eyes holding more intelligence than most people Arthur has met. The numerous paintings on the walls are like windows to another world, people moving about and softly chatting to each other. Several of their eyes are pointed at him in a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Brightly coloured patterns on thick luscious materials cover every cushioned surface making for a truly staggering display of wealth. Even the shape of the room is new and unfamiliar.

“Albus, I have news.” The sound of Merlin’s voice startles him and he turns his head to see his line of vision. Arthur’s face slackens at the sight of the old man walking towards them. It’s Dragoon. No…. wait. His face is rounder. Softer somehow. Arthur startles again, as he remembers that no, Merlin is Dragoon. Is this man his son? But that’s not right. Merlin said he was alone. Had no family.

Merlin’s quiet laugh breaks Arthur out of his head. “I know what you’re thinking, and no. It’s just chance. There’s no relation.” This seems to mean something to the headmaster-Merlin-look-a-like, as his eyebrows raise and he looks from Merlin, to Arthur and back again.

“Maldin?” He says the name slowly. “Who is this man?”

“Albus, I’d like you to meet King Arthur of Camelot. Arthur, this is the headmaster of the Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore.” His face is alight with a truly blinding smile as he introduces Arthur.

Albus’s eyes are wide as he takes Arthur in. He seems unsure of what to say. Arthur doesn’t feel much better. Distinctly wrong footed, and at a loss for how to proceed, Arthur takes a step forward and holds out his hand.

The old man snaps out of his daze, reaching out to shake his hand while smoothening down the front of his already straight robes. “It’s wonderful to meet you.” He looks over to Merlin with a question on his face.

“Why don’t we have a seat?” For the first time Arthur can remember, Merlin takes control of the situation, leading them towards a seating area with plush looking chairs.

Arthur and Albus follow his lead in silence, Albus’s eyes refusing to leave Arthur’s face while Arthur tries not to feel too uncomfortable.

“How-?” Albus addresses Merlin without looking at him.

“The prophecies were true. Arthur is the Once and Future King. He has returned.” Merlin joins Albus in staring at him. Arthur, although accustomed to being the center of attention, shifts in his seat.

It takes a while for Merlin’s words to sink in, but once they do, Arthur is more confused than he started off. “What do you mean, ‘the prophecies?’” Arthur doesn’t recognize the sound of his own voice. Merlin’s tears continue their course down his face as he takes in Arthur.

“Apparently there were prophesies about us. Me, Emrys, and you, the Once and Future King. The great dragon told me, after… after you died… that you would return. You’d come back.” Merlin drags his sleeve across his face before continuing and Arthur feels a pang at the reminder that Merlin spent an uncountable amount of time alone. That pang was quickly overcome by horror.
“What do you mean prophesies?! There were people that knew this would happen?” Arthur feels sick at the thought that his life is out of his control. As obvious that is already is, he enjoyed what ounce of control he had left. Illusion or not.

“Yes. Killgharrah, the Druids, probably some others. They were always very vague. I- I didn’t believe them. I mean, at first I did. It was said that you’d unite the lands of Albion, legalize magic, and bring about a time of peace. I saw all of that in you, knew it to be true. But you weren’t supposed to die.” Merlin’s tears turn into all out crying at this, his voice cracking and volume diminishing. “I didn’t protect you and you died before it could come true. Kil-Killgharrah told me, after, that you’d come back- and I waited- but… but so many years passed. I watched everyone around me die. It didn’t seem right. Than Camelot changed, people changed, wars came and ended, and still. You were gone. I stopped believing.” Merlin’s turned to Arthur, pleading at him. “I thought it was a lie. A gift for my failures—”

Arthur’s heart breaks for him anew. It seems impossibly cruel for Merlin to have to wait all that time for Arthur, while he’s incoherent, dead, somewhere in Avalon. That Merlin should have to bear all of that. That he was left alone, cursed by whatever higher power exists.

“I’m sorry Arthur. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t there for you, I’m so sorry I failed you. And then I gave up on you. I’m- I’m so—”

Arthur’s arms wrap around the trembling man, his own seat abandoned and Albus forgotten. “No, Merlin, no. None of this is your fault. Mordred betrayed me, not you. And no one should have to wait that long.”

“But- I wasn’t there fo—”

“No Merlin, I wasn’t alone. I had Ethel remember? I was fine. I am fine. And I’m here now.” His voice is soft and soothing, but inside his panic threatens to take over again. How can I be there for Merlin, when I can barely keep it together myself? I know nothing about this modern world. I’m no use to him. No use to anyone.

For the first time since pulling Excalibur from the stone, Arthur feels truly helpless. He has to right the wrongs he left behind. He has to help Merlin.

Arthur does the only thing he can do, and offers up comfort. He rests Merlin’s head atop his shoulder and eases his fingers through his soft dark hair. “You’re not alone anymore. You have me. I’m not going anywhere.”

After a moment, Merlin settles and Arthur moves back to his seat, ignoring the damp patch on his shirt.

Merlin composes himself and turns to the silent headmaster. “I’m sorry Albus. That’s not how I planned this introduction to go.” He manages a small wet sounding chuckle.

“Arthur just got back, he’ll need somewhere to stay. At Hogwarts that is. Somewhere that will allow for us to be seen together that will fit with my cover as a student. He’s not a wizard and he won’t be going in a disguise like me.” Arthur lets out a relived breath at that. He hadn’t been aware that was a concern he had until Merlin shot it down.

“It would be an honour for King Arthur to stay here at Hogwarts and I understand it would be unwise to reveal him to the public. I have just the thing.” He gives Arthur a kind smile that serves to reassure him more than anything Merlin has said so far. “He can stay with Hagrid and assist him as Hogwarts’ groundskeeper and care of magical creatures.”
Merlin’s hand goes to his mouth in an attempt at a muffled laugh, his eyes filled with mirth. “Oh, yes. That’s perfect!” Arthur feels apprehension sneak its way back in.

“Groundskeeper?” He’s not entirely sure what that will entail.

“Yes, it’s the best position for someone without the need to perform any magical tasks. Your lack of wand as well as age- you’re not of age to be either a student or teacher- will not come into question. And it will allow you free reign to roam the castle as you see fit, while also allowing you to interact with the students.”

“That seems perfect.” Arthur looks to Merlin in confusion while he continues to snicker to himself, tears finally starting to dry.

“And Hagrid is a trustworthy person. You will be safe with him.”

Merlin sobers up enough to interject. “I don’t want to tell anymore people of our identity Albus. It’s not time yet. It would put Arthur in danger.”

“Of course. Hagrid will be notified of acquiring an assistant, but his back story is left up to you.”

Merlin nods his head at this, contented.

Arthur narrows his eyes in suspicion at him. “What does being a ‘groundskeeper’ entail exactly?”

“You will have several duties involving upkeep of the school gardens, maintenance of the forbidden forest, helping out students, keeping after the keys, and performing other such odd tasks throughout the school, usually entailing preparations for events. Of course, you aren’t expected to handle everything yourself, you will be merely assisting Hagrid as a cover to explain your presence here at the school.”

Arthur blinks slowly. That sounded an awful lot like the duties of a servant in the castle. His eyes track over to Merlin, whose bottom lip is being chewed in an effort not to laugh again. I’ve got a servant’s job. He stifles his want to protest loudly against it. No, if Merlin can do it for 10 years than I can certainly manage for a little while. To maintain cover. My pride is not what’s important here. He nibbles his cheek, brows knitting together. There is no place for kings in this modern world.

“I assume that you are here to help out with Voldemort and his Deatheaters?” Albus’s blue eyes are fixed on Arthur.

“Yes, that is my plan.”

“No!” Merlin almost lurches out of his seat with the force of his startled protest. “It’s too dangerous Arthur, they all have magic. All of them. You just got back-” He stops there, but Arthur hears what he isn’t saying, you just got back to me.

“I have to help fix this Merlin. I have to. I think- I think that’s why I’m here. At least part of it anyways.” I have to fix my mistakes.

Merlin’s chin wobbles, but he takes a deep breath and it steadies. “We’ll discuss this later Arthur. You have to know all of the details of everything.”

Arthur makes a sound in agreeance.

Merlin walks over to Albus, placing his hand companionably on his shoulder, before nodding his head once.
Albus stands up and walks over to one of the desks, seating himself in front of it, quill in hand. “I have some preparing to do. I’ll inform Hagrid of the changes, he’ll be expecting you around 9:00 at his hut. I’d like it if you both could join me for a meeting tomorrow after dinner. The first Order meeting this semester is scheduled for next weekend. I’ll discuss it with yous then. I’m sure you have much to catch up on. It has been a pleasure meeting you Arthur.”

Arthur tries to memorize the new layout of the castle as Merlin leads him along, but after the seemingly hundredth turn he gives it up as a lost cause. He’ll have time in his job as assistant groundskeeper to re-familiarize himself with everything. The students walking past them give Arthur strange looks, but thankfully being followed by many pairs of eyes is a sensation he is accustomed to.

Finally Merlin stops in a deserted part of the castle. In front of nothing. He turns to face the blank wall space and Arthur braces himself for more displays of terrifying magic.

A door appears in front of them along the blank stretch of wall space, gaining size until it’s large enough to fit the both of them at once. Arthur lets out the breath he was holding feeling relieved. No monsters this time.

Merlin opens the door and gestures for Arthur to enter first.

Arthur reluctantly makes his way through the entranceway, his heart stopping at the sight that awaits him. A table rests closest to the door next to a roaring fireplace. A dresser, changing screen and window. A canopied bed with bright red blankets. Arthur’s chambers appear exactly as he recalls them, apparently untouched throughout the many years of his absence.

At Merlin’s sharp intake of breath, Arthur turns to him. “You saved my room for me.” He feels inexplicably touched.

Merlin shakes his head. “No, I didn’t Arthur. This is the room of requirement. It takes the form of whatever you need most at the time. This wasn’t me.”

Arthur looks back at his room feeling confused. So this isn’t his room? Nothing in this castle makes any sense anymore. Feeling comforted by the familiar sight none the less, Arthur flings off his shoes and tosses himself on top of the already made bed. “Real or not real, it’s good to be back.”

“No, it’s real Arthur. It’s just not the original. This room changes.” His words are soft and hazy, almost as if he is unaware of speaking. Merlin’s eyes trail around the room, taking everything in with an unreadable expression on his face.

When his eyes land on Arthur on the bed his face seems to come to a decision and a huge dimple filled smile takes over. He laughs out loud in delight and Arthur feels his spirits lift at the sound.

The longer Merlin takes in the sight of Arthur, alive and well in his old chambers, the more his eyes turn from misty, to wet, to full on soggy. The pale complexion of his face makes way for a bright red to match Arthur’s blankets and he falls to his knees in front of him.

Arthur sits up in alarm, understanding taking a moment to dawn. *He was always emotional, but this is different. It will be a while before Merlin is ok again. If he ever is.* Arthur stomps down hard on that thought. There’s no room for that. *That’s what I’m here for.*

Arthur reaches his hand out to him, but hesitates. *I have no idea what to say. Guinevere would know what to do. She’d know how to help him.* Arthur feels her loss hard and sharp like a dagger in his
chest. No, she might not be here, but I am. Merlin is. I have to do something.

Arthur completes the motion and rests his hand on the top of Merlin’s head, soothing down his hair in what he hopes desperately to be a comforting motion. *Merlin is a chatty person. He likes to talk about things, works through things out loud. Complains about things.* “Do you want to talk about it?”

Merlin lifts his head, Arthur’s hand sliding down the side of his face, wiping away the trail of tears. “It’s time I told you everything.”
“So you’re a Warlock that for some, unfathomable reason, decided not only to make Camelot home, but worked in the palace right under King Uther’s nose? I just don’t get it Merlin. Why not anywhere else? You could have been anyone, done anything. Had riches, castles, a wife, kids, servants of your own even. Why live in hiding. Why help me?” Arthur peers into Merlin’s eyes as if expecting to find the answers to all of his questions reflected out for the world to see.

“So, don’t hand me the whole, ‘but you’re my friend’ bit. I accepted it last time ‘cause I was dying, but now I’ve had more time to think on it.” Merlin’s swallows thickly at the mention of the last heart breaking days of Arthur’s life. “I’m not saying we aren’t friends now, but there’s no denying we hated each other when we met. Why stick around for a guy you disliked, a prince you didn’t respect?”

Merlin looks away from Arthur’s bemused face. “They were frightened of me. My village, my neighbours, my friends. My mother.” Merlin misses Arthur’s wide incredulous eyes. “I hid it best I could, but as an infant floating objects around the room, setting fire to food I hated, I imagine it was pretty hard not to notice. For the most part, the town’s people pretended they didn’t know. They avoided me best they could. It got harder when I was older. My magic got stronger and I couldn’t contain it. They could no longer act like it wasn’t happening when half the town and their cows watched a bucket of water freeze from falling half way to the ground. They never said anything, but their panicked and suspicious looks followed my mother and I to the point where mum figured it’d be best for me to learn some control. And put some space between me and the villagers.

“Mum studied under Gaius for several years. She knew he had studied magic, he helped my father get out from under Uther’s nose so he was obviously learned in the ways of ah-” He gives Arthur a sheepish look, but notices Arthur is stuck staring at the far wall, mouthing father with a confused face and the look of someone scouring their memory. “Ah. Right. We’ll just skip right to that part then shall we?

“You remember Balinor?” Arthur’s eyes squint, and after a short time, widen in recognition, just to go back to squinting again.

“What does he have to d-”

“Just let me-” Merlin sighs. “I’ll get to everything ok? It’s just been a while since I’ve recalled everything in any kind of coherent order. Let me work out my thoughts.” Merlin spends a moment to
figure the best way to come clean to Arthur about everything. “I never knew my father growing up. Mum never spoke of him to me, or anyone else as far as I’m aware of. Knowing what I do now, it’s little wonder as to why. She must have figured him dead, and as mum had no magic and mine must have come from somewhere, it’s a logical conclusion. Then I released Kilgharrah- I’ll get to that- and we went looking for a dragonlord. Gaius filled me in on certain information I had not been privy to before. Balinor was my father. With you- that was the first time I ever met him.”

Arthur’s stunned expression is frozen on his face. “The old grumpy dragonlord hermit was your father!?” Words finally burst out of him, leaving him slumped where he sits.

“Yep. And when he died, I inherited his powers.”

Arthur’s mouth drops open. “Is that why you’re-” he waves a hand at Merlin.

Merlin shakes his head. “No. I don’t know why I’m like this. Still here. It’s not a dragonlord’s power. A dragonlord has magic, but it’s different. A dragonlord and others with strong magic might be able to live a long time, but none are immortal.”

Arthur looks gobsmacked. “I just can’t believe you’re a dragonlord. I mean, at this point I should probably have expected it. Or something at least. But it’s still so hard to wrap my head around. My clumsy idiot manservant is in fact a powerful magical being and dragonlord. A *dragonlord*. I just…”

Arthur drifts off and then sits up abruptly.

Merlin startles at the sudden change. “What?”

Arthur’s voice is anguished “I didn’t know. Merlin I’m so sorry I said what I did, I had no clue.” His face is pale.

“What do you have to be sorry for Arthur? It’s not like you knew I was a dragonlord.”

“No, gods Merlin, I’m sorry I said what I did. That no man is worth your tears. You were mourning the loss of your father, what an awful thing to hear me say.”

“You didn’t know, I knew that. It’s not your fault you didn’t know, it was mine.”

“But still,”

“It’s fine Arthur. It’s been a long time. I’ve had the time to grieve. More than enough time. I was upset over his passing, but I never knew the man. He was a stranger to me. Didn’t even know I existed until the two of us just showed up at his cave.

“There’s still much yet left for you to know. That you need to know. There’s not enough time for it all today, so I’ll skip some stuff for now, and fill you in on it later.”

Arthur nods his head once and rearranges himself to a more comfortable seated position on the bed.

“After you-” Merlin takes a second to collect himself, “passed on, I went back to Camelot. They all knew you had been injured and apparently before I got back Guinevere had pieced together that I was the old sorcerer at Cammlan. She cornered me when I got back, scaring the daylights out of me, demanding answers.

“She accepted me. We mourned your loss together. There was a- never mind. Not right for a man to hear about his own- anyways, it was tough for her at first. But the knights stepped it up, supported her and as you know, the people of Camelot had always adored her. She settled the kingdom, hunted down the remainder of the Saxons, and passed a law legalizing magic. Well, it was several laws
actually. She formed what is now known as ‘The Ministry of Magic’, the government system for wizards, and other magical creatures.

Arthur’s eyes glisten at the accounts of his late wife. “Camelot became a sanctuary for sorcerers after the legalizing of magic. People with magic came from all over to participate in the magical games put on by Camelot. Sorcerers were added to the ranks of knights and trained in the fields every morning. Eventually a wing in the castle was used as an orphanage of sorts for abandoned magical children and over time it expanded to consume the entire castle, kick-starting the opening of Hogwarts. This,” he sweeps his arm around dramatically, “is Camelot’s legacy. Yours and Guinevere’s.”

Arthur snorts in protest. “Guinevere was always the better of the two of us. She did what I never had the nerve to. She had the kindness and purity of heart to see past her own short comings and fears. Hogwarts is wonderful, it really is. But it’s not mine.”

Merlin places his hand over Arthur’s on the bed between them. He gives it a gentle squeeze that Arthur tries not to wince at. “Arthur, this is all thanks to you. You set the groundwork for everything. You started a movement for equality between nobles, commoners, and Druids. You stopped the raids on the magical population. You listened to people. You made Gwen queen. You gave everything to Camelot, you gave your life. If it wasn’t for you, none of this would be here.”

“If it wasn’t for me, sorcerers wouldn’t have to keep hiding. I know how everything is divided. Non magical people don’t even know magic exists. They have no clue. And there is a crazy fanatical group going around killing people. Brainwashing people. There’s so much hate and fear still. My father started the divide and I perpetuated it. I allowed this to happen. That is my legacy. Not this. I can’t take credit for this.”

“No. You are not your father. You were changing things. You died before you could see them all, that was no fault of yours.” Merlin’s voice cracks and he stops to drag a hand over his face. “Things were good. They were great. Magic was legal, people were starting to accept it as being normal, even enjoying it. The games helped with that, and the knighted sorcerers. But Camelot was a small city in the vast forest of the world, and not everyplace shared her views. Uther’s old supporters fled into the outlying counties and banded together. Over the course of a couple hundred years, their hate and fear had spread, starting the witch hunts and burnings back up again. They outnumbered us. Kings, knights, merchants, farmers, villagers, and children. They wouldn’t listen to reason, and I couldn’t possibly just wipe them out. We banded together and went into hiding, with Camelot at the core.

“That time of peace that we had, those were your years Arthur. That was thanks to you.” Arthur didn’t fight him on it, but he could tell he still had more convincing to do.

“The divide nurtured unrest within the wizarding world. Magical families hated the non-magicals for what they did. The family members they murdered. Entire families swore vengeance against them, blinded by their rage. First they killed those in power, the ones who did the deeds directly, but they didn’t stop there. They weren’t satisfied by the deaths. They wanted revenge for what had been done, they killed the innocents, the families of the murderers. Innocent little children. They were everywhere, I tried to stop them, talk sense into them, but while I would be with one group, another would sprout out while my back was turned to continue the work. It got out of hand.

“Eventually the population banded together to put a stop to it, and the families went into hiding. The waited quietly, teaching their children to hate, brainwashing generation after generation of wizards to despise non-magicals. The plot for revenge got all bent out of shape, and a new monster was born. The witch burnings have faded from memory, but the rage remains. Tom Riddle is one such child who was born into a family intend on whipping out the non-magicals. He goes by Voldemort and is
the current leader of the cult of wizards plotting to take over.

“That’s what brought me here actually. I had, uh, been out of town for a while and hadn’t realized how bad things had gotten. I was lead back to Hogwarts to take him down and stop the uprising before it leads to war. At least, that’s my assumption. Destiny is never really all that straight forward, and I don’t have Kilgharrah help this time.” Merlin takes a deep breath, waiting for Arthur to say something.

Or do something.

Or react.

Anything at all.

Arthur breaks his trance by sliding his hand over his knee and visibly swallowing. “I want to help. I’m here to help. Ever since I got back- came back- whatever- I have been stuck on the why. Forget about the how of it all, why would I of all people get brought back to life? And over a thousand years in the future? It’s to correct my wrongs, it has to be.”

“Arthur-”

“It has to be. I have to finish what I set out to do, I have to make the world equal. Equal and safe. United. No more nobles and peasants, masters and servants, wizards and muggles. We are all the same. The fighting has to stop and I am here to help make that happen.” Determination colours his voice, his mind is set.

Merlin feels the bed dropping out from under him, his hand tightens around Arthur’s. I cannot lose him again. He has no army this time, no magic, and not even any angry villagers. He’s defenceless against them. The memory of all the people he witnessed die by magic flutter behind his eyes in a horrifyingly colourful assortment. Sheer unfiltered panic shoots through his veins, causing his magic to flare up on it’s own for the first time in centuries. He tries to swallow it down, but his mouth is dry and pasty. He closes his eyes against it.

“Arthur no, I can’t lose you again.” He voice is unsteady and barely held together.

“I don’t- I’m not- Merlin, I have to do this.” Arthur’s eyes hold understanding and sympathy but his words slice through Merlin’s heart.

His mind screams out in horror and fear. I will not lose him again. Not if I have to magically strap him to a chair myself. He stares into his eyes as if looking for something. He’s serious. He is going to get himself killed in this fight. A fight that is not even his. Merlin takes a moment to calm himself, his magic a couple flinching seconds away from tearing a wall down. He forces his hands to stop trembling.

Stop it. Arthur was never defenceless, and of course he wants to do this. This is Arthur. He cannot simply stand by while his people are in danger. Merlin mentally smacks himself. Twice. How dare I think otherwise. I know it’s been a long time, but have I truly forgotten the heart of the man I-

He has an army, he has magic- he has me. He is my king and I will listen to him. For once. His magic settles at his mental vow.

Merlin spares a moment to feel shame at himself for his train of thought. Horror at the idea of trapping Arthur to keep him safe. It was never about me, Merlin reminds himself. These are his people, different era or no, and Arthur will not stand to see them suffer.
“I’ll support you in this. In everything. Anything. I am yours.” Merlin tips his head down in a small display of servitude.

Arthur gives him a sharp surprised look, presumably startled at the change of tune. Than his words seem to finally sink in and a hot blush fills his face. Merlin replays his words in his head and bites his lip, face red to match. His eyes slowly widen in horror. *I did not mean for that to get out. Goddess no, I can’t believe I said that!*

He quickly stands up to distract from his apparently freely running mouth. “We should get you to Hagrid’s. Introduce you and get you settled in and everything. It’s running rather late.”

Thankfully Arthur accepts the abrupt topic change and stands up himself, brushing a hand over his rumpled shirt. “Why can’t I just stay here?”

“Some of the students know about this room. Although they cannot get in while you are using it, if you leave, someone could enter. The room would change for them as it did you, and you would be locked out. Dumbledore trusts Hagrid, he seems like a decent person. It should be fine.”

Arthur takes one last mournful look around his ‘old chambers’, sets his jaw, and heads to the doorway, lips in a firm line.

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*ARTHUR’S POV*

Hagrid’s hut is huge. When Arthur heard about his new accommodations sharing someone’s ‘hut’, concerned, he had thought of the numerous huts he had encountered in his time. Tiny, damp and cold one room houses built from sticks, straw, and mud. Or rock, if the person was more fortunate. Found deeply buried in forests, in the middle of abandoned fields, or on the outskirts of villages, huts have all met a certain standard. Or failed to meet one, pending on how you look at it.

This is not a hut. Hagrid’s ‘hut’ is high ceilinged, sturdy roofed, wooden floored, multiple roomed, and warm. Although a far cry from noble accommodations, this is not any sort of poor man’s shack.

Arthur marvels at the massive kitchen table and the heavy mug of tea in his hand. Everything is larger than life. His eyes drift up to look at the back of his host’s bushy head as he busies himself with making food. The answer to the unasked question is obvious after meeting his host. Hagrid is a giant of a person, easily twice the height of the average man. Arthur wonders to himself if he is entirely human.

Merlin happily sips his tea next to him, looking ridiculous in his younger form holding a mug so large. Arthur has to hold back a mad peel of laughter.

Hagrid turns around with a plate heaping with lumpy looking bread things. He smiles politely as he sets the plate down in front of them and seats himself at the table joining them.

“I’m very glad to have you ‘ere Arthur, Dumbledore speaks very highly of you. It’ll be nice having some help ‘round with things, but to be honest, the real treat will be the company. The other teachers are nice enough, but the students have the tendency to avoid me- but of course not you Maldin. It’ll be good having someone around.

“It’s fine really. Apart from the work, I’m here for Maldin actually. We go way back, and he could use a familiar face around. I’ll be helping you out and helping him out.” He looks Merlin in the eye as he makes the promise. Using Merlin’s fake name feels strange and wrong on his tongue so he grabs one of the large bread things to distract from it.

Quickly grabbing a napkin, Arthur discreetly spits out what little chunk of bread he had managed to break off. The rock like substance threatened to break his teeth, and Arthur refuses to risk it. He side eyes Merlin as he tears off a piece of his own rock-bread, chewing easily and swallowing before reaching for more. Arthur figures there must be some sort of magic at work and slides his portion over onto the other man’s plate.

The evening passes quickly with Hagrid filling Arthur in on what he can expect at his new job, as well as stories of the creatures living in the nearby forest. His eagerness and enthusiasm is infectious and Arthur finds himself actually looking forward to trying out some of the work as well as familiarizing himself with the ways of the modern Wizarding World.

Deeply enthralled in Hagrid’s latest story of ‘Aragog’ the giant spider- and his apparent friend, Arthur almost misses the glazed look in Merlin’s eye. Turning his head towards him fully, Arthur notices a faintly glistening streak running down his face. This is not what he needs right now. I am so oblivious. Merlin had remained uncharacteristically quiet through the entire evening and I hadn’t noticed. How many times has he suffered in silence while pretending like everything is alright, while I continue on like his feelings don’t matter? This is not what he needs right now. Hagrid is not going anywhere, we can talk in the morning.

His eyes are swollen and dark, I should urge him to bed. Give him a chance at escape. We can meet up again in the morning and he can finish filling me in on everything.

Arthur takes one last sip of tea waiting for Hagrid to finish his tale, the wonders that are giant spiders now the farthest thing from his mind.

“It’s gotten rather late, I think we should call it a night. I’ve got a busy day ahead of me by the sounds of it, and I know Maldin has been awake far longer than he should.” Arthur pushes his chair back in after getting up. The sound of the chair legs screeching over the hardwood floor snaps Merlin out of his haze and he nearly knocks his still full mug of cold tea over in his haste to stand.

“Oh Merlin’s Beard, Look at the time!” Arthur’s blood freezes cold in his veins and he darts an alarmed look in Merlin’s direction. “It’s way past curfew, Maldin you better hurry off and be sneaky ‘bout it, or you’ll be get’n into trouble. ‘S my fault really, but Filtch won’t see it that way.” Arthur’s confusion grows as Merlin’s fake name is used, the man himself seeming less than concerned.

Not wanting to make a scene, Arthur grabs a red faced Merlin and marches him to the door. “I’ll be right back in, I’m just going to walk Maldin to the school. Wouldn’t want him to get eaten by a giant spider or anything.” Hagrid gives Arthur a bemused look before the door closes behind them.

“What the hell was that?! How does he know you’re Merlin? Does he know who I am too- did your friend Albus just betray our trust?” Arthur’s enraged whisper is very far from quiet and Merlin shushes him while yanking him away from Hagrid’s hut.

“It’s not like that. It’s actually rather…” Merlin bites his cheek, his face appearing scarlet even in the dark of night. Does he look… embarrassed? Arthur’s face scrunches as he tries to work out what had happened that he clearly must have missed. “He doesn’t know I’m Merlin. We have no reason to
worry about that. You might actually be hearing my name rather frequently. It’s become sort of a… ah…” Merlin seems unable to continue the explanation, his face set in a grimace of pain.

Arthur abruptly stops their walking, turning to face Merlin directly. “I understand that people know of us as some sort of historical figures, but why would your name come up in casual conversation? Merlin?”

Merlin looks at him and sighs heavily, his shoulders slumping in resigned defeat. “Over time, my name has went down in history as a sort of god-like figure.” Merlin visibly struggles to get the words out. “Well, eventually my name became used as a sort of exclamation. They don’t know me personally, or even know that I exist still, so my name has turned into- something… it’s-” Merlin stops talking abruptly at Arthur’s sudden shout.

Unable to contain the burst of laughter, Arthur clamps a hand over his mouth to try to muffle the sound. “Oh my god! Merlin!” Tears make their way down his cheek in droves. This is too good. “You’re the new Oh my god!”

The death glare Merlin directs at him is sharp enough to slice clean through Hagrid’s rock-bread, but Arthur cannot contain himself. If anything, the sight of a thoroughly embarrassed and angrily ruffled Merlin sets him off even more. “What else do they say Merlin?”

“I’m not- they don’t- I’m not going to tell you! No way. This is not funny Arthur. Arthur stop it.”

Merlin offers up an indignant squawk when Arthur firmly pats him on the back. “Oh, but it is Merlin.” Arthur staggers along the path to the school, feeling lighter than he had since his re-awakening.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the unexpected delay in updating. I was up visiting my parents for the holidays and, as they live in a forest in the middle of nowhere, their internet is really shitty. More so than I expected.

I’d like to just point out my obscene level of satisfaction at the current word count. (incase you're reading this after the next chapter is posted, it's at 66666)

*Thanks for all comments and kudos!*
Chapter 21

*MERLIN’S POV*

They stop just outside a small discreet door leading back into the castle, Arthur’s hand gently resting on his shoulder is the only thing stopping him from a collision with its solid wooden mass. Eyes bloodshot and dewy, Merlin is trapped, fixated on the lower half of Arthur’s face. On the smile he had thought lost to him forever.

A questionable amount of time passes before Arthur’s good-natured grin slowly slides off as he takes in Merlin’s piercing stare. Merlin startles and turns away, only now conscious of his behaviour and close proximity to Arthur.

“Are you ok Merlin?” Arthur’s expression is suddenly serious, his gaze flicking back and forth between Merlin’s eyes.

“Right. Yes, I’m alright. Better actually, great even.” At realizing just quite how true that statement is, a blinding smile lights up his face and Arthur blinks back at him, startled. “I’ll meet you here before breakfast tomorrow morning. There’s still so much left for me to tell you. Too much. An impossible life-time’s amount. Actually, you might want to think up a question or two you want answered right away before then.”

“That’s probably a good plan.”

Merlin notices a relieved look on Arthur’s face and, not for the first time, is reminded of all of the secrets he kept from him when he was alive the first time. As well as all of the lies he told him. The old familiar flavour of guilt comes back to him and he finds within himself the need to say more. “I’ll tell you everything Arthur. Anything you want to know, I won’t hold back, you have my word. I have nothing to hide from you. No secrets.”

Arthur’s looks away, removing his hand from Merlin’s shoulder, but not before giving him a solid pat. Seemingly unable to find the words to a response to what Merlin is coming to realize was a statement long overdue, Arthur settles for a nod of his head.

“Our friendship will take some rebuilding. As happy as Arthur is to see me, he probably doesn’t fully trust me again yet. Wanting nothing more badly than to reach out between the short distance separating them and wrap his arms around Arthur, Merlin inhales loudly before taking a step back.

“I trust you’ll be alright at Hagrid’s? I’ll show you where the Slytherin dorms are tomorrow so you know where to find me” Merlin awkwardly clasps his hands together in front of himself.

“Of course. I’ll meet you in the morning and get the full tour then.” Arthur’s face scrunches up at what Merlin assumes is the mention of touring his own home.

“Good. Okay then. Yes.” Merlin feels light and airy, his blissed out state leaving little room for coherent thought. *Arthur is back!* He breaks out into a spontaneous and no doubt absurdly goofy grin, leaving Arthur looking slightly bemused.

“So I’ll be seeing you then.” Arthur absentely scratches the side of his head before making a move to turn back.

“Yes. Tomorrow. You’ll be here in the morning.” A concerned look is the last expression Merlin catches before Arthur’s back is turned and he makes his way back to the hut.
Finding it near impossible to turn his eyes away from his retreating form, Merlin catches Arthur shooting the imposing form of the castle one last haunted look. Arthur gives Merlin a feeble wave before the heavy wooden door closes with a final thud.

The moment Merlin turns away, an unsettled nagging feeling gnaws away at him. Every step leading farther from Arthur feels more real than the last, the floaty-bubbly-ecstatic feeling evaporating completely leaving him feeling empty and drained. His weight lands heavier with every footfall, his steps echoing loudly in his ears.

The deserted hallway mocks him with its emptiness. Merlin is alone again. His heart beats painfully in his chest and sweat beads down his face.

Arthur’s back. It feels too good to be true. After an obscene amount of time, Arthur has been brought back to life as the Once and Future King. Something about that doesn’t sit right. Centuries of agonizing doubt followed by hollow acceptance and resignation stick to him like sharp burrs. This is all he ever dreamed of.

It wasn’t real.

Panicking, Merlin stops in his tracks, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. The clear image of Arthur’s parting glance shines behind his eyes. It felt real enough. Countless bouts of insanity as well as sleep deprived and hunger induced hallucinations have provided him with a clear understanding of the tricks his mind can play on him. The past day felt nothing like the hazy and uncanny scenarios his mind could provide him.

Arthur is back. That actually happened. This is real. Even just thinking it feels like an impossibility, his mind warring between rejecting the notion in fear of being let down, and clinging onto it with desperation.

“What are you doing out of bed at this hour Mr. Ambrose?” Professor McGonagall’s voice cuts through Merlin’s frozen horror, startling him badly.

“Uh…” Blinking up into the unimpressed face of the head of Gryffindor house, Merlin’s brain is suddenly blank. “I’m heading off to bed now.” His mouth speaks the words before his mind has time to catch up, his face heating as he belated realizes how redundant the statement was.

“You most definitely are Mr. Ambrose. I understand you’re new here, but surely Professor Snape has filled you in on the school rules? Staying up past curfew wandering the halls is entirely unacceptable behaviour for a Hogwarts student. I expect better from you in the future.” Merlin kicks himself for forgetting to use the invisibility spell, his mind a hundred miles away. “I am removing 20 points from Slytherin and I will be seeing you for detention after dinner tomorrow.”

“Yes ma’am, sorry. I’ll just-” Merlin gestures in the direction of the dungeons.

“Yes, off you go. Go straight off to bed and no dallying. If I hear you’ve been up at night again you’ll be spending every evening in my office for the next month-”

“I hardly think that will be necessary Minerva.” Professor McGonagall’s eyes widen in surprise along with Merlin’s at the interruption. Merlin squints at the dark patch to his right and his eyebrows shoot up as Snape seemingly materializes out of nothing. “I can take this from here, if you don’t mind.”

Professor McGonagall gives Merlin one last stern look. “I’ll be seeing you in my office tomorrow.”

Snape’s back is a stiff straight board as she disappears around the corner. His eyes lock with Merlin’s yet he remains silent towards him. Sensing the awkwardness thick in the air, Merlin mumbles his
thanks before making a quick retreat.

Damn, I forgot about my meeting with Albus tomorrow. That’s going to make things awkward.

Feeling annoyance break through his growing cloud of fear, Merlin clings to it desperately. I am not a child. I will damn well roam the corridors at any hour which pleases me! I am old enough to be her ancestor. He thinks back to the uncertain and slightly embarrassed look on Severus’s face. So far filling him in seems to have been a good idea, might make him act a bit nicer to the students in his presence. As long as he doesn’t behave too differently and cause people to notice. God, if he pulls another malicious teacher act like before, Arthur would have some stalks made up just for him. At the reminder of Arthur, Merlin speeds up his walk.

The door to the dungeons open as he approaches, aware that all the other students have long since fallen asleep. The sooner he can join them, the sooner he can meet up with Arthur in the morning. As long as Arthur is actually back, and that wasn’t just some nasty trick my mind thought up in answer to my-

No, that’s not a safe trail. Yet the nagging feeling that the past day was just a cruel fever dream refuses to leave him alone. Merlin’s mind nags at him that if he were to finally give into the sheer bliss and mind numbing relief that Arthur is actually back, just to come to the sick realization that it was all a lie, it would destroy him for good. Than he would be no use to anyone.

Determined to put it from his mind until morning, in his distraction he walks right into Draco.

“Ow, watch it!” Draco’s hand rubs his side, the motion catching Merlin’s eye.

“Sorry,” the words coming out entirely on auto-pilot. What’s that on his arm? Draco’s sleeve is bunched up on his arm from the action of soothing the spot where they collided.

“What are you even doing up at this hour, Maldin? And you missed supper.” Draco looks at him like he’s trying to figure the answer to a rather challenging math problem written on his face. He follows Merlin’s path of sight and quickly pulls down his shirt sleeve. Was that a-

“Have fun on your date with that Granger girl? Is that why you didn’t come to bed at a proper hour, too busy roughing it in the Gryffindor coms with that mousy little book worm?” His smirk is unpleasant and guarded as he drags Merlin over to their shared dormitories.

“No, I…” Eventually Draco’s words sink in and he sputters in horror, his escalating panic now firmly pushed back. “No! Absolutely not! Hermione, Ron and I met up at a pub for drinks, than we parted ways and I spent the evening with Hagrid.” Draco’s face turns an alarming shade of scarlet and his eyes bug out of his skull. Before he can open his mouth to make an exclamation, Merlin’s brain catches up with what he said again.

“Oh my gods, no! Not like that! An old friend showed up and he’s going to be staying with Hagrid while working at the school. We were catching up over a bite to eat and lost track of time.” Goddess above, this is becoming a real problem today.

Draco’s hand comes up to cover his mouth, muffling the laughter that threatens to topple him over. “You really had me there Maldin. First that Mudblood Granger girl, than Hagrid? Are you completely unable to function at a late hour? You should get your ass to bed before you start going on about Flitwick next.” He pulls back the curtains to his bed while Merlin smack his hand over his face.

Peering out from between his fingers, Merlin catches another glimpse of Draco’s wrist, half exposed as he pushes his bed covers back, the material of his bedclothes some sort of silken texture. What he
sees is unmistakable.

With a sick feeling settling into the pits of his stomach, Merlin bids a still giggling Draco goodnight while tucking into bed himself.

Curtains fully closed around his bed, Merlin marvels at Draco’s diversion tactics. What was he doing up so late at night himself? He thinks to the room of requirement and double checks the magic connecting him to the cabinet. No intruders yet, and the alarm holds.

Merlin sighs softly. This is all truly quite a big mess. With poor Draco caught in the center of it all, a defenceless pawn. His ignorance will be the end of him. Merlin cannot but help relating him to Arthur, swearing to himself that he will not allow him to suffer the same fate.

Pulling the blankets over his head and closing his eyes, Merlin wills himself to sleep. Sleep. He wills his consciousness to rest. I am asleep. He rolls over and squashes a pillow over his head. I am fast asleep. I am sleeping. Sleeping.

Damn it.

Hot tears track their way down his face, quickly being absorbed by the pillow. In no time at all, the covering is damp and soggy, sticking unpleasantly to his face. He throws the pillow off him and rolls onto his stomach.

Seeing Arthur again is like breathing for the first time after spending so long drowning at sea, and now that he is alone again he finds his head firmly back under frigid waters. A terrible fear clutches around his heart. How could I leave him alone again? I abandoned him, what if he needs me?

All suspicion that Arthur was just a part of his imagination is walled off and locked firmly behind several doors in his mind. He will face that in the morning.

An image of the Sidhe crawling out of the lake and swarming Arthur as he sleeps assaults the backs of his eyes. What if him being here is a mistake and they come to take him back? Arthur lying dead in his bed, his golden skin pale with death, his sparkling blue eyes vacant and lifeless. Merlin’s trembling makes his teeth chatter.

I have to check on him! I cannot leave him alone to die again! Quickly, Merlin yanks the covers down and spreads his arms out in front of him. Conjuring clear glass between his hands, he focuses his power and his eyes blaze a molten gold. The glass suspended in the air immediately turns black. He squints up at the mass in front of him, brows pinched and worry eating away at him. Arthur where are you?

He tries muttering the spell in case his magic went awry somehow the first him, but the black remains. Is it not working? Has something happened to Arthur? Dread forms a thick cloud in the air around him. Was it really all just a dream? All of his fears seem to culminate in this moment and his stomach threatens to expel Hagrid’s rock cakes.

As he squints at the black expanse in front of him he suddenly feels colossally stupid. My gods, the very minute Arthur returns I transform into the very idiot he always accused me of being. Letting his hands drop back down to his sides, he expels the useless image before him. It’s night time and he’s sleeping in a dark room, of bloody course if I try to scry him all I’ll get is darkness. There is no light to see him by you numpty.

His tears of terror and despair quickly morph into tears of frustration. Pull yourself together Merlin. You are no use to anyone like this, and Arthur needs you. The world needs you functioning. He turns
his head in the direction of Draco’s bed next to his, letting his concern for the boy wash over him, distracting him from the unwanted feelings of lingering doubt.

Wiping off his face on his already wet pillow, Merlin controls his breathing and allows himself a moment to bask in the knowledge that he was wrong. Arthur came back. The prophesy wasn’t a lie, he has really returned.

Clinging desperately to those thoughts, he finally drifts off to a fitful sleep.

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*ARTHUR’S POV*

Merlin’s eyes are bloodshot, outlined with thick dark and puffy circles. Arthur spends a moment assessing his old manservant. It looks as if he had not slept a wink since their parting last night, yet his smile is bright and genuine. Merlin’s thinner and un-calloused hands tremble slightly as they make an aborted motion to reach out to him.

Concern, followed by unease, makes Arthur hesitate before awkwardly clapping him on the shoulder. He’s uncertain about where they stand, as well as the changes his old friend had no doubt underwent. Returning to their old rolls as king and manservant seem even more absurd now than they did upon Merlin’s initial magical reveal.

Arthur’s chest is heavy with the loss of everything he held dear to him. Refusing to let any of this show on his face, he plasters on his best fake smile and braces himself for roaming his old home-turned grave site. His initial urgency over returning having morphed into the sharp pangs of grief overnight.

Selfishly relieved to still to have Merlin, or at least the man his old manservant has turned into, Arthur’s stare lingers a little too long on his face. Merlin’s head tilts to the side, his eyebrows drawing up as he make a motion for Arthur to follow him inside.

“Before we join the others for breakfast in the great hall, there is something I have to do.” Merlin’s now borderline terrifyingly cheery smile now thins out into a grim line. He volunteers no other information.

Realizing, regardless of what Merlin had said the other night about not keeping anything from him, of course it would never be easy. For all of Merlin’s talk of complete transparency he is still reluctant to share relevant information. Arthur speculates that perhaps lifetimes of secrecy have permanently damaged Merlin’s ability to disclose personal or magic related details.

“Where are we headed Merlin? What has happened over the course of one night that is so important and time sensitive that it cannot wait until after we’ve eaten?” Arthur allows a touch of annoyance to seep into his tone.

“Oh, right. We’re going to the headmaster’s office.” He ducks his head and leans closer to Arthur as they walk, his voice pitched low. “What I got to the dorm last night, I saw Draco, a classmate of mine. His arm was bearing the deatheater sign, he’s been recruited officially into their ranks. Albus would want to know, and might want in on a plan to help him.”

Arthur’s eyes widen at the information and a tingle runs down his back that he’s not entirely sure he can blame on Merlin’s words alone. Merlin’s eyes are blue with a hint of sparking gold staring back at him intently.

Struggling to find words, his tongue momentarily tripping over itself, Arthur breaks eye contact.
“You want to help a boy who sides with the fanatics?”

Merlin gives him a pointed look before talking. “He’s misinformed and ignorant due to the enforced beliefs and brainwashing of his parents and peers. It is also very dangerous for him to contradict them in any way. He needs our help before something bad happens to him, or he does something he will be unable to turn back from.”

Arthur’s face colours as the words hit close to home. Of course Merlin would stick by the boy. He stuck by him after all, regardless of how many times he announced loudly that he and his kind deserved to be put to death. Arthur bites his lip as he looks at the side profile of his friend. Perhaps he really hasn’t changed that much after all.

With the loud hunger gnawing on his stomach ignored, they climb the stairs to the headmaster’s office. Arthur spares another glance for the stone beast guarding the entrance before they round the corner out of sight.

Merlin, in his typical fashion, barges through Albus’s door without knocking.

“I cannot do what you ask of me—” A tall angry looking man is mid-way through a fierce yelling match with Albus when he notices their entrance. He freezes in place, eyes locked onto Merlin’s. Arthur watches as Merlin fearlessly strides into the room completely ignoring the gaze of the angry man.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I have news. Again.” Merlin addresses a rumpled looking Albus, sparing a short glance for the black haired man. Arthur steps forward to stand next to Merlin.

“Severus, our discussion will have to wait.” Albus gestures for Merlin and Arthur to sit. “What is it you have to tell me?” He makes a polite motion dismissing the man, Severus, than takes a seat himself.

Merlin opens his mouth, but freezes upon noticing Severus as he boldly pulls out a chair and seats himself next to Albus. A small smile tugs at Merlin’s mouth and he makes no move to correct the man.

“Severus, if you will be joining us for this conversation, than there are some introductions that we should start with. Arthur, this is Hogwarts potion’s professor and head of Slytherin house Severus Snape.” Severus’s cold stare bores into Arthur, his face a hard mask. “Severus, this is Arthur Pendragon, the Once and Future King of Camelot.”

The man’s eyes widen into circles at Merlin’s declaration. “Were it from anyone else, I’d have never believed…” Severus’s voice is soft for once, his argument with Albus clearly forgotten.

“Now that that’s out of the way, Albus, I’m afraid my news isn’t good.” Merlin leans forward, picking up a cup of tea that had been left on the table surface and sipping on it. “Last night when I returned to the Slytherin dorms, I was met by Draco Malfoy. I caught a glimpse of his arm, and there is no doubt. He has been accepted into the ranks of Voldemort’s deatheaters.”

Arthur watches for the old man’s reaction, but finds none. He looks to Merlin to see his mouth set in a grim and bloodless line. “You knew.”

Albus looks to Severus, their eyes meeting. “Yes.”

Merlin squints and leans forward, studying Albus. “Yet you said nothing last we spoke.” He waits silently for Albus’s reply and Arthur marvels at the way he manages to voice his disapproval, a question, and an accusation in a mere statement. Merlin has certainly matured well past the bumbling
nonsensical servant boy he used to be. Finally, Arthur finds a change he can appreciate.

Albus looks suitably chastised, adjusting his spectacles to no doubt stall for time to think up an excuse. “There are certain… events… that have taken place. As unfortunate as they are, we have had to take certain measure that have unavoidable consequences. As much as I wish it weren’t so, they are unchangeable. Perhaps selfishly, I put off telling you of some- ah, previous developments.”

Merlin raises a singular sceptical eyebrow that has an alarming resemblance to Gaius that Arthur hopes to never see directed at him.

“Before the start of the school year, the deatheater Lucius Malfoy, Draco’s father, fell into bad graces with Voldemort. Seeking to punish Lucius, Voldemort accepted Draco into his ranks of deatheaters, tasking him with an impossible quest. Failing Voldemort is a grievance punishable by the highest order. It is mine and Severus’ understanding that Voldemort wishes to see Lucius punished with the death of his only son.

The task Voldemort gave Draco is my death. Voldemort himself has been unable to defeat me, the fear of me alone what kept the school safe from his attacks for years. He thinks I will kill Draco, or, in the far likelier possibility, Draco is unable to defeat me and I merely cast him away, Voldemort will have leave to deal with him as he sees fit.”

Concern for the boy Merlin cares for fills Arthur with a sick sense of dread, and he turns to look at his friend’s stricken face.

“Of course, neither Severus nor I can allow either of those scenarios to play out. After being mortally wounded by Tom’s ring, and fully expecting to pass within the year, I devised a plan. Obviously Draco shall not be allowed to sully himself with my death, the boy is innocent in this. Severus struck an unbreakable vow with the boy’s mother, promising to accomplish the task in his stead. Of course he would have only be putting me out of my misery, cursed to die shortly anyways. When Draco makes his move, Severus has agreed to be there to finish it.”

Severus is glaring openly at Albus, a cornered fury in his eyes. “Except, you are no longer dying.”

“I have to Severus. I cannot allow the boy to suffer instead, and you made an unbreakable vow. Your life is on the line.”

“I refuse to raise a hand against you! Had I known you were to be cured, I’d have never have made that promise!” Feeling like he has clearly missed a vital aspect of this argument, Arthur looks to Merlin in confusion.

Merlin’s calculating look soothes over upon making eye contact with Arthur. Putting him out of his misery, he answers at least on of Arthur’s unvoiced questions. “An unbreakable vow, if not abided by, will result in the death of the one who left the task uncompleted.”

Things finally clicking into place, Arthur looks between the headmaster and the distressed professor. “So if Albus doesn’t die by Severus’s hand, Severus will die. And if Albus doesn’t die at all, Draco will die?”

Merlin’s eyes are hard and unreadable. “It seems so.”

*Albus has to die at Severus’s hand. In front of Draco and other deatheaters.* Arthur soothes his hand through his hair, feeling, for all of the stress of the situation, as if he finally has both feet firmly on familiar ground. He turns his head to meet eyes with Merlin and sees a familiar glint. Not waiting to hear his thoughts echoed by the other man, he leans forward, “I think I have an idea.”
After a Sunday spent showing Arthur around the new landscapes of his old castle, followed by a night spent completely absent of sleep continuing to fill Arthur in on the events of the past, Merlin is surprisingly awake. Feeling deliriously and selfishly happy, he sneaks a glance at Arthur’s stooped profile. His face is paler than Merlin remembers, and redder around the eyes. He assumes it is only fair considering the exhausting ordeal he has been put through, coupled with the lack of sleep.

“You should get some rest Arthur, you’ll be starting your cover of working with Hagrid tomorrow.” Merlin places a hand on his back, completely unable to stop himself. Arthur doesn’t shrug him off. Probably too tired to notice.

Arthur slowly turns his bleary eyes on Merlin. “The sun has started to rise Merlin. I won’t be spending my first day slacking off like you did.” His words hold no bite as a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth.

Feeling lighter than he can ever recall in his life, Merlin claps his hands together, eyes momentarily flashing gold.

Arthur startles back at the loud popping noise announcing the entrance of a clean and prim looking house elf.

“Elby is at your service sirs,” her bow is deep and with surprising flourish “what is it you be needing?” Arthur’s mouth is open and a look of shocked alarm is written plainly across his face. Merlin notices his hand wander towards the side of his belt and feels guilty for forgetting.

“Sorry Arthur, this is Elby” Merlin nods his head in greeting at the pale elf, “she is one of the many house elves working for Hogwarts. She is completely harmless.”

At his words, Elby takes in Arthur’s hostile body language and takes a hurried step back, eyes watering slightly. “Elby is not meaning to scare Mr. Dragan, Elby is very sorry sirs. Elby is meaning no harm!” Her desperate please break through to Arthur and his shoulders slump minutely.

“A house elf?” Arthur addresses Merlin, the colour slowly returning to his face.

“Like Mr. Ambrose says sir, I am Master Dumbledore’s elf sir. I is making food for students and cleaning the castle.” She states the name of her master like a challenge, defiantly jutting out her small chin and narrowing her large brown eyes.

“Elby, would you mind getting Arthur here a mug of your best coffee? Lots of sugar please. Thank you.” Elby disappears again with another sharp crack the minute Merlin dismisses her. Arthur turns his head at him after checking for signs of other elves hiding around the room.

“Merlin, what was that?!"

“That was Elby. Obviously.”

“Yes, thank you. I got that. Why are there random magical creatures in the castle? And why are they making food?”

Arthur’s apparently lack of sleep has made him hysterical. That and a very possible information overload. “Yes, house elves are magical creatures. They are a species apparently willingly enslaved by the wizarding community. Hogwarts has many of them working to keep the school running. They
have no desire to harm you or anyone else.”

Arthur blinks at this, his face carefully blank. “And as you will recall, I am a magical creature. Although it would be grossly inaccurate to refer to me as harmless, I do not have any plans of attacking the residents of this castle.” Merlin’s voice is now dry and unimpressed. Arthur will have to get over this if he is going to be living in any close proximity to the magical community.

Arthur’s face reddens and his eyes widen at Merlin’s statement. “Of course- I never thought- I just… wasn’t expecting that. Sorry.”

“This has been a difficult and confusing past several days for you, there is no need to apologize to me. Just try to remember that magic does not equal bad. And there are many other species than just human that are capable of intelligent thought.”

Arthur takes a moment to just stare at Merlin. “You’re… you’ve-” he stops and chew his lip before starting up again. “You’ve changed.”

Merlin meets his eyes with a wooden stare. “Yes Arthur, I grew up.”

Arthur looks away, running a hand through his hair. Merlin belatedly realizes how truly strange this must have been for Arthur having grown up raised by Uther, and that the Merlin he knew was very different than the man he is now faced with. Feeling guilty for his last words to him, two steaming mugs of coffee appear in front of them before he has the chance to voice anything.

Arthur awkwardly picks up the mug and takes his first tentative sip, all while his gaze remains fixed on the far wall. After a tense few seconds, he slams the mug down on the table, causing Merlin to nearly jump out of his skin.

“This stuff is incredible! What is this? Is it magic?” His fingers curl protectively and possessively around the green porcelain, completely ignoring its no doubt scalding temperature.

A laugh is startled out of him before he can answer. “That’s coffee with a particular generous boost of caffeine. It’s not magic, no. But it will help to keep you awake throughout the day. Just don’t drink too much of it.” Feeling relieved at the broken tension in the room, Merlin reaches for his own cup and downs it in one go.

“I should probably get going to class now, as to not arouse suspicion. I imagine I will be skipping several classes in the future and should probably not be starting that now. You’ll have a good time with Hagrid, I’ve heard Ron and Hermione praise him. I’ll meet up with you at lunch today. If you need me for anything, just say my name three times fast and stomp your right foot on the ground.”

With that, Merlin takes his exit, leaving a very baffled Arthur to start his first day of work.

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*ARTHUR’S POV*

Arthur allows himself a satisfied smirk before steeling himself and knocking discreetly on the heavy wooden doors. After several long minutes, they open softly to reveal a startlingly short sorcerer with a severe nose and bushy eyebrows. He peers up at Arthur in polite confusion.

“Is there something you need from this classroom?” His voice is high and bubbly. Arthur is reminded slightly of the house elf that morning.

“Would you happen to be Professor Flitwick?” At this point, Arthur is willing to believe anything.
“I am, yes. I am in the middle of teaching a class. Unless Dumbledore sent for me for something urgent, if you wish to speak with me, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait.”

“Oh, no. Hagrid sent me actually—” the small professor raises one long eyebrow, “I work for the school now, I’m new. I’m here to help deal with the school’s margle-mite infestation. Apparently it’s gotten rather bad. I’m to check every classroom for them.” Arthur tries his best to look like he belongs here and knows what he is talking about.

“Right, yes! Come on in then, just try not to disturb the students.” He opens the door wider and beckons him in.

Arthur tries to hide his reaction at seeing his first magical class, but fails miserably. Mouth open and eyes wide, he takes in the unimaginable amount of magic happening around him. The large classroom is filled with excited teens talking amongst each other while pointing their sticks at moving rocks on the tables in front of them. The rocks themselves are glowing a range of different cool colours while producing a low hum.

Arthur stomps down on his alarm, squares his shoulders and walks to the other side of the room. Professor Flitwick walks over to a student with a particularly angry sounding rock and Arthur takes his moment to scan the students’ faces. Several of them are looking back at him with varying expressions ranging from harmless confusion to suspicion. One of them is smiling like a loon. Quickly making his way to the far table with the goofy liking student, he makes sure to keep his eyes trained on the walls for signs of margle-mites. Apparently the school is crawling with the mysterious and gross sounding creatures. Arthur secretly hopes he never spots one.

“Arthur!” Merlin’s eyes are unfairly clear and free of the large heavy bags seated firmly below his own. Seeming to just now realize where they are, Merlin’s smile falters and he discreetly scans their surroundings. “Why are you here? Is everything alright?”

“I’m checking the school for signs of margle-mites. I figured I’d come check this room first.” Arthur supresses a grin at Merlin’s reaction.

“How did you know- I mean, why this room first?” Merlin bites his lip at his near slip-up.

“I ran into your friend Hermione in the halls and she mentioned the infestation was pretty bad here. I figured if I can scout out their nest, I can save myself of having to do this again next week.” The half lie falls seamlessly from his lips, boosting his confidence in all of this undercover business.
“Right, of course.” Merlin remains staring at him in a strange, stunned sort of way, his wide eyes making him look even younger.

“Maldin, this is the middle of class. I get that you finished your spell already, but some of us are still working on theirs.” Merlin’s desk-mate turns to face him, abandoning his hard scrutiny of his rock and freezes upon noticing Arthur. “Maldin, who is this?”

“Draco this is Arthur Dragan, Arthur this is Draco Malfoy. Draco and I are friends and share a dorm, Arthur and I go way back. Arthur is working at Hogwarts now helping Hagrid with grounds work.” The young blond man’s hair is a lighter shade than his own, swooped and styled into a perfection that would make Gwaine jealous. His face is thin and pale, the jut of his chin proud. Noble borne for sure.

Draco purses his lips and narrows his eyes at Arthur. “You’re working for Hagrid?” Arthur hears disdain in his words and recalls what Merlin has told him so far about the boy. He does remind him an awful lot of himself in his youth.

“Yes, I’m assisting Hagrid. I’m here about the margle-mites right now. It’s nice to meet another one of Maldin’s friends, I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other.”

Draco looks to Merlin, possibly glimpsing the moronically happy look on his face before turning back to Arthur. “I’m sure we will.” Hs words are measured and uncertain, his eyebrows slightly drawn together.

“Well I’d best get to it then. Do notify me if you spot any margle-mites. I want to make sure I get them all.” Merlin winks at Arthur before he turns around to head towards a patch of peeling wallpaper. He really has turned into a quirky old man.

Arthur sets to work on trying to ignore the ridiculous displays of magic around him. Almost every student has their stick out and is causing their rocks to perform seemingly impossible acts.

The peeling wall paper is indeed the sight of an infestation as parts of it are flapping in a non-existent breeze. Arthur tentatively reaches his hand out and grasps the thin air above the shadow he spots on the ground. Immediately the small misshapen body of margle-mite appears and squirms in his grip. Following Hagrid’s instruction, he quickly squeezes it until it disappears again. Arthur quickly wipes his hand with a damp odd selling cloth and tries not to gag. Thank god it disappears when dead. The image of slimy pink skin covered in thin hairy red legs is seared into his brain. He blinks several times trying to dispel it with mixed success.

One down, millions more to go. How does Hagrid do this? Arthur resigns himself to a full day spent hunting and killing the foul creatures in droves.

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Lunch is an eventful affair filled with nosy students and difficult and awkward questions. Many of the student body recognize him as a new face and have made it their next greatest mission in life to uncover all of his secrets complete with a full life story. Merlin manages to save him from several of the rather inappropriate inquiries, but Arthur is still left feeling oddly attacked. Accustomed to everyone already knowing his name, face, and full family history, this is an entirely new experience.

Arthur makes a firm mental note to spend the rest of his meals either in private or at the staff table, Merlin be damned. He shoots an accusatory glare at the man in question to communicate the point. Merlin gives him a sheepish and apologetic look and his shoulders slump slightly. Message received.
Surprisingly Draco stays quiet throughout the entire meal, glaring heatedly at his mashed potatoes. He spares the occasional glance up at Arthur with a question clear on his face, before he turns back down to his food. Merlin scoops his bacon over onto the boy’s plate when he is distracted. Followed by a slice of pie and a cookie.

We’ll help him. It’ll work out perfectly. Arthur runs through the plan in his head to prepare. It could be at any moment now. Then he’ll be faced with some difficult and life changing decisions. Arthur feels bad for the young boy, understanding exactly how stressed he will feel at the hard choices he will have to make.

Arthur follows Merlin to his next class, intent on ridding those rooms of the pests first. Seeing Merlin in a classroom setting next to others performing magic is something he has yet to find boring. Of course he realises that Merlin already knows all of what is being taught, and the magic they are performing is small-scale and very minor compared to what he is capable of, but it is still more magic than Arthur has ever willingly subjected himself to before.

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*MERLIN’S POV*

Merlin rolls onto his back, wayward sheets clutched firmly in hand. Arthur’s idea is a good one. He felt relieved to hear Arthur echo out Merlin’s own thoughts on the matter, his king taking charge once again.

The soft sounds of Goyle’s snoring are punctuated by muffled footsteps. Merlin peers out through his bed curtains to spy Draco just now getting into bed. Soon, I imagine.

Forcing his eyes to close, Merlin stills his thoughts. The boy’s persistent snoring increases in volume. He rolls away and sandwiches his head between his pillows. The loud braying continues. Teeth clenched tightly, he sits up in bed casting a silencing charm on his bed curtains.

Now engulfed in complete silence, Merlin lays back down, delicately arranging the sheets around him. His eyes are closed, his breathing is even.

He curls his legs up and wraps his arms around them. He stretches out and straightens his back. He counts wyverns in his head.

Considering my lack of sleep the night before, this should really not be this hard!

Letting out an annoyed gasp, Merlin shoves the covers off and sits up. Without fully giving himself time to think it through, he quietly peels out of bed, checking to insure his house mates are all fully asleep. Satisfied, he stalks off to the bathrooms adjoining their sleeping quarters.

After splashing his face with freezing water, he makes his way red-faced to a toilet stall in the far corner. Hoping desperately that this will suffice, he bends down to flush the toilet, at the same time, disappearing with a loud ‘pop’.

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“Aaaah!”

Merlin is met with a loud shout followed by the sound of flailing sheets in the pitch black. Muttering a quick spell, a blue orb of light ignites next to a ruffled head of blond hair.

He takes a step back, Arthur’s sword pointing dangerously close to his midsection, the man in
question looking alarmed and breathing heavily.

Arthur squints in the general direction of Merlin’s face, eyes slightly watering at the light. The tip of Excalibur is slowly lowered to the ground. “Merlin?” His voice is scratchy and low.

Taking in the sight of his long lost king standing before him in grossly oversized bedclothes of a rather obnoxious shade of yellow, hair spiked up from sleep, and face all scrunched up, Merlin’s mind suddenly goes blank.

“Merlin, what are you doing here? Is everything alright?” Arthur places his sword on the desk next to his bed and puts a hand on Merlin’s shoulder.

Jumping slightly at the contact, Merlin realizes just where he is.

“Arthur, I’m sorry. I just—” His eyes skate around the room. What am I doing here? I woke him up! He’s going to think I’m mental.

A second part of his brain argued back that Arthur would be right in that assumption. “I had to see you.” The words sound stupid in his ears.

“At three in the— alright then.” Arthur makes a small shake of his head, “come to bed then.” Merlin just stares at him with wide eyes. “We have a rather long week ahead of us, it would be best to get what sleep we can while the opportunity is here. You clearly are incapable of looking after yourself, and I don’t fancy a trip back up to the castle at this time of night, so crawl in.” He pulls back the sheets on his narrow bed and slips underneath.

Merlin is frozen on the spot.

“Well there’s not enough floor space for a small child let alone—” Arthur waves his hand at Merlin, “and it’s not as if Hagrid has a second spare room. Of course you could always take the lumpy couch, if you don’t mind sharing with Fang.”

Merlin imagines himself snuggling up next to Hagrid’s drooling dog and shudders. Looking at the vacant side of Arthur’s bed he quickly makes up his mind, sliding under to join him.

After several minutes of decidedly awkward silence, Merlin opens his mouth to speak. “Thank you Arthur.” His voice is quiet and small, barely loud enough to fill the dark cluttered room.

“Get some sleep Merlin.” Arthur rolls onto his back, taking with him the majority of the scratchy covers. Careful not to touch Arthur, he arranges himself into a comfortable position, feeling warmer than he had in years.

Determined to follow his king’s orders, he closes his eyes against the sudden onslaught of tears and drifts off into sleep.

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Merlin startles awake to the sound of loud knocking on the door. “You’d best be up Arthur, if ya want to eat a bit ‘o breakfast before ya start yer work.” Hagrid’s deeps voice rattles through the small room, his large fist knocking gently on the door enough to cause several dusty bottles on a shelf to rattle together threateningly.

Eyes now wide open and alert, he rolls over to the sight of a drooling Arthur. His relaxed face is peaceful, would it not for the sound of his soft breathing and his slightly pinked cheeks, Merlin would be panicking. Arthur always slept like the dead. A cold shiver passes down his back at that, causing him to pull the blankets up higher.
Nothing short of a shrill voice and the sun shining directly onto the prat’s head would be enough to
wake him. Merlin lets his eyes wander freely over his face, taking in the features he had missed so
dearly. Memorizing anew, all of the plains and angles. The sight of golden stubble on his cheek and
the slight wrinkle lines next to his eyes. Not a day older than when Merlin last saw him in Camelot.

Merlin gently strokes his hand across the prickly skin of Arthur’s jaw before snatching his hand back
in horror. *What am I doing?!*

He quickly scrambles out of bed and straightens out his bedclothes. *Damn, I didn’t bring a change of
clothing,* He transfigures his pajamas into suitable Hogwarts attire, still feeling oddly exposed. The
allusion of real clothes is never quite enough.

Listening to Hagrid’s front door open and close, he stands next to the bed. “Rise ‘n shine!” Merlin
puts on his best cheerful morning smile.

Arthur mumbles in his sleep.

“Good morning!” Making up for all of the passed missed morning greetings, he lays it on thick.
Arthur rolls over.

“Let’s have you lazy daisy!” Merlin gives a firm tug on Arthur’s shoulder. “The early bird gets the
worm!” He tugs off the covers without mercy.

“Mmm… ok, alright. I’m up.” Arthur’s eyes firmly remain closed.

“Riiiight.” Merlin rolls his eyes dramatically while he grabs Arthur’s legs and steers them off the bed,
feet planted on the floor. “Next time I use a fog horn.” Merlin knows Arthur doesn’t know what that
is, so he refuses to be intimidated by his vicious one-eyed half-squinted glare..

“Did you hear Hagrid? You don’t want to miss breakfast!” Arthur’s eyes open fully at those words.
“Thought that might do the trick.”
Merlin cannot take his eyes off him. The sight of him is addictive. His back straight, elbows tucked, and fork held poised. His placement at the head of the dining hall with the other staff and faculty serve to remind Merlin with startling clarity of the many feasts held when Arthur was king. His own placement at the Slytherin table with the other students feels wrong and he is overcome with a sudden nagging urge to be standing in the front corner of the room behind Arthur’s table. His eyes flick to that spot before resting back on the sight of his king glowing in the sunlight from a nearby window.

His view is abruptly obstructed and Merlin refocuses his eyes to a hand waving in front of his face.

“Earth to Maldin. Hello. Wakey wakey.” Goyle moves his hand away when Merlin turns to face him.

“I get the new bloke is hot, but he’s a little old mate.” Draco’s normal drawl is more pronounced when paired with his smirk. Merlin’s face heats to scalding, his bran short circuiting.

“Pft, just more of a challenge that way. He’s got experience.” Pansy’s voice is wistful as she looks up at the teachers table. “Anyone got any clue who he is and what he’s teaching? God, I hope it’s history, I’d never fall asleep in class again if I could look at that all class.”

Merlin’s body tries to melt into his seat. He’s not sure what about this scenario mortifies him the most. Dear goddess, send help.

Goyle looks over at Pansy, scandalized. “Draco’s right though,” Draco’s smirk turns pleased, “He does seem a bit too old for you Pans. What is he, like, 30?”

Finally Merlin’s brain has been given a safer topic to fixate on. Old?! What? Arthur’s not old! Look at him, he’s in his prime! He’s still so terribly young. Albus is old, not Arthur. Merlin’s mind catches up to that thought. I’m old. Gods, I’m old.

Merlin’s left eye twitches. These children think thirty is old. Merlin’s out of place feeling from earlier intensifies.

Pansy turns a sharp eye towards Goyle. “Do you doubt my charm Goyle? Think I’m too immature for an older man Goyle?” She says his name as a threat and he swallows audibly before quickly looking down at his plate.

“He’s no teacher. He’s working for that half-human Hagrid.” Draco’s sneer is back at full force and Merlin resists the urge to flick porridge at him.

Pansy’s face screws up at the news. “Why is he working for him?” She studies the teachers table with scrutiny.
“Maldin seemed to know him quite well when he came into class the other day. They go way back apparently.” Draco’s accusatory tone is evident and Pansy whips her head around to face Merlin, looking eager.

“You know him?! How? Who is he, what’s he doing here, and is he single?” Merlin’s spoon fumbles out of his hand and back into his bowl with a clang. “Maldin, it’s important!”

“We’re old friends.” Pansy’s eyebrows shoot up in surprised disbelief. “Family friends. From Canada… his name is Arthur Dragan. He’s come here looking for work after I mentioned the opening here at Hogwarts. He’s just settling in from the move, came over a bit later than I did.” Merlin’s refuses to answer her last question.

“So this is just an in between job? He’s not staying?” Draco rolls his eyes at her.

“I’m not sure.” Merlin takes a generous gulp of ice water to try to cool off his face.

“Hm.” Pansy looks back up at Arthur with a thoughtful expression. Merlin supresses a shudder.

“Couldn’t find any better work than that?” Draco’s voice is quiet and no doubt meant to go unheard. Merlin looks up at the teachers table, unable to resist, to notice Professor McGonagall making her way over to the Slytherin tables. He feels a wash of relief at their conversation being interrupted, before catching the look in her eye.

Damn, I completely forgot.

The conversation around him comes to an abrupt halt as she stops at the table in from of him. “Mr. Ambrose. I’m glad to see you alive and well, although I must admit to being rather confused at your obvious health and vitality. Surlly you must have been gravely ill and bed-ridden to have missed your detention in my office last night?” Her voice is hard and unwavering, her stare cold enough to intimidate even the students it isn’t directed towards.

Merlin makes a show of covering his face in his hands before meeting her gaze, his eyes wide and terrified. “I’m so sorry Professor, I completely forgot.”

“My friend just arrived here from another country and we spent all evening catching up. It completely slipped my mind.”

Professor McGonagall glances over at Arthur with a dawning look of realization upon her face. “Ah yes, our newest member of staff. Be that as it may, there is still no acceptable excuse to skip detention Mr. Ambrose. 10 points will be deducted from the Slytherin house.” Merlin can hear several of his nearby peers grumbling angrily at that. “I expect you in my office at 7:00pm sharp every day for the rest of the week. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes Professor. Sorry.” Merlin directs his apology to the rest of his table as well.

Well that was annoying. I have more important things to be doing than detention. He considers sending in an projection of himself to sit through detention in is stead, but rides it off figuring McGonagall might get suspicious of the lack of talking.

“You forgot about detention with McGonagall? Are you insane?” The look Draco is shooting him suggests that he is.

Pansy finishes off her bite of breakfast before answering for him. “I’d risk it too, if I got to spend an evening with him.” She points her spoon in the direction of the staff table. Draco rolls his eyes. Merlin’s brain supplies him with an image of his morning spent with Arthur and he resolves himself
to never look him in the eye again.

The rest of breakfast thankfully passes without much fuss and Merlin stalks off to his first class with a nod from Arthur that causes his stomach to flip.

Pansy recruits Daphne, another Slytherin girl in their year, to interrogate Merlin about Arthur for the duration of their transfiguration class. McGonagall shoots repeated glares in their direction while giving Merlin himself a lingering look of pointed disproval. Merlin eventually has to tune them out or risk a final and complete death, immortality be damned.

Potions class is thankfully quiet as none of his eager classmates are willing to risk the ire of their intimidating head of house. For once, Merlin is grateful for Severus’ less than pleasant approach to handling the students within his care.

He catches Severus’ eye and the professor gives him a discreet nod. Phase one of the plan is clear to happen this evening. Merlin feels a familiar rush of nervous anticipation mixed excitement. As unpleasant as their endeavour is sure to be, he cannot help but feel happy at being back to tackling danger side by side with Arthur. Despite the threat of death (or in Merlin’s case, an assumed death) and destruction, Merlin had deeply missed going on hazardous quests with his best friend and king. He feels as if a second part of himself that had been missing has just slotted neatly back into place.

The rest of the class drags on slowly, not helped along by the fact that Merlin has to slow his potion making pace down considerably. He entertains himself with imagining Arthur running around the school in search of little invisible pests. Dealing with Hagrid’s slobbering dog. Perhaps even cleaning out the school’s owlry. Merlin likes that last one. Very similar to cleaning out stables. He ignores the fact that Arthur will most likely not be getting cleaning tasks as assistant grounds keeper, but amuses himself with the thought none the less. Perhaps I could ask Hagrid to give him the task of owlry cleaning. Oh Arthur would love that.

Merlin snickers to himself as he adds in chopped pig’s tails into his frothing cauldron. And Arthur cannot use magic to hurry the task along while people aren’t watching.

The bell chimes just as Merlin adds the last ingredient, still chuckling to himself at the image of Arthur covered in dirt, feathers and bird excrement. His classmates quickly pack up their things and file out the door, leaving him alone with Severus.

Sending his magic out to insure they are not overheard, Merlin makes his way over to Severus’ desk. “You convinced Draco?”

“I spoke with him shortly before class. He will be allowing me to take over for him in dealing with Albus. He’s not happy about it, but he seemed relieved.” Severus continues with his lecturing voice, obviously uncertain as to how to interact with Merlin.

“I can imagine.”

Merlin’s book tries to slide out from his grip and he has to fumble to catch it. He eyes the text wearily before patting the front of it and sticking it firmly in his bag. Severus follows the movement before his previously carefully held blank face morphs into a puzzled look. Merlin looks sheepishly back up at him. This is why no one can ever take you seriously Emrys.

“Are you really as powerful as legends say you are?” Severus’ question startles Merlin and he frowns up at him.

“Yes. More so actually.” Merlin hates the admission, be he had come to the decision to tell the truth
to Albus and his confidant, and sees no point in starting back up with the lies.

Severus blinks at him slowly, his forehead wrinkled from the stretch of his eyebrows. He takes a moment to digest the new and clearly unexpected discovery.

“Where have you been all this time? Why come back now instead of earlier?” Merlin could have sworn he answered those questions already, yet they still take him by surprise.

“Well… I have been around. Not here obviously. Living for the past while at least, in Northern Canada in a muggle town. I didn’t know about the happenings with Voldemort until recently, and that’s part of why I’m here now.” The positions teacher seems less than satisfied with that answer.

“So you’re all powerful and yet you let the wizarding world think you were long dead? You could have prevented all of this.” The rage is now simmering under the surface, Merlin can almost make out the steam coming from his ears.

“I am not the wizarding world’s god. I am immortal, and yes, I’m powerful. But that is just it. I live forever! That is not what society needs. A never dying god figure to solve their problems for them. Govern them and rule them for all eternity. I mean well, yes, but that would be catastrophic.” How is this not obvious?

_Humanity always wants others to swoop in and save the day. They need to pull their own weight or they will never evolve as a species._

“I am not here to solve the wizarding world’s problems for them. I will help out as best as I can, but I will not take charge.” Merlin foresees himself repeating this line more in the future with the increase of people aware of his true identity. _I’m ready to hide back under a rock now._

Goddess, I have my own life to live. Yes, it’s a very long one, but it is still mine. I will go completely barking mad if I have to deal with incompetent wizards and their problems all day every day. I never did envy Arthur as king.

Severus thins his lips. “After Voldemort is ousted, there will be need of someone to lead the people.”

Merlin looks him square in the face. “And that place is not mine. Arthur is back, perhaps he wants to try his hand at it. Might be interesting, a muggle at the head of the ministry. Nice change of pace from Tom. He’s certainly more qualified than _I_.”

Severus’s eyes bulge at that. He takes a moment to collect himself and seems to re-asses Merlin.

“Very well. I will be seeing you later this evening.” Severus collects the vials of the students’ potion samples and glides out of the room with more grace and robe flair than Merlin has ever managed to muster.

The remainder of Merlin’s afternoon is spend searching the castle for signs of Arthur. He just spots him rounding a corner when he feels a pull.

Alarm bells ring off in his head at full volume and he staggers off in the direction Arthur disappeared. “Arthur! Come back here you prat!”

Arthur freezes and turns around at the sound of Merlin’s voice. He makes his way over to him quickly upon noticing his unsteady legs. “Is it time?”

Merlin can only nod his head as the ringing continues, feeling like a giant gong is being struck repeatedly against the side of his head. He closes his eyes and cuts off the connection to the
vanishing cabinet. He smacks his palms against his head to disperse the lingering bells.

Arthur gives him a look. “You alright there?”

“Hm? Oh, yes.” His stare is slightly unfocused.

Arthur grabs his arm and marches them in the direction of the headmaster’s office.

He takes a note from Merlin’s book and barges in without knocking. “They’re on their way.”

Albus abruptly stands up from his spot on his desk chair and makes his way towards the far cupboard. He brings out a bottle of aged red wine and sets it on the coffee table by the fireplace, beckoning them to join him.

Once seated, Albus waves his wand around and a patronus appears and floats off to inform Severus. “I assume young Mr. Malfoy will be here momentarily.”

Merlin and Arthur nod along. Yes, seeing as we just informed you that the deatheaters have arrived. Why is it that old people have the tendency to do state the obvious like that? Is that something I do? Merlin summons a wine glasses from the kitchens, promptly filling his and Arthur’s with water.

Albus passes time by staring at the wine bottle, presumably contemplating his fate.

Severus bursts through the door, cloak impressively billowing out behind him like a supermodel’s hair blown by a fan. “Are you ready Albus?” His expression is anxious.

“I am ready.”

Just then, a knock sounds on the door.

Albus slowly gets up from his spot on the chair and makes his way over to the door. “Oh hello Draco.”

“I need to speak with you headmaster.” Draco’s voice sounds strained from Merlin’s spot by the fire.

“Well you have perfect timing my boy, we were just about to enjoy a beverage in good company.” He opens the door further and gestures towards the seated group. “Please join us and after you can feel free to ask me any questions you require.”

Draco’s already white face gets even paler at the sight of Merlin and Arthur seated next to Severus around Albus’s short table. He makes his way over in silence, seating himself in the plush maroon recliner next to Severus.

“Hey Draco.” Merlin gives him a warm smile knowing that unfortunately it will probably do very little to ease the boy’s nerves.

Draco makes an aborted sound in response, feebly lifting his hand in a failed attempt at a wave.

“Well now that we’re all seated, Severus, you said you had a nice aged old wine for the aged old man?” His eyes twinkle merrily as he takes the offered bottle out of Severus’s hands. He uncorks it easily and gives it a deep sniff. “Mmm, smells delightful. Care to join me in my beverage adventure?” He directs his question at Severus and Arthur, already knowing the response.

Draco’s eyes widen in poorly concealed alarm as Albus holds out the bottle in offering.

“I picked it out with you in mind Albus. You know I prefer white.” Albus turns from Severus to
Arthur.

“I’m afraid I’ve already had a glass with my dinner. I’ve got another early morning tomorrow so I’d best not. Thank you though, I’m sure it’s lovely.” Arthur’s courtly voice is like soft velvet.

“Like the students here, just water for yous then. Or juice. Help yourselves.” Albus waves his wand at the table and two pitchers appear. Merlin tops up his own glass of water and Draco slumps back in his chair with relief.

The room goes silent and watchful as Albus brings the full wineglass to his lips. Severus tries to be discreet, Merlin couldn’t be bothered, and Arthur studies Albus through the reflection in his own glass. Draco is watching unabashedly and obviously.

Albus makes a pleased sound after swallowing his first mouthful before immediately falling forwards onto the floor in front of his seat. Draco’s hands clench painfully in his lap, and Severus clears his throat. Arthur puts on a good show of looking concerned as he rushes forwards to check on the old wizard. Merlin’s hand shoots to his mouth as he stifles a very convincing squeak.

“Oh my god, is he ok?” Merlin pitches his voice higher and leans forwards towards the scene.

Arthur feels Albus’s temple and his face goes grim. He looks up at the rest of them. “He’s dead.”

Punctuating Arthur’s declaration is the sound of loud stomping outside the late headmaster’s office, followed by the sounds of several people in conversation.

The door bursts inwards straight off of it’s hinges in a dramatic display that has Draco quickly standing up from his seat. “It’s done.”

Severus takes a deep shuddering inhale and closes his eyes as Merlin senses something magical pass over him. The vow has been fulfilled.

Tangled curly dark hair with volume to rival Morgana’s in her later years bounds over to the body of the headmaster with glee, completely ignoring the other people in the room.

“Is it true Bella?” A tall man with long hair pulled back from his face into a pony-tail points his wand threateningly at Merlin while a larger and long haired copy of Draco points his at Arthur.

“He’s dead!” The dishevelled witch squeals and then claps her hands together, her wild eyes looking at Albus’s body with excitement. Draco looks as if he needs to sit down, his face an unhealthy tinge of green.

“Draco, who are these people?” The man, clearly Draco’s father, sneers at Merlin and Arthur, his wand now inches from Arthur’s face. Merlin is overcome by sudden rage and protective fear, raising his hand up in front of him, he freezes the deatheaters in a tableau where they stand. The glamour on his face is lifted and his eyes shine a bright and terrible gold.

Severus wastes no time in rushing over to Albus’s limp body, propping his head up gently on a pillow after forcibly pushing the frozen witch aside with a look of fleeting disgust. Severus wastes no time in rushing over to Albus’s limp body, propping his head up gently on a pillow after forcibly pushing the frozen witch aside with a look of fleeting disgust.

He reaches within his robes to unveil a small blue potion vile. Draco’s eyes are flitting between the frozen figures of his fellow deatheaters and Severus’s hand on the potion now dripping into Albus’s wretched open mouth.

Until his gaze settles on Merlin.
Draco’s mouth opens in shock at the sight of his classmate standing in the middle of the chaos, hand splayed, wandless, and eyes emanating a powerful golden light.

Arthur too stands seemingly transfixed by Merlin’s display of magic. Meeting Arthur’s eyes, Merlin swallows and lowers his hand, eyes remaining luminescent.

Albus picks that moment to take his first rattling breath back into the world of the living and all eyes are quickly directed to his now moving chest.

Chapter End Notes

*special mention goes to user spicymarsha for accurately guessing what would happen.*

*Gold star to you!*
*ALBUS’S POV*

Albus suspects he must overcome his old age and become the wizarding world’s next heavy weight champion in order to possess the strength to lift his ridiculously heavy eyelids. He grunts with the effort, hearing the muffled voice of Severus close by.

“Albus, can you hear me?” Snape’s concerned voice registers as a distant garble.

Finally, after a monumental amount of effort, his eyes register a bright white light in front of his face. The light shifts from side to side in front of him, and he attempts to swat his hand at it, succeeding instead, to knock his palm against the flat of Snape’s face.

Snape grabs his wrist and moves his hand back down, resuming the light waving. A cold hand forces a leaden eyelid open farther and Albus strains to close it against the harsh light. “How are you feeling?”

Albus tests his movements, swallowing and licking his lips before answering. “I’m feeling only as to be expected Severus. Thank you, but my vision is fine.” Severus’s wand light fades and he helps Albus to a seated position.

“You’re-” Albus turns his head with some difficulty to spot a terrified looking Draco Malfoy standing a couple steps away and seemingly lost for words.

“I’m not dead, no.” Despite the taste of something rotten in his mouth, Albus feels relieved to have succeeded in relieving him of the terrible burden.

Suddenly Albus is crowded by two other figures, moving to stand in his limited line of sight. Arthur and Merlin share a look of grim agreement before Merlin turns his golden gaze onto the group of frozen deatheaters across from them.

Albus takes a moment to digest the scene he finds himself thrust into. Deatheaters paralyzed on the spot, wands still out and mouths mid forming words. His frightened student now looking between his frozen father and comrades, and the glowing young face of his supposed classmate Maldin. Arthur with half of his body needlessly shielding that of his newly re-united friend, and Merlin himself standing tall and at the ready, looking with determined resignation towards the frozen intruders. His eyes are more luminescent than the light of the candles on his desk.

Feeling the situation to be quite out of his hands, Albus takes a sip of the glass of water thrust into his face by the concerned potions professor.

Merlin’s golden glow expands out of his skin, the terrifying image of a god raising his hand out towards the deatheaters. Face set in a mask of horror, Draco appears to realize the danger, as he rushes forward to stand in front of the unmoving mass of his father.

“Don’t hurt him!” His voice is strong despite his obvious fear and confusion. Albus feels proud of the display of bravery from the young man, standing up to protect his family.

Merlin’s mouth thins, but his arm does not lower.

“He’s my father, you can’t hurt him.” Draco raises a shaking arm out, holding his wand pointed at his classmate.
Albus think to the shared memories of Merlin. *Lucius and his lot will be slaughtered without even the slightest bit of effort.* Albus considers protesting on behalf of his student. The deatheaters deserve to die surely, but Draco has the right to a father. The frightened look upon the boy’s face shines through his mask of anger.

Then again, thinking back on his own father, Albus wonders if perhaps Lucius’s death would benefit Draco.

Before Albus has time to fully consider his view on the matter, Merlin lowers his hand and the golden haze surrounding him fades back.

“He will change his ways or there will be no place for him.” Merlin’s timeless gaze pierces Draco’s watery eyes, his voice resonating unnaturally within the small room. The ageless power emanating from him is all the more unnerving due to his youthful appearance.

Draco darts his eyes momentarily to the figure of his father. “Release them! Or I’ll kill you!” His wavering voice breaks on the last word, his face shuddering, tears leaking from his eyes.

“Not only would that be quite impossible, but it would rather defeat the purpose.” Merlin does not release them, but his posture changes from defensive.

“I don’t know who you are, or how you are doing this, but I will stop you.” Draco’s shaking voice is quiet and uncertain despite his words. He looks over at Albus, not quite meeting his eyes.

Biting his lip, Merlin looks questioningly at Arthur. Arthur responds by raising his eyebrows and blinking once. Merlin takes this as some sort of confirmation, and turns back to face the young Malfoy.

*MERLIN’S POV*

“Put your wand down before you accidentally hurt someone.” Draco’s grip appears to only firm its hold on his wand. Merlin twitches his hand and Draco’s arm moves back down next to his side. Draco’s eyes go wide and he looks down at his wand now pointed at the ground.

“My name is not Maldin, and I’m not a teenager.” Draco’s eyes lock with his. “My name is Merlin. I’m here to help.” Draco takes a moment to process his words.

“Ha! Merlin. Right. I don’t know who you are, but when the dark lord finds out about this, he’ll be coming for you.” Some of Draco’s spark appears to have returned to him at the apparently ridiculous notion that Maldin is in fact a centuries old warlock.

Merlin looks to Arthur, unable to help himself. The man’s face is a mixture of amazement and rage.

“Tom and I will most certainly be meeting soon, but he will not be hearing about the events of today.” He turns his gaze back to the deatheaters, the golden light once again increasing.

Sensing danger, Draco’s wand arm shakes in place as he tries unsuccessfully to lift it.

Finding the minds of each of the adult deatheaters in the room, Merlin forcibly rips out their memories of the events at Hogwarts. He reaches back farther and removes all memories tied to Severus’s vow. Completing his task, he gently arranges their memories to slide neatly around the blank spaces. *Draco failed to kill Dumbledore, but Dumbledore spared his life. He is under the headmaster’s protection. Severus was unaware of Voldemort’s task for Draco and thus was unable
Arthur mutely passes him a candle holder and Merlin bestows some of his magic upon it before placing it on the side table.

Merlin nods his head and the deatheaters unfreeze. Stiffly and without acknowledging their surroundings, they march mindlessly towards the candle holder. Draco startles and steps out of the way, eyes wide.

In unison, the deatheaters grab hold of the metal stick and disappear into thin air.

Arthur lets out a loud exhale and plops down into the nearest chair in a rather un-kingly display. “Although I knew it was coming, it was still somehow surprising. People just disappearing like that. Can you travel that way yourself?”

The apparent mundane question is what sets off Draco, suddenly sprouting back to life, hands reaching up to grab at his hair. “What was that?! Where did they go? What have you done to my father?” Draco stops himself from launching at Merlin, no doubt recalling his earlier displays of power.

Sighing, Merlin ignores Draco for the moment and turns to Albus. “How are you feeling Albus, are you alright?”

“Quite fine now, thank you Merlin.” Albus accepts Severus’s offered hand up and seats himself heavily into the chair opposite Arthur. “Why don’t you come and join us Mr. Malfoy. We will explain everything in due time.”

Draco looks to Albus like he is crazy, standing firmly planted on the spot.

Merlin summons cups of tea from the kitchens and settles himself into the chair next to Arthur, Severus claiming the one next to Albus.

Taking pity on Draco, who’s face is now a particularly bright shade of red, Merlin starts his explanations. “I wiped their minds of all recollection of Severus’s unbreakable vow, as well as this evening. Replaced with a rather quaint memory of dining together at a ‘muggle’ pub. Completely fabricated of course. I then sent them on their way via portkey. They will have woken from their trance as soon as appearing in their new location. Completely unharmed.”

The look on Severus’s face speaks of his disgusted disappointment with this fact. “Leaving them alive and unharmed? So that they may kill again next chance they get? I thought you were here to deal with the Dark Lord? I thought you were on our side.” Severus’s voice is like ice.

Draco only looks more confused.

“I have no fear of killing, believe me, but I am not the monster you seem to expect from me. I will not kill a boy’s father in front of him. You will not win this war by slaughtering all on the opposing side. It is not that kind of battle. Mindless killing is how this all started in the first place and it will only be what drives more farther afield.” Merlin refuses to be used as the wizarding world’s executioner. Memories of battle fields being leveled by lightning, drowned in flames taller than a double story house, and the more memorable time where the soldiers simple dropped dead in unison as if their thread had been cut filter through Merlin’s mind. I will not let it come to that again. Not this time. He shakes his head to dispel the lingering stench of death and decay from his nose.

Albus nods at Merlin in agreement, with a look of pleased surprise. “Merlin is correct of course. Have a seat Mr. Malfoy.” Albus apparently loses patience with the boy and congers up a seat directly
behind him, causing him to stumble and land in it.

The hostility in Draco’s glare at Merlin and Arthur fades to be replaced with disbelief and suspicion. Merlin braces himself. “Draco, I’m sure you are wondering who Arthur and I am to be a part of this situation.” Draco narrows his eyes and Merlin takes that as an agreement. “What I will be telling you cannot leave this room. Can I trust you to keep a rather overwhelming secret?”

“I suspect if I cannot, you will simply just violate my mind and ‘erase’ it from my memory alongside those I have shared it with?” Merlin looks grim, but nods. “I will not share it, you have my word.” Draco spits out his words with venom, realizing he has little choice if he wishes to know what is going on.

“Well, thank you.” Merlin sits up straighter in his chair and soothes down his hair. “I am not Maldin. That is not my name, I made it up. And I am most definitely not a teenager.” Draco’s hands are gripped into tight fists on his lap. “As I told you, my name is Merlin. I have come to Hogwarts to help in the war. I am in the guise of a student as I used to be a professor here many years ago and my cover would be blown quite spectacularly if I were to be recognized by any of the portraits.”

Draco’s face is deep red in anger and hurt. “I thought we were friends. How old even are you? And what is your real name, why don’t you show your real face?” The disgust and rage are apparent in his words.

“I was under the impression we were forming a friendship as well. And I see no reason why that has to end due to my revelation, unless of course you wish it to. I gave you my real name, it is Merlin. I don’t see how a man’s age is anyone else’s business, but I’ll share mine with you since you asked. 1583, give or take a decade or two. As far as my face goes,” He waves a hand in front of himself, “this is it. Of course it helps that I can appear at any age I choose. I think what you’re expecting is somewhere closer to—” Merlin shifts his body into his advanced elder years. “But it is no more real in appearance than that of my teenaged form. I can choose to present myself as I wish.”

Draco’s face looks smacked. “You mean to tell me you’re Merlin.”

“I am telling you that, yes.” Merlin allows a touch of gold to enter his vision, purely for dramatic effect.

Draco’s eyes widen and he leans back in his seat.

“And this here is King Arthur Pendragon of Camelot.” He sweeps his arm towards Arthur in what he hopes is a regal fashion. Never was good at announcing his royal presence.

“I’m not king any more Merlin. Just Arthur.” But even he cannot help the gleam of gold around his head as the light from the fireplace lights up his hair like a simmering crown.

“Just Arthur has always been more than enough.” Merlin smiles at him with a glint in his eye.

Draco narrows his eyes at Arthur, studying him. “I never knew King Arthur was a wizard.” he says his name mockingly, still apparently refusing to believe Merlin.

Arthur looks offended. “I most certainly am not a sorcerer.” After a pause, he startles momentarily. “Not, that there’s anything wrong with being one.” He sends an apologetic look Merlin’s way.

Draco’s eyebrows shoot up, his eyes now once again widened as far as they will go. “You’re a muggle?” His lip curls down involuntarily.
“I don’t know what it is that you are implying, but I have never, nor do I ever plan on, studying magic.” Arthur’s voice is firm and Draco looks beyond surprised.

“One does not require magic to be extraordinary.” Arthur’s face colours slightly at Merlin’s words. Albus nods his head in agreement and Severus merely watches events unfold.

Draco scrunches his face in disbelief but says nothing. Merlin takes that as improvement.

After several moments of silence, Draco stiffens in alarm, his face losing all colour. “He’ll kill me.” Four pairs of eyes turn to him.

“He will want to, yes. And he will try.” Severus’s voice is grave.

“We will not let him. Not harm will come to you, you have my word.” Merlin tries to calm the boy.

“You are safe here. Voldemort would not dare strike you so close to my presence. And I have no intention of letting you wander far.” Albus sets his cup of tea down in front of him.

Draco’s eyes start to water. “He’ll hurt my parents. He’ll kill them.” His once strong and haughty voice is trembling and broken. “He gave me an impossible task to punish my father and I didn’t complete it.” He turns his sad eyes to the headmaster. “It was our only hope. I failed.”

“Your parents value your safety above all else. They would not blame you for this. Narcissa and Lucius will have to go into hiding.” Severus’s voice is softer than Merlin has ever heard it.

“The Order of the Phoenix will protect them. You have nothing to worry over Draco.” Albus’s kind eyes meet those of the frightened boy.

“My father’s a deatheater.” Draco states the obvious as if expecting it to be a game changer.

“Although I cannot, and will not, protect Lucius from the law of the ministry when this has all been blown over, I will not allow for him to be murdered in Voldemort’s rage. You have my word he will be safe from harm along with you and your mother.” Albus picks up his cup of tea again and takes a sip, making a face at the now cold temperature.

“Nothing will stop him. The Dark Lord will not be deterred.” Draco still looks scared.

“I will stop him Draco. That’s what I’m here for. He cannot get through me, I assure you.” Merlin’s aged voice sounds throughout the room in a promise.

Draco turns his wide eyes onto Merlin. “Right.”

All of a sudden, Merlin shoots out of his chair, standing at attention, delicate cup of tea now spilt on the floor. “I can’t believe I forgot again!”

The rest of the room startles in alarm, readying their wands, and in Arthur’s case, reaching for a sword that isn’t there.

“What’s wrong? What is it?” Arthur looks around the room as if expecting to find more deatheater visitors.

“I’m late for my detention with McGonagall!”

Arthur lets out a breath through his teeth and slumps back into his chair. “Dear Gods Merlin, you nearly gave us all a heart attack!”
“I will be eaten alive by that woman! Have you not seen her?” He stomps away from their seating arrangement mumbling quietly to himself. *I’d sooner face the rage of Voldemort than that woman angry. ‘Aught to set her on him as our final secret weapon.*

Severus cracks a smile before sipping his own cold tea and Albus just looks confused. Draco doesn’t seem to know how to handle the sudden shift, or the oddity that is an elderly man complaining about detention.

Merlin shrinks back into his younger body as he takes hold of the door knob. “If any of you lot require me, just say my name three times fast and stomp your right foot on the ground. Hard.”
“Mr. Ambrose, you are capable of telling the time, are you not?” Professor McGonagall’s voice is bordering on shrill, her look of disapproval expertly sharpened. If Merlin truly was several centuries younger, he would be quaking in his shoes.

“I am, yes. I am really very sorry Professor, I was having a discussion with Headmaster Dumbledore in his office and had completely lost track of time.” Merlin clasps his hands earnestly in front of himself.

“Headmaster Dumbledore?” McGonagall’s voice is dry with disbelief. “You mean to tell me that the headmaster is the reason you are late for your detention?”

“It is professor, yes.”

“And he could not have left you a note to bring with you explaining your delayed presence?” McGonagall doesn’t wait for a reply before continuing, “I will be checking in with the headmaster later than, to confirm your tale.” Her gaze is steady, clearly in wait for Merlin to start back-tracking.

“Thank you professor. Please send him my regards when you do.” Merlin sets his bag on the floor next to the desk and chair he assumes he is meant to be seated at.

“Get your quill and parchment out, you will be spending your time writing essays on the dangers of time travel. Tomorrow’s will be on the theory behind transfiguring object into a form later or earlier in their respective timeline, and why this magic is banned in 5 countries. Transfiguration in relation to time, is going to be our next unit of study so, seeing as you have the tendency to skip appointments, I will not have you falling behind in class when you decide to start skipping that too.” McGonagall seats herself in the high backed chair at the desk across from him, picking up her own gleaming red quill and resuming her marking of student essay’s, her face the picture of stern disapproval.

Merlin quickly takes out his things and opens his textbook to the required chapter, not bothering to read it before starting on his essay. Will she notice if I write the entire thing without consulting the text? Perhaps I should browse through a bit, just for show. And spell some words wrong just in case. Goddess, I have better things to be doing than this.

Hand writing on autopilot and eyes staring at a fixed point on his opened textbook, Merlin takes the opportunity to digest the events of the day. Poor Draco. He looked completely distraught. Our friendship is probably ruined now that he knows I’ve been lying this whole time. Merlin didn’t expect it to hurt as much as it does. The teen might be bigoted and terribly misinformed, but he has a good heart. Merlin had found himself growing fond of the boy.

His hand pushes a little too hard on the quill and the tip breaks through the parchment, staining a splotch on the wooden surface of the table. Merlin sighs and grabs himself a new sheet, pointing his wand in his other hand and fixing the desk. At least he’s safe, and free of Tom’s absurd demands and influence. Merlin hopes desperately he’ll come around like Arthur had, even if he wants nothing to do with Merlin in the future. He has such potential for goodness.

Merlin sets back to work on his essay, re-writing out the half page he had destroyed. Now three people know my identity. He shifts around in his chair. Stage two: I have to introduce Arthur to the
Order of the Phoenix. He will probably refuse to lie to them. He hates the idea of keeping things from the people who he will be fighting along-side. He will tell them. Merlin makes an effort to lighten his grip on the poor feather before it crushes. If Arthur comes out as the Once and Future King, I will have to step out from the shadows as well.

The side of Merlin’s lip splits open as he bites down on it hard. I made the choice to lay the decision at Arthur’s feet never truly expecting it to come to pass. But here I am. Here he is. Merlin is elated at Arthur’s return, but sweat beads down his back at the thought of revealing himself. There will be no going back from that. No more chance at a quiet life.

Of a peaceful life.

Well, I’ve spent long enough barely living at all. Perhaps this will be a welcome change. His mind flashes to an image of Arthur. Definitely a welcome change.

McGonagall stops grading papers and stares at Merlin. It takes an embarrassingly long time for him to notice. Freezing mid word, Merlin sets his quill down next to his page. Before he can ask what the matter is, McGonagall arches an eyebrow and sets back to work. Merlin looks down at his own writing, realizing he must have been writing at inhuman speeds for his scrawl to look that messy. Entire paragraphs are barely legible, the ink smudged and blurred under the sweep of his hand as he continued writing lines before the ink properly dried.

He squints to try to make out what the last paragraph says, surprised to note he doesn’t recognize his own words. His eyes cross to read the garbled writing, and after several long moments his face goes scarlet. He had certainly not been writing on the essay topic. He runs an embarrassed hand through his hair at the thought of obliviously handing it in to the professor.

Quickly scrunching up the ruined page, he vanishes it with his wand before the evidence can stare at him any longer.

Forcing his hand to work slower and his thoughts to follow the words he writes, the rest of his detention passes unbearably slowly.

Putting his books away under the careful scrutiny of the Gryffindor Professor, Merlin dreads spending the rest of his evenings in her office writing mind numbingly simple essays. A couple weeks ago, he would have had little issue with passing time in such a manner, but now he has more important things to do. More pressing matters at hand. More urgent tasks ahead of him.

Oh you cannot fool yourself so easily you old bat. Merlin fears he might be forced to address his current problem some point in his near future. As important as the defeat of a certain dark wizard along with the rehabilitation of his followers are, his mind has not been focused on the task at hand for quite some time. Selfishly, he realizes, his priorities have re-arranged themselves.

Merlin understands that he should probably feel guilty over this, but cannot seem to bring himself to.

He sighs to himself as he closes the office door on his way out.

His footsteps echo ominously as he descends down the corridor in the direction of the dungeons. He comes to an abrupt stop, staring straight ahead. I don’t want to go to bed. When he fully registers his own thoughts, he slaps a hand over his mouth to stop the gargoyle of laughter that comes out as a surprised shout. For once, my mind matches my body. He examines his unwrinkled hand with a frown.

Despite the blatant childishness of his realization, the sentiment holds true. Just the mere notion of
leaving Arthur alone for any farther length of time is enough to buckle his knees and send him sweating. He ought to be watching over him. Protecting him. Keeping him safe and alive at all times. He doesn’t have time for sleep.

He spins around and briskly heads in the other direction. Off to Hagrid’s hut he goes.

After about 15 steps, he stops again. What will Arthur think? Is this really what he wants? What he needs? Hogwarts is safe, I told him that myself. That was no lie. What use will I have keeping watch over him all night? Yet the thought of spending any more length of time apart rankles. He’ll demand I join him in bed again. His heart sends a thrill at that.

_I cannot do that._ He feels disgusted and disappointed with himself. _Impose on his hospitality another night. How selfish of me._

_And what would Arthur think of you then? His old friend senile and driven mad with the passing of time. His old servant Merlin would never behave in such a manner. Unable to be alone for any stretch of time without panicking and making a fool of himself._

_Pull yourself together old man._

Merlin turns around once again, his shoulders set and a scowl upon his face, he marches down the corridor.

The Slytherin common room is quiet as only a small handful of older students mill about finishing up last minute homework assignments. Merlin stalks off to his dorm room ignoring their curious looks.

Closing the dormitory door softly behind him, Merlin makes his way to his bedside while peeling off his day wear. Trying desperately to keep his mind carefully blank, he misses Draco’s bed curtains opening.

“What are you doing here?” Draco’s question sounds more like a demand, his voice quiet yet harsh amongst the muted sounds of the other boy’s snores. Merlin flails in surprise and his arms tangle up in his shirt on its way over his head. Draco casts a wary eye around the room, checking to insure the other boys are still asleep.

Merlin sags onto his bed, remaining in an upright position facing Draco. “What do you mean, what am I doing here?” _I thought I made my presence clear._

Merlin can’t make out the details of Draco’s face in the dark, but his voice is one that borders on panic. “What are you doing _here._ In this dorm. Right now. Why are you in the boys’ dorm?”

Merlin thinks perhaps he is missing the point. “I’m here to go to bed, to sleep.” He says the words slowly.

“Obviously. But why _here._” Draco’s voice is starting to sound heated.

Merlin’s shoulders slump and he casts a wordless sound barrier around their two beds. “I am staying at Hogwarts as a student. It would be quite odd if I were to be sleeping in a hovel somewhere.”

A deflated sigh comes from Draco and his bed curtains open up wider. “Right.”

Merlin braces himself for the expected barrage of questions.

“So you’re really him. Dumbledore and Snape explained a bit more after you left. And uh… Arthur.” His voice trails off and Merlin can hear his bed sheets ruffling.
“Yep.” Merlin takes a breath in. “My name is Merlin. I’m old. Arthur is a resurrected King. We’re here to restore the balance. All true.” He looks confidently towards the boy’s hazy face.

“Thank god. I mean, this shit is weird as hell. And messed up. And for the record, it is really freaking strange to be sharing a room with Merlin.” Draco’s talking speeds up and takes on a frantic edge. “But thank Merlin there are more powers at work here than just that batty old coot of a Headmaster. Ah… I mean, thank god. Or, er-” He stutters to a stop.

Merlin scrubs a hand over his face. This is going to be making blending in as a student difficult. He pulls the covers over his legs, beginning to feel sad, but then stops himself. He refuses to feel mournful over an ended friendship he had based entirely upon lies.

“I understand it will be impossible to go back to our previous state of friendship, but I will need you to still treat me as any other student. It is important that my cover is not blown.”

“Uh… right. Sure, of course. Just like any other student.” Draco lets loose a hysterical laugh that has Merlin glancing around them despite the silencing charm.

“I appreciate it.” Merlin lays down onto his bed, but leaves the curtains open.

After a long stretch of silence, Draco flops down onto his pillow and rolls to face Merlin. “My parents are staying in a Muggle town. Dumbledore arranged everything. You said you’d keep them safe…”

“I’ll drop by their place and set my own wards. You have my word that they will be safe. I will insure it.”

Draco stays silent for a moment longer.

“Where have you been? Why has no one-”

“I’ve been around. For the first while I was an ‘active member of society’ as they say. Helped guide the changing of the laws, settled disputes, kept people safe. And others not so safe. But things start to go a little sideways when you notice you don’t age. It took me many years to perfect altering my body in such a manner as I do now. I used to have to take potions, and it was very exhausting.” Merlin realizes he’s rambling.

“Your history class is all wrong. I came back to Camelot after everyone who knew my face had passed. Helped raise Rowena, Godric, Salazar, and Helga, then when they were older, I left them to it. Traveled for a while. Disappeared for longer. I taught here in the 1750’s. I had Professor Snape’s job actually. Then I lived in Northern Canada for a while teaching. The staying out of the magical world part of my story as a student here is true.” Merlin gives Draco time to digest it all.

“I’m not a god. Yeah, I’m powerful, yes, I am immortal, but I am not ‘all-seeing’, ‘all-knowing’, or in any way better than anyone else. I’m just different. And old. The last thing I, or anyone else needs, is for me to take control of the ministry and rule for eternity. I know my place, and that would be catastrophic.”

Merlin catches his breath, talking about himself is still strange and new feeling.

“This is all a bit much.” Draco’s voice is quite in the dark of the room.

“Yes, it is.” He’s still so incredibly young. This is probably too much to grasp. The concept of the passing of time is often lost on those still too young to feel it.
“You didn’t have to solve everything for us, but you could have at least helped a little bit.” Draco’s whisper is sharp and accusatory.

Merlin throws his spare pillow at him, hitting the side of his head. “I did.” Draco steals the pillow, hiding it under his blankets. “And besides, I’m here now, and everything’s going to be changing soon. Arthur’s back and he never liked hiding who he was. And it’s about time my life had a little excitement in it.” Mentioning Arthur’s name is accompanied by the new sensation of his innards performing impressive acrobatics. Draco can probably hear the smile in his voice.

“Excitement.” The words are dry and flat.

“Well, yes. I don’t enjoy the threat upon people’s lives, or the danger of everything going impossibly and terribly wrong, but I do enjoy living at the moment.” This is the greatest time since the early years. The goddess has finally answered my pleading.

“Good for you.” Draco’s snide and clipped way of talking has returned.

Merlin settles more comfortably in his bed. “Thank you.”

He can hear the angry rustling of blankets, followed by still silence. Then more rustling. “You’re helping me with my coursework from now on.”

Merlin takes the begrudgingly offered olive branch with a smile. “Of course.”

…..

Draco keeps giving him weird looks whenever he think’s Merlin won’t notice. He feels the grey eyes drilling holes into his skull. Merlin waves at him even though they are seated across from each other at the breakfast table. Draco’s eyes widen and he quickly looks down at his food.

Merlin digs into his own breakfast and feels the drilling quickly resume. He looks up again to catch him, an eye-roll planned and ready, but it’s not just Draco. Seated next to Draco across from Merlin is Goyle, his stare also fixed firmly upon Merlin’s face.

Merlin arches an eyebrow at him while he chews his food. “What?”

Goyle looks to Draco and shrugs his shoulders. “I figured if he’s making a thing of it, I’d join in. Find out what all the fuss is about.” He looks back at Merlin without blinking. “’Tis kind of fun.”

Draco elbows him in the ribs as he takes a bite off his fork and the food bit flings over onto Pansy’s plate.

“Ew man, that’s disgusting! Keep your germy food to yourself.” Pansy picks up the napkin next to her, and uses it to scoop the food off her plate and onto Draco’s.

“That was Goyle’s, not mine.” His lip curls up as he moves the rest of his food away from the intruding bit on the side of his plate.

Merlin lets loose the eye-roll, leaning over and shoveling the food bit onto his fork. He lifts it to his mouth, glad the awkward staring has finally stopped.

Both Draco and Pansy look at him in horror as he swallows the food.

“Hey, that was mine!” Goyle’s protest is spoken through a fit of giggling.

Merlin feels a tap on his shoulder and turns to find Hermione standing behind him.
“Want to study in the library after classes today for our dueling session this week? I’ve managed to talk Ron into it with the lure of learning new hexes.”

Merlin nods his head with enthusiasm. “Mind if people join us?”

Hermione glances up to the teachers table where Arthur is currently chatting away happily with Hagrid. Probably about Giant spiders. “Of course.” She smiles at him and heads back over to her own table, pulling out the chair next to a waving Ron.

Merlin swivels back around to his fellow Slytherins. “Hey Draco, Goyle, want to join me in the library after class to learn new hexes for the dueling session this week?” He’s met by two wide and excited smiles.

“Oh, I’ll be there.” Draco looks excited and Goyle nods along enthusiastically.

“Excellent!” Merlin claps his hands together once before pushing back his chair and getting up.

Chapter End Notes

Please take note that we have now reached the point where the updates have caught up with my writing. I have yet to edit chapter 26, and I am part way through writing chapter 27, but I am a very slow and very fresh writer. I will try my best to maintain frequent updates, but I really cannot make any promises. I have three jobs on the go, two of which I have been badly neglecting and need to put in more hours towards, so the time I have available to write will be sporadic and irregular.

I guarantee I will not stop writing until this fic is done though, you have my word, I swear upon my honor.

Thank you to all who have kept with me this whole time, to those who have read it all in one go, and to those who are slowly still trudging through the chapters, I love you guys and you make this entire process worth it!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the kind and encouraging words!

For once in his life, Arthur finds himself fascinated by the corridors of the castle. The bland stone walls of his time have been covered up with a mismatch of grand looking paintings in glistening ornate frames. The portraits are like little pockets into other worlds, or like windows into someone’s house. Proud looking sorcerers in tall white intricately curled wigs, a beautiful woman wearing nothing but the deflated body of some sort of giant feline beast, it’s head perched on her shoulder, eyes gleaming with a startlingly life-like gleam. A painting half as large as Arthur is tall, squashed full of many small arguing men, none of which have any hair on their heads. He is reminded of Ethel’s laptop and the moving images on the screen.

“Hey, you there!”

Arthur peers around the hallway but spots no signs of life. He waits to the count of 20 before turning back to the gallery in front of him.

“Are you choosing to be rude, or do your ears simply not work?”

“Well I’d acknowledge you, if you’d show yourself!” Arthur projects his voice down the hallway, wondering where someone could possibly be hiding.

“I’m over here! My god you’re daft.”

*That sounded like it was coming from*— Arthur’s eyes widen, his eyebrows scrambling up his face.

“There you go. Yes, hello.”

Arthur walks closer to the wall, squinting at the portrait placed slightly above eye level next to the painting of a rather viscous snake, it’s tongue darting out at random intervals.

“Hello?” Arthur looks up at the portrait framed in enough intricately swirling silver to pay way to feed an entire village for the span of several weeks. The portrait of an imposing black haired man, his coal black eyes set under a surprisingly elegant swoop of brow, angles his head down towards Arthur. *Did the painting just talk to me? Am I going mad?* He blinks his eyes to clear the vision.

“You look awfully familiar. Have we perhaps met before? I haven’t seen you at the castle before, I know that, yet I can’t help but feel a sense of…” The man tilts his head to the side as he peers down at Arthur. *He definitely just spoke.*

“You don’t look familiar. I really don’t think there’s any chance we’ve met before.” The man’s clothes are clean and ornate, dark pine green with black embroidery, the shoulders pointed out and a row of impressive silver buttons to match the frame are sewn down the front. That is not any fashion he has seen before. “How are you talking? Are you alive?”

“Well that’s I question I don’t get often here. I’m not alive, no, but I once was, in a way. I am a bewitched portrait of Salazar Slytherin. Surely you’ve heard of me, you do look incredibly familiar.”
A long graceful finger swipes across his lip as he continues to scrutinizes Arthur.

*Magically talking paintings. Why didn’t I consider the possibility? Everything here is bloody magic now, why not the art as well? “Slytherin as in the Hogwarts house?”*

“The one and the same. What is your name sir? Surly you are not faculty…”

“Arthur Dragan, I’m working here as assistant grounds keeper. I’m new. Pleasure to meet you Salazar.” Arthur gives a polite nod of his head in greeting.

“Arthur! Yes of course! You wouldn’t happen to be a descendant of the Great Arthur Pendragon would you? Uncanny family resemblance.”

Arthur studies the portrait’s face. Not a flicker of familiarity.

“I’m um… actually…” *What do I say? Merlin would kill me if I blow our cover so early. Yet he recognized me… and he’s just a painting* - Making up his mind on the spot, he straightens his back and holds his head high, meeting the cold dark eyes head on. “I am Arthur Pendragon, past king of Camelot. And I have no children.”

A look of surprise flickers over Salazar’s face. “You don’t look to be a ghost…?”

“I’m not. I’m alive. It’s eh, ah, rather new development. How did you recognize me, I swear we’ve never met in person…?” He clasps his hands together behind his back.

“Interesting. Merlin had something to do with it I take it? Finally worked out how to raise the dead?”

Arthur’s eyes widen in alarm. *Merlin was attempting necromancy? He was trying to call me back from Avalon?* He feels a jolt of ice down his spine. “No actually. Merlin was just as surprised as I.”

“Hmmm. Well. I recognized you from a painted likeness Merlin had displayed in his, er… quarters. At the time.”

*He kept a likeness of me? “I take it you knew Merlin a uh, while ago?”*

“I did yes. He was the one who set up this school. Well, at the time it wasn’t really a school. He fostered myself and three others in these very halls in the early 6th century. Was a father to me for most of my life.” He says this with no small amount of pride evident in his voice and the set of his shoulders.

*Merlin raised children?* Arthur tries to picture the regal and imposing man in the portrait as a child tugging on Merlin’s sleeve and running around the halls of the castle. It is not an easy task. *Merlin said he had no family.* “I was not aware that Merlin raised children.”

“Well, he never called us his own. He was our teacher you understand. Taught us all we knew. We looked up to him as a father. When Merlin deemed us old enough, he departed, and the four of us founded Hogwarts as an official school of magic.” The way Salazar speaks Merlin’s name has an unsettling amount of reverence and awe that Arthur is still unaccustomed to hearing when referring to Merlin.

“I see. I’m glad to hear he was not alone for all that time.”

“Oh certainly not! At least, not while I was alive. He was almost always swamped by children and other magic users seeking the answers to questions or looking for guidance. He was very active and popular in my time.” Salazar’s smile is wide and slightly *sharp.*
“You’ve done a lovely job with the school as far as I have been able to tell. The castle’s changes certainly are spectacular. And very, ah, original.” Arthur thinks to the alarming hall filled with shifting and moving staircases. All composed of a very high-grade marble. Definitely impressive.

“Why thank you sire, truly high praise coming from you. Although unfortunately I cannot take credit for all of the castle’s alterations as the others had their part to play as well.” Arthur’s heart gives a stutter at the formal address, never expecting to hear that again.

“I see, well all the same, the school is quite grand.” Arthur nods his head again as he turns to make his leave, storing the new information away to ask Merlin about later.

“It has been a please conversing with you, do stop by my portrait for a chat again. Please send my regards to Merlin, along with my request for his presence. It has been too long.” Salazar’s face falls into the shadows as he bows his head low, his long hair sliding from his shoulder to cover half his face, his small smile almost completely hidden.

“I’ll make sure to pass it along, good day.” Arthur notices the other portraits eyeing him with poorly disguised curiosity as he makes his way down the hall.

His day tasks for Hagrid, thankfully completed without difficulty, leave him free for the rest of the day to do as he pleases. He can certainly say he never expected to do yard work in his lifetime. Or second lifetime. He brings his hands up and picks out the remaining dirt from under his nails. Thinking on where he should explore next, he is struck by a brilliant idea. The library! I want to learn more about the modern world, what better way to do it without seeming suspicious than to research with books! For the second or third time that day, Arthur finds himself missing the muggle world and their technology. The internet would make this so much easier.

Now, I remember where the library used to be, but I have absolutely no clue where it might have wandered off too after all these years. The interior of most of the castle is entirely different.

Having an idea, Arthur stops suddenly and turns to face the wall to his right. “Um, excuse me ma’am?” He address a painting of an elderly lady perched on top of a stack of wooden chairs. “Would you by any chance be able to direct me towards the location of the library?” He throws his most charming smile at her.

Not even making eye contact, a purple clad arm reaches and points up and to the left. The old lady teeters precariously on top of the stack from the movement of her arm.

“Thank you kind madam.” Arthur wastes no time heading briskly in the direction of her pointing. Climbing a hidden enclave of stairs, at the end of the passage is two very large doors with the words ‘Library 2nd Entrance’ engraved in brass, nailed above the doors.

Perfect. Brushing down the front of his now admittedly rather tired red shirt, he opens one of the doors and steps inside.

The interior is huge. Like no other library Arthur has ever stepped foot in, or even heard of, the stacks of books go up as high as the length of three men. Large windows let in sunlight from the far wall, reflecting the stacks onto the polished wooden floor, giving the illusion of the book shelves continuing on below their feet.

Slowly, Arthur walks in farther, spotting several wooden table with seated students and large heaps of books arranged in front of them. A couple books float around the space between the stacks towards an unknown destination and Arthur has to drag his eyes away.
Where in the world do I start in here? They must have books on every topic ever written! He peers at the row of books closest to him, the foreign symbols in a language he couldn’t ever hope to make sense of. The words blur slightly and he squints his eyes at them, trying to make out the rounded curves of the unfamiliar script. Slowly they come into focus as they re-arrange themselves into a recognizable shape. ‘Apparition and the theory of instant travel vol.8’.

A magical book on magic that can magically translate for the reader. Wow.

As Arthur peers around at the other book titles, he notices all which are written in a foreign scrawl re-arrange themselves into a recognizable shape. Incredible.

“Arthur!” Said man nearly hops right out of his skin at the unexpected sound of his own name being loudly whispered dangerously close to his ear.

“Gah!” Arthur flails around in an un-kingly fashion before composing himself again at the sight of the person next to him.

“Sorry about that, I didn’t intend on startling you. What are you up to in the library? There aren’t any marge-mites in here are there?” The bushy haired girl Arthur recognizes as one of Merlin’s friends is holding a large stack a books in front of her.

“Just wasn’t expecting that is all. No, they’ve all been dealt with, thankfully. I finished up all my tasks for the day and figured I’d come by the library for a bit of educational reading.”

“Oh!” Hermione’s smile is large and pleased. “We have a table by the far window, you should come join us. We’re all working on research for our upcoming duel class.”

“Uh, sure. That would be nice, thanks” Not knowing where to start his research, Arthur quickly pulls out a book on the shelf at random and follows her to their table.

“Hey guys, I hope you don’t mind making a bit of room for Arthur. I figured, the more the merrier right?” At the table are Ron, Draco, another larger boy, and Merlin. She gives a tight lipped look in Draco’s direction before sliding her chair over a bit and sitting down.

“Oh hello Arthur! Yes, join us, please do.” Merlin’s eyes light up at the sight of him and he happily makes room at the table.

Arthur places his singular, and rather small book, on the table before seating himself next to the old warlock.

Draco looks up from his intense staring at the loose sheet in front of him. Is that Merlin’s writing? He meets his eyes before quickly looking back down at the page, his face several shades paler.

Ron appears to be parked as far away from the two young Slytherins as possible, and is pointedly looking in any direction but there’s. “Hello Arthur. Nice to see you again. What are you doing here in the library mate? Surely you don’t have any assignments to study for.”

“No, no, nothing like that. I completed my work for the day and figured I’d do a little research in the library to pass the time.” Ron looks at him like he’s insane while Hermione’s face is smug.

“What are you researching?” The large Slytherin boy Arthur has not yet been introduced to yet pipes up while trying to get a look at his book. Merlin manages to read the title and arches a brow at him.

Arthur tilts the book towards himself to read the cover for the first time, just as curious as his desk mates. ‘Advanced charms for the common household’ Huh. He holds up the seemingly ancient book
for the others to read.

“I have no idea what that says mate. What even language is that?” Ron’s eyebrows are drawn down as he tries to make out the strange scribbles on the book front.

“I think that’s in Arabic actually.” Merlin’s confused face peers at the words in wonder.

“It is, that’s Arabic. I can’t read it, but I’ve seen it before. My great gran used to speak it.” Hermione turns back to her own studies after glancing up at it.

“You can read that Arthur?” Merlin apparently cannot.

Arthur looks down at the book in newfound confusion. *If they cannot read it, I guess the books are not ‘magically’ set to translate like I thought they were. How can I read a language I’ve never even heard of?*

*Come to think of it, have we even been speaking to each other in Welsh?*

Arthur’s heartbeat picks up by several notches. *What’s going on with me?*

“Arthur?” Merlin’s look of curiosity has turned to concern.

“Yeah? Oh, um, yes. I can read it.” He covers the panic in his voice. We’ll have to talk about this later. Without the others around.

“Interesting.” Merlin looks into his eyes as if looking for something.

Finally opening his book, Arthur seats himself more comfortably. Several long minutes pass by in silence as the makeshift study group leafs through texts. *Huh. I never knew magic existed for stuff like this. Makes sense.*

*God, how much of Merlin’s chores where actually performed by hand?! Did he really do everything with magic? How was he still so slow then?* Arthur continues to read through the book on practical household magic, the technical terms and explanations flying far over his head, but the basics somehow make a strange sort of sense.

*Why would anyone want to do chores by hand when you can just wave a wand around and everything does it on its own?*

Arthur thinks to his father and his blood runs cold. *He killed men for less. Executed just for doing the simplest of tasks. An old lady murdered for using magic to lift a heavy jar off a high shelf. A new mother using a charm to wash her infants soiled clothes. Harmless magic. The blind cruelty seems unimaginable. For the first time, Arthur truly sees his father as the monster that he was. And I thought the sorcerers trying to put a stop to it were evil. I hunted them down and killed them where they stood.*

Arthur takes a deep breath and closes the book gently in front of him before standing up.

“Need help finding anything?” Merlin rests his hand on his page and looks up at him.

“Sure, that would be nice. Thank you.”

They make their way silently out of earshot from the others, leaving them to their awkward yet bizarrely tense studying session.

“How can I read this?” Arthur brandishes the offending book in front of himself.
“I have not a clue Arthur. It’s not as if anyone else has returned from Avalon before.” Merlin rests his hands on ether of Arthur’s shoulders and stares intently into his eyes. Arthur’s breath catches as he looks back into the abyss of sparkling gold. “There’s… something. I think. But it’s faint, and um…” He squints his eyes, deep in focus. “different. That’s different.” He blinks his eyes rapidly as they turn back to their normal blue.

“What is it? What’s different?” Concern colours Arthur’s voice. What’s going on?!

“I’m not entirely sure. I’ll have to have a better look later. Not here. You’re alright though, nothing seems to be wrong.”

Arthur finds no comfort in his words, but understands the library is not the place. He drags a hand over his face. “Alright then.”

“What sort of book were you looking for?” Merlin changes the topic back to safer territory.

“Not really sure. Something to help fill me in on things would be nice.” He looks down one of the imposing rows of book cases, completely lost in where to start. Arthur always had Geoffrey, Merlin, or one of the other servants fetch his books for him, very rarely actually venturing down to the old dusty tomes in person,

He never liked the library, or reading in general, in his time. The old volumes of boring battle accounts and strategies had to be committed to memory along with countless lists of noble’s names and family ancestry. The occasional text on agriculture, weaponry, and architecture along with several of others on similar subjects were skimmed and scoured through before council meetings. They were always dry, dusty, and very very long.

Morgana had this one book of romantic poetry they would laughingly read to each other when they were young, pulling silly voices and grand hand gestures to fit. She would have loved it here. Surprisingly he feels a familiar pang of sorrow at the loss of his sister, having long since ridden her off.

“Alright, well I have an idea where to have you start then. Let’s grab the ‘Hogwarts, a History’ book, oh! And ‘Vol. 1 of The Maxward’s Introduction to the Modern Wizarding World’, that book was written for muggle-bourns entering the wizarding world for the first time. Perhaps a bit out dated, but it should get you started.” Merlin pulls out two terribly large books off the shelves near the bottom and plops them into Arthur’s arms. They look to be in reasonable repair, the pages a startling shade of white and the cover still rigid and brightly coloured.

“Oh god.” Arthur looks down at the pile in his arms with dread.

“What is it?” Merlin freezes on the spot while reaching for another ungodly large text.

“These books are huge! This is going to take forever to get through.” Arthur’s heated whisper is perhaps a little too loud.

Merlin puts the book he had half slid out, back into its place on the shelf. “When you finishes reading those two, there’s lots more, not to worry. We’ll get you all caught up in no time, for sure.” Arthur swears the man’s smile is wicked.

“I thought you were going to verbally fill me in on what I missed? You know, hearing it from someone who lived through it and was there? A direct account. Probably loads more accurate.” Arthur tries really hard not to sound like he’s pleading. Or desperate.

Merlin gives him a look. “I am only one man Arthur. I cannot be everywhere at once. Yeah, I’ve
seen and done a lot, but I wasn’t there for everything.” Arthur opens his mouth to say something but gets cut off. “And I have classes to attend, homework to complete, detention, as well as trying to sway the student body to our cause. I won’t have the time to catch you up in time for when you’ll need it. The sooner you learn this stuff, the better.”

A large huff of breath leaves him at the logic he is faced with. Resigning himself for an excruciating next few days, he stalks back to their table.

Merlin and Arthur quietly pull their chairs out and join the teenagers in their studying. Arthur places ‘Vol. 1 of The Maxward’s Introduction to the Modern Wizarding World’ on the table surface, open to the first page, and begins reading. Just as I thought, completely boring.

Arthur rubs his eyes as he turns to the next page, having finally gotten through the Introduction’s introduction. He refrains from smacking his head down onto the table top. I can do this. This is easy. It’s just reading.

Boy, I wish there was something I could beat up. A good sword training session would be perfect about now. He looks over at Merlin, who’s quietly helping out Draco and Hermione with their hex pronunciations. Or a nice mace drilling session.

With a look of defeat on his face, Arthur turns to look back down at his book, mirroring the expression of the large slytherin boy next to Draco.

“What are you reading? It looks like you want to hex something right now. Know of any interesting ones?” Ron looks up from his own, far more exciting looking book, and peers over at what Arthur is reading.

“Where have you been living?! Under a rock? Even I know that one” Ron’s voice is slightly too loud, Arthur resists the urge to look behind himself half expecting to see the angry disproving face of Geoffrey.

“Uh, something like that, yeah.” Arthur glances over at Merlin, I hope I didn’t just blow part of my cover with this. Draco’s eyes are glued to him with a look of poorly masked horror.

“Didn’t you learn this stuff when you went to wizarding school?”

“Ronald.” Hermione gives Ron a light smack on his arm. Boy has he ever heard that tone before.

“I didn’t, no. I was homeschooled growing up. Much like Maldin. They don’t have a lot of magic schools up north in Canada. Not a large enough magical population to warrant one.”

“Our parents’ could have had us travel, but it would have been quite far away. They just opted to teach us themselves.” Merlin pipes up to save him from floundering his lie.

“But Maldin’s education was very advanced. He knows a lot of what they are teaching us already.” Ron cannot seem to stop himself.

Merlin smiles as Arthur feels his stomach sink in dread. “Well I was always the brighter one.” Arthur’s scowl is spectacular. Merlin probably notices, choosing to revise his statement, “Our parents had different backgrounds, so our homeschooled education was a little different. Not to mention we lived in a muggle town”

“That makes sense.” Hermione gives Arthur a look of approval. “It’s very commendable that you willingly choose to improve upon your education.” She sends a pointed look Ron’s way and Arthur feels himself relax.
“I have an idea.” Suddenly, Merlin perks up in his seat, turning towards Draco, who had, for the most part, been trying to ignore the rest of his peers around the table. “Draco, would you mind tutoring Arthur in some of the goings on of the wizarding world here in Europe? I feel that you would be much better suited to it than I.”

Draco actually looks frightened as he lifts his head from his page to look at Merlin. “I guess I could find the time.” His voice is small and uncertain, drawing a look from his classmates around him. Ron seems more surprised by the turn of events that Arthur himself.

*That was smart thinking Merlin.* Arthur takes a moment to reflect on the rarely thought sentiment. Then Arthur gets a better look at Draco’s face. *This is the muggle-hating deatheater’s kid. I’m a muggle. He knows I’m a muggle. Well this will be awkward. I guess this is somewhat how Merlin must have felt in Camelot all those years ago. Looking into the eyes of those who hate him simply for existing.*

*I guess I’ve been given my first mission: Get Draco Malfoy to like me.*

He unleashes his most shining kingly smile. “Thank you Draco, that would be very kind of you. I’m sure there’s a lot you will be able to teach me.”

The boy looks rapidly back and forth between Merlin and Arthur. “Of course. We can meet after dinners while Merlin’s in detention.”
Arthur’s spine fully straightens and he looks in alarm towards Merlin, who is surprisingly, not reacting. At all. In fact, he doesn’t even look up from where he is gesturing towards something on a hand written note in front of Hermione.

Ron, on the other hand, did notice. Several loose locks of bright red hair flick out in a very Gwaine-like fashion as he turns his head in their direction.

Draco seems to belatedly catch his mistake, as he freezes in place with a dawning look of horror. He too, turns to look towards Merlin, perhaps to plea for mercy or beg forgiveness.

“Pfft, oh come he’s not that smart. Everyone knows the smartest student in the school is a Gryffindor: Hermione.” He wraps his arm around her and she shrugs him off without comment. “Besides, he’s clearly not the brightest if he managed to get caught doing whatever nefarious Slytherin things and land himself repeated detentions. Must have been really bad if not even Snape could save him.” Merlin finally looks up and arches an eyebrow at the boy, but doesn’t argue the point.

Oh thank Gaius’s old sweaty socks, that was close. Arthur visibly deflates with relief. He turns to Draco, throwing his sharpest eye daggers straight at his face with the practiced aim of Camelot’s best warrior. The boy audibly swallows.

I can’t believe Merlin’s name being used as an expression has save our asses.

Arthur mules it over, the true potential of that thought slowly sinking in. He smiles to himself in a way that has Draco leaning away unconsciously. Oh, this is going to be fun!

…..

*Merlin’s POV*

Merlin grudgingly makes his way back from detention with McGonagall. Embarrassingly, he toyed with the idea of telling her his identity throughout the entire mind numbingly dull 2 hour session, simply so that he could get out of attending another.

He picks up his stride after he rounds the last corner, the empty halls allowing for more speed than he could manage between classes throughout the day.

The feeling of a strange presence passes over him and he stops in his tracks, feeling an intense sense of de-ja-vu. What was that?

He closes his eyes and extends his magic out past the walls. He sinks it into the ceiling above him, past the floor, and into the open space of the first floor. Found you! He snaps back into himself and jogs down the hall and up a set of secret stairs. He races through the corridors, feeling the presence start to fade away into the other direction.
Not so fast! Certain that whatever it is, it’s not a student, Merlin snags the presence, locking it in place with his magic.

He speeds around the final corner to be confronted with a wall. A solid blank wall of stone. Merlin barely stops himself in time before he rams into the hard surface at full force.

Where are you? The presence is immobile, trapped in the gentle grasp of his extended magic, yet nowhere to be found. I can feel you, how come I cannot see you? He carefully feels around a bit more. The presence is vast, and seems to wrap itself around the wall in front of him.

Focusing his magic in a way he had not done in centuries, he changes the vibrations of his atoms and sifts through the wall.

Well that was a mistake. Merlin finds himself squashed between the solid stone wall and the cold flesh of something massive and smooth. He maneuvers himself around until he can feel the flesh with his bare hand. Scales!

“Hello? I’m sorry to trap you like this, but who are you?” Merlin speaks out loud as well as telepathically, hoping the strange and enormous creature will understand him. Merlin feels the shape of the creature with his magic. A snake. What is a giant snake-a basilisk-doing in the walls of the school? Did Albus allow him free reign?

<<Emrys. I never expected to hear your voice in my lifetime.>> The serpent speaks out loud, thankfully in a language Merlin understands.

<<You know me?>>

<<I know of you. The legend of Emrys is one often spoken.>>

Merlin shifts around, trying to get comfortable. <<What are you doing here?>>

<<I was brought into the castle by who I believe was an old student of yours. Salazar Slytherin. I was given a permanent home in the Chamber of Secrets, but finally released by a student several years ago.>>

Ah yes, the basilisk released and controlled by Tom Riddle. I cannot believe she’s still here. <<I figured you’d be long gone by now, Tom’s presence has long sense left the school.>>

<<Unfortunately, in my younger years, I ignorantly allowed myself to be bound to the life of a human and now I am trapped by the will of Salazar’s descendant. I cannot leave here until He so graciously grants me passage out of the castle.>> Her smooth voice is laced with a venom more powerful than the one found in her fangs.

Merlin is appalled at the treatment of his fellow magical creature. To be bound to the will of another, trapped in the suffocating confines of the castle. He berates Salazar in his head for his stupidity and lack of foresight. His silver tongue could talk almost anyone into doing anything.

Feeling horrified and disgusted, Merlin releases his hold on her. Smooth and powerful scales gently slide past him until he is given enough room to faintly see where he is. This must be another secret passage way I was unaware of.

<<What are you doing here Emrys?>>

<<I’m here because of your jailer actually. He messed some things up for the wizard community quite thoroughly and I’m here to try to fix it. What is your name, if you don’t mind me asking?>>
"Sariya. He was quite the little menace, I’m sure you have your work cut out for you."

"I do, yeah. Sariya, it is lovely to make your acquaintance. Please accept my apologies for how I started this interaction. I did not recognize your presence and acted quite rashly. Apparently the events of late have left me a little jumpy."

"It is my pleasure to meet you Emrys."

"Oh please, call me Merlin. I never go by Emrys to those who know me. So would you like out of this castle?"

"One does not normally enjoy being imprisoned against their will."

"Right, of course. Sorry if this feels a little uncomfortable."

Without waiting, Merlin sinks his magic under Sariya’s skin and explores the magic within her body. Strong and warm feeling, the serpent’s essence is encased within a thin band of black oozing magic. Very familiar magic. Damn Salazar really had no idea what he was doing. He summons more of his golden magic and forcibly yanks the rope of black until it snaps, dissolving in a frizzle.

Sariya jerks violently, smashing Merlin flat into the wall. The breath whooshes out of him and he feels several of his ribs break, one of them stabbing into his lung. If he had any air left in his body, he’d be coughing up blood.

"What happened, did it not work? I thought it worked?" Merlin reverts back to mind-speak as spoken words are a little beyond him at the moment.

"I’m free! You released me!" Merlin feels a surge of powerful magic plow past him feeling strongly of relief and joy. "Thank you Merlin, I owe you a great debt." Her voice is loud in the small passageway.

Must have caught her off guard. Idiot. He takes a rattling breath in that dies out in a choked sound. In her excitement, Sariya fails to notice the pancaked warlock smeared across the stonework.

She slides farther past him, calling out as she makes to leave. "If you ever require my presence for anything, call and I will be there." Merlin feels a strand of her magic settle over him with the promise. Without waiting for a response, she moves down the passageway and disappears out of sight, no doubt planning to leave the castle far behind.

Standing on unsteady legs, Merlin props himself up and reigns the rest of his magic back in. It slams into him at full force, briefly lighting up the dank narrow hallway in a warm glow as sudden and brief as a lightning strike. Without waiting for his consent, his ribs snap back into place and his innards sew themselves back together seamlessly. The blood in his mouth chokes him on its way back down his throat as it is re-absorbed into his system. Everything back into its place, Merlin takes a step away from the wall and assesses himself.

He feels surprisingly more comfortable than he been since coming to Hogwarts. He casts a blue light orb to float in front of him and he lifts a hand in front of his face. Wrinkly. Thin and papery skin loosely hugging bones and sinew. Merlin is old again. My magic must have restored me to the state it had grown most comfortable with. He takes a moment to savour the feel of the form he feels most familiar with. Being younger again sometimes feels like wearing the body of a stranger.

He resigns himself, takes a clear breath and shifts into his younger form.

I wonder if Albus was aware of Sariya’s presence here in the school?
*Arthur’s POV*

There is something very unsettling about the castle being absolutely filled with children and teenagers. A child or two here or there, working as a servant in training, or an apprentice to someone, or a villager’s kid doing who knows what, ok, but everywhere?

Arthur almost found relief in today’s job of tending the school’s vegetable garden, but was once again nearly trampled by and excited hoard stampeding from the castle to the greenhouse. Nowhere is safe from them.

Their wide eyes track his every movement throughout the castle. He even noticed a group of two students doing a poor job of stalking him. Following ten paces behind him and ducking around corners and into empty classrooms. Arthur wonders what it is about him that these kids hope to uncover.

Although Arthur was accustomed to being someone a little taller than most, it is a very strange thing to be able to see clear over the heads of almost everyone he sees. During set hours of the day, between the students scheduled classes when the halls are packed in the corridors as tightly as pie-filling, Arthur can see clear over the lot of them. With the exception of the occasional absurdly tall teenager of course.

Arthur wonders if this is how Hagrid must feel all the time.

Thankfully at this hour most of the students are relaxing in their dorms or slaving over more dusty old tomes. Draco leads Arthur past a group of students seated on couches by a massive fireplace, all reading what appears to be a copy of the same book.

The décor of the Slytherin dorm is more extravagant than Morgana’s old chambers as Uther’s ward. The rich royal greens bring out the vibrancy of the silver metalwork throughout. Everything is shiny, glistening, and too intricately detailed to make sense of. Curtains obscuring the terrifying view of the bottom of the lake are of finer and more elaborate material than that of a queen’s coronation dress. Arthur’s mouth is left unhinged and flapping about.

“I thought you were a king” Draco’s harsh whisper startles him out of his observations and his mouth closes with a soft clack.

He shoots a glare at the boy. Damn smug little face. The kid’s tongue reminds him of Merlin. “These riches could feed the entire lower towns for weeks. I’d have been a greedy and oblivious king if I had surrounded myself in extravagance while those in my care withered away.” Arthur makes sure to keep his voice low, yet he still attracts the attention of one of the small children lounging nearby.

Draco doesn’t reply to that, instead picking up his pace in their quest for a secluded study nook. He comes to an abrupt stop in front of another bookcase of all things and Arthur has to suppress a sigh. More blasted reading? His brain almost melts out his ears after the long day of researching.

Draco reaches for a blank untitled book at arm’s reach, pulling it out only slightly. He lets go, leaving it half in the shelf still before reaching for another. Arthur looks on in confusion as Draco disturbs the shelf, pulling several books half out of place in a seemingly random order. With a dramatic flourish, he pushes a particularly large book inwards before taking and step back.

With a quick glance in either direction, Draco grabs Arthur’s sleeve and manhandles him to smack into the shelf. Except he doesn’t.

Without being given enough time to dig his heels in, Arthur finds himself being pushed through the
book case. He moves through the wall, as if it were merely air. Before Arthur can make sense of what is happening, he finds himself in a small well lit room with a table, several comfortable looking chairs, and hanging pictures of sea monsters of all things.

Draco’s lets go of his sleeve and he makes his way over to one of the chairs. “Figured we could use somewhere away from prying ears now that the library’s getting a bit too full.”

“Yes, thank you.” Arthur looks back at the solid wall they just walked through, wondering, hoping that it is not as solid as it looks.

Arthur hopes that their ‘tutoring’ session continues on a less awkward note. Draco had simply dropped several more volumes in front of Arthur at the library and told him to go wild. He had refrained from even looking in his direction for the entirety of the evening, until Arthur gave up and started asking him questions. Draco refused to answer them, instead, abruptly getting up from his place at their table and stalking off. Arthur almost went raging after him, but he stopped by the door to shoot him an exasperated look before beckoning him to follow.

“So you want to know how it is that the muggles don’t know magic exists.” His question is stated in a flat voice. Arthur can almost hear the scoff at the end. Merlin would have scoffed.

“Yes, that would be nice.” Draco’s eyes bore into him. “When I was alive, the first time, magic was not something anyone thought of as fiction. How do you hide the existence of something so… er… obvious?”

Draco rolls his eyes. “Muggle’s are stupid. They choose not to believe magic exists, because if it did, than they’d be faced with the reality that they don’t have it.”

Arthur almost laughs. “Yeah, I see how magic is something that is nice to have. Saves you lots of time and effort and all that, but it’s never been something I wished I could use.”

Draco looks at him like he’s crazy.

“You cannot tell me that the majority of the population of humans on the planet simply turn a blind eye to magic out of jealousy. That is not how people work. Trust me.” Arthur seats himself across from the boy, crossing his arms in front of him.

Draco shifts in his seat. “The ministry has people wipe the minds of muggles who are witness to acts of blatant magic. But you are right, it is still obvious.” His face reflect his feelings towards muggles, his lip curling up and his nose scrunched.

“They wipe their memories? Well that’s invasive.” Arthur feels a touch of anger threaten to bubble up to the surface. Draco is silent on the matter. Putting that, horrible revelation to the side for a moment, Arthur moves on. “It sounds to me like the magical community chooses to stay in the shadows.”

“Well can you blame us? Muggles killed us by the thousands before we decided enough was enough and scrubbed their filthy little minds clean of us.” Draco’s fist slams into the table top.

“Yes, the sorcerers went into hiding to stay safe. I can see that. But there is no one left alive who has those views. Not even their grandchildren are still alive. The muggles who hated magic are long gone. You have a clean slate.” Man, father, we messed stuff up big time.

“Ha! A clean slate. Yet here we are, cowering in a corner while they get free reign to do as they please.” Draco’s pasty complexion is heating up.
“It is not the fault of the muggles of today that you are in hiding still. That is a choice that the magical people made for themselves. It makes very little sense to blame a group of people who are not even aware of your existence. Non-magical folk have no reason to hate those with magic anymore. There is no more animosity. You can start fresh.” Arthur chooses to ignore the fact that muggles are apparently repeatedly mentally violated by wizard memory magic.

“Anyways, I was asking because I just had no idea how that many people could say hidden for so long. Tell me a bit about the magical community. What was it like growing up here?” Truthfully, Arthur has no idea what questions he should be asking. No clue where to start.

“Well, the magical community is very advanced.” His pointed chin raises higher in the air. “We have a minister of magic, who the people vote for. Before the age of 11, we go to schools where we learn the basics of history, maths, astronomy, astrology, and other such practical thing that do not require the use of a wand. Some wizards attend school with the muggles. Then we get our letter when we come of age and go to school for magic, are granted the use of a wand, and become proper members of society. After 7 years of school at Hogwarts, or another such wizarding boarding school, you graduate and work in a job using the skills you are best at, as per your NEWTS. Standardized testing. I plan to work for the ministry. Possibly as a historical archivist.” Draco states it like a challenge.

Arthur marvels at the differences of their time. Freely given education. For everyone. Mandatory even! A ruler the people vote for, no more nobles and royalty vs. peasants and servants. It does sound truly incredible. Definitely advanced.

But not unusual or unheard of. In my time, yes, definitely. But the modern muggle civilization is not so different at all. Ethel explained about the non-magical community touching on all the same points. I get that I’ve not been around for quite some time, but it is Draco who’s been living with his head buried in the sand.

“It all sounds truly incredible indeed. Certainly very different than the life I had grown up in.” Draco’s smug, self-satisfied expression reminds him of a younger version of himself. Oh, he has a lot of growing up to do. “But it’s not actually very different than how the muggles currently live their lives. They vote for their ruler, they attend schools, they work government jobs. They even invent things! Completely wonderful things, without the use of magic. You’re worlds mirror each other.” Draco looks disgusted.

“Well, I guess that is enough information for me for the evening.” Not really. “Surely you have some questions of your own? You mentioned you want to work as a historian of some sort? Although, admittedly I was not alive the first time for all that long a time, it was quite different to how things are now.”

Draco bites his lip, clearly fighting with himself. “What was Merlin like back then? How old was he when he helped you become king?”

Arthur’s eyebrows shoot up at the unexpected question. “Well, Merlin was…” Clumsy, an idiot, a poor decision maker, ungainly, unexpectedly brilliant, blinding at times, “he was a ridiculous person. Still is really.” Arthur relaxes his stance and rests his hands on the table in front of him. “He was intelligent, sneaky when he wanted to be, and extremely kind. Even hated hunting because of the apparently ‘needless killing’. Of course he could also be ruthless when he needed to be.” Lightning on the battlefield, entire scores of battlements struck down to nothing. “But he never hurt anyone if there was a better way.

“He also had zero sense of propriety. A terrible trait in a servant.” Arthur’s voice is fond. “He was the most insolent person I had ever met.”
“Wait a minute. Do you mean Merlin was your servant?” Draco’s face is warring between outrage and good humoured disbelief.

“Of course he was. The use of magic was illegal, and he most certainly wasn’t born into nobility. Merlin was my personal manservant.”

Draco sputters, his face bright red. “He was just your manservant?!”

“He was manservant to the king Draco. That is the highest position in the castle possible for a servant. Not that he ever acted as anyone’s better. I just can’t picture that.”

“I thought he was your court sorcerer? That’s what we’re taught in class.” Draco’s voice is loud in the small space.

“Unfortunately that was after my time.”

“I just cannot imagine Merlin doing chores. Cleaning your old muddy boots. Was he your father’s servant before yours? How did you come to have an old man as your manservant?”

Arthur feels the need to wash himself. Merlin as King Uther’s servant. “Most certainly not. Merlin came into my service after saving my life at a banquet. My father appointed him to me while I was still a prince. He was the physician’s apprentice at the time.”

“Apprentice?” Draco’s face has scrunched up.

Arthur suddenly realizes what the problem is and laughs. “Merlin is younger than me! He was not an old man when we met, gods, not at all! He was just a little over a year older than you are now, and I had just celebrated my 21st earth cycle. I never knew him as an old man. He used to disguise himself as an elderly sorcerer when he did open displays of magic, but no one ever knew it was him, and it certainly wasn’t his true form.”

Draco leans forwards in his seat, completely captivated. “I find that difficult to picture. So he wasn’t like some sort of father figure to you?”

Arthur snorts with enough force to be heard from the roof of the castle. “Like a father?! Gods, no!” He has to wipe a tear from his eye to see straight. “Not only was he younger than me, and completely and infuriatingly insolent, but we hated each other for the first while. Our first meeting lead to a physical brawl that landed him a night in the dungeons.”

Draco’s surprised face is hilarious. “You certainly don’t seem to hate each other.”

“Well we did at first. Of course, when we got to know each other properly, we got over our animosity and became friends. Over time, very close friends.” Arthur rests his chin in his hands, elbow on the table top, fond memories playing through his head.

Draco’s eyes widen and his forehead wrinkles. “You were, ah, close. Oh”

*Close? Yes, that’s what I said, why is that a… oh. Oh.*

Arthur sets his hand down on the table, his face contorting into a completely new shape. Before he gets the chance to protest, a large shape comes bolting at full force into the room. The student materializing unexpectedly through the wall startles Arthur and Draco nearly off their chairs.

*Merlin, of course. Horrible timing as always. To Arthur’s horror, he feels his face start to colour at the sight of him. Dammit Draco.*
Merlin makes several futile attempts to wipe down his surprisingly filthy and torn robes. “I have been looking everywhere for you guys!”

“Merlin, what in the world have you been doing? What happened to your clothes?” Arthur leans away from the cloud of dust that comes off him when he seats himself in the extra vacant chair between them.

“Basilisk.” He pats his unruly hair down with equally filthy hands as he catches his breath.

“Basilisk? As in, massive terrifying serpent that turns people to stone basilisk?” Draco’s voice is shrill.

“Yeah. She’s free now though, not to worry. Just got a bit dirty in the process. Some old passageways in the school haven’t been cleaned in several lifetimes.” Merlin it truly a mess.

“You mean to say, you’ve been fighting off a giant magical snake in the school?” Of course he was. This is Merlin after all. Leave it to him to find trouble somewhere that was supposed to be safe.

Some things about Merlin really haven’t changed.

“Fighting? Goddess no, she was trapped here. I set her free. No harm done.” He raises his hands in the air as if to prove his point.

“You made friends with a giant deadly snake? Right. Look who I’m talking to.” Arthur gives up. Life is weird.

Draco’s expression is comical. Clearly he has not yet gotten used to having Merlin around. Give him time.
Chapter 28

So here’s a bit of a filler chapter, but I figured it was needed. Poor Arthur and his singular set of clothes.

Sorry for any errors. I have been editing them all by my lonesome, and I'm not very good at catching my own mistakes.

The comments you guys send are really wonderful, thank you for taking the time to post them!

The week passes by slowly for Merlin. He spends every second he can in Arthur’s presence, and every minute not next to him, he spends thinking about him, wishing time would go by faster so he could find him and spend more time with him. After hundreds of years away from the man, he has no intention of wasting even a minute of the second chance he has been given.

Saturday morning is here and finally Merlin can spend an entire uninterrupted day reunited with his king. He stretches in bed and wretches the covers off. Not a moment spent wasted.

Peeling off his sleep sweaty nightclothes, he speed showers, spells his teeth clean, throws on a random green jumper and black pants before tearing out the door with a shouted goodbye to the still groggy Draco.

Careful not to slip on the freshly polished floors, he races down the hall and begins his climb up the stairs.

Merlin comes skidding into the dining hall, for once, not thinking about food at all. His eyes lock onto the form of Arthur, plate heaping with fruit slices.

Oh no you don’t. Merlin ignores the other students at the tables and marches right up to the staff table at the front.

“Arthur.” He plants himself in front of said man’s table, looking at him expectantly.

Arthur swallows his mouthful. “Yes Maldin?”

McGonagall gives Merlin one of her disapproving looks of doom between mouthfuls of porridge. “This is the faculty table Mr. Ambrose, and you are a student. Unless there something you needed from one of us that was so urgent you couldn’t wait for office hours, you can go back to your seat at the Slytherin table.”

Severus chokes on an apple slice and Hagrid gives him a firm pat on the back with enough force to send a first years flying across the room. Severus glares at him.

“I’m here for Mr. Dragan, ma’am.” Merlin is fed up with being treated like a child by this woman. I don’t think she likes me.
McGonagall gives him a firm look before turning back to her breakfast.

“What is it Maldin?” The sun shines down on Arthur from the window behind him like a spotlight. Merlin cannot tear his eyes away.

“It’s Saturday, come join me for breakfast!”

“I’m already eating breakfast, Maldin.” He lifts his fork up and points it at him.

Merlin leans in towards him over the table, his voice low as to avoid catching McGonagall’s ire. “So bring it with you! Come join us at the Slytherin table, you don’t have work today, no one will care.”

Arthur gives a pointed glance in McGonagall’s direction, singular eyebrow raised.

“Come on.” Ok, maybe I really am a teenager.

Arthur sighs and stands up, grabbing his plate of food before making his way around the table. The other faculty members trail his movement with their eyes, Hagrid the only one with a smile.

Merlin pulls out a chair for him at the Slytherin table, earning him a snicker from several of the students and an exasperated eye roll from Arthur. He seats himself next to him and Arthur leans in towards him, voice low and barely above a whisper. “You never were the most vigilant servant Merlin, why start now?”

Merlin replies by thieving a pear slice from Arthur’s plate. He looks up to see Draco offering Arthur a private smile, and Arthur’s face immediately turns scarlet. I wonder what that’s about? He raises his best Gaius eyebrow and is met with the corner of Draco’s mouth twitching up. Well at least he seems in better spirits.

Several pancakes and a generous helping of maple syrup later, and Merlin is ready to start the day. “So, Arthur. I figured you could probably do with having some more clothes, why don’t we head out to the village today and get you sorted?” Merlin pointedly eyes his rather tired looking red shirt.

Arthur looks down at himself, no doubt noticing that although it has been washed, the yard work has done it no favours. “Yes, that would be nice.”

“I didn’t know it was another scheduled Hogsmeade weekend.” Pansy leans over with an excited glint in her eye.

“Oh crap. I knew that one too- Arthur must have seen the momentary panic written on his face, because he quickly pipes up. “Well I’m an adult, as well as a member of the staff here. I’ll be accompanying Maldin the entire time, so I don’t see how it will be a problem. I’ll check in with your head of house, if it would make you feel better?” He looks to Merlin for approval.

Merlin quickly and vigorously nods his head.

“Ooh, I wish a handsome man would take me out of the school too.” Pansy rests her head in her hands and sighs after directing a glare at Merlin.

Oh goddess, not this again. Please, at least hold off while Arthur’s here.

Arthur’s face twitches.
“A Hogsmeade weekend sounds nice right about now.” Goyle is not helping.

“Wait, did I just hear that right? Is Arthur here going to take us to Hogsmeade?” Blaise and Crabbe scoot over closer to their little group.

Merlin shoots a pleading look Draco’s way, hoping as the boy actually knows who they are, he might take pity on them and get them out of this.

He catches the look and puts his fork down. “They’ll never let Arthur out of the castle with so many students tagging along. He’s not even a professor, there’s no way.” The other Slytherins deflate where they sit and Merlin almost sighs out loud in relief.

Draco catches his eyes and signals him something.

What is that supposed to mean?

Merlin gently elbows Arthur, before sliding out of his seat and walking out of the great hall. Both Arthur and Draco get up to follow.

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*Arthur’s POV*

Arthur cannot help but to stare.

At everything.

If the non-magical city, the muggle city, is like what I thought the land of the dead to be like, than I’m now in dream land.

The store fronts crowed together like the market in the lower towns, brightly painted signs wave in the breeze above the heads of the bustling crowds. People in all sorts of strangely draped fabric and robes walk briskly about, in and out of the shops, the doors ringing merry sounding bells. Crooked glass windows watch like the sightless eyes of a monster from above. Store windows at eye level display an assortment of mysterious products and moving advertisements.

“This isn’t Hogsmeade.” Draco’s voice states the obvious and Arthur feels temporary relief at not being the only one looking around startled.

“No, not much selection for clothing there, unfortunately. I figured we’d hit somewhere a little more appropriate for expanding Arthur’s wardrobe.” Merlin thankfully grabs onto Arthur’s arm before he gets plowed away into the crowd. “Welcome to Diagon Ally Arthur! This is where most folk around here get their first introduction to the magical side of things, so I thought it would be fitting. Am I right Draco?”

“Yes.” Arthur notices the boy take a step closer to Merlin as to not get sucked into the moving sea of people. Arthur wonders how Merlin can stay so rigid and unmoving in amongst the force of all of the moving people around, behind, and in front of them. He also wonders at the fact that no one seemed surprised in the least when three strangers just materialized out of thin air in the middle of the walkway.

Arthur considers it a miracle that he hasn’t freaked out yet at all of the ridiculous and extreme displays of magic within the past week. It’s everywhere. His mouth hangs unhinged.

“While we’re here, is there anything you’d like to get, Draco?”
The boy licks his lips while trying to see over the tops of people’s heads. “Perhaps if we stopped by Charlotte’s Chocolate Web at some point today?”

“Oh, that sounds like a splendid plan. Got a sweet tooth have you?” Merlin rests his other hand on Arthur’s arm as well. “Arthur, have you tried chocolate yet?”

“Yes actually.” Arthur still cannot take his eyes off of the strange sights around him, glad for the firm hold Merlin has him in, despite bristling slightly in being treated like a child. “Ethel served some several times. Truly delightful creation.”

Merlin looks slightly put out at this, but only for a moment. “Well we’d best be on our way then, and stop road blocking.” He lets one of his hands go from Arthur’s arm and grabs Draco, the boy letting out an indignant huff and brushing him off as Merlin leads them through the hoard of people.

Arthur takes a breath as they finally emerge from the flow of people and through the door of one of the shops.

The differences between this clothing store and the one he had been led into upon his ejection into the modern world are vast. For one, the lighting comes from sparkling orbs of pure warm light simply floating above their heads. Tables line the walls, each displaying an assortment of different robes and dresses hovering above them, as if being donned by an invisible person. Folded heaps of richly died material lines shelving sporadically placed throughout.

Behind a desk at the back of the shop stands a thin middle aged man dressed entirely in shades of dark purple. As the man’s eyes connect with Draco, he stands up straighter, before waving them over with an excited smile.

“What can I get you and your friends today, Mr. Malfoy?” Arthur and Merlin both turn to Draco.

“Uh,” Draco looks between Merlin’s exuberant grin, and Arthur’s perplexed expression.

Merlin takes mercy upon him. “We’re here for Arthur,” He pats Arthur’s back and he has to bite his tongue to stop from snarking at him. “Needs an entirely new wardrobe, I’m afraid. We’ve come here to start with getting him some proper formal wear.”

The purple robed man’s eyes light up in a way that has Arthur second guessing this entire outing. “Oh, well then you’ve come to the right place!” He steps up closer to them and holds out his hand. “Arthur I take it?” Arthur shakes his hand with a forced smile. “Pleasure.”

“Name’s Julius. Come right this way and we’ll get you measured.” That man’s smile is too large.

His traitorous friend takes this moment to finally let go of his arm as he’s lead to the back corner of the store and through an entranceway leading to a room with a tall mirror on one wall, and several doors of thick velvet material on the other.

“Stand right over here please.” Arthur obliges, knowing for once, full well what comes next. “I’m going to take your measurements and then we can get started with the fun part.” Doubt that.

Merlin and Draco seat themselves on two of the chairs littered about the room, talking quietly amongst each other.

Arthur grits his teeth. He never liked this part. Too many stuffy old men coming into his chambers and poking him with their sharp needles, telling him which colours best suited his complexion.
Forcing him to try on different itchy and uncomfortable fabrics. Gwen was a breath of fresh air when she took up the job as his royal seamstress.

_Can’t we just get more of whatever it is I’ve been wearing already?_ Arthur looks down at his stretchy red-fabric shirt.

Julius asks him to lift his arms and he holds the position. _The man’s robes are simply hideous. I hope they don’t plan on fitting me into something like that. No way in hell am I ever wearing something that ugly._ He looks over at Merlin, hoping to see a sign or hint of the answer upon his face. Merlin doesn’t notice him staring, too intent on his hushed conversation with Draco. He envisions the man in Julius’s purple robes, but has to stop as his laughter causes a needle to sharply jab his armpit.

Arthur looks down at himself again to see Julius has taken the liberty of starting to pin material to him already. _Wow, the man works fast, not even Gwen could take my measurements so quickly._ Then Arthur truly registers what he is looking at. Julius has him draped in a crisp white tunic, with black robes to match Severus’s. _Well this will certainly be a new look on me._

After a surprising couple seconds, Julius stands up fully, takes several step back, and turns him to face his reflection in the mirror.

_I look like a sorcerer._ Arthur never thought he would ever think those words, but there they are. His heart beats louder in his chest and he takes several large breaths.

Merlin and Draco’s whispering ceases, and Merlin stands up to get a better look at him. Arthur turns to him and raises an expectant eyebrow.

“You look like you could be Draco’s older brother or something. Wow. You look very different in that.” Merlin makes an uncertain face. “Kind of unsettling.”

Draco scoffs at Merlin’s comment. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you look _good_ Arthur. Much better than those _muggle_ clothes.”

“You really could be related you know. Blond hair aside, there’s a similar air about yous.” Julius gives Arthur a thoughtful look. “Are you sure you not related to the Malfoy’s?”

Arthur looks to Draco and lifts and eyebrow. “Certainly not. And I have to disagree with you actually Draco. Although, surprisingly I don’t _dislike_ these robes, but the muggle clothes are certainly more comfortable and easier to move in.”

Hearing that, Julius gives a squawk on his way out, quickly returning with a stack of red material in his arms.

“Well we’ll pick up more casual clothes for you as well, not to worry. But with working at Hogwarts and all, it’d be best to get you a set of robes so you fit in better for the formal days at least.” Merlin takes from the red pile in Julius’s arms and gets close up into Arthur’s space.

Arthur, surprisingly, doesn’t have to fight with himself not to back away from him. Merlin’s eyes reflect the glittering orb light and Arthur finds himself trapped in them. Merlin reaches his arms around him to tie something around his neck before taking a step back again and appraising his work.

Following his gaze, Arthur looks down to see a blood red tie around his neck, folded neatly under parts of the white fabric of his shirt. He turns to see it in the mirror. _It actually looks kind of good. I mean, not kingly attire, at all, but not bad._ He feels the material of the red tie. _Silky smooth like if ice was warm._
Merlin spots the approval in his eye and turns to Julius. “We’ll take it, thank you.”

Julius merrily flicks out his wand and Arthur feels the unsettling sensation of his clothes shifting around while he is still inside them. His eyes widen in alarm as many glittering metal needles fly from his robes, over into Julius’s outstretched hand. Expecting his clothes to fall limp from his form and to an undignified heap onto the ground, Arthur startles when they don’t. He checks his sleeve, noticing thin black seams of thread already in place. *Well that was fast. The marvels of magic truly never cease.*

Draco gives Merlin a flat look. “He can’t go around wearing the *same* robes to *every single function.*”

Merlin blinks his eyes, still stuck on Arthur’s newly robed form. “Right, of course not.” He gives Julius another wide smile. “We’ll take another set. In green.”

Arthur lets out a very unkingly snort. *Oh, how our roles have reversed. Now he’s putting me in his house colours. Well played Merlin.*

Merlin, seeing Arthur’s nonverbal response written all over his face, gives him a playful wink.

Several clothing stores, a book store, and a store filled with apparently wild animals later, Arthur is exhausted and his arms are weighed down by several bags of *too much goddamn stuff.* Arthur figures Merlin’s getting some sort of revenge at him for always making him carry all of his hunting gear. Who knew bags of clothes could be so heavy?

“Are we almost done here Maldin? I would hate to miss dinner at the castle. And we wouldn’t want to get you or Draco in trouble with any of the professors.” Arthur figures it’s worth a shot.

Draco, if anything, only seems to have woken up more after their shopping adventure.

“Yes Arthur, just one more stop and you can plant your sorry ass back into a chair. We need to hit Charlotte’s Chocolate Web to satisfy Draco’s sugar cravings.” Arthur rolls his eyes. The sweets shop has one of the more ridiculous store fronts Arthur has had the pleasure of setting his eyes upon. *Really, who designs these shops? It’s like something out of a child’s fever dream.* The entire store front is in different shades of chocolate brown, the windows displaying an actual *fountain* of chocolate. *Absolutely ridiculous.*

Arthur finds his mouth watering as they enter the store.

Merlin leans in close to his ear, his breath hot against the side of his face. “We can pick some stuff to take back with us as well, if you want.” Arthur nods his head, overwhelmed at the sensation. Merlin leans back away from him and Arthur takes a rattling breath in.

They make their way around different groups of hungry looking people to the front desk.

“I’d like to have a box delivered please.” Draco points at a large purple box open to display a selection of delicate chocolates with different laced swirls on their tops.

Merlin tilts his head at him. “We can just carry them back with us, Arthur’s still got lots of room.” Arthur shifts the weights of his many bags around. *Definitely revenge.*

Draco leans closer to them and whispers back, his face carefully neutral. “They’re not for me.”

Merlin’s face lights up. “*Oh?*”
Draco huffs. “Not like that. They’re for my mother. Since—” He leans in even closer, dropping his voice below a whisper, “she went into hiding, she can’t just go waltzing about and pick them up for herself, now can she?”

“That’s very considerate of you Draco. Your mother must be pleased to have you as a son.” Draco gives a tight smile in response.

The lady behind the desk sets a copy of the purple box on the counter in front of them, it’s lid closed and displaying an incredibly frilly bow. “Thank you ma’am.” Draco hands her some small polished metal disks and they exit the store after Merlin makes his own, rather large purchase of chocolate frogs of all things.

He leans in close to Arthur’s ear again and he has to fight down a shiver. “You’ll love these, I swear.” He slips the box into one of Arthur’s many bags before taking his and Draco’s arms and transporting them outside the gates of the school.

Arthur drops his bags and Merlin catches his shoulders before he face-plants into the dirt. “Little warning next time?” He fights back the food that threatens to make a reappearance. Whoever invented that mode of travel needs to be thrown into some stocks.
Arthur feels as if he had just completed a rather vigorous bout of training with the knights. His legs hurt, his back hurts, his arms hurt, and his ass hurts. Arthur resigns himself to never go shopping with Merlin again. Magic aside, that man can be terrifying.

He sighs as he settles into the familiar mattress of feathers and lays back with his arms cushioning his head. *Thank god for this magical room. I think I’d go batty without at least something familiar. And it’s admittedly quite nice to be back in my old quarters.*

Merlin stands next to the bed in the exact spot he used to when waking him every morning, staring down at him with a haunted expression. “Merlin?”

He snaps out of it and wipes a shaking hand over his face. His eyes are suspiciously wet.

Arthur pats the bed next to him, giving his friend an expectant look.

With barely a moment’s hesitation, Merlin slips off his shoes and flops down next to him. He thieves one of Arthur’s pillows and stretches his legs out.

“I am never going shopping out with you again.” Arthur tries to stretch a kink out of his back unsuccessfully, almost elbowing Merlin’s eye out in the process.

Merlin huffs out a laugh and sits up. “You needed an *entire* wardrobe Arthur. Here, sit up and I’ll help.”

With a grunt, Arthur heaves himself up. *What magic trick does he have up his sleeve now?* He forces himself to relax, the thought of magic being used on him is still enough to make him feel uncomfortable.

Arthur feels Merlin shift around until he’s parked directly behind him, seated on his pillow.

“Was this just another grand ploy to steel my other pillow?”

“Of course not. If I wanted your other pillow, I’d have had it.”

Arthur lets out a huff of air. “Well then you better not be farting on it. I do put my *head* there.” Merlin’s laugh sends a flutter through his chest.

“Just relax yourself Arthur. Shoulders down.” Arthur nearly startles at the feel of Merlin’s hands gently easing his shoulders to a more neutral stance. He forces himself to exhale out the rest of the tension in his body.
“There, that’s better.” Arthur almost asks him what sort of spell he will be performing on him, still a little apprehensive about the magic. Even if it is just Merlin. _What if knowing what it does makes it somehow worse?_

Before Arthur can work up the courage to inquire about what Merlin plans on doing, he feels the man’s warm hands on his back. His fingers press firmly onto points around his shoulder blades, pressing on impossibly specific areas that cause Arthur to nearly melt into a puddle right there on the bed.

_A massage?_

Arthur feels his surprised embarrassment slowly fade away with the lingering tension in his muscles. “Where did you learn to do this? You’ve gotten much better since-” Merlin’s hands find and make quick work of eliminating a knot, “-last time.” Arthur’s head lulls to the side.

“Well, it’s been quite a while for me since then. I’ve had plenty of practice, and actually a fair amount of education on the human musculature structure. Of course, there’s still muggle chiropractors and massage therapists out there who can do much better than I.” His hands seem to know exactly where the sorest points on Arthur’s back are, working out kinks he didn’t even know were there.

“I couldn’t imagine.” _Perhaps I would be willing to go out shopping with him again, if this is how the day ends._

Only after Arthur feels like a pile of warm boneless goo does Merlin give him a gentle pat on the back before scooting out from behind his place wedged between Arthur and the headboard. The minute the space is vacated, Arthur flops back down and rolls over to face him.

“Thank you Merlin, that was… really nice.” He feels contented and fully relaxed for the first time since he left Avalon. Possibly for the first time since he was crowned king even.

Merlin’s smile is surprised. “You’re welcome Arthur.”

Several minutes of comfortable silence pass.

Merlin turns his eyes at Arthur, golden light momentarily flashing. Arthur’s pillow shoots out from under his head, and his head drops to the mattress with a soft thud. “I’ll be taking that, thank you.” He stacks his now second pillow on top of the first, and sinks his head down onto them.

“Hey!” Arthur makes a grabs for it, but Merlin’s sunk his claws into its squishy surface and refuses to let go.

“It’s mine now.” He sticks his tongue out, the images made even more childish by the young face he is wearing.

“Over a thousand years old Merlin, and you still haven’t grown up at all.” Arthur’s smile fights his words and Merlin laughs. “Really though, you look crazy young. Is there a way you could… change back?”

Merlin bites his lip and looks into Arthur’s eyes.

“You look like a youth Merlin, it is a little strange.” _Strange and wrong._

Something other than magic flashes behind Merlin’s eyes. “Alright then.” Arthur can see the smile he’s trying to hold back.
With a nearly blinding flash of gold, Merlin’s body morphs into a new shape. Arthur supresses a shudder at the unnatural sight.

Merlin’s form quickly settles and Arthur narrows his eyes at him. “Merlin!”

“Yes, my lord?” His cheeky smile is one Arthur is completely unused to in this form.

“You’re old!” Arthur voice is loud despite their close proximity.

“Pfft! Oh please! This isn’t old. I’m only 45.” He runs his hand through the touch of grey at his temples.

“You’re older than I am. It’s just wrong Merlin. You are younger than me, this is just cheating.” He glares at the smile lines etched into his friends face.

“Older and wiser, Arthur, just admit it.”

Arthur narrows his eyes at him.

“Oh! I know!” Merlin’s eyes glow, yet again, and something even more terrifying happens to him.

“Well? What do you think? Better?” His mischievous grin is now framed by short black facial hair. Arthur cannot tear his eyes away, but Merlin shifts slightly and Arthur notices something that has his eyebrows shoot into his hairline.

His normally boney shoulders have broadened out and rounded. His sweater stretches tight across large muscles resembling Percival’s. If he ran across Merlin in the street, he would probably not recognize him.

Arthur’s face is frozen in a look of horror. “Gods no, stop it.”

“You like it?” Merlin’s taunt has him nearly recoiling right off the bed. His normally pleasant tenor has lowered into a rich bass, rumbling out of his chest as if he underwent a second puberty.

This proves to just simply be too much for Arthur. He bursts into sudden and uncontrolled laughter, eyes watering and snot threatening to slide down his face.

“Yeah, I don’t think this look suits me all too well either.” His features ripple out and he shrinks down to proper Merlin size. Arthur tries to control his breathing.

“That’s much better.” Arthur soaks in the features of his friend as he remembers him from his past lifetime.

Merlin wiggles around in his spot on the bed. “I haven’t had this form in… well, it’s been awhile.” Merlin feels his face with his hands in a way that suggests he forgot what it looks like.

“Well, it’s an improvement.”

They stare at each other for perhaps a bit too long.

Arthur gets lost staring into the deep crystal blue Merlin’s eyes. Little sparkles of gold shoot out from his pupils to the outer rims of his iris’ like tiny shooting stars. Arthur is amazed he had never noticed it before.

*Without being king, and him a servant, we are finally on even ground. We were always friends before, but now we have no restrictive boundaries or lines not to cross. I can be just Arthur and*
The true scope of his new reality hits him. When all this blows over, I could be whatever I want, whoever I want. I could be a farmer. I could travel. No more obligations, roles to fulfil, expectations to meet, or bone crushing responsibility. I am truly free. Arthur’s not sure whether he wants to shout with joy, scream in horror, or cry like a baby.

What will I do with myself?

He studies the face in front of him. I will never leave him again. Whatever I do, it’s with Merlin. The thought of how lonely he must have been, hundreds of years without anyone to confide in or call family, haunts him. The image of Merlin’s devastated face upon seeing him for the first time flits across his mind. The anguish, the relief, and the joy at having Arthur back.

Arthur feels relieved to at least have a direction with his life. He had never known a time where he was free to just do as he pleases.

We could travel together. He could show me all those wild and breathtaking places I’ve never even dreamed of. Or we could get a place together and settle somewhere.

But what if he wants to do something else with someone else? Yes, he’s relieved to be reunited with his long dead friend, but is that it? He lives his life, I live mine, and we visit on occasion? He helps me integrate into society and I help him settle in somewhere? What if I just end up holding him back? Arthur is surprised by the amount of fear this causes him.

He’s got many more years ahead of himself than I do, what if he cannot stand to be around those who live and die so quickly? He mentioned he couldn’t marry to doom himself to a fate of watching his wife age and die. Or outlive his own children. Has anything really changed? What if he doesn’t want to stick around because I’m a mortal?

The thought of the rest of his life spent without his best friend is enough to cause his heart to stop. I don’t know if I could make it without him. He can barely recall a time without Merlin by his side. It’s all he knows.

Arthur memorizes Merlin’s features as if he will fade away where he lies.

Merlin narrows his eyes and leans forward in a way that makes Arthur think he is looking right through him. “There is definitely something about you that is…”

Arthur swallows and resists the urge to lean forward.

“Off.” Merlin blinks his eyes and continues to stare.

“Off?” At first Arthur feels offended, but then he comes to his senses and concern filters through. But I just got back here...

Different unpleasant scenarios run through his head. The shores of Avalon calling him back, sucking his soul back into the frigid waters of that damned lake. Coming down with some sort of magical flesh-eating disease. Finding out his soul is merely possessing the body of someone else that just looks remarkably like him.

Merlin seems to look deeper inside of him, his face now close enough to feel his breath on his nose. Merlin reaches a hand over and gently feels the flesh of his cheek. His thoughts still at the contact.

“Merlin?” Arthur’s voice is quiet.
Golden eyes blink several times in succession and he seems to come back into himself. “I can sense something magic.”

Arthur’s heart beat picks up. “Like an enchantment?”

“No, nothing like that. More like something of you is magic.”

Arthur takes a moment to digest that. He bites his cheek and his face pinches. “I’m a sorcerer? Or wizard? Is that what you’re saying?”

Merlin shakes his head slightly. “No, you’re not a wizard. I don’t sense a pool a magic within your core like that. But there is something that is, um, different? In a magical sense?”

“I really have no idea what you mean Merlin.”

“Nor do I really. It’s not something I’ve noticed on anyone before. And I can’t really tell unless I focus, it’s not something terribly obvious.” Merlin bites his lip and furrows his brows.

“Well that’s helpful.” Not. Arthur sighs, but does feel relieved at not being cursed.

“Sorry.”

Arthur notices he hasn’t moved back over onto his half of the bed. He feels like he should be scooting back, but for some reason couldn’t be bothered.

“Well it’s not like you put the magic there.”

Merlin gives a soft hum in response.

“…You didn’t, right?”

“Of course not!”

Now it’s Arthur’s turn to narrow his eyes at Merlin.

They lie there facing each other for several moments before Merlin breaks the silence. “I have something that I think will help.”

“The mystery magic?” Arthur perks up.

“Sorry, no. Not that.” Arthur waits while Merlin seems to collect himself. “I have been leant a magical artifact that can summon the spirits of your loved ones.”

Arthur takes a sharp breath in at that. “Like raise the dead? ‘Cause, you know, we’ve tried that before with my father and the horn remember? Not exactly that best of plans.”

“No, not like that. They don’t return to this plain. It’s like it shows you a window into Avalon where you can interact with people. Just verbally though. I mean, you can see them and talk to them, but that’s it. It’s not like they’re a ghost or anything, from what I can tell, it’s safe.”

“You’ve used it?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see me there?”
Merlin blinks his suddenly wet eyes. “No.” His voice is small.

“Oh.” Arthur doesn’t know what to think of that information. “Did you- who was…?”

“Everyone else. You can- you can talk to and see everyone else.” Merlin takes a loud shuttering breath in. “I thought it might help you. You know, get some closure.”

Arthur is suddenly hit by the reality of what Merlin is proposing. I could see them again. Guinevere. The knights. His heart gives a jump and he feels his throat catch.

Suddenly Arthur has his arms full of Merlin, as the man slides forward without warning and embraces him. His soft dark hair tickles his nose as Merlin settles into the nook of Arthur’s shoulder and neck. His warm body trembles slightly and Arthur wraps his arms around him, pulling him in tighter.

Arthur thought embracing Merlin would be weird, awkward or uncomfortably tense, but it’s surprisingly nice. He feels Merlin’s hand move across his back in a gentle pet and Arthur gives in and slides his hand up into the man’s hair.

“I’m so sorry Arthur, but I’m so glad you’re here.” Merlin’s voice is wobbly and barely a whisper. He sniffles slightly and Arthur realizes he must be crying.

Arthur buries his head into his soft hair. “I’m glad I’m here too Merlin.”

Merlin’s shoulders give a shake as he hitches out a sob. “Really?”

Arthur runs his hand through the strands. “Well, seeing as I had never heard of the prophesy of the Once and Future King, I didn’t exactly expect to come back. To be given a second chance at life. When I was going, I thought that was it. But here I am.” Merlin’s cries only seem to pick up in volume.

“It’s a little weird, admittedly. And ridiculously far into the future. But I’m happy to be given a second chance at all. And here you are. I would be lost in this strange and incomprehensible world without you. I know it’s very selfish of me, but I couldn’t be happier that you’re here with me. I thank whatever gods allowed this to happen.” I don’t think I’ve ever been more sincere in all of my life. Yet the words are surprisingly easy to utter.

Merlin’s breathing is fast and erratic. Arthur’s neck is now damp and his front is sweaty. “I’m so happy you’re here with me. That this is real.” His watery voice breaks Arthur’s heart with a twang like a snapped lute string. He tries to hold Merlin from trembling apart, his muffled cries pressed firmly into Arthur’s neck.

He feels his steal resolve slot into place with a new sense of purpose. The tears coursing tracks down his face finally cease as he finds the strength to hold himself together. Merlin needs me. The feeling of being lost in this strange new word, stumbling around helpless, the vast darkness in his heart singing to him that he is un-needed and un-necessary in this time period fogs over a tiny bit more.

The task of fixing the balance he and his father had left destroyed is a seemingly endless and daunting task that, although gives him a definite direction in life, doesn’t quite feel like something tangible. When Arthur’s friends and mentors died in battle, he trained harder, pushed himself farther, and went on more border patrols. When Morgana betrayed them, he attended council meetings, trained his knights, and went on adventures with Merlin. When his father fell ill and eventually died, Arthur became regent, then king, lost himself in an endless sea of paperwork, gave speeches, held council meetings, and listened to the complaints of the people. Now, Arthur is faced with the passing
of almost everyone and everything that he knew, without the tasks and responsivities he had grown to rely on.

As Merlin’s choked sobs rattle through his body, Arthur finally feels the dizzying lost sensation settle. Merlin’s wellbeing, although always important to him, is now his top priority. Arthur is not purposeless.

Finally, after a seemingly endless amount of time, Merlin’s cries peter out and he stills in the warm embrace of Arthur’s arms. *I’m never leaving you Merlin.* Arthur wants desperately to say it aloud, but clamps his mouth shut around the words. Merlin’s reality is not lost on Arthur, and as much as he plans on spending eternity never leaving him to suffer alone again, the spoken promise would be heartlessly cruel. Arthur is a muggle. Perhaps one with a little more magic than most, but he is still only a mortal man.

Arthur had been faced with the reality of his inevitable demise his entire life. He had accepted it and made his peace with it the moment he took his vows as a knight. At his passing, although he would have preferred to stay, he had come to terms with it. Although he would always fight to be alive, he did not hate his death. But now he clings desperately to what he has. If he could will his heart to beat forever, he would. The thought of leaving this plane again is jarring and repulsive to him. The first time, he always knew in his heart that his passing would be joined by those he loves. Not right away, of course, but eventually. He would not be alone in the afterlife, and his family would not be made to suffer life for longer than the mortal soul can bare. They would meet again, and be together in the emptiness of death. But that truth has been pried brutally away from him. When Arthur dies, *Merlin* will be alone. Arthur can go on into Avalon, but he shall remain here.

Arthur curses the gods to have done this. He crushes Merlin against him as if to shield him from their cruelty. He wishes desperately for something he can say or do to make it better, to ease his friend’s pain. He knows it is an impossible task.

He strokes his fingers through Merlin’s now sweaty black hair and realizes that the man has cried himself to sleep. Arthur feels his breath in even little puffs against his damp neck, cooling him slightly. His back has a twinge again, but he doesn’t want to disturb him.

Their earlier conversation comes back to him as he lies there awake in his old bed. *I can see them again. I can have the chance at the farewell I never had before. Guinevere, Leon, and the knights. I wonder what the afterlife is life for them? If it was the same as for me?* He shuts at the thought, hoping he is wrong. *Merlin said that he couldn’t summon me with the stone, so they must be somewhere else.* Arthur hopes he’s not deluding himself. The afterlife was nothing for him. It was as if he had ceased to exist until he was wretched from the lake. *Would their deaths be like yesterday for them? Would they awaken as apparitions for the first time since their passing, like one day into another?*

Arthur bites down on his lip to drag him back from that train of thought. There is no sense dwelling on it.

He drifts his eyes around the familiar room, and feels the sudden urge to be upright and out of bed. His limbs feel jittery and anxious. *I meet them all tomorrow. The ‘First Order Meeting’ where I will introduce myself to the other warriors in this battle. He mulls over what he should say. Should I prepare a speech? What would I tell them?*

*No one will take little unassuming Mal din seriously, and there’s no way Merlin has the nerve to out himself in front of their entire group at once. He recalls his friend’s awkwardness and un-comfortability disclosing his identity to just Draco. He always had issues talking about personal matters. And he was never a public speaker.*
Arthur feels the need to start pacing the room, his legs are antsy and his heart is picking up speed. He grinds his teeth.

Finally working up the nerve to dislodge from Merlin’s grasp, Arthur slowly lifts the man’s limp arm out from around him and slides out of bed, carefully propping a pillow under his head to replace his presence. Merlin curls around the offering with a faint grumble of protest.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Arthur’s voice is a soft whisper, not entirely sure if Merlin is awake enough to fully notice. Merlin mumbles something incoherent and buries his face into the down of the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Coming soon: Bonus chapter "Arthur and the Resurrection Stone " 
Chapter 29.5 (BONUS)

Chapter Notes

That’s right guys, welcome to another bonus chapter.

*Thank you all for the wonderful comments! I will be replying first chance I get!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arthur looks back on the tangled lump of blankets hiding Merlin. He didn’t have the heart to force him up and out for dinner, his bleary eyed face a truly pitiful sight when Arthur attempted to rouse him with the lure of food. He mumbled something along the lines of not being hungry before handing Arthur something small shiny and metallic. His head made a solid and slightly alarming thump when it landed back onto the pillow stack, Merlin promptly falling back to sleep.

Arthur himself feels nothing like eating, the stress of their conversation overriding his need for sustenance after a long day. Perhaps he could summon Elby somehow to bring him a snack later?

He slumps back in his chair at his desk table, running a hand through his hair. He has put it off long enough.

The ring sits on the table in front of him, staring him down. Summoning together what’s left of his courage, he reaches over and places it in the palm of his hand. The stone is the exact shade of freshly dried blood. With a deep yet unsteady breath, Arthur slides it onto his index finger.

He looks around the room hesitantly, as if expecting the ghosts of his loved ones to slip out from behind the scattered furnishings of the room. After several long moments of nothing but silence and the loud beating of his own heart in his ears, Arthur realizes that he forgot to ask Merlin how this stone is supposed to work exactly. He holds it up to his face and stares in concentration.

Perhaps he must ask for it with the name of the one he wishes to speak with? Arthur closes his eyes. “Guinevere Pendragon”. Nothing. He tries it again, this time picturing her in his mind. Her long bouncing curls, her large sparking brown eyes, and her lips pressed together in the beginnings of a smile.

Arthur opens his eyes and gasps, nearly falling off his chair. Guinevere is seated across from him, her hands neatly folded together on the table surface. She’s wearing the dress Arthur had known her to favour in the beginning of her time as queen. She always claimed of all her gowns, it was the most comfortable.

Shaking hands reach up to cover his mouth as a clawing sob tears through him. Her form is transparent and slightly blue-tinged, as if she were standing underwater. This is real. She’s actually dead.

Upon waking up in the modern world, Gwen was simply not there. Finding out he was in the distant future alerted him to her inevitable passing, and although that was hard, it was almost impossible to fully grasp. That his wife had lived a full life, and died without him.
Now seeing her spirit, bodiless in front of him, he is faced with the undeniable truth of her passing.

He reaches a trembling hand out to rest atop hers, but to his horror, his hand moves right through her and onto the table top. He leans forward, desperately grasping at the space she is supposed to be taking up, but is met by nothing. He almost screams, but remembers to smother it as to not wake Merlin. Gwen’s eyes are sad as she takes in the broken image of her late husband.

“Oh Arthur.” Her voice sounds heartbroken as shiny glittering tears course down her cheeks. Her delicate hand reaches up to wipe them away. Arthur wishes he could be the one to do that.

“Sorry.” The word come out waterlogged and feeble. Arthur takes a large sniffle and tries again. “I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to see this. It’s not right.” He hastily wipes at his own wet face, angry at himself and his tears. “You shouldn’t have to see me like this. You’re the one who had to deal with my death, you shouldn’t have to see me mourning yours. I widowed you. I’m so sorry.” He pushes his lips together in an effort not to start openly sobbing. He wants desperately to take her hand, to hug her, to kiss her, to hold her. His hand twitches with the effort of holding back, afraid he might lose it completely if he is confronted once more with merely empty air. She is so close to him, yet so horrifyingly out of reach.

“You’re allowed to cry Arthur. Goodness knows I did when I found out I had to live the rest of my life without you.” Arthur’s shoulders shake and he squeezes his eyes shut against the tears.

“It’s so good to see you.” Gwen’s voice is warm and her smile is blinding. “I knew when I married you I was marrying a warrior. Death on the battlefield is an honorable way to go, and it is a reality every knight faces when they go off to war. You died a hero Arthur. I was sad, and of course upset, but I understood that.”

Arthur can do nothing but sit there and try to hold himself together as he drinks in the image of his wife.

“That you have been given another chance at life is incredible.” Her hands are firmly clasped together over her heart. Arthur wishes he could wrap her in his arms and never let go. “I got to live a long, full life, and now so do you.”

Arthur’s eyes move up to meet hers. “I just wish we could live it together.” His throat is raw and scratchy.

Her eyes fill up again and overflow. “It was not meant to be.” Arthur bites down at his anger over the words. She does not deserve his rage.

Guinevere must have read his expression, as she shakes her head slightly. “You’re not alone Arthur.” Her gaze shifts over to the lump of covers on the bed, little tufts of black hair shooting out from the top by the pillows.

Arthur’s eyes follow hers and he finds himself overcome by gratitude. Yes, Merlin is a blessing I will forever be grateful for.

He looks back to the transparent face of his queen. “I miss you. I love you.” Despair threatens to overwhelm him, drowning him and choking him.

“I love you too.” Arthur notices her hand clasped around something hanging from her neck. She fiddles with it and he gets a better look at it. It’s her wedding ring.

“I had a good life. A great life. After your passing, it took some time of course, but I found myself happy again. Merlin and the knights helped with that.” She smiles over at the lumpy bed again. “I
adopted a son. I’m not sure if Merlin would have told you that. His name was Kay. He was a real trouble maker, but noble, brave, and kind. You’d have adored him. He took over as king when I passed. You’ll move on too. You’ll be happy again. Promise me you’ll be happy again?” Her voice is pleading.

Arthur doesn’t have it in him to deny her anything, but he’s not sure that’s a promise he can keep.

Gwen notices his hesitation. She runs a hand through her hair and adjusts her position on the chair. Arthur wonders at how she can even be seated on the chair when his hand passes right through her. He doesn’t think on it too hard.

“I always knew there was space in your heart reserved for another. It never bothered me. At first, admittedly, I was a little upset. But I soon came to realise that there is never anything wrong with love. I never questioned your feelings for me, so why should it bother me that you have the potential to fit more in your heart? You were a faithful and devoted husband, and I never questioned that.”

Arthur wonders where in the world this is headed. “I might have found it uncomfortable and yes, a little strange, but now I could not be more relieved. It is a wonderful thing. Even though I am no longer here, you still have the potential for happiness in love. Please tell me you will take it. Don’t hold a candle for me. I will not be the one responsible for dooming you to a life without your love.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I love you and I want what is best for you. For you to be happy again, any way that you can.”

Gwen gives him a flat look.

Arthur’s eyebrows contort into a look of deranged confusion. “Guinevere, there has never been another woman, and there never will be.”

Her laugh is magnificent, eyes sparkling through her tears. “Oh Arthur. Life is never easy for you, is it?”

He huffs in exasperation. *If it were, I certainly wouldn’t be here.*

Arthur spends the rest of the evening asking her endless questions about her life. About her child, and about the kingdom. Although he is far away from any sort of closure, it feels good to hear about it from her. To know that those he loved led happy, successful and fulfilling lives, with or without him.

As she talks, he studies Gwen’s form. She looks *exactly* as he remembers. *But that’s not right, is it? She had lived a long life after my passing, she should appear well into old age.* He refuses to question the reality of her presence. *This is Guinevere, no doubt about that.* But where has she been? Has Avalon offered her a different afterlife than the one he had tasted? He wants to ask her about it, but fears the answer.

*Perhaps because I was destined to come back to the land of the living, I had not fully entered the afterlife?* Arthur takes a deep breath. *She does not look like someone who’s last memory was their own demise. She’s crying, yes… but she seems-* he swipes a hand across his eyes to clear them, -happy.*

“I wish I could wear this ring and hold on to you forever.”

Gwen wipes at her face. “No Arthur, don’t spend your life living in the past. I have moved on. We have different paths to take.”

Arthur wants to throw something. He wants to scream and punch and kick, and *bite.* The unfairness
and the cruelty of it all leave him shaking.

*If I ever get my hands on one of those gods, they are going to pay.*

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys liked this bonus! What do you guys think of me writing another bonus chapter, later on maybe, covering Arthur meeting his knights again through the resurrection stone? Would that be needed, or was this enough?

(do you guys want me to get moving on with the plot faster, or is this slow crawling pace alright?)
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the longer than expected wait time! This chapter was tough to start. I just wasn’t sure what all needed to happen. After much thought, planning, outlining, research and discussions, I have the future of this fic mapped out! In apology, I have made this chapter twice as long (once I started writing, I was on a roll!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Where were you last night? You never came back to the dorm.” Goyle pulls his shirt over his head, muffling the last half of his words.

“Waiting up for him, were ya’?” Blaise smirks and Goyle sticks his tongue out at him.

Merlin hastily peels off his rumpled clothes, having slept in them all night. He forgoes a bath for the need to be prompt. A quick cleaning spell is never the same, but it’ll have to do. Goddess knows, he’s smelled worse before. “I had too much stuff to catch up on, I didn’t manage to get back. Fell asleep right where I was.”

“It’s a miracle Filch didn’t find you.” Blaise’s voice is flat and his disbelieving eyes bare holes into Merlin. He fights off the blush he feels trying to claw its way up his face.

“How was your outing with Dragan? Lucky you, we spent the whole day listening to Pansy complain.” Goyle’s voice is muffled yet again, but this time by the toothbrush sticking out of his mouth.

“Merlin, that girl can yammer on.” Merlin trips over his pant leg, trying to get dressed. “I thought I’d start bleeding out my ears. Might have ruptured something. She ‘ought to come with a warning label.” Blaise combs his fingers through his short, already perfectly shaped, hair.

“Dodged a bullet, we did.” Draco belatedly emerges from behind his bed curtains, his white blond hair sticking straight up in the air.

“Sounds like it. Our trip was successful. Arthur got some much needed new clothes, I got some more potions ingredients. Draco also purchased some books.” Merlin checks his reflection in the mirror. There is no way anyone will believe he is the over-a-thousand-year-old warlock like this. His tall lanky form is little better than a clothes hanger for his cloak, his short hair exenterates his already large ears, and his face is baby smooth. He runs his hand over his soft stubble-less cheek. He’s not quite worked out how he feels about it yet.

“I cannot believe Snape let you guys off school property like that. I would rage and call you a teacher’s pet, but I’ve seen how he treats you in class. Or rather, doesn’t treat you. I’m half inclined to believe you’ve used some sort of suggestible potion on him.”

“He’s the potions professor, mate,” Goyle snorts in disbelief.

“Exactly. So how did you do it? Blackmail? What do you have on him?” Blaise meets Merlin’s eyes
through the mirror.

“No, nothing like that. Arthur just spoke with him, assuring our safety and all that.”

“Riiiight. Promised to clean out all the old nasty cauldrons for the rest of the year did you?” Goyle smiles as he comes back out of the bathroom.

“Something like that.” Merlin laughs as he pulls on his shoes.

“Well you’re not getting any of my help with that. I was just along for the ride, any conditions are on you.” Impossibly, Draco has managed to finish getting dressed and ready before the rest of them. His robes are pristine, wrinkle and dust free in a way in all his years, Merlin has never managed to accomplish.

“So, what’s your grand plan for today then?” Goyle’s eyes are hungry.

“Oh, nothing exciting really. I’ve got to meet with Headmaster Dumbledore right after breakfast. Then, I don’t know… studying maybe?” Merlin rubs his hands together. Today, Arthur and I reveal ourselves to Albus’s gathered allies. The first Order meeting. Merlin thinks that perhaps he should deodorize a second time, just to be on the safe side.

“Oh, gross. Good luck mate, I wouldn’t want to be you. Think it’ll have anything to do with your trip yesterday?” Goyle struggles with the laces of his shoes as if it were his first time without velcro. Blaise rolls his eyes at him, points his wand, and spells them in cute little bows before they run any later.

“Nah, I doubt something like that reaches the headmaster. We did have permission, you know.”

“Suuure. Well, next time I’m tagging along too. Refuse to spend another perfectly good Saturday trapped with Pansy’s large and unstoppable gob.”

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Merlin stumbles out of the fireplace with a clump of ash lodged in his throat. Nearly stepping on Arthur’s heel in front of him, he stabilizes himself with an arm against the mantle and hacks up black globs into the hardwood. So much for making a grand entrance. Why does this always happen?

Arthur turns around to give him a pitying look, mouth half-cocked in a laugh. Albus smooths his robes down as he enters the small seating room, elegant and poised in a way Merlin has never been. Arthur steps out after him, not a hair out of place.

Merlin wipes his mouth on his sleeve, unknowingly smearing soot across his face. He resists the lingering urge to bow at the tall impressive looking man standing in front of the old musty looking sofa. His dark face is proud and with a distinct air of nobility, his shoulders squared and his back straight. The man greets Albus first, with a subdued smile, a warm hand shake and a nod of his head. He then turns to face Arthur, with Albus introducing him as “Mr Arthur Dragan, my new and trusted member of staff at Hogwarts.”

Arthur shakes the man’s hand as he proclaims himself to be Kingsley Shacklebolt, aurur and running candidate for Minister of Magic. Arthur raises his eyebrows and shoots a look at Merlin, who mouths the words knight and aspiring leader.

Arthur turns back to Kingsley, who is now casting questioning looks at Merlin. “It is a pleasure to
Kingsley gives a startled, yet warm laugh. “It’s just Mr. Shackelbolt, but you can call me Kingsley.”

Arthur returns his smile. “Kingsley then. You may call me Arthur.”

“That might get a little confusing down the line I imagine.” He tilts his head at Albus. His good natured chuckle causes Merlin to like him instantly.

Arthur darts a questioning look between Albus and Kingsley. “Confusing?”

“Ah, I see I’ll have to introduce you to Mr. Weasley. There are two Arthur’s attending this meeting, Arthur Weasley works at the Misuse of Muggle Artifact office at the Ministry. You might be more familiar with him as the father of Ron and Ginny Weasley at Hogwarts.”

“Oh, yes then. I do believe I’ve been introduced to Ron at Hogwarts. Speaking of, this is my dear friend, a 7th year student at Hogwarts and a classmate of Ron’s, Maldin Ambrose.” Arthur grabs Merlin’s shirt at the shoulder and steers him closer. Judging by the way his hand twitches before falling back to his side, he is resisting the urge to give him a pat on the head. Merlin narrows his eyes at him for good measure.

Kingsley spares a glance for Albus before holding his hand out to Merlin. “Pleasure to meet you Maldin Ambrose.” Merlin feels scrutinized under his stare.

“Likewise.” He flashes him a bright and guileless smile.

“Well, we’d best not hold everyone up. Off we go then. I believe everyone is gathering at the dining table?” Albus leads them all out of the room and down several narrow hallways before coming to a stop outside of two impressive looking double doors leading to what Merlin assumes must be the dining hall.

Albus winks at Merlin before waving his wand at the doors, causing them to open into a large windowless dining room filled to the brim with people loudly talking amongst themselves.

The chaotic conversations around the table tapers off into an awkward, yet expectant silence. Merlin finds himself on the receiving end of several suspicious glares and more than one raised eyebrow. The more impressive of this variety is that of Professor McGonagall. Merlin feels a ridiculous amount of satisfaction at meeting her cold stare across the table and raising his eyebrow in turn.

She shoots a questioning look at Albus as he walks into the room and takes a seat at the head of the table, leaving Arthur and Merlin standing behind him, slightly off to the side.

Ron and Ginny Weasley gape at them with matching expressions of shocked surprise amidst several other of their likely siblings, judging by the sea of red hair at that end of the table. Hermione gives them both a bright a welcoming smile which serves to dislodge some of the growing unease in Merlin’s gut.

The mass of confused and expectant stares coming at them from all angles overwhelm him, and, ignoring the back of his mind nagging at him that he is being too forward, he grabs Arthur’s hand in his, clutching desperately for dear life. Arthur’s hand is surprisingly clammy.

Of course Professor McGonagall is the first to break the silence. “Hello Mr. Dragan, Mr. Ambrose. Albus, I assume there is a good reason why you have brought Hogwarts’s new Slytherin student to this Order meeting?” Merlin spots Severus seated several chairs down, openly glaring at her.
“You assume correct Minerva. Everyone, this is Arthur Dragan, Hogwarts’ new assistant grounds keeper, and Maldin Ambrose, a new student at Hogwarts as of the start of this school year. Yes, Maldin was sorted Slytherin. They are here to join the order and assist in any way they can. I am certain they will make excellent allies in the upcoming battles.” Albus’ eyes twinkle.

“Pardon me for asking Albus, but I feel that I must. How do we know we can trust them?” The speaker is a pale man with unruly black hair strongly resembling Gawain’s mop in the morning. He is seated next to their Defence against the Dark Art’s professor Lupin, angled towards him.

“I have been granted the privilege of viewing private memories, proving their identity. I would trust them with my life.” Albus’ declaration wins them several surprised and considering looks as well as deeper confusion in several of the order’s older and more suspicion members.

Before Albus can fight his point farther, Arthur cuts in. “Thank you Albus, but that is quite alright. Maldin and I are ready to make a proper introduction for ourselves, which will hopefully answer a few questions everyone no doubt is wondering.” Arthur looks to Merlin for permission before continuing. Merlin’s stomach flips and he fights down the sudden need to hack up more soot from his lungs, but he nods his head.

“Many people. Oh goddess, this is it. I don’t know if I can do this. So many people. Oh goddess, this is it. I don’t know if I can do this. He gives Arthur’s hand a sweaty squeeze. It is a good thing that Arthur has taken it upon himself to reveal them, as his tongue feels completely incapable of moving. The curious stares of the order members swim in and out of focus.

“I’m sure that I don’t have to tell anyone that what is revealed today is not leaving this war table. Magical protections and precautions have been put in place to ensure the information which you are about to be privy to does not wander.” Several concerned, incredulous, and curious eyes look up at him. Merlin can see his chest rise with a deep breath before he continues.

“I have been informed that everyone here is aware of the story of Camelot and her prophecies, to some extent at least, so this may or may not come as a surprise. Arthur Dragan and Maldin Ambrose is what we go by currently, but they are not our real names. This is probably going to sound rather obscured at first, but please bear with me and hear us out.

“My name is Arthur Pendragon, past king of Camelot and head of the Knights of the Round Table. I died after leading my men to war, hundreds of years ago, only to find myself bursting from a lake little under a month ago alive and well. I am still adjusting to everything the modern age has to offer, and have really, absolutely no idea how it is that I came to be here alive and breathing a second time. Trust me when I say there is no one more surprised than I that this has occurred. But yet here I am.”

About half of the order members are looking to Albus with varying looks of disbelief. The other half remain glued to Arthur with either a look of surprised consideration, or outright laughter. Several eye brows are drawn together set above thin lips and stretched frowns.

“I have no intention of wasting this second chance afforded to me. I am here standing before you today with my closest friend and ally to join forces with the order, offering our aid in any way we can to turn the tide of the future.” Arthur gently guides a trembling Merlin closer to the table. His legs feel like jelly.

Pull yourself together Merlin! Is this the image you want to present to people? A terrified old man scared of crowds, too tongue tied and inarticulate to speak for himself? Yeah, that ‘taught to give them confidence. The ‘Great Merlin’ stumbling through life like a faun on three legs.

He gives Arthur’s hand one last squeeze before letting go and forcibly fixing his posture. If you can face down angry mobs, you can face this.
Curious and doubtful, somewhat even hostile eyes meet his as he scans the group he’s faced with. “I’m not a 17 year old Hogwarts student, as I’m sure after Arthur’s speech you’ve come to assume.” His throat feels gritty and dry. Perhaps I could ask for a glass of water? He takes a moment to swallow. Dammit, stop stalling. “I was born shortly after Arthur here, sometime in the mid 3rd century. We didn’t exactly keep record of exactly when, as well, paper was somewhat of a luxury. I was not born into nobility as more people just assume, instead I made my start in life as the bastard in a little farming village called Ealdor. I was sent to Camelot as a young adult to learn to control my magic, where I became Arthur’s personal manservant.” Merlin takes a moment to collect himself, noticing his speech is harried and too fast. He wipes his hands on his trousers as discreetly as possible in front of a crowd intent on staring at him.

This only gets harder each time, I swear.

“So you’re the servant of the supposed Once and Future King Arthur, here?” The dangerous looking man with one lidless blue eye intent on staring right through his soul puts both hands on the table in front of him and leans forwards. “What is it exactly you can help us with? Why were you never mentioned in the prophesies? Unless ‘Once and Future Manservant’ rings a bell with anyone else here?” His real eye casts around the room while the obviously magical one remains pointed at Merlin.

Merlin makes the mistake of looking towards the Weasley side of the table. Ron looks as if he smelt something bad and Hermione’s expression is unreadable, but definitely not encouraging.

“I can help you with a lot of things.” He leaves that to hang in the air for an ominous moment while he collects the broken shards of his prepared speech. “I’m sorry, I’ve done this before a couple times now, but apparently it really doesn’t get any easier. I’m not exactly accustomed to sharing this with people, and I’ve went about it all wrong. My name, my real name, is Merlin.”

With that, a couple people around the table burst into fits of barely concealed laughter. The eyes of two identical Weasleys decide to start watering and they’re shaking their heads at Merlin as if he’s either told the best joke ever, or lost all of his marbles upon the old hardwood floor.

McGonagall’s face is beat red and is glaring accusatory daggers at Albus.

Merlin waits half a second before taking a meditative breath and morphing into his older form. The commotion around the table titters off into complete dead silence as the order members notice his transformation. Realizing, it may take a bit more than that for this crowd, he removes the concealment charm on his eyes, allowing them to flash a brilliant gold as he swipes a hand over his front, transfiguring his cloths into more dramatic and imposingly eccentric wizard robes of deep emerald. Unfortunately for him, it still feels the same as his second hand jumper and perhaps slightly scratchy trousers.

Several sharp intakes of breath can be heard over the deafening silence of the room. Feeling eons more comfortable in his elder form, he runs a hand through his impressive white beard letting his nerves settle down a moment.

Feeling the need to make up for his pathetic and fumbling start, he places an old wrinkled hand on Arthur’s shoulder, body glowing a faint gold, he casts the illusion of Kingly armour and a gleaming crown upon Arthur. “I am Merlin Emrys, I have been alive on earth since the moment of my birth over a thousand years ago. I have been wandering, waiting, and fighting. I am here with Arthur to help aid in the fight for balance. I am undercover as a student at Hogwarts collecting information, and helping wherever and whenever I can.”

“There’s just no way. That’s not something that’s possible. It’s a story of fanatics and conspiracists.
What are we supposed to do exactly? Hand over the reins of the resistance to a couple lunatics?
Albus, I’m shocked.” A plump redheaded woman at the Weasley side of the table looks at them in
disapproval and outrage.

“I understand your concerns Molly, it admittedly does sound rather absurd, but they are speaking the
truth.” Albus gestures for Merlin to continue.

“I am not hear to lead you. I am not a ruler, Arthur is the man I follow. We are here as allies and
nothing more. We are revealing ourselves for ease of strategic planning and because it would not be
right to lie to comrades.” Merlin sends a fleeting apologetic glance at Arthur, but he is not watching.
His face is set forward, his kingly mask firmly in place.

“Merlin, is there a way to prove to them our identities?” Merlin’s skin crawls at the thought of
sharing his memories with the entire crowd.

Carefully, he takes his wand out of his pocket and places it upon the table top. Slowly raising his
hands, fingers splayed, he adjusts the perceived reality of the room, creating a very realistic illusion
around them. Eyes like the sun peering through the clouds, magic bursting through his flesh and
lighting his skin in a vibrant gold, the room appears to spin around them. Merlin’s fine white hair
spreads around him in delicate wisps.

Alarmed shouts ring out from the group as hands desperately clasp at the unmoving table. The room
slowly stops turning to reveal a completely changed interior. Shining stone floors polished to a
mirror-like finish meet white stone walls. Tall and imposing stained glass windows line the walls
around them, the now vaulted ceiling impossibly high. The table, now rickety in comparison, is
firmly seated in the center of Camelot’s old round table room.

“We have not traveled, this is merely a shift in scenery. Nonetheless, welcome to Camelot’s round
table room. I figured it’d be a more appropriate surrounding for this meeting. If anyone needs to
leave the room say, for a washroom trip, worry not, the door still leads back to the hallway in
Grimmauld place.

“I realize that this is all a bit much to digest. And I sympathize. I also would like to apologize to those
of you whom my cover as a student required me to lie to. It was never my intention to hurt anyone
and I hope we can remain friends, although I understand if you wish not to.” Merlin walks towards
one of the empty chairs next to Albus, and finally seats himself.

“For any planning and strategizing to be effective, both allied parties must know of the other’s
strength and weaknesses. As I am the guest at your table, I shall start first. I am a muggle.” Arthur
ignores the reactions this provokes. “When I was alive the first time, I was Camelot’s finest warrior
skilled in both hand to hand combat, and combat with sword. I have fought beasts and monsters,
deadly spirits, evil hell-bent sorcerers, mercenaries, and other skilled knights. I have years of
experience successfully leading an army against countless foes on the battlefield as well as avoiding
conflict to spare the lives of my people. Uniting lands, rallying allied troops and undertaking
numerous private quests. I have personally trained and lead the finest warriors in the realm.

“But more than that, I have ruled my people. I have kept them safe, settled disputes as fairly as
possible, gained allies for Camelot, and stopped wars before they happened. Yes, the times have
changed, and greatly. None is more aware of this than I. Except perhaps Merlin. But my skills are
still of use. I can help plan. I can help train, and I can help you prepare for war.”

Merlin rallies his nerve. “Arthur is a brilliant strategist and negotiator. He will be an invaluable
asset.” Arthur gives him a wide pleased smile.
“And of course, there is Merlin. Where I am lacking, he excels. He is the most powerful warlock of our time. Perhaps ever.” Despite Merlin wanting to melt into his seat, this is definitely preferred over having to talk himself. Although he’s sure his time is soon coming. “Merlin has over a thousand years’ experience and intel gathering. He is more powerful than any other living being I have yet to hear of. He is also intelligent, loyal, and infinitely wise. Merlin is also patient enough to outwait a god.”

Merlin feels his face colouring. Ron is openly gawking at him in a way that makes him distinctly uncomfortable. Hermione’s hand is covering the lower half of her face and her eyebrows are drawn down atop wide disbelieving eyes seemingly studying the lines of his face for clues. McGonagall, much to Merlin’s delight, looks as if she has eaten a raw goose egg and is still attempting to swallow it down. Severus is taking the opportunity to study those around him, while Lupin and his shaggy looking friend whisper quietly to each other between shooting questioning looks at Arthur and Merlin. Merlin struggles to control his heart rate.

“I understand you probably have a tone of questions for us, and Merlin and I agree to do our best in answering them. For the sake of time-management, I would please ask everyone to hold off on their questioning unless urgent and pertinent to today’s order meeting.” With that, Arthur walks over to Merlin’s other side and takes a seat.

“How are you still alive?” Professor Lupin seems to have gotten over any awkwardness with the student-revealed-old-man quickly, as the look he directs at him is level.

“I am immortal. I cannot die.” Merlin’s voice echoes throughout the large projected room as everyone goes silent.

“Immortal. You mean to say, you have your own philosopher’s stone?” The room seems to hold its breath.

“No, this is not something I have volunteered for, nor done to myself. True immortality is not something I’d wish upon anyone. Even if I choose to, I cannot die. I am trapped on the mortal plane in this body.”

“I can change my body, my form, at will-” He shifts his body slowly backwards through the years, stopping at roughly 30 years old. He pets his black beard once before receding it back into his face, smiling at Arthur as he does so. “As far as I know, my body will never die and my soul will never move on.”

“Just how powerful are you? Are you stronger than Albus?” Kingsley looks between him and the pleased looking headmaster.

“What Arthur said was true. But I am not a wizard, sorcerer, or probably even warlock. I don’t know what I am really. I am infinitely more powerful than any other magical person I have encountered, or heard about. I don’t require the use of a wand nor the words to perform magic. I will it,” his eyes flash and a steaming cup of tea is summoned in front of him, “and my magic makes it happen.” Several people flinch or startle back at the sudden appearance of tea. The crazy-eyed man still has not faltered in his stare.

“I am not a god. I cannot perform every act. I was not the one to bring Arthur back to life and I am not an all-seeing-all knowing entity. I am one man, although I do what I can.”

“You’re entirely made up of magic. No part of you is human at all.” Crazy-eye man’s words slice clean through Merlin, voicing his deepest horrors for the entire room. *Is he a mind reader, or is it his eye? Who is he to know what I am?*
“How can you tell this?” Merlin refuses to let his voice crack at the words.

“My eye.” Crazy-eye points to the monstrosity on his face. “It allows me to see magic, amongst other things. You are entirely made up of magic. Flesh, bone, soul, everything on you is gold magic. Pure magic.” His voice is quiet and raw. Like an awed stage-whisper.

Merlin directs a panicked look at Arthur. *Not human. Nothing about me is human.* Of course, he’s suspected it for years, even thought of himself as having finally accepted it, but hearing it put like that, in absolutes from a stranger who knows nothing about him, yet can read his body like a centaur reading the stars on a cloudless night. *So it’s true then. Was I ever really human?*

“So it’s true then.” Merlin flinches to hear his thoughts voiced aloud by another. “It’s all true. Merlin and King Arthur. Alive and real.” The scruffy haired man next to Lupin brushes his hair back from his face with a trembling hand.

“Yes, it’s all true.” Thankfully Albus picks up for Merlin when the silence stretches a tad too long. “I believe we have time for one more question before we move on to the next order of business.”

His eyes crinkle merrily at the corners at his pun and the red-head twins discreetly high-five under the table.

“Where have you been? Why are you coming to us now, instead of when Voldemort first rose to power?” Most of the group flinches when Crazy-eye says Voldemort’s name.

Prepared for this question, Merlin pipes up before Arthur. “Arthur was still in the land of Avalon, not yet arisen amongst the living. He did not get to choose when his time came. What I told my teachers and classmates at Hogwarts was mostly true. I was in a small muggle village in Northern Canada. I spent several years as a history professor at a muggle university, but in reality, I probably spent most of my time entertaining my neighbours’ kids. I was completely unaware of the goings on over here. I had not kept updated. I’ve lived many different lives over the course of my existence, as I find it extremely tiring to remain in one spot.

“It wasn’t until I had a vision in a crystal that I knew to come to Hogwarts. I used to be a teacher here, had Severus’s old job actually, so it wasn’t possible for me to return as a teacher without arising suspicion. So, a student I became. It’s been quiet fun so far actually.” He tries for a friendly and open smile at Ron and Hermione with mixed results.

“Well, I hope that satisfied everyone for now. Let us commence with the sharing of information.”

Albus takes a presumptuous sip from Merlin’s teacup before continuing.

“Merlin has uncovered a dark artifact at Hogwarts left by a teenaged Tom Riddle. This has gained us significant information on Voldemort’s thought patterns, behaviours, and goals up until the point which he graduated school. I will be making this intel accessible to the adult members of the order through the pensive in my office.”

Merlin wonders at the omitted information. Why not mention Voldemort’s horcruxes to the order members? Are they not to be trusted? If so, why did Albus vouch for them for the revelation of Arthur and Merlin’s identities? Merlin raises a questioning brow at Arthur.

Merlin snorts as Arthur takes his turn thiefing a sip from Merlin’s cup. A much larger sip. He pretends to ignore the discreet wink Albus directs at him after catching Arthur’s movement.

“I have freed the basilisk trapped within Hogwarts castle. She has promised to aid me in a task of my choosing in the future. She will make an excellent ally for our cause.”
Albus sits up straighter in his seat, but McGonagall beats him to the punch. “You mean to say the monster from the Chamber of Secrets has been let loose upon the world?”

Merlin turns to her with steel in his eye. “Yes. After spending hundreds of years confined within the castle walls slave to the whims of madmen, yes, she is free. She will not harm us unless we give her cause.”

“You speak parseltongue?”

“I do, yes. I can communicate with serpents as well as all magical creatures.” This seems to impress her to silence.

Arthur produces a quill and parchment from places unknown and starts jotting down points in his irritatingly perfect scrawl.

“Unfortunately my news is of the bad sort.” Kingsley leans forward as he addresses the Order. “All of my competition- all of the other running minister of magic candidates- are compromised. It appears Voldemort has his hands in every pocket and fingers around every throat. My informants tell me that my competition has been spotted conversing with one or more of our known undercover death eaters in private meetings over the course of a couple months. Harlton has all but admitted to being a death eater himself, on more than one occasion. Of course, no one else in the ministry suspects, or would believe if I told them. At this point in the game, regardless of what proof I somehow and quite impossibly might manage to uncover, it’d all be considered opponent slander.

“Of Nott, there was really never any doubt, but Shoret is an unwelcome and unhappy surprise. He always struck me as a level-headed guy, but after tailing him for several days I have discovered he is also merely a pawn in Voldemort’s game. Hates muggles, but just never brings it up around certain company.”

“Slimy little bugger” An unknown Weasley grips the table edge with long sharp looking nails.

“Agreed. But the public loves him. Claims plans to revolutionize our education system.” Severus’s eyes widen in alarm. “No, nothing that forward. No. He plans to bring back math and other such practical studies in school. Surprising really, considering his stance on muggles and the fact more advanced maths have often been regarded a muggle territory.”

“Ew-” Hermione shushes Ron before he can go on.

“So far he’s our strongest opponent. I’ve given public speeches about the changes I wish to implement in our education system, but his voice is louder. And people like hearing him. My plan of action is to have a public debate between us, with a teacher or two suggesting different courses of action to which will support my aims.”

“And what are your aims, Mr. Shackelbolt?” Hermione’s voice is clear and confident.

“It’s my goal to implement a new and mandatory class at magical schools for years 5 through 7 focused on career choosing, training and independent study. Guest speakers currently in the field working different positions giving presentations and advice to aspiring students.”

“That’s a brilliant idea.” Hermione’s excited face is in high contrast to Ron’s look of constipation.

Arthur runs his thumb over the edge of the table-top before speaking up. “Have you considered giving a presentation at Hogwarts? Like a sort of test-run at the school for the students to get a taste of what they could have? Make them excited for this new class, gaining successful reviews of your test-run to tell their parents.
“Open up a question-answer session with the parents and teachers where you can refine your idea into something they will vote for. Then release a public statement of your aims with a pre-approved carefully outlined class plan. I’ve always found it’s best to flesh out all of an idea, working through the kinks and already having all the answers and what-ifs figured out before presenting to a sceptical group.

“Make your case and have the students, teachers, and parents fight your battle for you.” Merlin smiles at the brilliance of Arthur’s planning. Gods, I’ve missed this.


“So all of the other candidates are compromised.” Crazy-eye’s voice is grave.

“I’m afraid so.”

“We’re fighting a losing battle.” A long haired Weasley runs his hands through his locks in frustration. “No offence Kingsley.”

“No, none taken. Our odds are slim.”

“Don’t give up before you’ve lost. And from my understanding of things, this is just one front of this war. Where we lose at one, we may prevail in others. Merlin and I, alongside Ron, Hermione, Reamus, and Minerva will try our hand at swaying public opinion from within the school.”

Kingsley gives him a thankful nod.

“Any new developments Severus?” Albus directs the attention of the Order to the scowling potions professor.

“Nothing new, no. Narcissa and Lucius have successfully relocated and assumed new, muggle, identities. They are safe, but I believe they find their new lives chaffing. It may be in our best interest to bring Draco into the Order. He has expressed interest in wishing to help. He is done being a Voldemort’s pawn.”

“Malfoy?! No way, there’s no way we can trust his lot!” Ron’s face is red and his voice unnecessarily loud. Hermione rests a gentle hand on his shoulder, but his mother and father, alongside several of his siblings, seem to agree with the sentiment.

“He is a good kid, trapped in a bad situation. Give him a chance to rise to the occasion and he might surprise you. But if you don’t give him the opportunity to change, he never will.” Arthur takes the words right out of Merlin’s mouth.

“That’s a huge security breach and a risk we just cannot afford.” Lupin’s scruffy friend voices Ron’s point with more civility.

“He already knows of Arthur and I’s identity, and of the existence of the order. He is also aware of Severus’ position as spy. He has shown promise and I will vouch for him. I’ll assume responsibility for his actions. Draco will not be a security breach, I assure you. I will not allow it.” Merlin’s voice is firm and brokers no argument.

“If you insist,” The man turns to his friends around the table, gaining the groups approval. “And can promise that our plans will not leak.”

“I do.” Merlin meets Severus’ eye and gains a slight upturn of the corner of his mouth. The largest
smile Merlin has ever seen on the man.

Chapter End Notes

Oh ye gods, I can’t believe I’ve reached 30 chapters! And over 100k! When I first started this, I thought to myself, hmmm maybe I’ll make the story about 30-40k? I really couldn’t fathom writing any more than that. But the story just kept going! There was so much that needed to happen (and still needs to happen). I’m still nowhere near done! I’m completely mind boggled. Honestly. This has been an adventure. Really though. Before this, the longest thing I ever wrote was 30 pages. This is now slightly over 200 in my word doc. I never knew I had it in me.
Merlin sinks into the hard and slightly crusty sofa with a sigh, his eyes fluttering closed. That’s it. It’s over. He feels incredible relief at having that painful revelation now put behind him. There will doubtless be more to look forward to in his future, but he refuses to think of that now. He also refuses to think of how the potentially hardest part is not yet over.

They know. No shouting, screaming, nasty accusations, and only a mild level of hero-worship. So far at least. He entertains the idea of everything going back to normal and resuming his comfortable cover as student with classes to attend, homework, and friends.

His hand shakes as he brings the rattling teacup to his mouth, the once nice Earl Grey, now down to the last bitter dregs. His mouth fills with the grainy leaf-bits. Friends. Right, the people I had been lying to. Who thought of me as one of them - of their own. Not a grossly old man who’s not even human.

They probably hate me. After spending so long gaining Ron’s trust as a Slytherin, now that’s it. He tries desperately not to care, to cut himself off like he had so many times before when he inevitably lost someone. They’re still alive, it should be easier. But it isn’t.

He takes comfort in the muted sound of Arthur’s voice in the other room, shaking hands, getting to know people’s names, and offering answers to questions.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself Merlin! You have been granted a gift more precious than any. You are not alone.

He takes another sip of tea, noticing belatedly that there are only soggy tea leaves left. He chews it with frown and swallows.

The sofa dips slightly as someone seats themselves next to him. Reluctantly, he opens his eyes, wishing badly to be back in the room of requirement snuggled under Arthur’s old bed covers. He is surprised with the sight of Ron and Hermione.

Their expressions are hesitant and guarded. Merlin braces himself, setting his empty cup onto the coffee table in front of him with an awkward clang.

“So. You’re the ‘Great Merlin’. I must say, that was a truly impressive cover, I never would have guessed.” Ron awkwardly clasps and unclasps his hands in his lap.

Hermione meets Ron’s eye with a slight nod, before turning back to him. “We understand why you did it. We’re not mad.” The formality in her voice causes Merlin’s stomach to drop.

Ron gives her a quick scowl. “You’re not mad.”
“Ronald.” Hermione’s whisper is sharp.

“No, I guess you’re right. I’m not mad. We’re not mad. At first, I thought you were mad. And not of the angry sort.” Ron’s tone fights with his obvious display of nerves. “It’s true isn’t it? I mean, I know you proved it in back there, told us and shown us all. But still. Doesn’t really seem very believable you know?” His voice is uncertain.

“It’s true, yes. I’m not a teenager, I’m not a wizard, I’m not my cover story. I am Merlin. But, those lies aside, I never put on an act with you guys. I may have spoken about a past that was not mine, omitted several rather key facts, and pretended to be something I am not but my behaviour and friendship was all my own.” Ron and Hermione’s sceptical and uncertain looks slice through him.

“I’m old. Yes. I’m different, yes. But I trip over nothing, drop fragile things, enjoy food a little too much, and chew too loudly. I make an ass out of myself on multiple occasions, I get nervous, and I make mistakes. I am not a god, an idol, or a leader. Please don’t look at me like that.” Ron’s eyes have narrowed and are attempting to see through him.

“But you’re Merlin. The Merlin. How can you be like the rest of us? There’s no way you weren’t just acting. And why us?” He casts a fleeting apologetic glance at Hermione. “Why me? Why make friends with me? Why pretend to care? Wouldn’t you be more comfortable with, I don’t know, Dumbledore?”

“I was not acting.” Merlin wants to hide within himself.

“He’s good, but not that good.” Arthur’s disembodied voice floats over from the other room, how he heard their conversation through the bombardment of people he’s facing is a wonder Merlin doubts he will ever uncover.

Ron’s eyes are wide as he turns to face the wall which Arthur’s comment drifted through.

“I never pretended to care. I do care. I think of you both as my friends. You sat with me on the train ride to Hogwarts. I never planned that, but I’m glad it happened. You both were interesting, funny, and seemed like good people. I don’t want to go through life in a bubble never making connections or reaching out. That’s not a life worth living.” Merlin’s voice catches at the end, but he absolutely refuses to make a scene. The trying events of the meeting have left him raw and exhausted. “And Albus and I are friends.”

Ron’s face is blank like an old computer trying to download too large a file. Hermione is biting her lip.

“I have six of your chocolate frog cards. Looks nothing like you.” Ron studies his face and Merlin resist the urge to grow his hair out long to cover it like closed curtains. Hermione’s stare isn’t helping.

“Well, it’s not as if anyone really knew what I looked like. Not only have I not been around magical Britain in quite some time, but I haven’t actually gone by my real name since after- well, it’s been a long while.” Merlin tries to clear his mouth of the tealeaf-bits, but fears he’s making a fool of himself.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what’s your true form?” Hermione’s brows are pinched in the middle.

Merlin gives a slight awkward chuckle. “This is.” He gestures to his currently adult body. He gives them a second before shifting into his elderly form, and then his teenaged one they are familiar with. “They all are. I aged normally up until about my early 20’s I think. It was annoying looking like the young fresh one amongst my friends, all of whom matured and aged into respectable adults.” Merlin
leaves out mentioning the true horror he felt at the discovery. “Eternal youth is not all it’s cracked up to be, believe me. Eventually, I figured out how to change my body in a way that wasn’t reliant on a temporary potion, illusion, or spell. Actually changing the base-line of my physical form.”

“But, what do you look like unchanged?” Hermione elbows Ron.

**Would I ruin all chance at friendship if I morphed into his mother?**

“Any age version I assume is my ‘true self’. After all, it’s not like I can actually show my true age.”

One of the young aurors apparently overheard their conversation, taking interest and discreetly exiting the other room to claim the chair across from them. “So you’re like me then? A metamorphagus? I’m Tonks by the way.” She shakes her head and her purple hair turns a vibrant yellow and her face sprouts the beak of a raven. Ron excitedly looks between them.

“Yes and no. Nice to meet you.” Merlin scratches the side of his head. “Unlike a true metamorphagus, I had to learn the trick to it. For me, it’s more like forcibly rearranging the atoms making up my body, whatever form I take becomes my new reality. With you it’s more natural, and your body remembers its original state.” Tonks and Hermione give him curious looks while Ron just looks confused.

Merlin’s eyes glow as he re-shapes his hand into a dragon’s claw, shiny scales black to match his hair. “If I change completely and remain that way for too long, I may forget what my original form looks like and give myself the wrong features when trying to change back.” Wide eyes stare at his clawed hand as he flexes it and turns it for inspection.

“Wicked!” Ron’s face is getting closer.

“Mind if I…?” Tonks reaches her hand out, but stops before touching.

“Yeah, go for it.” Merlin sets his dragon hand on the table in front of him and the three of them gently run their fingers across his scales.

“Blimey! If you can change into anyone- anything, why… no offence- would you,” he waves his hands around in Merlin’s direction, “you know…” His eyes linger on Merlin’s ears.

“Ron!” Hermione’s outrage is paired with wide, horrified eyes.

“Choose this form you mean? Why don’t I just open up the nearest Witch Weekly and model myself after the buffest, comeliest, most sleek-haired underwear-model I can find?” Merlin laughs. “No offence taken. This is the body I was born with, it has been my home. I’m most comfortable in it. And I never really thought of myself as being horrible to look at. No underwear model I’m sure, but I have no complaints. And besides, Arthur would be jealous. Couldn’t have that. One pretty face between the two of us is enough.” He pitches his voice a little louder in case Arthur wants to overhear that as well.

Ron seems to belatedly realize he still has a hold of Merlin’s hand when Merlin transforms it back into that of a human. He quickly wretches it away, looking awkward.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you come to be like this?” Hermione’s polite tone is masking the curious gleam in her eye.

“You mean, immortal, or completely magical?” Merlin really doesn’t want to think about what Crazy-Eye said right now, thank you very much.
“Both. Were you like us, and something changed you? Or…?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve always been like this. Maybe my body changed over time, but I’ve always been… different. Not like the others.

“Some claimed I was the son of a demon. And if by demon, they meant Dragon Lord, then yes my father Balinor was a Dragon Lord. Although, those are not the same things. But, if they are referring to my mother, then that is just rude.

“It’s all just speculation. By others, and by me. Honestly, I’m really not sure why or how. Fulfilling a prophecy? Who knows. I’ve stopped wondering about it, stopped cursing the gods or goddesses responsible.”

After a moment of decidedly uncomfortable and slightly confused silence, Hermione breaks it. “Well, you’re definitely going to be helping us with more of our homework now. You’re a primary source!” Her face brightens with the all the possibilities.

“Merlin’s beard! That’s why you always looked so weird when we studied history in the library! Always grumbling about false information and speculation!” Merlin’s face colours at the reference to his beard, as well as in horror at what they taught about him in class. Ron seems to realize what he said and slaps his hand to his mouth. Tonks and Hermione start to laugh as Ron sinks deeper into the sofa. “That’s going to be really weird. Argh! What else can I say?!” Ron scrubs his now red face with the palms of his hands.

Merlin swallows, his mouth now dry at the thought of what he is about to say. He wipes his sweaty hands on his trousers and smooths down his already tamed hair. “Um… so, friends?” His smile is timid and frightened.

“I cannot believe this is happening. Sorry, it’s just… unbelievable. You’re dorky, weird, clumsy, and… Slytherin. Merlin. God. Um.” Ron’s contorted face doesn’t know what expression it wants to settle on. “But I guess. Yeah. I mean, how can I say no? Merlin. Blimey. Mum used to tell bedtime stories of you when I was a kid.” Merlin looks to Hermione for a translation, but Ron beats her too it. “Yeah, we can be friends. I mean, if you want. I’d like that.”

“Of course. It’ll probably take some wrapping my head around it, but yes. We’re still your friends.” Hermione’s comforting voice loosens the tangled knot of fear, dread, and nerves in Merlin’s gut. He lets out a shaky breath and relaxes back into the solid cushioned surface of the sofa.

“If the invitation is there, I’ll take it. Friends?” Tonks holds out her own scaled and clawed hand to Merlin with a bright and hopeful, if slightly quirky, smile.

Merlin reaches out and shakes her hand with a relieved laugh. “Yeah, I’d love that. Friends.”

*ARTHUR’S POV*

Arthur casts one last fleeting glance at the dark grey wall separating him from Merlin, his poor friend’s hesitant and nervous voice repeatedly snagging his attention away from the hoard of people awaiting private introductions. Arthur is reminded of all of the royal gatherings his father would throw, meant to feel out the thoughts and behaviours of his allies and potential rivals. Although most people have grouped off to other corners of the large, yet surprisingly dank room, he doesn’t miss their discreet glances and angled body language. Merlin is too busy to save him with an elaborately clumsy distraction this time.

He’s still not entirely sure if those were planned or simply well timed.
Granted one small moment of breathing room, Arthur quickly downs a glass of tepid water while assessing which member of the Order will make a snack of him next.

A tall man, perhaps 15+ years his senior, with dull red hair speckled with grey makes his hesitant way forward. Arthur guesses this man to be Ron’s father, Mr. Weasley. Taking the time to mentally curse Merlin in his head, he braces himself for more impossible, invasive, and even stupid questions. The misinformation on Camelot is truly astounding. And embarrassing.

“Mr. Weasley, I take it? Lovely to meet you. I’ve met you’re son Ronald through Merlin, at Hogwarts. Nice boy, Merlin speaks highly of him.” Arthur shakes the man’s enthusiastically offered hand.

“Name’s Arthur actually. Arthur Weasley.” His smile is terrifyingly wide. “Named after yourself. My mother was always a huge fan. It’s an honour to meet you sire.” The man’s eyes gleam and Arthur is reminded of an excited puppy waging their tail. Arthur hopes this man will refrain from slobbering on him.

“Oh, I’m not a king any longer. I’ve been brought up to speed with the modern forms of government. It’s just Arthur now. Although, I imagine that might get a little weird for us now.” Kingsley was right. Not that he doubted it, but still. People named their children after me?! Arthur feels grossly flattered and at the same time, horribly inadequate. Kingsley’s warning really didn’t prepare me.

Arthur Weasley gives a too loud laugh. “It might, yes.” He holds Arthur’s eyes for too long a time. “So, if you don’t mind my asking, what sort of technogie did your kind have back when you were-” he makes a series of bizarre gestures, “-alive the first time?”

“Um… my kind?” Is this man not human?

“Sorry, of course. Yes. Muggles I mean. What sort of ‘Tech’ did you use back in that era? Or did you live more like the wizarding world, but without magic? How would that function?” His speech is quick and leaves Arthur only more confused.

“I’m not familiar with what you refer to as ‘technogie’, but it sounds alike to the modern ‘technology’, would that be similar to what you are referring to?”

“Oh yes, that does sound similar doesn’t it? How muggles power machines and other such metal contraptions through the use of eclectic-ity?”

“Ah, I see. Well, the modern non-magical people of this time have vastly changed from my time. We didn’t have any such metal machines or constructions, although I do find them fascinating. Our way of living, in those terms, are indeed quite similar to your magical modern civilization. Technology-free. We had no internet, fridges, cars, or other such things. There have been many incredible advancements since my time.” Arthur feels proud of himself for knowing things that, apparently, some modern men do not know. Perhaps he is not as far behind his learning as Merlin hinted at?

“Amazing. So no magic, and no technolo-gy? How did your people survive?” His wide eyes finally blink a couple times. “Pardon me for asking, it’s just truly incredible to have a source I can ask these things to. Of course you cannot answer all of my questions here at this time. It’s just very exciting.” He runs his hand through his short frazzled hair.

“I felt much the same way when faced with the current non-magical world. I’d love to answer any questions you have about Camelot and her surrounding kingdoms at a later time. Perhaps we can have a sit-down one evening after dinner and you can fill in some blanks of the modern magical
world for me as well?” Arthur feels himself warming up to this odd puppy-of a man.

Arthur doesn’t know how it’s possible, but the other Arthur’s grin stretches even wider. “Oh, I’d love that! Truly. Yes, thank you, that would be brilliant. I look forward to it, definitely. Perhaps over the Hogwards’ winter break?”

Suddenly Ron’s nervous babble makes sense. “Yes, that should work well. We’ll schedule it for the break.” Arthur smiles as he claps the man companionably on the shoulder and makes his retreat.

He makes his way towards the platter of rich cheeses and bread-bits, taking a generous helping to settle his stomach. Arthur hopes Merlin is faring alright without him for the moment, he estimates he’s only 70% through his introductions for the evening. Arthur notes the absence of Ron and Hermione from the gatherings of people around him.

“Arthur Pendragon, it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance. Sirius Black.” The dark haired man Arthur remembers from the meeting seated next to the Professor Lupin approaches him with a friendly smile. His clothes are of fine make, but casual compared to the rest of the order members. A wealthy man for sure, but not one for overstating it. His handshake is firm and dry.

“Pleasure to meet you.” Arthur tilts his head slightly in invitation.

“This is my manor, the Black manor. I inherited it upon my mother’s passing.” Sirius doesn’t seem displeased or saddened by this, his voice, if anything, sounds relieved. “Of course firmly and resolutely decorated by my great-grandmother. Unfortunately the furnishings have proven rather… stubborn.” Sirius narrows his eyes at the row of paintings lining the wall, who narrow their eyes at him in turn.

Arthur wonders what that’s about.

“Of course, as working at Hogwards now, you’ve probably met my husband Remus,” Sirius reaches back behind himself to snag the arm of an unsuspecting Professor Lupin who has the unfortunate timing of wandering by at that exact moment. Arthur fights his first reaction of raising his eyebrows and taking a step back. Husband?

He pauses for one awkward moment, brain reeling at the new and unexpected information, before recovering. “Yes, Remus Lupin, DADA Professor. I’m pleased to see you here at the order meeting. You’re skills and knowledge, as well as influence with the students, are sure to help in the battles of the future. My apologies again for having to deceive you upon our initial introduction.” Arthur reverts back to his ingrained formal tone while his brain re-boots.

“Well, I must say, I was very surprised. King Arthur. Still surprised really.”

Remus meets Sirius’ eye. “If you have Albus’ trust, you have ours.”

Sirius nods his head once in agreement. “We are happy to have all the help we can get. I’m certain your advice will be invaluable. And Merlin’s of course. I must admit, I’m feeling much better about our odds with him on our side.”

“We will do any and all we can.” Arthur feels he should complement the man on his manor, but cannot bring himself to, nor is he sure it would be welcome after- whatever that was.

“If you wouldn’t mind, we’d love to invite yourself and Merlin back here for a lunch, or dinner, some time to get properly acquainted. I’m assuming all I know of Merlin so far as Maldin can be written off as his acting cover. Very superb job at that.” Remus’s eyes shift to the wall separating this room from the one Merlin is currently seated in. “That and all of the, no doubt inaccurate, speculation
around the ‘Merlin and Arthur of Old’. I imagine that must get quite annoying.”

“Mostly to Merlin, yes. I’m still new to everything here, so I thankfully haven’t had to face it for nearly as long. Dinner would be most welcome. Perhaps I can manage to get Maldin away from the school to come here some time.” Arthur shoots a glance in the direction of the infamous Professor McGonagall.

A glance that Remus and Sirius don’t fail to miss, leading to their surprised and amused laughter. “Ah yes, good ‘ol Minerva. Just as terrifying now as she was when we were in school I take it? Sometimes I wonder if her firm stare was the only thing saving us from an expulsion.” Sirius wraps his arm around Remus, jostling him slightly.

Arthur’s annoyance towards the woman turns to respect. Perhaps now that she knows who we are, she could make a good friend? A firm yet kind lady at Albus’ right hand. He wonders if Merlin will be ok with Arthur going ahead and inviting her to join some of their discussions, what with his endless complaining about the woman. On the other hand… Arthur smiles to himself. Making Merlin squirm has always been fun.

“Mind doing me the favour of re-introducing me to the Lady Minerva?” Arthur hopes being endorsed by these two will help her warm up to him.

“Of course, right this way.” Sirius makes a dramatic flourish in the direction of the professor and leads Arthur along by a hand on his shoulder.

“Minerva! Lovely to have you in my home this evening.” His smile is full of mischief, but warm. She raises an eyebrow. “Allow me to re-introduce you to Arthur here. Late King of Camelot, and close friend of a certain student of yours.”

Arthur shakes her hand as she assesses him through her spectacles. “Clever choice of names, Mr. Dragan.” Arthur lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding as she gives him a slight smile.

“Thank you Professor. I would like to apologize on Merlin’s behalf for his, ah, antics as a student. He’s always been a bit of a handful.” Arthur pitches his voice a little on the loud side.

“Oi! Have not!” Merlin’s faint disembodied voice floats over from through the doorway and Arthur snickers.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

I am really sorry for the month long wait. That was completely unintentional. It’s been a crazy time full of being sick, scrambling around, and realizing that I had forgotten some rather important life event-type things. My apologies if this chapter is a bit uh, unfortunate, as I wrote it at about 30% functioning brain power. It was quite late into the night when I typed it out, fearing that inspiration would leave me if I waited ‘till morning.

The next chapter will not take as long, I assure you.

Special thanks to everyone who left a comment/kudos, you guys are truly lovely. (I will reply as soon as I get the chance to)

*ARTHUR’S POV*

Albus’ quarters are warm and welcoming after the stoic dark grey rooms of Grimmauld Place. The fireplace is a comforting presence casting soft gold light upon their seating area.

Arthur sips his wine glass and allows his posture to relax as he eases his weight onto the chair back. He reviews the names and faces of the Order members in his head, committing them to memory. Ron and Hermione he knew from Hogwarts already, although the many other freckled faces of his family members he has slight difficulty matching the correct names to. Professor McGonagall- Minerva, was seated next to Kingsley, the man competing for place as minister. The lady whose features sometimes shifted in a way that made Arthur stomach flip, Tonks. The beautiful woman with the fine starlight hair and aristocratic face, Fleur Delacour. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, the married couple. Now, that was a surprise. Arthur has yet to wrap his head around that new piece of information and all that it entails. Then there is the terrifying and gruff looking man with the magical eye which Arthur fears might make an appearance in an upcoming nightmare, Alastor Moody. All together they make for a rather, different group. Certainly not the sort of soldiers he is accustomed to dealing with that is for certain.

For a moment Arthur wonders at how this small group is supposed to have the power to defeat the described armies of their enemies. It isn’t until his eyes wander over the unassuming form of his friend Merlin slumped in the seat next to him that he halts that line of thinking. When it comes to magic, appearances are deceiving.

What they are lacking that the enemy has in growing abundance, is influence.

The slight form of Merlin trembles under the force of a yawn. Blearily whipping at his watering eyes, he turns to him with a smile. “So, wat did you think of the Order, Arthur?”

Arthur sets his glass of wine down on the table top in front of him before leaning back again. “They are motivated and… diverse. Trained warriors as well as families fighting together for their beliefs and freedoms. I think they are very brave and noble.” Albus carefully folds his hands in his lap, his
full attention on Arthur. “They are too few to be an army. Fighting behind the scenes and in the shadows only works if either you have a specific hit list, or the ear of the right people.”

Arthur looks Albus in the eye. “What you are lacking in numbers, you must make up in influence. Yes, you have the most deadly warriors- warlocks like yourself and Merlin, but unless you have the support of the common people, a shared belief, this war will never end.”

“It was our hope that with Kingsley as Minister, we could sway the public view in our favour. Many of the wizarding families already believe in our cause, they are just frightened and therefore silenced. With someone on our side in control of the ministry, we would be the voice for these people, we could change laws for equality.” Albus sighs. “But, it seems Voldemort shared our plans and has infiltrated Kingsley’s competition. Our chances are…” He trails off and dejectedly rubs at his face. “The people are scared. They don’t want to speak up in fear of being permanently silenced. Our world is divided.”

Merlin looks around himself at the portraits of the headmasters around them. “You have a school. What better place to educate people then by starting with the children? Like we mentioned in the meeting, Arthur and I will start by talking to the students. Showing them that their beliefs are wrong and violence and force is not the answer. This happens slowly. As the headmaster, you are in the perfect position. The students look up to you, trust you.

“So educated them. Hold classes about muggle culture and their technological advances. Have fieldtrips out into their towns and cities. The students love their Hogsmeade trips as they allow them freedom from the school. They’d jump at another chance like that. You could hold an annual school trip to the movies or something similar. To see a film. They are close enough to magic not to be dismissed right away, and they can be educational as well as entertaining. Show the students the fun things in the muggle world. Have them interact with muggles. Befriend them even.

“The only way to do that is to stop the isolation. No one will believe you if you say we are no better than them, unless you show them. This is a private boarding school. The only interactions they get are with other magicals, and the muggle studies class is outdated as well as treated like a joke. Don’t tell them, show them.”

Merlin catches Arthur’s eye with a twinkle. “Working from the shadows, although admittedly a comfortably safe place to be, is not how you go about opening the minds of the people. If every act for good that you do goes unseen and the only visible force is that of your opposition, then the people are really left with no choice at all.” Merlin’s words strike Arthur somewhere in his midsection and he is left fighting for a breath of air. “Trust someone who made that error in the past, although a risk, it is one worth taking. Visibility is important.” Merlin’s voice is soft and apologetic, his eyes desperate and sad. He understands. After all this time, now he gets it.

Albus takes a moment gazing into the fire, his brows pinched in the middle. After several minutes, he seems to reach some sort of conclusion and turns back towards Merlin. “You speak wisely. Although some parents would disagree, and probably pull their children from the school, it would be remiss of me to dismiss your advice.” He takes a pause in which he appears to be gathering his thoughts. “Your idea is truly quite inspired. Although I must admit ignorance to what a ‘movie’ is, I can still clearly see the point you are making. Perhaps it is time to stop working only in the shadows, and come out into the light.” He reaches forwards to pick up his own wine glass and takes a generous mouthful. “I shall think on it more and devise a plan for the extra classes you mentioned. If you wouldn’t mind running over my outlines before I implement them?”
“Of course, I’d be happy to help.” Merlin’s sleepy smile strikes like a gong in Arthur’s heart, which he chalks up to the effects of being over tired.

Arthur recalls the terror and nerves Merlin displayed before the meeting. His usually fearless friend’s anxiety had rattled him a little. “How you are faring, Merlin?”

Tired blue eyes blink a couple times in attempt to focus on his face. “‘M alright. Why do you ask?”

“Well, the outing. Everyone in the Order now knowing who you are? You going to hold up alright?” Damn, he looks out of it.

“Oh. Yes, that. Uh… well it hasn’t really had time to sink in yet. I don’t know. Okay I guess? I mean, they seemed to handle it well enough. We’ll see how things go in class, and at the next meeting though.” He absently rubs a hand over his arms as if he’s cold despite the blazing fire. “I’m relieved to have it over with, that’s for sure. Thank you for making it easier. Helping.”

“Of course.” Arthur rakes his eyes over his slumped form in concern. If he doesn’t get him moving now, Albus will have a guest for the night. “Well, I for one, am needing of a good night’s sleep after all that. Merlin, lets head off and leave Albus here to get some rest for tonight.” He hoists himself up out of the devastatingly comfortable chair and onto his slightly unsteady feet.

Seeming to just now to come to the realization that he is currently in a half-reclined position and about to fully merge with Albus’ cushions, Merlin’s eyes go comically wide and he makes a valiant attempt at righting himself. Unfortunately, his efforts gain him mixed success, as his body veers dangerously to the side, threatening to collide into Albus in his seat next to him. Albus looks up at his incoming doom with the calm acceptance and professional bravery of a seasoned knight.

Reaching forwards with reflexes sharpened through many years of hard and grueling training, Arthur quickly grabs Merlin before he can accomplish their enemies’ job for them by taking out their first ally.

“Oh whoops, gods, I’m so sorry!” Merlin’s face is bright red as he takes hold of Arthur and the rest of his dignity. “Didn’t quite realize I was that tired. Right. Off to bed for me. Sorry again. And uh, thank you Albus. That’s for-“ He flicks his hand out in an hazardous fashion.

Albus stands in one fluid, graceful motion that has Arthur wondering where Merlin went wrong in his old age. “Of course my friends. Some rest shall do us all good. I’ll be seeing you both at breakfast tomorrow, ‘til then, I bid you a pleasant night.” His eyes are warm and crinkled in a way that makes Arthur think of Hunnith. Weird comparison, but there it is.

“Thank you for the tea.” Arthur’s returning smile comes easily. “And your support. Good night.”

He leads Merlin to the door of Albus’ chambers, wondering if he should bother taking Merlin to the Slytherin dorms, or just save himself the interruption and bring him back to Hagrid’s ‘hut’ with him. Would save him the hassle of making his way over in the middle of the night on tired and barely functioning legs. Would certainly insure we both slept better. For some reason Arthur cannot seem to muster up the annoyance at this that he is certain he should be feeling. Perhaps I should just tell him that he can cut the extra nonsense and just come to sleep with me. Then he reviews that thought and nearly trips over his own feet as he walks them both down the stairs.

Thankful that Merlin is far too focused on maintaining his upwards position to notice how red his face now is, Arthur takes several deep breaths and takes the right turn leading them down towards the dungeons.
Arthur flops down on his fluffy bed, the air leaving his lungs in a whoosh.

That was an eventful day. A stressful day. Lots of new developments, new information, and new faces. He tears away the image of Merlin’s sleep dozy face and replaces it with a flip-book of all the new faces he was introduced to.

Many things to take up space in my mind. But the image of his friend returns.

My father would say my mind is scrambled. He would be right.

I can’t be expected to be thinking in my right mind after a day as full as that. After a week as full as that. Of course I’m a little… off. He cannot be blamed for his… wayward thoughts, after everything. Would be unreasonable.

I’ll wake up tomorrow and things will make sense again.

He tries to silence his brain with a pillow shoved forcefully into his face. He rolls over in a tangle of blankets. Merlin is asleep, you should be too. Arthur tells himself firmly that after a good nights’ rest, things will be reasonable in the morning. He will be reasonable in the morning.

I think Albus will turn out to be a good friend and ally. He seems to really care for Merlin. And for his friends in the Order. For his students.

Ron and Hermione will have fun dealing with Draco outside of their hostile school environment. Learn to be civil with each other. That should be fun to witness.

That Ron has a huge family. To have that many healthy children, Molly Weasley is truly fortunate. They seemed like decent people. Arthur– now isn’t that weird– is a curious man, our meeting to discuss ‘muggle’ things will probably result in me learning more from him that the other way around though, I’m sure. He feels warm at the idea of making new friends. Like he belongs here.

It seems loneliness is not a fate I will have to suffer. Unbidden, the image of his crazed and ill father fights to the forefront of his mind.

Sirius and Remus invited Merlin and I to dinner. Arthur’s legs are firmly trapped in his bedsheets. They seem like very friendly and capable people. Like the sort I would have gotten on well with in my first lifetime. Married though, now that’s a new one.

Arthur takes the time now that he has it, to process that information. Two Men can wed. Probably any two people can in this time. Why would that be a thing? Arthur scours his mind for answers. Well, there’s really no reason really why it shouldn’t be. Sirius and Remus seemed very happy. Like any other married couple I’ve met in Camelot. Happier even, then some. That’s all there is too it I guess.

Suddenly he realizes the possibilities this opens up for him in his future. Not that I’d want to wed a man though.

I don’t.

But I could. If that would make me happy. No more marrying for the good of the people, but for myself. No more need to choose a good queen for the people. No more pressure to produce an heir for the people. Or to ally lands together to make it safer for the people.
I could marry literally anyone. Father would roll over in his grave if he knew. Arthur takes supreme pleasure in this thought. It’s one thing to marry a commoner, but a man?

Suddenly Gwen’s transparent form takes over his thoughts. My wife. I never thought I’d have need to marry again. Or want to. He feels like his thoughts betray her. He loves her.

He’s happy that the people are now free to wed any their heart desires, but he has no need. His heart’s desire was already his.

“Even though I am no longer here, you still have the potential for happiness in love. Please tell me you will take it. Don’t hold a candle for me. I will not be the one responsible for dooming you to a life without your love.” Gwen’s voice slices through his resolve.

But she was my love, is my love. Arthur’s breath catches on something sharp and he covers his face firmly with the pillow once more.

He squeezes his eyes shut and banishes all thought from his mind. He is working himself up for no reason. It’s not as if he even knows anyone in this time well enough to even consider romantic involvement. His thoughts flit over all the faces in similar age as him, taking comfort that there was no one that stood out to him in that way. Shape-shifting girl he found unsettling, the lady with the starlight for hair surely was the most beautiful woman he had laid eyes upon, but there was no attraction. He supposes the older Weasley brother- Charley was it- was attractive enough, but a little too rugged for him to find appealing. Sirius reminded him too much of Gawain, and he is married already to Remus. Kingsley was handsome, but coolly professional. No one he is interested in or has any inclination to pursue.

Of course, there were others as well. Minerva, he laughs hysterically at the thought of being with. She seems a bit, well, old. And terrifying. Her, Albus, and all others over the age of 40 he blocks out from his train of thought completely. No need to give himself nightmares.

Who could Gwen have been referring to? Unless there is someone he has yet to meet? Can the dead see the future? Are the powers of the seers tied to Avalon? Arthur wonders if Merlin is interested in anyone. He was pretty adamant about being alone and uninterested, but you never know. Arthur thinks back to his friend in his younger years. The only one he ever really seemed to show any attraction towards was Morgana, and that stopped as soon as their friendship formed. Arthur wonders if, perhaps in this new age, Merlin would be interested in men.

Arthur finds himself scowling at the ceiling. Why does that thought bother me so much? It’s not as if, once the shock wore off, Sirius and Remus’s relationship bothers me. He wants his friend to find happiness. That is his number one goal in his new life. Merlin’s happiness. Yet, the possibility of him finding love with another man seems to be an issue for Arthur. Would I be less upset if he found a woman? The image of Merlin and Morgana together was too ridiculous to even consider, so it’s not as if I ever took that potential seriously. He recalls how face-changing lady seemed to really hit it off with Merlin after the Order meeting. What if they were to become involved? I would support them. Of course I would. Yet his skin crawls at the idea.

He flails his legs in the knot of blankets, twisting one more firmly around his foot.

What is my problem?

I will be happy for him if he finds happiness with someone, of course I will. His happiness is my happiness. His stomach feels hollow. Why is this something I have to convince myself of? Am I really so selfish, wanting everything to stay the same, holding him back?
The tangle of bedcovers saves him from hurdling to the floor as he startles back at the loud sound. His heart beats wildly in his chest as he widens his eyes as if it might help him to see better in the dark of the room. It doesn’t.

“Merlin?”

There is a slight shuffling noise before a yellow light flickers into existence above the bed, illuminating the room in a soft warm glow that is still to bring for Arthur’s eyes. “Argh!” He covers his face with his one freed arm, eyes scrunched up and watering.

“Oh, right, sorry. I forgot.” Merlin’s voice is clipped and nervous. Arthur is getting used to the sound. Suddenly and thankfully, the light dims and Arthur is able to remove his arm from his face, squinting out across the bed. Merlin’s striped nightclothes look ridiculous.

“Little warning next time, maybe? You’re lucking I didn’t almost run you through again. Gods, Merlin. You were saved by blankets.” He scrambles to tear the offending sheets from his legs.

“Yeah, I’ll…” He trails off sounding uncertain, and striking a strong resemblance to a deer.

“You could try appearing outside the door next time, and I don’t know, knocking?” It’s not as if his dropping in was unexpected, or that the man has ever knocked on a door before in his life, but Arthur is feeling peculiarly rattled seeing him after his mental analysis a minute ago. To hell with awkwardness, I should have just tucked him in here to begin with.

That seems to snap the Merlin out of it. “I wouldn’t want to disturb Hagrid.”

“Oh, but disturbing me is alright then?” Arthur’s whisper is indignant.

“Of course. Dollophead.”

“Still not a word.”

“Yes it is.”

“You can’t just invent words, Merlin.”

“Really Arthur. How do you think languages were made? Just bestowed upon us from the goddess?”

Arthur glares at him with the satisfaction of knowing that, due to the light in the room, Merlin can see it.

“Shut up Merlin. I don’t even know how you are on your feet right now, last I saw you, you were barely coherent.” Merlin crosses his arms at him. Arthur struggles to even out the covers on the bed as much as possible. “Well come on then, we don’t have all night.” His eyes are glued to the blankets. Anywhere but at Merlin.

After a short hesitation where Arthur refuses to look up and make eye contact with him, Merlin makes his way over and crawls in next to him, stealing the majority of the covers. Arthur doesn’t even know why he thought it would be any different.

“Your bed’s cold.” Arthur rolls his eyes. Merlin waves at the orb of light and it extinguishes itself.

“Goodnight Merlin.” He tries his best to sound irritated, but fears he fails miserably.
“’Night Arthur.” Merlin’s sleepy voice is happy and contented, and Arthur knows he didn’t succeed.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I’m am so very deeply sorry for such the long wait. I swear to you I am not ditching this story. Not until it’s finished. (And even then, I’ll keep you guys fully informed). It’s just been still quite wild over here for me. I have too many things on the go, just merely reading my to do list freaks me out. It seems never-ending.

Hopefully I can make it up to everyone with a longer than usual chapter! It’s got fluff (but actually, ha!), modern wizarding discoveries for Arthur, and some stuff written in Draco’s POV as promised.

Thanks again for all of the incredibly lovely comments everyone, (and the kudos!) they brighten my day significantly.

Air hits his side and Arthur shivers. Arms scramble for purchase on the coverings, making futile attempts at pulling them over towards him. His delirious mind insists that he must save them from the boulder they must be stuck under. The ground is uncommonly soft this morning, so it shouldn’t be this difficult to wiggle his covers out from underneath. He puts his back against the boulder for leverage. The surface of the rock is shockingly hot in contrast to his cooled flesh. That’s weird.

He reaches his hand back to feel it, almost startling back in surprise. I shouldn’t be really. A night as cold as this, it’s not the first time Merlin has ambushed my bed mat and stolen all of the warmth under my covers. Feeling merciless, Arthur gets a generous handful of blanket and gives a nice strong tug all at once, while pushing back against Merlin’s sleeping form. Finally, he’s rewarded with enough blankets to fully cover himself. Merlin shifts in his sleep, mumbling something incoherent.

Smiling in his victory, Arthur snuggles farther under the covers trying to warm his frozen side. Merlin’s body heat like a steady fire against his back.

After a moment of sleepy indulgence in his warm and comfortable cocoon, Arthur figures it’s time to get up and get Merlin to tend to breakfast. Hopefully they haven’t slept the entire morning away, they have a patrol to finish, and it’s up to him to make sure everything is in order. Guiltily, Arthur wishes for the opportunity to spend a morning as unproductive as he pleases, with someone else to run the kingdom for a day so Arthur may spend the entire day adventuring in the forest with Merlin.

I’ll take what I can get. A good night’s sleep and a bit of a lay-in.

Regretfully peeling his eyes open, Arthur’s heart nearly stops. Everything floods back in in a terrible rush as he stares up at the dusty jars on a shelf on the wall. Suddenly his thoughtless wish for a day free of his kingdom feels like a slap to the face. Regret and shame flood through him for his selfish thoughts, as well as the jarring feeling of being out of time and out of his depth. He desperately blinks back the moisture that forms in his eyes, taking in a large lungful of air.

Clumsily and a little shakily, Arthur rolls over to face his only living friend. Merlin’s warm presence
comforts him more than he ever thought possible. His steady breathing, proof that he is not alone. That his friend survived. His best friend. “Merlin?” His raspy voice sneaks out from his lips before he can stop them.

Stripped and brightly dyed purple bedclothes make a appearance out from under the quilt as Merlin rolls over to face him. Shiny blue eyes slowly appear from under thick dark eyelashes as Merlin opens them to the light. “‘thur?” His voice is scratchy and dry, his eyebrows drawing together as he takes in the distressed face in front of him.

Not wanting to give voice to his panic, or notify Merlin to his slipping grip on everything, he is at a loss on what to say. “Um… good morning sleepy head.” Merlin blinks at him with a blank expression. Arthur tries again. “Something about lazy flowers?”

“Hey, that’s my job you clotpole. Gods Arthur, you didn’t even get it right.” His sleepy smile is fond and a little dopey. He blinks his eyes several more times and they seem to find focus. “This is a bit of a first for you, isn’t it?”

Arthur doesn’t know what to make of that, his face reflecting his confusion.

“First time being in charge of waking me up.” His still somewhat sleepy face looks smug.

Arthur’s earlier worry melts away as he laughs. “Really now? Going senile in your old age have you Merlin? I seem to recall- and quite clearly at that- having to peel your sorry ass out of your bed.” He looks up to the wooden panelled ceiling. “Out of your cot. Up off the floor. And in one particularly memorable case, off your horse. You fell asleep riding a horse Merlin. This is hardly the first time I’ve had to wake you. And I highly, highly, doubt it will be the last.”

He waits for Merlin’s face to morph into one of indignance before punctuating his point with another firm tug on the blankets, leaving Merlin exposed to the harsh elements of the room.

“Least you could do is learn how to wake someone properly. ‘Cause apparently it’s not like you haven’t had practice. You must be a slow learner.” His eyes flash the brilliant gold of morning sunlight as he yanks the blankets back overtop of himself with magic. Arthur lets out a huff and narrows his eyes. “It’s proper form to wake the sleeping with a cheerful and pleasant morning phrase. Like a title for your day. If you’re feeling particularly uninspired, one might try a simple ‘good morning’. Unless that is simply too extraneous for your little foggy morning-brain?”

Merlin’s singular eyebrow is raised and Arthur is having none of it. In one smooth motion, he reaches behind himself with one hand to grab a pillow while he takes a firm grip of the covers in the other. Not waiting for Merlin to catch on, he swings the cushion at top speed onto the side of Merlin’s face, while using the distraction to free his stolen covers back. He gives a few forceful pats on top of the pillow for good measure, eliciting a huffy sounding muffle from underneath.

After flailing at Arthur’s arm to let go of the pillow smothered against his face, Merlin takes a deep breath before pasting on a scowl. “Hey!”

Arthur isn’t buying it. He places his hand on Merlin’s ridiculous bed-ruffled hair and forcefully messed it up farther.

Merlin sputters from under the mop on his head. “Hey! You know what? That’s it!” He grabs the offending pillow and catapults it at Arthur. Arthur laughs at his pathetic attempt, making something fierce ignite behind Merlin eyes. His grin is ruthless and bloodthirsty before Arthur is momentarily blinded by gold.
Dozens of pillows seem to materialize out of thin air and projectile towards Arthur. He lets out an embarrassing squeak as he ducks down with his hands over his head for protection, feeling pillow after pillow pelt at him.

“You win, you win!” Arthur’s not sure Merlin can even hear the words through so much fluff, but the badgering stops. Tentatively, Arthur moves his hands off his head and emerges from the actual mountain of cushions. “Where in the world did those come from?”

From Arthur’s seated position on the bed, he cannot make out any of the mattress or blankets at all through the tall heap of pillows. White pillows, coloured pillows, patterned pillows, and a pillow with what appears to be little chicken drawings on it. “Did you make these?” Arthur has no idea how magic works.

“No, I didn’t make them, just summoned them. They’re mine. Well, most of them. I think?” He looks with mild confusion at a bright pink pillow seated firmly at the top. “I had to get my ammunition from somewhere.”

“Hm. Well. You can have fun cleaning it up then.” Arthur musters up as much regal bearing as possible, emerging from out of the pile straight backed and un-phased. “I’m to meet with Hagrid at 10, so while you can just sit around in a lazy heap all day, I actually have work to do.” He narrows his eyes, looking in all corners of the room for something salvageable to wear. Without Merlin to keep his room at least somewhat tidy, his admittedly meager possessions seem to have grown a will of their own and have started wandering.

Merlin unleashes an unseemly snort, a poor attempt at covering up his rapidly growing smile. “Enjoying your time as a grounds cleaner then I take it? Not too difficult for you I hope? Just the right amount of challenge?”

Arthur refrains from tossing an unfortunate smelling shirt at him. “It’s assistant grounds keeper, not like I’d expect you to actually know the proper words for things though.” He exaggerates his eye roll as he bends to pick up one of the new outfits he has not worn yet, hoping desperately that it has not been wrinkled from its convincing act as a carpet.

Making a show of it, I am fully capable of dressing myself in the mornings, thank you very much, Arthur changes into fresh cloths for the day. He almost jumps out of his skin at the sound of Merlin’s startled squeak. He looks over at him, trying to figure out what set him off, and is met with Merlin’s blue eyes as wide as they go, determinedly staring at the ground. His face, neck, and ears, a vibrant shade of red.

Feeling slightly thrown, and refusing to feel awkward for something that has never made him feel so before, Arthur, now fully dressed, turns to face Merlin with his hands on his hips. “What’s keeping you? Plan on spending your day in whatever bedclothes you call those? I’m not helping you dress, if that is what you’re waiting for.” Merlin’s eyes finally look up from their intense study of the floor, his face clearly not entirely sure which expression to settle on.

Finally, his brain appears to have re-booted and he blinks several times, before glaring at Arthur. “I have never required that kind of service.” Without waiting a beat, Merlin’s eyes flash and his school robes appear in his now outstretched hands, neatly folded and wrinkle-free. Narrowing his eyes farther, he turns his back to Arthur before quickly getting dressed.

Arthur would roll his eyes again at the display, but Merlin wouldn’t see it. Instead, he finds himself fixing his hair in the mirror on the wall as to not remain simply staring at Merlin’s exposed flesh. Not that it’s anything he hasn’t seen before. Arthur ignores how his face in the mirror seems a little pinker than usual.
After a hurried breakfast of some sort of potato-creation, Arthur and Merlin part ways, Merlin for potions class with an awkward and slightly shell-shocked Draco, and Arthur for the main broom shed for his meeting with Hagrid.

Opening the doors, he’s assaulted by the wafting smell of mildew. Screwing up his nose, he opens the doors as wide as they go and leaves them like that before stepping inside to where he can see the stooped figure of Hagrid trying not to bang his head on the too low ceiling.

“Arthur! Thanks for agree’n to meet me here! We’ve got the firs’ years learn’n to fly today and the brooms are… well.” He gestures to a pile of sorry looking brooms propped up against the wall to his right and Arthur cringes. He’s not entirely sure what brooms, of all things, have to do with flying, but can nonetheless appreciate the desire to not want to get any closer to one of those sorry brooms. He’s not too certain how they will be able to use them to clean anything in the state they’re in now.

“Yeah, we’ve got’r work cut out for us.” Hagrid rubs his hands together in anticipation.

Arthur’s face says more than his words ever could on the subject.

“’N unfortunately for us, since brooms are carefully layered with some rather dangerous magic, there’ll be no cleanin’ m with any sort of spell. ‘Tis the ol’fashioned way for us.” He tosses Arthur a large damp rag before he uses his large arms to scoop up as many decrepit brooms as possible and marches out of the shed, dumping them on the ground outside.

Hagrid plops down unceremoniously on the grass in front of the pile, his own damp rag in hand. Arthur mourns for his once clean new clothes as he seats himself on the ground next to the giant man. “We’ve got to polish the wood gently ‘til it shines. Then sort through the bristly part, like so.” He demonstrates running the cloth through the broom bristles, taking out large clumps of mouldy looking dirt as he does so.

Arthur picks up the nearest broom into his hands, feeling like he’d much rather chuck it out than bother salvaging it. Setting his jaw, and holding it as far away from his person as possible, he begins the horrid process of cleaning out clots of greenish badly smelling goop.

After about 15 minutes too long of this sick torture, Hagrid turns his head to face him. “So, tell me ‘bout your time before Hogwarts, you were friends with Maldin before commin’ here right?”

“Yes, we were close.” God, I have no practice with this. I hope I’m as convincing as Merlin.

“His uncle homeschooled me, and then when Maldin’s parent’s passed, took Maldin in and homeschooled him as well. He pretty much raised us. Maldin’s like my crazy younger brother.” God, did that ever taste weird coming out of his mouth.

“Seems like a good kid.”

“Is, yeah. When he’s not being a pain in my ass.” Arthur’s smile is genuine as his thoughts flit back to this morning.

Hagrid huffs out a laugh. “’Tha’s what lil’brother’s are for. Always wanted one myself.” His gaze grows momentarily distant. Arthur lets that distract him from the skin crawling sensation that started up at the mention of Merlin as his little brother. “Must be tough for you guys, so far away from everythin you knew.”

Gods, you have no idea. “It really is. I think Maldin’s been putting on a good strong front in the face of everything, but it’s been quite hard on him. I’d like to say I’ve been finding it easier…” Arthur
He’s really not good at this whole, ‘lying to everyone’ business.

“Yer lucky to have eachother. And you’ve come to a great place. Albus’ll help you’s out. And me o’course. Anything you’s need, jus let us know. We’re ‘ere for ya.” Hagrid pats his shoulder with his filthy hand, nearly sending him to the ground with the force of it.

“Thank you, I really appreciate it. All you and Albus have done for us, I am extremely grateful.” Arthur’s smile is genuine as he rightens himself back to a proper seated position.

Arthur and Hagrid continue to make surprisingly easy small talk as they clean up the remainder of the brooms, thankfully providing Arthur with a distraction to take his mind off of the disgusting task. He has certainly gained a new appreciation for Merlin and all of the time he’s sent him off to clean the stables. Not that he’ll ever tell him that.

As the last bit of grime is wiped off the last broom, students start to mill out of the school and crowd around in a circle a little ways away.

“Perfect timing.” Hagrid smiles as he collects the brooms back up, this time, taking them towards the group. Arthur prepares himself for yet again more cleaning, now that the brooms are serviceable.

He drops the impressive pile in the center of the student circle. “Thank you Hagrid and Arthur.” A middle aged witch stands next to the pile, her eyes a startling shade of yellow.

“O’course, not a problem at all.” Hagrid beams at her before walking back out of the circle, standing off to the side to observe. Arthur, endlessly curious, walks over to join him after offering his own greetings to the strange lady.

The young student’s eyes light up in excitement as their teacher instructs them to each grab themselves a broom, and Arthur marvels at the wonder of seeing so many children actively wanting to sweep. Arthur looks around for the flying instruments they will no doubt be tasked with cleaning, but cannot spot anything.

He watches in fascinated confusion as the students all place their brooms next to them on the ground before starting to yell at them to come ‘up’. This is truly ridiculous. Why don’t they just pick them up again? Why did they even set them down? What is this ritual? Surely their culture is not this absurd? Arthur’s eyebrows shoot up as he watches the first broom raise up neatly into a student’s waiting hand. Huh.

Once every student has their broom now carefully back in hand, their teacher gives them further instruction and they promptly mount them. Like uncomfortable seats. Arthur gives up guessing what will happen next. Clearly wizards are insane. It shouldn’t surprise him really, considering Merlin of all people.

As the first student floats into the air on their broom perch, Arthur’s eyes nearly pop right out of his skull. They fly on the brooms. Flying broomsticks. What the hell? Then the sheer impossibility of a flying child on a broom nearly smacks the breath out of him. Not even his wildest of dreams have ever looked this absurd.

Soon the entire class is slowly flying around the field, some with a rather concerning wobble.

Out of all of the truly outrageous things the future has had to offer so far, this is definitely the craziest.
*DRACO’S POV*

His potion is going horribly, *horribly* wrong. Draco’s eyes register what they’re staring at for the first time since the first ingredient dropped noisily to the bottom of his cauldron. Angry bubbles threaten to topple over the edge, their colour the sickening brown-purple of a fresh bruise. His eyes widen in alarm as one of the bubbles pops, releasing the too sweet scent of rot. He takes an automatic half step back as his body tries to flee from the stench.

This has never happened before.

Mind a frantic scramble, Draco points his shaking wand at the mess in from of him. *Dammit, what’s the freaking word for the vanishing spell again?! Why am I forgetting it now?! This is a third-year spell, come on!* His wand hand only trembles harder as the writhing goop slops over the edge of his cauldron and makes the slow crawl towards him. The thought of asking for help never even crosses his mind.

Taking a slow calming breath, which he regrets immediately, Draco steadies his hand. *I will not be helpless.* He ransacks his brain with ruthlessly sharp claws trying desperately to grasp the spell.

“Evanesco!” Draco’s voice is surprisingly horse, shoulders relaxing as the mess disappears into non-being. In all of his time learning potions, he has never, not *once* messed a potion so spectacularly. His eyes briefly dart over to the sweating and desperate form of Longbottom hunched over his own threateningly purple goop. Not for the first time this semester, hot shame curls up his midsection, prickling at his spine and churning his stomach.

Refusing this turn of events, and refusing the redness of his face, he straightens his back and brushes his hair out of his eyes. He meets Snape’s eyes head on, the man’s black eyebrows arched and imposing. He flicks a pointed glance at Draco’s now-empty cauldron which Draco also refuses to acknowledge.

“You should’ve seen *my* first attempt at the shrinking solution.” Draco nearly throws a stray curse as he jumps back in surprise. Merlin’s sparkling blue eyes regard him with amusement as he adds wormwood to his perfectly green and peaceful looking potion. Draco’s heart beat echoes around in his momentarily empty head. “Burnt straight through two floors of what was my house at the time. Ate through half my bath-tub. My neighbours weren’t much amused by the racket, let me tell you.” Merlin lets out a huff of a laugh, quiet still to match his voice.

“I didn’t—” Draco stops there, not knowing where he was going with that anymore.

“There’s been a lot going on, it’s normal to get distracted or out of focus every once in a while. From what I’ve seen from you already this year though, you’re a large sight better at potion brewing than I. The only reason I can get any of this right at this point, is from all my years practice. Trust me, it’s not natural talent. Gaius would always lament that one day I would surely take the whole castle down with one of my miss-steps. He never let me make anything unsupervised if he could help it. Smart move on his part.”

Draco has a tough time reconciling this information. *Merlin was like Longbottom? A stinking helplessly clumsy moron?* He narrows his eyes at him. *He’s lying.*

But why?

Merlin laughs as he stirs his perfect solution. “On my second go at this potion, I forgot to brew the
antidote and got stuck the size of my smallest finger for a number of months.” He holds up his little finger as if this proves his story. “Believe me when I say being stepped on is not a fun activity.” He bottles some of his green liquid with neat and efficient movements, spilling not a single drop. “Learned my lesson that time, that’s for sure. Never forgot an antidote after that. Granted, that could be ’cause I avoided brewing another potion for quite a number of years. Then of course I didn’t have much use for them later on.”

Draco just stares at him, trying to picture the hero of the wizarding world running around the size of a mouse, dodging between people’s feet and running from cats. A couple weeks ago, he would dismiss it as an absurd half-baked tale of unrealistic and far-fetched fiction. But now, knowing the actual flesh-and-blood Merlin, he can see it. He finds his lips quirk up as he shakes his head at his classmate.

He wonders if he should be feeling disillusioned, but has no issue recalling the bright vibrant magic bursting out of the man in Dumbledore’s office. As far as Draco has witnessed, Merlin holds up to the legend. The image of the terrifying and immortal being completely overwrites Draco’s impression of the ridiculous student Maldin. That boy was a lie.

Yet he has a hard time feeling intimidated by him. Perhaps it is the fact that although Maldin never existed, he can still see him in the man.

Merlin saunters over to Snape, handing in his completed solution and Draco notices the professor’s eyes go wide momentarily. *It seems I might just be the only one not intimidated by him.* Draco smothered a snicker with his hand.

*Merlin saved my family. He saved the headmaster too. Not like I care about that though.*

*I don’t.*

*But it was nice not to have to kill him.* Draco avoids thinking about the impossibility of him ever being able to kill Dumbledore. Or anyone really. No need to dwell on his own failures.

*He’s on the side of the light, yet he spared the lives of the Death eaters. Father would call him weak. To destroy your enemies is to prevail and be stronger than them. To prove yourself better than them.* Draco recalls the look in Merlin’s eye when he faced them down. The rage, the anger, and the burning overwhelming power. *I don’t think he’s incapable of smiting his enemies. That wasn’t the face of someone too scared to kill. I think he chose to let them live.* Draco doesn’t quite understand it, but he’s forever grateful. As much as his father has been an obstacle in his life, he loves him. And his mother loves him.

*He’s never going to change. Merlin wants him to ‘see the light’ like Dumbledore, but it’s never going to happen.*

Merlin comes back to his desk and joins Draco in packing up their texts and ingredients. “Gods, we have history of magic next. Foul way to end the day.” His eye twitches.

Draco scrunches his nose. “Wouldn’t you be really amazing in that class? Having lived through it and all?” His whisper barely carries amongst the sounds of all their classmates quickly packing their things, not wanting to linger under the intimidating stare of their professor any longer than necessary.

“Ha! Hardly. Goddess, I wish they would stick to the events as I saw them unfold. Well, the ones I was there for at any rate, can’t speak for the stuff I wasn’t around for. Bunch of lies that class is. *Embarrassing* lies.” His face contorts into that of disgust.
“But you’re real? What do you mean lies, I though, ‘cause you’re here and all, that it proves true.”’ They duck their heads under the low ceiling of the classroom’s side exit.

“Well, yes. Parts of it they got right. Obviously. Arthur was king, married to Gwen, Mordred killed him, and Gwen started up the ministry after legalizing magic. But that’s about all they got right.”

Draco is crushed by this information, his face falling. “I knew they must have gotten some details mixed up, as you said your job was a servant, not court sorcerer, but everything?” Draco feels horrified. *All of that misinformation. So much studying gone to waste. If that part of history is false, what else did they get wrong?* Draco is so caught up in his thoughts, he misses the chance to shoot the Weasley boy an angry glare as he passes, the other teen’s face contorted into one of revulsion at the sight him.  Merlin waves at him.

They make their way to the dusty old classroom, Draco’s fingers digging into the spine of his text. “Hold on a sec…” He stops walking abruptly, Blaise almost knocking into his back in the classroom entranceway. *I’m taking a history class with Merlin. I’ll be seated next to Merlin. He can teach me about history, as it actually happened! From the viewpoint of someone who was living there witnessing it in person, a part of it himself. The ultimate primary source! Forget about getting a good grade, clearly I’ll have to memorize a bunch of useless false-facts if I want to pass the exam, but I’ll be getting something better. The first ‘First-Hand’ account of how it all happened!*

Draco starts walking again at the glares and protests of his fellow classmates, scrambling to catch up to Merlin and snag the seat beside him. “Well, you’ll just have to fill me in on what actually went down then. Set the wizarding world straight, one student at a time.” Draco’s eager smile is the largest he’s had all week, actually reaching his eyes this time.

Merlin bites his lip as he nods his head in return. “Yeah, alright then.”
Chapter 34

CHAPTER 34

Hello my pretties! Hope everyone is enjoying themselves! My gift to you is a longer than normal chapter <3

Warning: This chapter contains mature language.

*MERLIN’S POV*

“Good morning everyone! I’m sure you’re all wondering why it is I am interrupting your no doubt scrumptious breakfast. Worry not, you will be encouraged to resume after just this one brief update. I am excited to announce a change to the curriculum this year, as proposed by Kingsley Shackelbolt. If successful, these curriculum changes will be implemented in all of Hogwarts’s neighbouring magical schools. Alongside your Hogsmeade trips, there is now a fantastic new opportunity being afforded the students here at Hogwarts. Accompanied by Professor Zaden, each year will be taken on a field trip outside of the school grounds into a muggle town to experience different muggle activities and learn about their culture as well as technological innovations. This is a mandatory class intended to be both fun, and educational. These trips will take place every other week, the schedule varying depending on your year. Please refer to the schedule posted outside of the hall doors for when your group will be departing.

As I’m sure you all are eager to know where your first trip will take you, Professor Zaden has allowed me to break the surprise and inform everyone that you will be attending what the muggles refer to as a ‘movie theatre’. Please join me in offering a warm Hogwarts welcome to your new second muggle studies Professor Zaden!”

A short fierce looking woman with close cropped dark hair and dark skins steps up to join Dumbledore at the podium. Her clothes are bright and very obviously muggle, her place next to Albus at the front of the hall is startling in their differences. She offers the students a short smile as they greet her with a stammering, and slightly confused applause. Albus’s eyes twinkle as he leads the students in a round of enthusiastic and mildly ridiculous clapping.

The slytherin table follows her movement with their eyes as she takes a seat next to Arthur at the staff table. Their combined gaze is bordering on hostile. Merlin smiles as he watches Arthur shake her hand and pull her seat back for her. He watches as Arthur’s smile warms as she says something to him that Merlin doesn’t catch. They look cute together.

“Merlin’s fiery pubes! Is that a muggle? It’s bad enough that Dumbledoop’s forcing his freaking muggle loving agenda on us, but now there’s a bloody muggle professor?! They’re forcing us to take time away from our studies for this?!” Draco’s eyes briefly dart towards Merlin at Blaise’s heated whisper, just lingering long enough to witness Merlin’s face turn a startling shade of purple. The boy looks a combination of horrified, as if Merlin may snap and take their heads off at any moment, and to Merlin’s utter embarrassment, amusement. He smothers a laugh with his hand that has Merlin glaring at him.

Holding the pathetic remainder of his dignity together by sheer brute force, Merlin leans forward to make his side of the argument. “How can you be expected to make any sort of informed opinion on muggles if you’ve never experienced or been exposed to any part of.”

“She could be a squib. Like Filch.” Goyle spits out the word squib as if it was a piece of rotten food
Draco reaches over to grab a pancake from one of the generously stacked serving dishes. “Who’s to say she’s not just a mudbloo-” He nearly chokes on his first bite at the look Merlin gives him, “-a muggle born? You know what they’re like. Raised by muggles, most of them can’t be bothered with proper wizarding attire.” By the end of his speech, his face is pink and he refuses to meet anyone’s gaze, his focus fixed on his fork. Merlin almost misses the tiny flick of Draco’s eyes to Arthur as he leans over to say something to Hagrid at his end of the teacher’s table. Merlin thinks Draco looks guilty as he takes in mouthfuls of syrup covered pancake.

Blaise looks at Draco as if he let loose a loud flatulence, but says nothing farther.

Merlin sets his fork firmly down on his plate. “The headmaster is not pushing any sort of agenda. He’s merely providing us with the opportunity to form our own opinions. Exposing us to muggle life and culture to allow us to see the truth, and whatever sort of conclusion we wish to draw from it.”

Blaise and Goyle, along with several other slytherins in their year roll their eyes at him, but it is Draco who speaks up, finally meeting him face forward. “He’s hoping we’ll make friends with them. Lowering us to their level. I have no use for muggle activities, not when our way of life works better.”

“They can take us to the zoo, but they can’t expect us to open the doors and join the animals. Live like them. Sheltered and magicless, and stupid. Our current Muggle Studies class is just fine thanks.” Blaise directs a dark look at Albus, currently deep in conversation with a troubled looking Severus. “He’d have us love them, breed with them.”

Merlin feels a new wave of anger sweep over him and fights to keep it off his face. His rage will help no one, convince no one. “How can you hate something and look down on something you have never been a part of, or even properly witnessed? You are just as sheltered from them as the muggles are from you. This class is meant to educate you, so that you may learn something. Whether that be that you and the muggle hating wizards were correct all along, or not, is up to you. Dumbledore is not telling you to love them, or to join them, or even to be-friend them. He’s allowing you to witness them to make you own, informed opinion.” Merlin meets as many of their eyes as he can without craning his neck. “If you still believe that in doing this, he’s pushing a brainwashing-muggle-loving agenda, than that means you believe that by merely witnessing muggle culture first hand, you will be swayed. Meaning that you think he’s right, and that muggles are no better or worse than us.”

A burnet girl to the left of Goyle sputters and spits out a mouthful of pumpkin juice down her front. “Gross, there’s nothing he can subject us to that will prove we should be consorting with muggles. Don’t be absurd.”

“But that’s my point exactly. There is no harm in gaining firsthand knowledge, you’re not going to be hearing a lecture on why muggles are fantastic, you’ll be merely witnessing aspects of their civilization. Dumbledore is not forcing his opinions on you.”

“I’m willing to go. It’s clear our usual Muggle Studies professor has no clue what their talking about, this way we get to see for ourselves. Maldin has a point.” Merlin smiles at Draco, taking a breath in relief.

“What’s your deal with Dumbledoop? You’re new, so no one really knows you… you’re not some kind of mudblood are you?” The girl squints at him as if looking hard enough will unveil to her some sort of secret. Draco looks nervously at Merlin, as if expecting him to take the school down with one angry word.
Merlin raises his head to look her straight in the eye, his jaw tight. Why does this part of my life never seem to change? “My father had magic. But no, my mother did not.” Several students look over at Severus, and a smaller handful even pointedly look down. ‘Half-bloods’ are not as uncommon in slytherin as the ‘pure-bloods’ would like to think. He got a couple of disgusted glances as well as a handful of pitying ones.

“It was she who raised me, protecting a small magical child with her life, sacrificing her livelihood, her friends, her everything to keep me safe. She gave up everything she had for me. Yes, I love muggles. I love them, not because someone told me to, or fed me a line about how wonderful they are, or even because I fell in love with one. I love them because I was able to see them and come to my own conclusions, and that is what I decided. I saw how brilliant they are, people are. With or without magic. It may not be your choice, but everyone is entitled to the opportunity to make their own. This is what Dumbledore is trying to grant you. A choice.” You can choose to be a bigoted clotpole, or you can choose to be a decent person.

“You speak as if we haven’t a choice so far. We’re not stupid or sheltered. I don’t need to see a pile of dung to know that I don’t want to eat it.” The girl’s lip curls up in revulsion. Merlin reminds himself that violence will not serve his cause. His hands clench in his robes and his eyes sting. This child is so young and already she sounds like Uther. How people can speak so horribly about others will always be a mystery to him. Pointless cruelty. He reins in his magic as it zings out through his body, causing those nearest to him to shiver involuntarily. Draco shifts away from him in his seat, his eyes wide and his face white.

All appetite lost, his magic spikes with his emotions, slipping out of his grasp in tandem with his anger. Merlin abruptly pushes back from the table and excuses himself.

He continues unseeing down past the house tables filled with excitedly chattering students, his stride even and quick.

Turning right into the first doorway he finds, Merlin seats himself on the back desk of an empty classroom. He rests his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. Slowly, he relaxes his hold on himself and his magic lashes out around him, golden claw-like tendrils thrashing at the air surrounding him, sinking into nearby surfaces and squeezing. Several desks crumble in on themselves like flowers in a desert drought. Sad black husks of unidentifiable shape surround him, the floor and walls dripping mass like a melting candle.
The surrounding air grows thick and heavy, dark yet brighter at the same time, the shadows growing in contrast with the light washing out all colours to a vibrant gold. Merlin slouches his back and takes a gulp of the solid air.

*First sorcerer, than muggle. Tainted. Corrupt magic user- dirty muggle lover. Vile half-blood.* Nothing he is is ever safe, and he is *tired* of it.

Merlin feels within himself a rage to rival Tom Riddle’s hate and loathing. He feels it next to the stain in his mind, the black soul shard accompanied by a smear of dark pulsating anger. A kinship between them.

Merlin feels the urge to puke at the comparison.

He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to un-see it. He opens them and is faced with the destruction around him. The classroom is no-longer recognizable as anything at all. Sad looking black globs piled on top of a goopy floor that looks ready to cave in. Walls that resemble the inside of a fire damaged cave more than anything else, streaks of what looks to be the remainder of wallpaper sag near the bottom, curling in on themselves and looking suspiciously soggy. The desk Merlin himself is seated on, now a shapeless heap of slimy black goop soaking in slowly through his clothes.

Merlin takes in the destruction around him and lets it go. Gathers up the hate inside and releases it through a puff of air passing his lips. “Fuck.” Self-disappointment wars with embarrassment as he stands on the mushy floor and wipes his hands on his now filthy robe.

His eyes blaze gold as he raises his hand, but before he can direct his magic, to his complete and utter horror, the door- or what’s left of it, opens. His heart stops in his chest and fear of discovery courses through him. He mentally braces himself to have to obliviate a potential innocent student.

Merlin nearly collapses in relief at the sight of a confused and worried looking Arthur, followed by Albus, his eyes wide as he takes in the damage surrounding him.
“Gods Merlin, what happened?” Arthur hurries into the room, headless of the way his shoes sink into the ground, his face contorted with worry. “Are you ok? You ran out of breakfast early and I- what the hell happened in here?”

Merlin feels hot shame course through him. He gives Albus an apologetic look before the room flashes a spectacular gold and the black mounds fill out, re-shape, and form back into the fixtures of the classroom it once was. The wallpaper rolls back up the walls and the floor fills out, regaining its colour and integrity. Within the span of several seconds, the classroom sits around them in the entirety of what it once was. Dust and all.

“Sorry about that. Really. And sorry to worry you. I’m fine. I just… let go a little bit.” Merlin’s hair is a wild cloud around his head. He wishes belatedly to have the presence of mind to have locked the door.

“Merlin, this place. Like the aftermath of a fire. What happened?” Arthur’s hands brace Merlin at the shoulders, his blue eyes wide and imploring.

“I just…” Merlin closes his eyes. “Had a moment. It’s over now. ‘m fine.”

Arthur looks about ready to start shaking him.

Albus steps fully into the room and closes the door behind himself. “It was the slytherins wasn’t it.” Arthur turns to him, brows raised. “They weren’t best pleased with the curriculum change.”

“No, they weren’t. And I expected that. I did. I know the sort of drabble they’ve been fed and how hard that can be to overcome. Change can’t happen overnight and all that. I know. But-” Merlin’s jaw clenches involuntarily. “So much like Uther. Like Nimueh, Morgouse, Morgana, Edwin, and countless others. Completely lost sight of reason.” Merlin’s voice is almost too quiet to hear, spoken mostly for his own benefit. Arthur’s face clears with understanding. *Lost sight of their humanity.*

“She’s just a child! Fear, hate, and pride I can understand. But the disregard for life, and desire to hurt pour out of them in waves! They may never see reason. I cannot help but feel responsible. Maybe if I was there, if I helped, if did something. Something more. I could have stopped this.”

Arthur’s eyes are sad. “No Merlin, this is not your fault. You’ve done everything you can, done more than even what was warranted. Way more. Too much even. I was given the opportunity to change the path humanity was on, and I did nothing. I spat in the face of the gods and stomped on their many chances they gave me.”

Tears magnify the blue of Merlin’s eyes, clumping his eyelashes and leaving streaked paths down his face. “No Arthur, we’ve been over this.” His voice wobbles and threatens to break along with his heart.

“Neither of you are responsible for anyone else’s behaviour but your own.” Albus rests a gentle hand on Merlin’s shoulder. “You did what you could, but you are your own person just as they are. What could have done differently exactly? Babysat humanity, guiding their decisions and shaping their future as you saw fit? Stomping out those that disagree? You have helped. And you’re here now. Not to mention, you have your own life to live. The world is not your responsibility nor your burden to bear. We can help, yes, but the burden of their actions lay on them alone.”

Albus peers at Arthur through his spectacles. “I will not claim to know the details of your lifetime, and the events that transpired, but you are here now. Not even the clutches of death herself could stop you from returning to help your people. You have given up your final rest in death to help them. You have given up more than any man thought possible. You are a great aid, not a hindrance.”
Arthur’s hand covers most of his face, his shoulders are visibly moving with his heavy breathes.

Merlin runs a trembling hand through his hair, doing nothing to flatten it back down. “Albus is right. Wallowing in self-pity will get us nowhere. Our first move has been made. Only actions will accomplish anything.” He lets out a shaky laugh, head tilting back and eyes unfocused at the ceiling. “Goddess knows, I will have plenty of time to wallow in it later.”

Arthur’s hand slips into his, giving it a firm squeeze. “We will.”

*ARTHUR’S POV*

His pack settles onto the wet ground with a soft squelching sound. He stretches his arms up over his head, then laces them together behind him. His modern shirt stretches against his flesh like a seamless second skin, allowing for an impressive range of movement. He goes through his warm up routine, mind racing over the morning’s events as he forces his breathing out evenly, counting between each inhale.

After Merlin’s rather overdue meltdown, Arthur and Albus guided him to Albus’ quarters to seat him on the soft couch with a generous helping of tea. His eyes were focused, his voice even and calm. His face twisted with his words into a smile at Arthur, assuring him that he was ‘fine, really’. Arthur marvels at how convincing he was, but refuses to buy into it. Merlin has had lifetimes to perfect his lies, of course he would be convincing.

Albus told them to take the rest of the day off, fighting Merlin’s protests with the claim that it would be more suspicious for a seventh year student to never skip a single class. Merlin took a sip of the still scalding tea and mumbled his consent, looking defeated and small. Arthur wanted nothing more than to curl up next to him and pet down his wild hair. The urge was strong and startling.

So Arthur did what he was accustomed to when facing unknown emotions and retreated. Feeling the strong need to clear his head and do something productive and familiar, he decided to pick back up training.

Tugging Merlin along with him, quite unable to part with him again, he made out for a clearing before the border of the so called ‘forbidden forest’.

Arthur recalls Merlin’s protests at carrying their pack with a fond smile as he moves through the motions of his routine exercise. Merlin makes himself comfortable under a tree, Arthur jacket spread out underneath him like a picnic blanket.

Felling suitably calmed, Arthur walks over and bends down to pick up his chainmail, thankfully rust free and shockingly shiny, courtesy of Merlin. He hauls the heavy garment over his head and secures his belt before reaching for Excalibur. He looks over at Merlin, the man’s eyes misty and gleaming.

Swinging her around, Arthur adjusts his stance to accompany the weight of the sword back in his hand. His feet move forward and he thrusts the blade out to meet an unseen attacker before making a sharp clean turn to slash at the air behind him. He moves seamlessly through the drills as if it were only yesterday since he wielded her in battle, and not over a thousand years. His muscle memory has stayed with him even through death. Arthur feels a lightness in his chest as a doubt he didn’t even know he had lifts off him.

Mind focused, his body sliding fluidly through the different formations, calmness over takes him.

When he reaches the end of his drills for the third time, he straightens and makes his way over to the now dozing form of his friend. He bumps his leg with his muddy boot. “Come on Merlin, get up.
Join me. There’s only so much I can do without a sparring partner, and god knows you could probably use the exercise.” He probes at him again with his boot. “Come on.”

Unfocused eyes peer up at him, squinting against the harsh sunlight. Merlin mumbles at him before closing them again and putting on an obnoxiously fake snore.

“Merlin!” Arthur’s boot leaves a glob of mud on his pant leg.

Merlin grudgingly opens his eyes, then yawns. “Why couldn’t you have just let me rest for once? Gods Arthur, it’s not like I was ever a formidable opponent with a sword, where’s the challenge for you? Or is the thought of taking the piss out of a poor old man just too tempting?” He glares at the world as he fumbles to his feet. Then his eyes meet Arthurs and suddenly Merlin’s face softens as he bites his lip, looking suddenly close to tears.

“What, scared that after all those many years of experience, you’ll be easily beaten by a thirty year old? I haven’t sparred in over a thousand years, surly that evens the playing field at least a little?” Arthur’s smile is teasing.

Merlin crosses his arms. “You think I’ve been spending my time honing my swordsmanship? Really? What did I ever do to give you the impression that that is what I would spend my long and luxurious retirement doing?”

“Scared it is then. Frightened of being beaten like your early days in Camelot. Well there’s only one way to fix that! And it’s not like we can have you getting flabby. What sort of roll-model will you be if you let yourself go? You know, they say exercise is good for the elderly.” Arthur swings his sword around and Merlin rolls his eyes.

Arthur tosses Merlin a sword of his own that Arthur feels pride at managing to have snuck off to get it without alerting him. The hilt is plain, but the blade is sleek and sharp, reflecting the sunlight off of its elegant mirror finish. Merlin holds it in front of himself, testing the weight.

Arthur’s eyes gleam. “What, too heavy for you already?” The laughter is clear in his voice.

“Shut up” Ha! It is!

“We can start with something smaller if it’s too much for you.” Merlin looks like he’s resisting the urge to hex him.

Merlin props his blade into the grass in front of himself. “If it’s a challenge in a formidable opponent you’re looking for then-” Merlin’s body glows a faint gold as his muscles tone and fill out just barely enough to be noticed from under his clothes. But the change does not go unnoticed by Arthur.

“That’s cheating!” His scandalized voice is bordering on shrill.

Merlin smirks as he takes off his sweater, showing off a bit as he picks his sword back up and twirls it around in a very Arthur-like fashion.

Arthur’s eyes nearly bug out of his face. “That’s actually kind of terrifying.”

“I promise, no use of my magic from this point on. It’ll be a fair fight.” Merlin and Arthur mirror their stances across from each other. This should be interesting.

Arthur’s smile and tightened grip on Excalibur is all the warning Merlin receives before he’s charged at. Merlin matches him, swiftly blocking each blow Arthur deals him and he nearly falters in surprise.
Several minutes pass in, still neither of them manage to land a blow. Finally, Arthur’s blade skims off of Merlin’s chest, tilted on its side as to dull the hit. Merlin gracefully twists away, the opening now safely guarded once again. His moves are fluid, organized, and surprisingly acrobatic. Arthur picks up his pace and strengthens his blows relentlessly pushing Merlin back. He breaks out into a sweat, enjoying their sparring more than he thought he would. *He could give several of the knights a run for their money. It’s almost a shame he never put that kind of effort in when I was actively trying to train him. He could have been formidable.*

After a rather impressive show of footwork and flexibility, Arthur call them to a halt.

“Where did you learn to move like that?” Arthur fights to keep the impressed tone out of his voice.

Merlin wipes a sweaty hand through his hair, still panting. “A combination of different martial arts. I did a bit of traveling while you were gone and took up some new skills. I’m unfortunately quite rusty though.”

“I’m impressed.” He is.

“I still don’t think I’d be able to beat you though. Out of practice or no. Over 1500 years and you still hold up as one of the best fighters I’ve ever seen.” His breathing slowly evens out.

“I never expected you to beat me. Just providing some sort of challenge is nice. For once.” His teasing smirk is met with a show of Merlin’s tongue. “Go again?”

Merlin responds by shifting back into a battle ready stance and raising a brow.

After several more defeats where Arthur lands a ‘killing blow’, or trips Merlin up, landing him firmly on the ground, he become aware once again of their surroundings. *We seem to have worked up an audience.* Flicking his eyes pointedly to the side, Arthur draws Merlin’s awareness to the small group of students standing a handful of paces away.

Smiling to himself, Arthur falls back into a slightly slower rhythm, Merlin easily picks up on the shift and matches him, the fight turning from ‘to incapacitate’, to ‘showing off’. They dance around each other merrily, blades singing through the air.

“Sure you don’t want me to train you Merlin?” Arthur shouts over the heavy ringing of their weapons meeting between them. “Might be fun.”

Merlin’s chest rises and falls, weariness in the line of his arms holding his sword aloft. “I haven’t much need of it really. But-” He dodges Arthur’s blow to his head, “admittedly, I might actually find it enjoyable.” Arthur laughs, effortlessly disarming him. “I haven’t had something to actively improve for myself in a long while. A challenge, you know?”

Arthur’s eyes glint. “Yes, I know the feeling.” Merlin swats him over the head with his now free hand, his sword laying a couple feet away from him where Arthur flung it. A round of enthusiastic applause meets them as they turn towards their unexpected audience.

“So this is what you decided to get up to instead of potions class. I must admit, it does look a large sight more fun.” Ron’s eyes shine as he regards them.

“Hey guys,” Merlin’s wave is slightly feeble, his shoulders slumped and tired. His face is pink, but happy looking. Arthur’s heart feels light.

“Why the swords? Wouldn’t it be more beneficial to practice dueling with spells? It’s not as if you can fight magic with mundane metal sticks.” A ravenclaw Merlin has never seen before is eyeing
Arthur’s sword with raised brows and crossed arms.

Arthur turns to Merlin, his head tilted and a question posed in his expression. Merlin bites his lip and nods his consent. “Yeah? You want to give it a shot then?” He swings his sword in a graceful circle, backing up to give themselves room. “Go for it. Hit me.”

The student straightens their back and widens their stance in response. Taking the hint, the other students back off, forming a loose semi-circle around them. Merlin joins them, picking up his sword to place on the ground farther away. He gives Arthur a thumbs up and a dimpled smile.

Arthur rolls his shoulders. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Cut!” Wand pointed squarely at Arthur, purple light shoots out from the tip. Arthur spares a split second to marvel at the fact that the spell was in Welsh- or the English he can apparent understand now, before he quickly dodges out of the way. Without a moment’s pause, the student shouts several more words followed by blasts of menacing looking light. He steps neatly out of the way of two, deflecting the third with Excalibur, the blue stream of light ricocheting back towards the student, smacking them right in their midsection. Immediately, they fly back through the air, landing in a heap on the ground with their wand flying back towards Arthur. He catches it easily in his hand.

“Magic is not all it takes to win a battle.” Arthur tosses the teen back their wand as they move to righten themselves.

The students gathered around take a moment of silent appreciation for the complete defeat of their peer. Wide eyes look to Arthur in surprise.

“Holy shit, that was cool.” Ron’s smile is large and his eyes hopeful.

“That was very impressive.” Hermione glances at Merlin, then back to Arthur, taking a careful step forwards. “Would you teach us?”

Excitement mixed with hope shines through Arthur. They want to train like knights. Well, mage-knights. Feeling like he might have a place here in this time, might belong, he take a step forwards. “I would be honored to.” He props his sword in the ground in front of him. “Although it will be a little different than what you saw today. My blade is not a normal weapon, and the art of its forgery has been lost to time. The skills you learn training with the sword are easily applied to magical duels. The most formidable opponents are those with a wide range of different skillsets, capable of combining them to maximum effect. And of course, it is still important to be capable of defending yourselves when wandless.”

Every student is looking at him intently their eyes focused and determined. They’re so… they may actually be better than the old noble’s kid’s I had to train. At least they want to learn. For now at least.

“I can train you to be faster, stronger, sharper, and able to see the weaknesses and openings your opponents will present you with. I can teach you to be just as deadly with a ‘muggle’ weapon as you are wielding magic. But it will not be easy. You will be tired, sore, angry, frustrated, sweaty, and exhausted. It is a fair trade, but one every knight in training must pay. To train under me, every student must accept that. It is hard work, and not one to come easily.”

Eagerly nodding heads surround him. Ron’s smile is larger than he’s ever seen it. A couple students are excitedly whispers to each other. Arthur’s matching enthusiasm nearly causes him to bounce on his feet.
Merlin’s eyes are gleaming. “Well I guess it’s official then. Welcome to ‘The Knights’ club.”

Hermione snickers into her hand, whispering the words ‘knight club’ to Ron, who just looks confused. Arthur ignores them.

Arthur nods his head once. “I like it. So it’s settled then. Every morning a half hour before sunrise, we meet here in this clearing for training. Eat a quick breakfast before hand, I won’t have anyone passing out on me, or having any teachers complaining to me that you lot are falling asleep in class. Maldin will bring the equipment the first day, but after that every man- and woman- will be responsible for the upkeep of their own.”

Ron’s face has gone white, along with several other students’. Hermione, if anything, looks more pleased.

“Blimey, that’s horrible! We’ll be awake before the house-elves!” A couple Gryffindor’s nod along, eyes wide in horror. “And… everyday? Surely we could just meet up like, twice a week or something, yeah? Like quidditch.”

Arthur raises his eyebrows. “Every day before dawn. You want to learn to fight and defend yourself? You have to work for it. Train your body to remember. And I still have work to do during the day, so it’s either the mornings, or before bed when everyone is already tired and warn out. If you want to join our club, you’ll be here tomorrow morning awake and fed.” He meets the eyes of a frightened looking slytherin first year. “And besides, you’ll want time to bathe before attending your regular classes, trust me. You’re classmates will thank you.” He winks at the older students, and the younger kids giggle.

Merlin breaks from the group to stand next to Arthur. “I’ll be doing the sign-up tomorrow morning, so just show-up if you’re interested. Feel free to tell more people and bring along anyone else who wants to join!”
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

I can’t believe that I’m at chapter 35 and still nowhere near finished the story. This has really blown all of my word count expectations. Chapters may take a little longer being released, but they’ll keep coming for a long while.

***I realized that pretty much all other fanfics have disclaimers, so here we go: I do not in any way own BBC’s Merlin or J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter. If I did, the series’ would have taken a sharp turn in a different direction. LGBTQ+ people need better representation than an off screen mention.

“SCREE! SCREE! SCREE! SCREE! SCR-” Arthur slumps back onto his mattress with a moan, heart beating rapidly and breathing in short little bursts. He’s going to kill Merlin.

His hand roughly scratches against his eyes in attempt to clear the foggy haze he woke up with. His mouth is dry and muscles feel tired and sore. He stretches out on the bed, back twinging in protest. Gods, I let myself go. Completely out of shape. He spares a moment’s thought of the morning practices being as much help for him as for his newly acquired students.

Merlin better be feeling it too. His face stretches into a smile at that. Images of Merlin’s loud complaints of sore muscles fill his head, dragging his feet pathetically while he walks, slumped and favouring his left leg. He certainly gave Arthur a surprise with his fighting abilities, but like he said, he’s rusty and quite likely in worse shape than Arthur. It's been maybe a couple months for me, but likely several years for Merlin.

“scree. Scree. scREE! SCREE! S-” Arthur sits bolt upright, eyes wide and body tense. The piercing scream jabs into his skull like a heated blade through the eyes. “SCREE! SCREE!” His hand slams down with full force onto the damned bird-shaped contraption Merlin gave him with a wink last night. I hope he suffers.

Now undoubtable awake, Arthur contemplates smashing the small innocent looking bird alarm. It glares back at him with its tiny unblinking beady eyes. He’s certain it will be satisfying. His hand clasps over it, but freezes with a wicked glint in his eye. On no, the little devil has a promising future yet. Oh yes.

Feeling now significantly more cheered, Arthur pushes all intruding thoughts of Camelot to the back of his head as he gets ready for his no doubt eventful morning. His armour slides comfortably onto his body, buckling up on its own in a way that Arthur refuses to find unsettling. Freaking Merlin. He’s definitely going to get back at him.

Hagrid’s snores shake the kitchen ware and rattle the pots hanging along the wall as Arthur passes by. Fang drools happily asleep on his bed in the corner of the living room. Arthur sneaks along silently even though he’s certain it would take more than a full battle raging to wake a slumbering Hagrid.

Feeling brave and lazy at the same time, he pockets a rock cake on his way out, certain that if his teeth have lasted as long as they have, they won’t be thwarted by mere breakfast food. The morning
air is fresh and damp as he makes his way towards the clearing.

Arthur looks up at the sky and the sun. He scrutinizes the shadows cast by the forest trees. He might be a little early. He turns back to the direction of the castle, not a student or Merlin in sight.

His bag thumps on the moist ground and he rolls his stiff shoulders. He unsheathes his sword and places it next to his bag before taking the time to move through his routine stretches. Might as well get a head start on everyone and clear his thoughts before the day.

An unknown amount of time passes, lost deep in his steady breathing and the burn of his muscles as he moves through forms, before he becomes aware of a figure at the edge of his vision.

“Good morning Arthur!” Arthur straightens and turns around to face the voice. Something is not right.

“Happy to see you up and about awake so early!” Merlin’s voice is crisp and chipper, cutting through the morning fog like a war flute. Arthur’s face is murderous as he takes in the sight before him. Straight backed, bright faced, perfectly balanced, and happy looking.

“What are you doing?” Arthur’s voice is almost a growl. That is just not fair.

“What do you mean? I told you I’d be here for sword fighting club this morning. Here I am.” His annoyingly well rested face looks at Arthur in confusion and mild concern. Damn him.

“No, why aren’t you, you know. Dead on your feet. Tired. Sore. In pain. Something. Why are you like this? I know you worked just as hard, if not harder, than I yesterday. You should be feeling it.” Arthur crosses his arms.

“What? Oh. Are you jealous? Is that what’s going on?”

“No!” Merlin’s face is smug and Arthur wants to lob a cake at it.

“I figured I’d be of no use to anyone today if I let myself hold back and make myself feel yesterday’s workout. So, I let my magic have at it and bam! Fresh as new.” As he talks, pieces of armour float up from his open bag and fit themselves onto his slight frame.

Arthur narrows his eyes at him and doesn’t bother with a response. He throws Merlin a sword, not waiting for him to go through a stretch routine as clearly he’s of no need of it.

“Looking forward to the field trip tomorrow? The seventh years get to go to the movies! You know what those are right? -Well, if you don’t it’ll be a fun surprise- anyways, I spoke with Hagrid and Professor Zaden, they’ve have agreed that you can take the day off work tomorrow to join us as an extra ‘chaperone’. So we can go together!” Merlin’s smile is disarming all on its own, and Arthur finds the distraction has led to Merlin actually one-upping him and landing his sword face down in the grass. “They wouldn’t tell me what film we’re going to see, but assured me that it’s a good one. Apparently it’s not a new movie, but an old one that’s getting a special screening, just for us.”

“Sounds promising.” Arthur picks his sword back up, red faced and off balance, but uncertain as to why. He swings it around a couple times, shaking his head to clear it.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been to the movies. Not quite as fun an activity alone. I’m sure it’s be a nice exciting surprise for the both of us.” Arthur scours his mind for the word ‘movies’. He’s certain he has never heard it before, yet his brain helpfully supplies him with images of moving people, disembodied voices, and ludicrously overt displays of magic flashing behind his eyes. Ethel had insisted he join her for what she referred to as her ‘daily program’ for several evenings and had sat
Arthur down on her plush chair to stare into what Arthur could have sworn was a portal into another world. She called the window an assortment of different names, none of which were ‘movies’, yet his head is insisting that is it. He recalls the laptop having a similar display of tiny moving scenes. Despite his emotional upheaval, Arthur finds himself almost missing his time with Ethel and all of her strange contraptions.

“Do you think it’d be possible to—” He blocks a rather strong blow to his midsection, “—possible to visit Ethel while we’re away from the castle?” It grates on him to ask permission, yet this entire situation has placed him so far away from any comfort zone he might have had, he shouldn’t feel all that surprised. Merlin, for all that he was Arthur’s servant in their first lifetime, is now clearly the one in the lead role. That and Arthur has no desire to be parted from him again, even if it is just to visit a friend.

Merlin takes a step back to wipe off the newly formed sweat on his brow. “Sure, I don’t see why not. It might be a bit tricky to part from the group without causing suspicion- or alarm, but it’s not like I don’t have practice.” He smile is perhaps a little embarrassed.

“Huh, yeah. I guess I’ll finally get to see you in action.” I hope she won’t mind us just poping in randomly.

They continue their sword play, lazily and perhaps a bit sluggish, the damp morning air making Arthur’s shirt stick to him awkwardly, until the first bit of students show up. Their eyes and face puffy and their hair bedraggled, they stand around Merlin and Arthur in a semi-circle eagerly yet still obviously sleepy.

“Welcome to the first day of training. I’m happy to see most of you could make it- and decided to bring friends.” He nods his head at the newcomers.

“If you could please sign here, you’ll be an official member of The Knights Club.” Merlin approaches the students one at a time, after producing a long scroll of parchment and quill, seemingly out of the air itself.

“Once that’s out of the way, then we can get to business. To my right, you’ll notice a pile of what we
are going to be using as gambesons, at least until we get you all properly measured for chainmail and
armour. Find one that looks like it will fit, as it is temporary it doesn’t have to be perfect. Put it on
and grab yourself a wooden practice sword. You won’t be fighting with the practice swords today,
but I want everyone to start building the muscle it takes to wield a blade properly.” Arthur notices
Draco amongst two other eager looking slytherin students, no doubt brought along by Merlin. He
smiles at him in greeting before tossing him a practice sword.

Once all the students are lined up wearing an assortment of ill fitted padding and holding their
wooden swords with gusto, Arthur instructs them all to put it on the ground next to them and follow
as he leads them through a series of stretches. He ignore the annoyed muttering about yoga, whatever
that is, and informs them to take note as this is what every morning practice will entail.

He guides them through the most basic forms, walking around the clearing and adjusting their
posture and the odd lopsided stance until everyone is not perfect, but at least not fumbling. He
demonstrates the different forms, slowly and smoothly moving from one to another, followed by
Merlin adding in the occasional addition from his studies abroad. The new forms compliment Arthurs
traditional ones and Arthur files them away for further practice use.

Half way through, the sun still low in the sky, Arthur instructs them all to pick up their wooden
swords. He demonstrates the proper hold for the size of the weapon they will be starting with,
followed by showing how the addition of a weapon changes your center of balance as you work
through the formations he just had them go through.

Awake and alert eyes follow his movements, everyone silent in their focus. Arthur finds the quiet a
harsh contrast to training his knights. He catches the sound of early birds chirping in the trees and
relaxes into it.

By the time Arthur has them all show him that they can manage the proper grip on their weapons,
their hands sweaty and their eyes squinting in the morning sunlight, Arthur calls practice to a close.

The students hunch down as if their puppet strings have been sliced through, their swords dropping
to the ground. Soft conversation starts up, as well as several smart students going through the
stretching routine again. Appreciative waves, nods, and thanks are directed his way, alongside more
than one surprised and impressed look at Merlin.

“Is it true that you can win a magical duel with nothing but a sword?” A wide eyed younger student
peers up at Arthur from under her hair curtains. He notices several other curious and hungry eyes
directed at him at her question.

“It is, yes. Of course, the blade you wield will make a difference, as normal metal will not be
resistant to certain magical attacks. But, yes, it is possible. Learning traditional sword play will also
help you duel with magic. Your physical strength as well as reflexes and endurance will improve,
giving you an advantage against those your up against.”

The little girl just stares at him in wonder, before dropping her eyes down to the wooden sword in
her hand. She nods once, to herself, before thanking him and running back to her group of friends,
also string at him in open admiration wonder.

“See you in Transfiguration Maldin, we’re headed back for a quick bath before class starts. Thanks
Professor Dragan.” One of Merlin’s slytherin friends waves at them before making his way back to
the school with his group. Arthur startles at being called professor, straightening his back and trying
to process the change. Prince, Knight, King Regent, King, Mr, and now Professor. Professor Arthur
Dragan. Is that what I am now?
As the last student makes off with their equipment back into the castle, Arthur and Merlin pack their things and follow after them.

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His eyes are huge as they take in all the sights around them. It feels as if he may never blink again. A train Merlin had called it. The massive serpentine metal contraption hurdles them faster than the speed of Ethel’s car. His wide eyes shift around to the students packed in around him, many of whom mirror his own white knuckled grip of the seat. One student even has their hand firmly pressed against their mouth in a- hopefully successful- attempt at keeping their breakfast. Arthur fears he may have to join them shortly.

Merlin looks down at him in sympathy from his post in the hallway between seats. His only support in the tunneling monstrosity, a flimsy looking metal pole secured to floor and roof. Arthur had urged him to seat himself, citing that he has no need to prove himself farther through feats of bravery, but was met with snickers from some of the gryffindors, of course of whom were also merely standing around as if they weren’t hurdling at frightful speeds under the earth itself. He hears snippets of whispering, the word ‘pure-blood’ pops up more than once.

“We shouldn’t be long Arthur. Just a few more stops.” His hand comes to rest briefly on Arthur’s shoulder.

“I don’t know how anyone in their right mind can travel in this insanity daily.” Draco’s usual pale skin is making a valiant effort to match his tie.

“This is awful.” Ron’s voice is muffled through his arms, his head buried in their folds in his lap. Hermione’s hand strokes along his back in a soothing fashion. Draco darts wide disbelieving eyes at Ron, probably over the fact that they finally seem to agree on something.

Hermione tries to catch Draco’s eye, but he looks away.

Arthur gets lost in the rushing smudges of light through the window. He relaxes into the steady thrumming around him and closes his eyes.

“Alrighty everyone, This next stop is ours. I’ll not have anyone getting lost on me, so I expect you all to keep with the buddy system and keep either Mr.Dragan or I in your line of sight at all times.”

Arthur perks up at the sound of his alias, blinking his eyes open and trying to soften the churning of his gut.

The seated students around them scramble to their feet and cling uneasily to the bars, some clasping nervously at the arms of their fellow students’. Arthur averts his eyes from the welcoming looking crook in Merlin’s arm as he holds the bar in front of them, grabbing instead the empty spot on the bar above Merlin’s hand.

Suddenly the train comes to another nauseating stop, half the students sliding around dramatically, struggling to remain upright. Arthur swallows down the taste of his semi-digested breakfast and squares his feet.

Without giving him the chance to protest, Merlin grabs his hand, lacing their fingers together and hauls Arthur off the train. Arthur opens his mouth to tell him in no uncertain terms that he is not a child, thank you very much, but shuts it quite quickly upon being plunged into the sea of people that await them. Arthur didn’t think it was possible to witness more people in one place then there was at
Diagon Ally, but here they are. Crazy hoarding masses moving along at various speeds in various undiscernible directions. Children and adults, elderly and babies in wheeled chairs, the rich and the poor, all together in this one horrible underground cave. Arthur tightens his hold on Merlin’s hand unconsciously.

Merlin cranes his neck above the people, before tugging Arthur sharply to the right and latching onto an unsuspecting Draco. He tries to yank his hand out of Merlin’s surprisingly strong grasp, but Merlin just barks something at him that Arthur doesn’t catch. Draco turns to Arthur, probably for support for his cause, but Arthur just hold up his own hand still tightly bound with Merlin’s and raises his eyebrows in a silent, what can you do?

Stuck to each others sides like they’ve been nailed together, they make with surprising speed to a set of stairs and then finally outside and above ground. Arthur takes a relieved breath of fresh air, catching Merlin grinning at him from the corner of his eye.

Biting down on his own grin, he squeezes Merlin’s hand and takes off to follow the students.

They catch up to Ron and Hermione, who are also holding hands, and Arthur fights his flushing face. As if reading his thoughts, Merlin tugs him closer. Arthur checks him lightly with his hip, sending his sprawling ungainly against a scowling Draco.

“Let go-” Draco’s heated whisper is loud enough for Arthur to hear in his close-proximity.

Merlin gives him the look an old man would give a child acting out and releases his hand. Draco dramatically shakes it out and, for some reason, scowls at Arthur. Arthur raises his free hand in surrender and Draco marches up to walk with his fellow slytherins instead.

“I don’t know why he insists on hating this trip. He might even find himself having fun if he would just relax.” Merlin’s stride becomes heavier as he continues to lead Arthur along.

They pass by several perplexing store fronts that Arthur wishes he had the chance to explore, his feet dragging along as he tries to get a closer look through the shop windows. Merlin slows down with him and several students pass them, giving them varying looks.

Arthur doesn’t want to make Merlin uncomfortable, but he feels he should say something before he drives the poor boy away. “It might be best to give him some space. At least for a little bit. Let him adjust, then come to you. Make yourself available to him so he knows you’re there, but-” He pauses, searching for the words. Arthur’s really not sure where Merlin has developed the new clinging-hand-holding habit of his, and he’s not sure if Merlin’s even aware how unusual it is. “-just try not to crowd him.”

“I didn’t-” Merlin’s face is warming its way into an indignant glare.

“Merlin, you grabbed his hand and wouldn’t let go. Again.”

Merlin stops walking abruptly, looking down at their entwined hands. He pries his fingers loose and then just holds them awkwardly at his side. Arthur’s heart breaks for the look on his face and he quickly grabs his friends retreated hands in his own, firmly re-twining their fingers. “Merlin,” Arthur’s voice is soft, “I have no issue with you holding my hand. Although admittedly, it is a little odd.” Arthur refuses to admit that he feels lost without the firm presence.

“I just- I… I don’t want to lose anyone. I can’t lose anyone else.” Merlin’s clear blue eyes gaze up at him, their round doe-eyed-ness only increased by his youthful form. “I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t. You won’t lose me. I am here with you and I’m not going anywhere without you.” His
voice is soft but strong and resolute. His thumb strokes the back of Merlin’s knuckles in comfort.

Merlin gives him a watery smile before tugging on his arm for them to catch up to the rest of their group. The assortment of different clothing styles making them easy to pick out amongst the bustle of everyday folk.

Finally, they stop in front of a large double doored building with bright lights lining a sign with some rather ridiculous and seemingly random words. Hermione appears by his side with an excited look on her face, tugging along a wide eyed and curious Ron. Draco and his housemates’ have replaced their usual smiling faces with masks of stone.

Professor Zaden stops them in the large entrance hall, collected in an uncomfortably tight group. “We are going to be seeing ‘The Sword and the Stone’ in theatre three. Everyone is to follow me and take their seats in the theatre before you are welcome to come back out to purchase refreshments. Popcorn is the traditional snack of choice while watching a movie, if you are keen on creating an accurate experience.

“There is to be no talking- at all- throughout the movie. If you must use the bathroom, quietly make your way out and back without disturbing the rest of the theatre. We will all be headed over to a café down the street afterwards to discuss our individual experiences as well as learn more about the different customs. Try to hold off commentary until then.

“And lastly, this movie experience is typically meant for entertainment purposes as well as educational, so do try to have fun.” Her voice is clear and echoes slightly in the open space.

Something about the movie title has Arthur suspicious.

As they make their way farther into the building towards room three, Merlin leans in close to Arthur’s ear with a whispered laugh. “The Sword and the Stone- I’ve seen that one. Goddess above, you’re going to either hate it or love it. Just keep in mind that they created it as a piece of fiction. It is intentionally false.” He bites his lips as if to stop himself from saying more and Arthur’s curiosity spikes.

Theatre number three takes his breath away. Arthur has a hard time comprehending how such the huge cavernous room fits inside the building they entered. And more than one, since this is number ‘three’. The massive box like room is made even more bizarre by the addition of a sloped floor lined entirely in comfortable looking seats. Arthur cranes his neck to look at the surprisingly un-ornate ceiling.

The entirety of the wall facing the sea of chairs is white, blank, and ominous. Arthur tries to imagine moving images like on the laptop, but of the size to cover the whole wall. His eyes nearly bug out of his skull.

“Come on, lets grab a good seat before they all fill out.” Merlin tugs Arthur up the steps and plops them down in seats along the back wall. “I hope you don’t mind sitting at the back, I just don’t want to be in ear shot of their grumbling and have it ruined on you.” Merlin narrows his eyes at the cluster of slytherins parked dead center in the room, sitting straight backed and stiff.

“No, it’s fine. This is good.” Arthur startles as his chair back tips backwards slightly with his weight.

Ron and Hermione take the seats next to them, Ron’s expression matches Arthurs. “This place is incredible. Dad would love it here, could you imagine? Hermione, we have to take him out to one of these.”

“The movie hasn’t even started yet.” Hermione’s smile is pleased.
“We should get our snack and stuff now, before it does.” Merlin gets up from his seat, leaving his vibrant green knitted sweater on the back of the chair. “No Arthur, it’s alight you don’t have to get up. I can get our food and bring it back.”

“Oh, alright. Thank you Maldin.” Merlin’s smile is disarming.

“Oh yes, definitely, I’ll come with. Ron, what sort of drink do you want?” Hermione stands to join him, her bag replacing her on her seat.

“Um, I’ll have some of that sweet fizzy drink? The orange stuff?” Ron struggles in his pocket to bring out small folds of paper, handing the full wad to Hermione.

“I’ll get you the orange fizzy drink too, I think you’ll like it, what with your new obsession with orange juice.” Merlin and Hermione make their way down towards the exit, Ron calling a belated thanks down to them before they disappear out the door.

“So. Ever seen one of these movies before?” Ron slides into Merlin’s now vacant seat.

Arthur gives a small laugh. “No I haven’t yet, no.”

“Oh, right. ‘Course not. Well. Neither have I really. I mean, Hermione’s shown me some programs on a teller-vision over the summer once, wildly exciting. But nothing like this.”

“Yeah, I’ve watched some things on a laptop, and some shows on TV, but nothing like this at all either.” He stares at the blank expanse of screen in anticipation.

Suddenly everything lights up at once and dazzling colours dance across the screen to form the image of a car barreling down the countryside, loud booming sounds come from all around them. Arthur nearly jumps out of his seat in alarm, heart beating a jig in his chest.

“Bloody hell man, that’s loud.” Ron’s hands tightly grip the arm rests, the bright lights from the screen reflecting off his wide eyes.

“It’s started but they’re not back yet. Should we tell someone to stop the movie and wait?” Arthur peels his eyes away from the colourful display to linger by the door.

“Nah, I don’t think this is the movie yet. Just some of those comertals.” At Arthur’s questioning face, he elaborates. “Like, advertisements and such. Trying to get us to buy stuff. Hermione warned me about these.”

They laps into thrilled silence, both sets of eyes glued to the screen as life-like food bits dance around larger than people to sharp clanging music with a strong drum beat akin to a war drum. After several of these play through advertising different assortments of mysterious things Arthur has a hard time piecing together, he spots Merlin and Hermione making their way back, arms loaded with bags and cups.

Arthur gently nudges Ron’s arm and he scoots back into his own seat without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Hey, here this is yours.” Merlin plunks a large heaping bag full of fluffy looking yellow bits onto his lap and places a lidded cup into the divot on the armrest of the seat.

“Thanks. What’s this?” He looks down at the delicious smelling food, the heat seeping through to the skin of his legs.

Almost immediately the lights in the room dim and then go out, the theatre falling silent in unison. Dreamy music starts up as a painted scene comes on screen, moving and twisting as if it were real.

Arthur takes his fist bite of popcorn as the movie plays, the crunchy yellow bite melting in his mouth with the comfortingly familiar flavour of butter and salt. He relaxes back in his seat.

His eyes widen comically as the main characters are introduced. Dear gods. That’s supposed to be me?!

He sneaks a look at the Merlin beside him, comparing him with his on-screen version. Pah! He’s an old man! Arthur finds a deep amusement and satisfaction in the fact that Dragoon was the face remembered for his friend, although he bristles at being portrayed as a child.

Merlin squeezes his hand, alerting him to the fact that they are still apparently holding hands. Merlin must have grabbed ahold again while he was distracted.
Hello both old and new readers! I have a new chapter for you! Here this fanfic turns into a bit of a “coffee shop fanfic” for one chapter, so enjoy the light and fluffy (it’s temporary). You will all be pleased to hear that the next chapter has already been partially written, as well as the outline been hashed out for the next several chapters. It is my goal to make the next couple updates come sooner than the gross stretch of time it usually takes.

Also! Check out chapter 34 again if you wish to see the illustration I have added.

*Any of you like the art? Well, if there’s a specific scene or character you’d like to see illustrated, feel free to let me know and I’ll consider it!

**For any of you who like to re-read, I’m sure you’ve been noticing I’ve been going back and editing/re-working some areas. If there is anything you think in the past chapters that could be improved upon, please please let me know. This is my first piece of fictional writing since high school (oh my), so any and all help is greatly appreciated.

***Special thanks to my wonderful reader who pointed out my poopy typo, goodness I almost wanted to leave it, it was so fabulously bad.

The café is thankfully empty of customers when they arrive, the four of them smile at the excited looking lady behind the counter as they seat themselves around a table in the back. Arthur looks around at the cozy little room, the fireplace on the wall, the strange art, the cozy mismatched chairs, and the assortment of strange machines behind the counter. Albus would feel right at home here.

“I’m really not sure we’ll all fit in here.” Hermione eyeballs the limited seating. Judging by the expression on the tavern lady’s face, this place has indeed rarely seen a crowd.

“Malfoy and them lot can always just stand in the corner. Likes to look down on us all anyway.” Ron settles back in his seat. Merlin sighs.

Arthur glances back over at the front counter and all of its mysterious and intriguing contraptions, wondering idly if he’ll ever get used to seeing such strange things in every area he looks. It seems as if for every question that gets answered, ten more pop up to fill the space. He feels like his head might burst from trying to keep them all contained and sorted.

The lady at the front catches him looking and her eyes light up. She scuttles around the area for a moment before opening up part of the counter like a door swinging wide, then makes her way over towards them.

“Hello there! Our hot drinks menu is posted behind the counter on the back wall for all who are interested, and our delicious selection of freshly baked goods-from this morning I might add- are behind the glass at the front, just over there.” She points a finger towards an impressive and impossible to miss selection of treats on display. “If there’s anything that takes your fancy that’s not on display, or on the menu, just ask and I can tell you if it’s something I might be able to whip up.” Her smile is overly large.
“Thanks. We’ll be up in a bit.” Merlin’s smile briefly matches hers. The lady nods politely before heading back to her post behind the counter, one of the contraptions now emitting a whirring sound.

“We should probably get our orders before everyone else gets here. If we ever wish to see our food that is.”

“Smart lady Hermione. So Arthur, any idea what it is you want to have? I don’t imagine you’re terribly familiar with what is available, shall I list and describe for you?” Merlin folds his hands in front of himself on the table.

“Actually, I was thinking it’d be nice to have one of those hot chocolates. Unless there is something else similar to that I have yet to try that you think I might like.” Ten years as his manservant has Merlin very aware of Arthur’s taste preferences.

Merlin’s eyes go wide. “You’ve been to a café before?”

“No no, you are with me here for this first epic journey, not to worry. Ethel severed hot chocolate a couple times and I found myself quite fond of it.” Ron nods his head along in agreement with his beverage of choice.

“Right then, um. You could always try a flavoured hot chocolate. Cinnamon, mint, spiced, with or without cream… Or you could try coffee!” Merlin’s mouth stretches to the far corners of his face. “Coffee is my favourite. It’s another hot drink, a bit bitter unless you add sweetener, and smells and tastes absolutely delicious. Got me through many early mornings back in my uni days. Wonderful invention coffee.”

“I could definitely see it being your favourite drink. That actually explains a lot.” Ron’s voice holds laughter.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Merlin’s eyes are narrowed, but the humour has not left his face.

“Well…” Ron trails off with a grin.

Arthur feels like he’s missing something.

“What they’ve both failed to mention-” Hermione pipes in, “-is that coffee is extremely caffeinated. It’s like an energy drink. Keeps you awake, and,” she gives a sly glance at Merlin, “perhaps a little faster.”

“So it’s a spell?” I thought this was a muggle place?

“No, it’s non-magical. It’s just the properties of the coffee bean. Completely natural in nature.” She pushes her chair back and stands to make her way over to the front.

Arthur turns to Merlin. “I’ll try one then. Since now I’m terribly curious.”

“A coffee? Alright then. I’ll make sure it’s sweetened for you, and with a bit of cream.” Merlin stands to join Hermione, and Ron gets up to follow, leaving Arthur alone to stare at the bizarre art hanging on the wall next to their table. Some sort of weird coloured blob.

Arthur jumps as a steaming mug of something is placed in front of him with a thump. Merlin appears in his line of vision with his own impressive mug and seats himself back down next to him, jarring his knee against the table leg. Ron and Hermione join him and the combination of new smells cause Arthur to peer into their cups.
Whereas Arthur’s own mug has a steaming light brown liquid, smelling strongly of something mouth-watering, Merlin’s is heaping with cream and flecks of something. Hermione’s seems to have some sort of pattern on the top, and Ron’s matches his.

“I got an espresso.” Merlin smiles down fondly at his drink. “With whipped cream and cocoa flakes.”

Hermione snorts. “That’s more than one shot of espresso. God, I down know how you can function after one of those. Or sleep. Ever.”

At Arthur’s questioning look, Merlin elaborates. “It’s like coffee, the caffeine that is, but condensed. It’s a lot stronger.”

“I imagine that would be a blessing for you.” Arthur’s eyes hold a twinkle and Merlin’s face goes red. Arthur turns to the others. “Given that Merlin once fell asleep on h-” Merlin’s hand shoots out quickly covering his mid word. The look he shoots him has an obvious underlying challenge. Arthur laughs instead of completing the story and Ron and Hermione look between them curiously.

Arthur distracts himself from thinking about all the embarrassing dirt Merlin has on him that could get aired if a war were to start, buy taking his first experimental sip of coffee. His eyes close as the strong taste swirls on his tongue. His brows crease. He takes another slow sip. “It’s different, that’s for sure. But, I think I like it. Not quite as much as hot chocolate, but I do enjoy it.”

“It grows on you.” Ron finishes half his coffee in one impressively large gulp.

Before Arthur can take a second sip and relax back into his chair, the door opens and a bell chimes. The lady at the counter’s eyes widen first in pleasant surprise, quickly followed by shock, then horror. A sea of teenagers quickly spill in through the doors.

In no time at all, all of the chairs are filled, people are leaning against walls, seated on the floor next to chairs, and some pairs of students even squeeze themselves into seats meant for one. Professor Zaden is talking in a low voice to the intimidated lady, gesturing towards the hoard and probably offering explanations and apologies.

“So, how did you find the movie?” Goyle has seated himself around their table with a chair stolen from another. He addresses only Merlin, with a polite nod towards Arthur, as if Ron and Hermione have ceased to exist.

“I share Hermione’s opinion actually. We found it entertaining, and non-offensive as long as you choose to remember that those who created it aren’t aware of the existence of magic and therefor don’t believe the characters to have ever been real. It’s a children’s movie and it was cute.” Arthur figures Merlin has had more time to come to grips with how he is represented. To Arthur, the movie had been although entertaining, also mildly horrifying and more than slightly embarrassing.

Goyle gives him a studying look and says nothing.

“I found the movie magnificent! Did someone really draw by hand every single second to make it look like it’s moving? How incredible! Man, just imagine that being your job. Just sitting there drawing the same characters over and over, but in slightly different positions. Would drive a person mad.” Ron’s wide eyes stare off into nothing, not noticing Hermione’s smile directed at him.

“It is quite impressive what people can accomplish without magic. Their civilization has progressed well past ours, their advancements so far along it’s now alien to us.” Merlin takes a drink out of his now half empty mug, foam clinging to his lip.
“Imagine the things we could make happen if our worlds were to combine forces.” Arthur finds it hard to look away from Merlin’s face.

“Yeah, instead of adapting muggle creations with magic, we could combine intellects to create completely new inventions together.” Hermione’s expression is wistful.

Goyle shifts in his seat looking uncomfortably uncertain.

“Why don’t you go drag Draco over here from his sulking in the corner? Looks like he could use the company. I’ll even offer up my chair.” Merlin takes pity on his out of place fellow slytherin.

Not waiting even a moment, Goyle pushes his seat back and weaves through hoards of students over towards Draco, who is indeed standing alone in the only poorly lit corner of the café.

Ron’s mouth is a thin line as they watch Goyle gesture over at their table to a miserable looking Draco. He darts a quick look to the group of slytherins huddled around the table closest to the door before he squares his shoulders and makes his way towards them.

Draco stops abruptly in front of their table, eyeing the lack of spare seats and eyeing Merlin apprehensively.

Merlin quickly scrambles out of his chair and offers it up. “Here, I don’t mind, really.”

“You don’t have to—” Draco’s indignant voice gains a sharp edge, but Merlin cuts him off.

“No really, I’ve been sitting too long in the theatre anyways. Wouldn’t want a flat bum.” They scoot their chairs over to make way as he kneels down on the floor in front of the table, resting his elbows on the surface.

Draco spits out a quick and quiet thanks before seating himself and staring down at his hands.

“So, what did you think of the movie then?” Merlin’s voice cuts through the awkward and uncomfortable silence held like a bubble over their corner of the café.

He looks over at Arthur and then Merlin, resolutely ignoring the other two seated around the table. “It was…” He blinks his eyes several times. “It was kind of funny?” He scrunches his face up as if recoiling away from his own words.

Ron and Hermione both look surprised at his reply, Ron in a closed off sort of way, his eyes scrunched and his mouth open slightly.

Merlin gives a small laugh. “It was, wasn’t it. I think more so from our perspectives as wizards.” Arthur arches a brow at him and he winks conspiratorially in response.

Arthur looks back down at Merlin and feels a pang that has nothing to do with their conversation. He feels sort of sickly looking down at him. His eyes trail to where his knees meet the hard ground, and he stomach knots itself. “Maldin, get up.”

Merlin turns his head to face Arthur, a question on his face. “What?”

Arthur refuses to let his voice shake feeling suddenly unsettled. “Get up.”

“It’s not right. Living his life as a servant completely unacknowledged. Fighting harder than any knight yet standing two steps behind. Kneeling at a table on the hard ground while the rest of us sit
“You shouldn’t be—” Arthur cuts himself off. “Take my seat. Here,” He stands up and offers it to him, pleading.

“Arthur, I’m fine really. You don’t have to do that.” He looks confusedly up at him.

“I do. Take it. Please.” It must have been the rare addition of ‘please’ that did it, as Merlin stiffly gets up from the floor and seats himself on Arthur’s chair. Arthur bends down situating himself on Merlin’s vacated floor space.

Draco and Hermione roll their eyes in unison, Ron looking shocked between them.

Goyle’s eyes are wide with realization as he looks down at Arthur and then back up again at Merlin. Arthur feels something unsettling shifting around in his midsection.

“Why don’t you guys just do what the others are doing and share?” Draco cannot hide the smugness in his face. Arthur feels himself go bright red and tries to hide it with another sip of coffee. The water is hot. That’s it, that’s all. It’s hot.

Apparently Merlin was taking a drink when he said that, as he sputters out coffee through his nose. Hermione gives him a disgusted look and passes him a napkin.

“Thanks.” His voice is scratchy.

“Listen up class!” Professor Zaden abruptly stands, demanding the attention of the room and instantly the chattering of conversation stops. Arthur lets out a breath of relief at the diverted attention and topic change. “Now that you all have had time to discuss the movie amongst yourselves, we are to make our way back to the school where you will be given time to start on your essay. We will be traveling by quicker means than the underground, using a method I’m sure you all will be more familiar with.” She pointedly meets as many of their eyes as possible. “We are to head over to 289 Lordell St. meeting at 4:00pm sharp. That gives you some time to explore the neighbourhood and perhaps do a little shopping until then. Any arriving late will be left behind.” Her voice turns abruptly sharp. “So don’t be.”

The reaction is immediate. Students stand up and clatter to the door in a surprisingly dignified fashion that has Arthur wondering again if there is some sort of unspoken rule or formation.

Merlin quickly downs the rest of his drink, eyes a little too wide, his hair standing on end more than usual.

Arthur really starts to feels his more advanced age as his knees give a pop as he stands. “What now?”

Their group makes their way to the exit after the rest of the students have filed out, thanking and waving to the now frazzled looking lady behind the counter.

“Well, we could just walk around the area, we could do what Zaden said and shop a little, or we could go to that cute little sweets shop on the corner for our sugar fix.” Merlin looks around at their group for input. Ron’s eyes light up at the mention of sweets.

Draco’s face is closed off, no response forthcoming.

“Oh! I know! We could check out the museum! I think it should be just a couple streets over, if we hurry, we should have enough time.” Hermione’s eager expression is comical next to the downward curl of Ron’s lip. Goyle just looks confused.
Arthur thinks he sees a hint of light behind Draco’s eyes.

“That sounds fun, I think we should do Hermione’s idea.” Arthur turns to Merlin. Remembering last minute to make it a question. Not a king anymore. Not even a lord or a small land owner. I am not in charge here.

“Yeah, that does sound nice. You wouldn’t mind terribly, would you Ron? Goyle?” Seems he caught Draco’s interest too.

“A muggle museum? Why would we need to go to something like that?” Goyle looks genuinely confused.

“It’s art, Goyle. It’s meant to be looked at. And muggle or no, it’s a piece of history.” Hermione looks at Draco in surprise at his words.

“That’s not the problem. Art is boring. Why is no one reasonable and want to go to the candy shop? Candy?” Ron says candy as if the word alone proves his point.

Hermione rolls her eyes and sighs. “Ronald, candy, you can have at any time. There are plenty of wizarding candy stores. But a muggle museum is an opportunity.”

Now it’s Ron’s turn to sigh. “I disagree. Getting more sweets is always an important opportunity. But if you guys really want to go, I won’t get in the way of that. But next time it’s my turn.”

Hermione’s smile is like the sun. “Thank you.”

“Well, you know the path, lead the way Hermione.” Arthur makes a grand gesture towards the stretch of side-walk in front of them.

As usual, Arthur peers inside every shop window along the way, eyes wide and sparkling with wonder and curiosity.

Fashion has gotten quite weird in the time I’ve been gone. What the hell even is that? Arthur slows down in front of a shimmering storefront display full of strange leather straps with odd bits of metal and lace like he’s never seen before. He feels as if he has almost unlocked the puzzle before Merlin grabs his hand and gives an urgent tug back towards their group ahead, his face red and determinedly facing forward.

“What was-”

“We’re going to lose them and then get lost if we don’t hurry along. Only Hermione knows how to get there, come on.” Merlin cuts him off and picks up their pace, still not quite meeting his eye. Arthur trails along, suspecting that Merlin’s non-answer might have still answered is question regardless. He feels his own face heat and lengthens his stride.

The Museum is huge and looming. The massive Greek influenced building towers over them in an impressive show of dominance. He cranes his head up to see the ornate carvings, fascinated. The building look ancient, yet Arthur knows it’s newer than his time. To see something so obviously old amongst all of the new he had been witness to earlier that day reminds him of himself. The outside is the same, but no doubt the inside has changed. Different. He looks over to Merlin, realizing that the awe-inspiring ancient building in front of them is a child next to him. Yet Merlin looks so young.

“Fun fact, although gsupporting the appearance of an old Greek temple, this building was actually built in the early 1900s and is quite new.”
Arthur stops himself from tripping, his foot stumbling upon a crack in the ground. *Gods, will I ever get anything right?*

“It’s like having your own personal tour guide everywhere you go.” Ron shakes his head at Hermione. “How do you store it all in there?”

“I read Ronald. And actually pay attention.”

Goyle leans in close to Draco, whispering a little too loudly. “Oh, shots fired.”

Merlin holds the door open for them as they make their way into the misleading structure.

The entranceway is surprisingly busy, lines of people twisting around making the large room feel small and cramped. “I doubted after wading through this, we’ll make it to the meet point in time.” Draco’s expression speaks of something unpleasant.

As if sensing a challenge, Ron pipes up. “Scared of the muggles, are you Malfoy?”

Draco’s face twists into a sneer but is interrupted before having the chance to respond. “I think it’s worth the attempt. We’ll just set our clocks and leave when we need to, even if we only get to see one exhibit, it’ll be worth it.” Merlin herds their group over to the shortest looking line, ignoring Goyle’s doubtful looks.

After waiting in a line for what feels like the equivalence of the time they spent in the theatre, they finally make it through, briskly marching to where Hermione leads them.

“I know the art is the most interesting to see, alongside the Ancient Egyptian exhibit perhaps, but it’s been a family tradition ever since the first time I can here.” Hermione’s excited face holds a hint of embarrassment. “It’s my father’s favourite, so he would always direct us here first.” The group comes to a stop outside a large archway leading into a massive cavernous room.

Arthur’s breath catches, his eyes wide and heart thundering in his chest. One word reverberates through his head, stopping him in his tracks. *Dragons.*
I know I said the update would be sooner. I’m sorry! I went on a last minute, unplanned camping adventure. It was incredible and exactly what I needed. As I am now all fresh and ready to move back into the swing of my life, I present you with two chapters in a row!

Giant skeletons of massive, threatening and deadly beasts surround the room. An entire small army of them. A winged monster, sharp talons extended from its feet mid grasping motion, suspends from the ceiling looming over them with a look of sheer menace. As Arthur casts his eyes around, he spots several tiny creatures equally as frightening standing alongside their mountain sized companions.

Slowly, he lets relief wash away the vigorous pounding adrenalin that had surged through his body upon entering, for the monsters are all very clearly dead. Long dead. Nothing but spotlessly picked clean bones hover in place as if welded together, not a hint of flesh or rot in sight. Arthur smells the air to find it clean and fresh.

“You alright Arthur?” Arthur reluctantly peels his eyes away from the remains, Merlin’s concern evident.

“Dragons, Merlin. They have dragons.” Arthur’s voice is but a whisper.

Realization flashes across Merlin’s face. “It would look that way, wouldn’t it.” His voice is quiet.

“How does a muggle museum come across the remains of dragons?” Draco’s question doesn’t seem directed at anyone in particular, but Hermione answers anyway.

“They don’t. They’re not dragons.” Her voice takes on the tone of a professor mid-lecture. “These bones belonged to dinosaurs. They were the creatures to inhabit the earth before humans. Dragons and Their Origins states that dragons first came into existence millions of years before humans. At that time dinosaurs were the earth’s main inhabitants. Dragons are like the magical cousins of dinosaurs.”

“So, like wizards and muggles then?” Ron’s eyes are wide as he looks up at the bones of the flying beast overhead.

Jaws large enough to swallow him whole loom close enough to the boy’s face to make Arthur break out into a sweat, deceased creature or no.

“In a way, but mostly no. Wizards and muggles are all humans, whereas dinosaurs have distinct genetic differences to dragons. Species cousins is a good way of putting it.” Merlin wanders from monster to monster, peering at them with a burning curiosity.

Arthur tries to imagine a time when the earth was overrun by such beasts and feels a shudder go down his back. Thank the gods they went extinct before humans came to be. He turns his head away from the monsters to face out the window, blocking out the howling screams and shouts bouncing around in his head. He squeezes his eyes shut in attempt to dispel the images of burning houses and
charred bodies.

He startles abruptly at the feel of something landing on his shoulder. He turns his head to meet Merlin’s eyes. “We can head over to the other exhibits and meet up with the others later.” Understanding shines in his eyes as he takes Arthur’s hand in his and leads him away.

Arthur keeps silent as Merlin leads him out, appreciating his polite not mentioning of his sweaty and lightly trembling hand.

After several twining corners, barely glimpsed marvels tucked neatly behind glass, and a long impressive hallway, Merlin stops them in front of a white room filled wall to wall with huge and impressive paintings.

A life-sized man inscribed with more detail than Arthur would have been able to make out if he were standing directly in front of the live man himself, stares imperiously out at the room clutching the limp form of a dead goat in even more horrifying clarity.

“My gods. Is this another example of technology?” Arthur squints up at the man’s face, taking a step closer. “The moving portraits in the castle I understand were a product of magic, surly this is the ‘muggle’ technological equivalent?”

Merlin lets out a soft laugh. “No, this is just paint. Paint, skill, and time.”

Arthur’s eyes widen. “It must have taken a lifetime. One painting for the entire span of a man’s life.” *That level of dedication is truly incredible.*

“A lifetime of practicing the craft,” Merlin nods his head.” But only perhaps several years to complete this piece in particular.” Merlin leads him gently over to the next painting.

Arthur feels as if he could reach out and push the painted lady over, climb into the frame, and live in the background himself. The forest scene is so heart-stoppingly familiar, it feels more real to him than the white room around them.

Merlin must have noted something in his expression, as he bumps him gently with his shoulder smiling. “This was done by a Welsh painter. You’d recognize the landscape.”

Arthur feels like he could pitch camp and spend a year in this room marveling at the artwork, adventuring into the depicted scenes.

As they walk farther into the room, he notices a distinct change in style. The colours seem muted and faded, the flesh of the subjects taking on a doll-like appearance in their perfection, smooth unmarred skin as fine as glass. Reality bends and twists in the scenery, idealizing the world in ways only found in dreams and long faded memories.

Eventually as they continue on, Arthur finds his feet stopping in front of a painting that makes his eyes water. Simple lines, almost flat colours, the shine of gold leaf. His eyes bounce around the familiar image as a smile takes over his face.

“Merlin!” Merlin stops mid step, nearly tripping over himself. Arthur tugs on his hand and points with the other. “Look at this!”

Merlin’s blue eyes narrow at the painting of the man in front of them, biting his lip in a way that Arthur has to force himself to stop looking at. “It looks… a bit familiar? I guess? I mean,” He glances down at the label below it, “the date is about 75 years before our time, so it very well could have been something you’ve seen before.” His brow wrinkles as he peers closer.
“Pfft! Perhaps seen before?! Really? You really don’t remember it?” Arthur studies his face, Merlin’s eyes dart around the painting as if analysing a map.

“No, I don’t think so. Maybe.”

Arthur bites down on his disappointment, his stomach leaden. Merlin scratches his face as he continues to analyze the artwork. After so many years, it’s unrealistic to expect him to remember everything. I should feel grateful that he remembered what I looked like enough to recognize me as it is. It’s actually quite astounding really, now that I think of it. It must be like trying to recall the faces of the people you knew as a child, everyone hazy and distant feeling. Arthur turns back to the familiar painting in front of him, trying not to wonder at what else has faded from the mind of his friend.

“So, you going to leave me hanging?” Merlin’s inquiring face is closer than expected, the detail in the blue of his eyes a painting all of their own.

“It was the art on the wall in my room. It was there when the room belonged to my mother before my parents were betrothed. You’ve complained about dusting the little grooves in the ornate frame for years.” Merlin’s eyes dart up to the frame, tracing the grooves as the cloth used to. He looks puzzled. “You used to stand next to it after upsetting me, probably hoping I’d be too cautious to throw things in its direction. You were, of course, wrong. My aim is too true to miss my intended target.”

Merlin laughs, his face losing its tight lines of concentration. “That sounds about right. I don’t recall, but I’ll take your word for it.” He smiles as he tugs Arthur’s hand, leading him around the rest of the room to admire the rest of the artwork.

Three perfectly white rooms filled with impressive and baffling paintings later, Arthur finds himself planted in front of what must be some sort of mistake. He turns his head slightly to peer at it from a different angle, but it remains unchanged.

“Intriguing isn’t it? This one has always drawn my attention. Truly breathtaking.” The stranger’s voice startles Merlin and Arthur feels him jolt slightly.

“Mmm.” Arthur gives a slight nod of his head.

The lady comes up beside Arthur, her attention flickering between Arthur’s face and the bizarre painting of bright squiggly lines in front of them. “What do you think?” Her voice is smooth and lilted in an accent Arthur cannot place.

“It’s…” Oh gods above, it’s horrendous. Like some sort of failed breakfast food.

“Definitely interesting.” He clears his throat.

“That it is. Such a clear insight into the chaotic emotions the painter was feeling. Such raw intensity laid bare.” Her eyes sparkle at him in a way that makes him distinctly uncomfortable.

Merlin save me.

“It’s certainly a unique combination of colours. The way they were applied makes me think of-.” Merlin’s voice holds a pent up laugh and he abruptly cuts off. Damn you.

“You enjoy this one as well?” Her inquiring gaze settles on Merlin.

“Oh yes. I think this one would look lovely in Arthur’s room. Or something like it at least.” Arthur glares at him.
“Arthur is it?” She turns back to him. “You’re son has excellent taste. Surely his father taught him well.” Her smile turns flirtatious.

Arthur feels himself freeze in place, his expression gone ridged. He darts a quick look at Merlin to find his face a bright and startled red. He barks out a short uncontrollable laugh that he manages to get the reins on before it can roar out of control. “Certainly my influence has inspired whatever ‘good taste’ he has managed to acquire.”

Merlin sputters. “I really think it’s more along the lines of, despite your influence.” The lady smiles at him in good humour, before regretfully turning her doting eyes back to Arthur.

“Maldin was just telling me earlier actually, how he had to use the rest room, sorry. If you’ll excuse us my lady.” She blushes at Arthur’s words as she steps aside to make way for them.

They make a hasty exit in the direction of the men’s room, trying to contain their reactions.

“Holy mother goddess above, your son?!” Merlin’s face morphs and stretches into an assortment of different horrified and incredulous expressions.

“There’s no way I look that old. I do not. More like your big brother if anything. Gods, it’s not even like we look anything alike!” Arthur’s indignant voice is pitched low.

Merlin looks down at their joined hands, biting his lip again, and Arthur is suddenly aware of what gave her that impression. He doesn’t mention it.

“That painting was awful. Really. I’m actually surprised you didn’t like it.” The laughter finally bursts out of him and Merlin clutches at his side as if requiring the extra hold to keep himself from flying apart.

Arthur tries his best to muster up a glare, but his lips keep twitching upwards. After a few pathetic attempts, he gives it up, moving swiftly to trap Merlin in a headlock, messing up his hair with his splayed hand.

“There.” He stands proud, looking to Merlin’s new rats nest. “Much better.”

Laughter bubbles up through Merlin’s pathetic attempt at a menacing look. “Oh no. Not any more, never again.” He frantically pats down his hair to no avail. Merlin’s reflection in the mirror pouts at Arthur, frizzy hairs sticking up at all angles.

Arthur gives him a smug grin. “Perfect.”

Merlin lets out an exasperated exhale, his eyes flashing a brilliant gold that glistens off the shining surfaces of the bathroom, seeming to light the room in the vibrant glow. As Arthur watches, his hair smooths down as if slicked by invisible hands, arranging itself into its original shape.

“That’s cheating and you know it.” Arthur crosses his arms.

Merlin sticks out his tongue as he turns to leave the bathroom.

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“Hurry, we’re going to be late.” Hermione’s urgent voice carries to the back of their group as Arthur tries to usher Goyle through the exit.

“We wouldn’t be so late if someone hadn’t insisted on squeezing in that last exhibit.” Goyle darts an
accusatory eye up to the blond head next to Merlin.

“They have a precious stone exhibit. Stones!” Draco’s eyes twinkle at the mere memory. “Do you know how many extremely important rituals and rare potions require some of the stones they had on display? Vital and potentially volatile ingredients just lying around! To stare at! Muggles are ridiculous!” His hands wave around to extenuate his point.

“Well, they were quite impressive to look at.” Arthur picks up his pace to not lose sight of Hermione, only to stop abruptly.

Ethel. We didn’t have time to visit Ethel. Arthur feels anger at himself for forgetting. Merlin didn’t remind me. He directs his building scowl to an unsuspecting Merlin.

I guess it’s not fare for me to expect him to only resume one of his manservant duties. After all this time I guess now it’s up to me to keep track of everything.

He hurries up and catches Merlin’s hand. “Hey,” He whispers quietly, “I’d like to take this weekend to visit Ethel. Do we have something scheduled for then?”

Merlin’s eyes bulge like a fish. “Oh goddess, I’m sorry. I completely forgot. Yes, I think that should be fine. We have dinner Saturday with Remus and Sirius, but plenty of time around that.”

They turn a corner to come to a halting stop. “This is it. 289 Lordell Street, look.” Ron points up at a decrepit sign that says just that, under the bold title of ‘Tax Fraud Lawyer’ The sign itself is crooked and yellowed.

Without question or hesitation, Hermione opens the frosted glass door and they head inside, Draco scrunching his nose at the dingy office front. Arthur has several burning questions, but holds them back, for fear of exposing his ignorance.

“Oh thank Merlin, we made it in time.” Ron elbows Hermione in the side and, seeming to just realize what she said, her face pinks.

Their classmates are all crowding in the center of the room, shoulders bumping and shopping bags jostling.

“Quickly now, make room! We’ve got 7 seconds left! Hurry!” Professor Zaden’s voice cuts over the chatter and students press even closer together to make a miniscule amount of room for them. Arthur feels about ten more questions pop up.

Merlin firmly grabs his shoulder and wedges them in amongst the hoard, urging him to take hold of a corner of what appears to be an old tattered rug.

Everyone snuggly clumped around the musty rug with a piece of it grasped firmly in hand, the room seems to hold its breath. Arthur feels his heart start to thump hard against his ribs.

“Don’t let go.” Merlin’s voice is barely a whisper in his ear, his warm breath close enough to move the little hairs on his neck. Arthur supresses a shudder.

“What do you m-” The air is abruptly tugged out of his lungs as the world jolts violently around him. Arthur feels the cosmos spiraling around him endlessly, the floor lost beneath his feet. Frantically clutching at the rug corner as if it’s the lone object tethered to reality, Arthur thrusts out his free hand for some sort of stability. It knocks against something soft and clothed feeling, his fingers clamping down hard around it.
The world finally slows around him, the blur of colour solidifying into smudged shapes he can almost make out. The rug piece no longer feels like the center of existence. Sooner than Arthur was prepared for, the hard ground comes up to slam into him like a fist to the gut.

Sprawled in a messy lump on the grassy ground, Arthur still feels the clothed something in his hand, the rug bit no longer at hand. Panic shoots through him upon this realization. He searches the floor frantically for the rug. _Merlin said not to let go. What if I was brought somewhere half a world away?_ His eyes scan the grassy floor.

Students sprawled out in heaps are scattered across the ground. Some of them are magically standing upright. Arthur takes a relived breath in, letting the pounding of his heart relax back to a normal tempo. He unclenches his hand from around whatever it was he had latched onto in his desperation. His eyes trail over to see what it was, an embarrassed apology waiting on his lips.

_Merlin, trying to rub some life back into his arm. Well then. He gives him a flat stare. Serves him right._ “Didn’t feel inclined to notify me of what we were about to go through beforehand?”

Merlin’s eyes widen, his hair back in disarray. “I’m so sorry. I hadn’t used a portkey in quite some time. I’d forgotten just how unpleasant they were.”

“I don’t know how anyone could forget an experience such as that. I wouldn’t half mind wiping it from my mind if that was an option.” Arthur struggles unsteadily to his feet, ignoring the smug students who remained upright. He takes a bit of satisfaction at the sight of Merlin’s sprawled form on the ground.

“All right, on your feet everyone! You’ll have some free time before your next class to write your personal analysis on the experience. I expect them to be completed in three days time, 20 inches of scroll minimum. You can reach me in McGonagall’s office.” The students scamper to their feet and follow after her in the direction of the castle.

As they approach the large front gates, Arthur can make out a figure running towards them from the school.

“Wonder what that’s about.” Ron squints his eyes to try to make out the distant figure.

At the half way point, the person’s features fill out into a recognizable face. They hurry their pace to meet him.

“Hey, professor Lupin, is everything alright?” Arthur comes to a stop in front of him.

The man’s face is lined with worry. “The headmaster has requested you and Maldin to meet him in his chambers. It’s urgent.”

“Of course, we’ll follow you there.” Arthur meets Merlin’s wide and concerned eyes.

They continue their path up to the school, Draco Ron and Hermione subtly trying to catch either of their attention. Merlin motions them aside, “We’ll fill you guys in later, I’m assuming you’ll find out what it is at the next order meeting anyway. I’ll meet with you three in the third empty potions room from the boy’s bathroom at noon tomorrow.” He leaves before they can respond with anything, Arthur looking back over his shoulder to see Draco and Ron scowling at each other hissing quite words Arthur’s too far away now to make out.

They make the rest of the trip in a brisk walk, weaving around students on their way between classes. Numerous pairs of inquiring eyes track their movement, until they turn the final bend leading up to the headmaster’s quarters.
They race up the moving spiral of steps, Remus’ fist already rapping against the hard polished wood of Albus’ door.

“Good, yes. Come in.” Minerva quickly ushers them inside., the door softly clicking closed behind them.

Albus’ office is as large and grand as always, but with the added sensation of thin wispy air, leaving the sour taste of rage and panic on Arthur’s tongue. A large table has been brought in from somewhere, placed in the center of the sitting room, the usual couch and arm chairs nowhere to be found. Albus is seated at the head, with Severus and Kingsley at either side. Minerva leads them towards the group, seating herself in front of the teacup next to Severus.

Merlin makes his way across from Minerva, a purple teacup magically appearing fully topped in front of him. That leaves only on other seat, across from Albus.

“I actually have class to teach in 5 minutes. It’s just 7th years, so they should be fine conducting a group practice on their own, but I have to get them started. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” With that, Remus makes haste towards the exit, disappearing quietly from sight.

The empty ornate chair at the other end of the table slides back on its own as if an invisible gentleman is offering him a seat. The wooden legs scrap harshly against the floor, making a very pointed sound.

Arthur takes the hint and settles himself into place with the rest of them.

“Thank you all for making such haste to get here after so little warning. Kingsley has just flooed here to deliver the most tragic of news.” Albus’ dramatic pause is filled with the clinking sounds of teacups being gently placed back down onto the table surface. “I’m afraid Voldemort has chosen today to make his move. He and a select group of death-eaters have raided two muggle towns, killing over thirty people and injuring countless others. All within the span of fifteen minutes. The towns have been evacuated, and the muggle authorities are claiming a nuclear leak at something called a ‘power plant’.

“By the time aurors made it onto the scene, the death-eaters had all left. The authorities are working towards locating some of their hideouts as well as identifications. No leads have presented themselves. We have no reason to believe that this will be the last of the attacks.

“I have gathered you all here to inform you before the news gets out in papers. It is paramount that we plan our next move, as well as strengthen protection at all muggle born residences.”

Merlin’s face appears frozen in place, white and rigid. Arthur feels a pit of dread form in the bottom
of his stomach.

Minerva’s hand is covering her mouth, her face horrified. “Do you have a plan Albus?”

The headmaster’s eyes are tired and old. “That is what I have brought us here to discuss. We need to work out who and when we send people to strengthen and add wards around our muggle born students’ homes, as well as how we are to handle breaking the news to the students.”

“I have a free period tomorrow, if you provide me with the location of the homes that require protective wards, I can discreetly make my way around.” Severus’ expression is carefully blank, but his eyes are as hard and sharp as Excalibur.

Albus nods his head. “Thank you Severus. And perhaps we can get Remus to join you.” Severus’ carefully composed face cracks slightly at that.

“We should make an announcement to the students before the owls arrive tomorrow with the news. Contain the reaction in a controlled and safe setting. Provide the students with someone to talk to about it privately if they require. Tell the muggle born students what we are doing to keep them and their families safe.” Arthur meets Merlin’s eyes and receives a slight nod.

“Agreed. I will make an announcement this evening after dinner. Minerva, Severus, do you think the heads of houses could make their own announcement to their students in the common rooms inviting any who have concerns or personal questions to come forth and meet with you during office hours, as well as notify all of the appropriate students that their families will be protected? I can pass the message on to Filius and Pamona.” Minerva and Severus assent their agreement.

Severus takes a slow, full sip of tea, deliberately meeting Merlin’s eyes across the table. “I think it’s about time something was done to put a stop to the Dark Lord. Or at least slow him down.” His voice has the ring of a challenge.

The table is silent around him. Merlin and Arthur meet eyes, coming to a non-verbal agreement.

“I agree.” Severus’ eyebrow climb into his dark hairline at the sound of Merlin’s agreement.

“Yes, it’s about time the other side realized they have an opponent to face, not merely an empty, clean map. Give the people something to support and believe in. The time of working behind the scenes is coming to its close. The attack was tragic. The people will need something to hold on to, to whisper about, and to cling to at night. Something to make them feel safe. We can work this to turn the tide of the vote in our favour.” Arthur looks to each of the teachers, settling his final gaze upon Kingsley.

“So you plan to seek out you-know-who? Hunt him down and battle him?” Kingsley addresses Merlin, his brows pulled low over his dark eyes. “Do you even know where to find him?”

Merlin sits up straighter in his seat. “No. If I hunt him down and kill him in his current state, he will merely re-appear in a different location, making it all the harder to find him again. It would buy us time, but in the end, merely prolong the war longer than necessary. It would be much simpler and more effective to locate his soul fragments and destroy them while he’s unaware of our knowledge of them.”

“Um. Soul fragments?” Kingsley leans forward in his seat slightly, a concerned pinch to his face. Minerva’s troubled expression slowly slides into that of dawning horror.

Merlin gives Albus a dry, pointed look.
“Yes. I’m afraid so. Tom Riddle, we suspect, has attempted a sort of immortality through the splitting of his soul. It is my belief that he has created seven of such pieces. It is our understanding that we have already destroyed- or detained- two of these horcruxes already.” Albus runs and hand down his beard, tugging on it slightly. “Voldemort will be unable to fully kill until all such soul pieces are destroyed, or else the destruction of his current body will merely cause his soul to wander about the earthly plain as a wraith, as his soul will still be tethered to the realm of the living. He would be reduced, yes, but unlike a ghost, still fully capable of attaining a body and continuing his rain of destruction.” Minerva and Kingsley share matching looks of revulsion and horror, Minerva’s delicate teacup trebles as she brings it to her mouth, clattering slightly against her teeth.

“So he’s undefeatable.” Kingsley’s voice is wobbly and faint.

“No. Just a little more difficult. Once his horcruxes are found and destroyed, he’ll be as mortal as the rest of you.” Merlin’s calm voice sooths some of the tension in the air. “Destroying such object, is of no real difficulty for me. But, truth be told, I have little to no idea of where to find them. The shard of Tom’s soul residing with me has given me only the barest of clues as to where they may be. I am at a loss.

“I have attempted to trace the magical signature to other locations with the same, but have had no luck. It is possible that the tearing of the soul has altered Tom each time to the point where his magical signature has altered. There is a real chance that the soul shard I have with me, if compared to the current active Voldemort, is almost an entirely different soul. A different person altogether.”

Albus’ surprised expression echoes around the table, stopping with Arthur. It’s obvious when you think about it. The act of ripping your soul apart would surly leave you completely altered. Damaged. After seven times, Voldemort must be insane.

“Would it… be possible to repair the soul, making it whole once more?” Severus wears an unreadably blank expression.

Minerva and Kingsley shoot him appalled looks, Minerva vigorously cleaning off her glasses with the front of her robe.

“No. It would leave him a broken man. Each soul fragment is potentially fundamentally different from one another. They would not fit back together again. He would be more a monster than he conducts himself as currently.” Merlin’s firm voice softens at the resigned look in Severus’ eye. “Whatever you saw in the man Tom Riddle is long gone.”

Kingsley looks distinctly uncomfortable, but doesn’t say anything.

Arthur catches Merlin’s eyes and holds them. “What of the crystals? Is there a way to use them to direct us to their locations? If they led you here in the first place, surely…”

“Unfortunately no. The crystals I have in my possession have shown me nothing but refracted light every time I check.” Merlin clearly takes this as a personal affront, his eyes dark and his jaw set. He glares intently into his tea for a moment, before perking up with a determined light behind his eye. “But I could go to the source! The cave!”

Arthur feels like slapping his hand down on the table top. “Yes! The same one you said you went to after Morgana-”

“The crystal cave, the one and only. I used to go there every couple decades or so, checking in on things.” His excitement simmers down at the memories. He stares numbly down at Arthur’s hands on the tabletop. “But it showed me nothing. Well, not nothing. It showed me scenes from the past.
But never what I was looking for. I figured as now I have three of its crystals with me, I could travel without having to go there again, still able to check on things. There is a chance, although the crystals in my possession remain blank, that I could force the matter at the cave. Use the ones in the cave to show me the past, as they’re so eager to do.” His voice holds a touch of barely disguised bitterness. “I could look into Tom Riddle’s past to when he made the horcruxes. Give us an idea of where they might be now, and certainly inform us as to what they will look like.”

Four sets of shiny and hopeful eyes face Merlin with the eagerness of a dog facing a squirrel. “That would make things a grand sight easier. Put us several steps ahead.” Albus’ voice has gained back its chipper edge, the twinkle back in his eye.

“I can go tonight. Minerva, if you could please excuse my absence from your class this evening.” Merlin sets his teacup down, empty.

“Of course.” Minerva remains rattled, her glasses slightly askew on her face.

“Excellent. If you wouldn’t mind the company Merlin, I would like to join you.” Albus slowly gets up from his chair, stretching out his back as he does so.

“I don’t see why not, it might even be a good thing to have another magic user other than myself aware of the cave’s existence and location. Albus and I will head out now, and if all goes well, Albus will be back for his after dinner announcement.”

Arthur inhales sharply. “You are not going anywhere without me.” Am I allowed to say things like that anymore? “I will be coming too.”

Merlin considers him for a moment, then nods once. “Alright then. Arthur will join us. It’s a party of three!” He abruptly stands, walking over to Albus, gaining height with every step. By the time he comes to a stop at the edge of the room, he’s back to appearing as the familiar adult Arthur’s accustomed to.

The table clears as the rest of them vacate their seats, chatting softly about the tasks ahead of them. Arthur goes to stand with Albus and Merlin by the door, noticing both of their cloths have transformed into comfortable grey travel cloaks.

“Here, let me.” Merlin steps up in front of him, his hands hovering in the air between then, eyes a vibrant and captivating gold that never fails to stop the breath in Arthur’s throat. He feels a distinct swooshing around his body and looks down.

Dark grey travel cloths and cloak replace his red shirt and black jeans, the material slightly finer than Merlin and Albus’ own travel wear.

“Thank you.” He shifts around, feeling the soft knit against his skin. Merlin reaches up to straighten his cloak at the collar, softly patting his shoulder after.

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*MERLIN’S POV*

The forbidden forest looms in front of them, dark and menacing in the late afternoon light. The shadows of the trees long enough to reach out and grab them.

Arthur’s hand is warm and strong in his, his presence a far sight more than a mere comfort by his side. Albus plants himself next to him and Merlin takes his hand as well.
“I’m going to take us a ten minute walk away. The magic from the cave could disrupt the apparition and pose a potential hazard I’d rather not risk.” He turns to face Arthur with an apologetic look. “This is not going to be comfortable.”

He can see Arthur’s throat move as he swallows firmly before nodding his understanding. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Merlin takes a single sharp step to the side, holding strong to the hands in his, apparating away to the familiar forest.

He takes a deep fortifying breath of the sweet air, smelling of home and magic. He turns to look at Arthur, awaiting his no doubt queasy and unimpressed expression. Nothing.

No Arthur.

Merlin frantically looks around, turning his body around in a circle in a mad search. Albus stands next to him looking out curiously at their surroundings. Still no sign of Arthur.

Merlin’s heart hammers in his chest, trying to beat its way out of him. No, no no no!

“Arthur- do you see sign of him?” Merlin can scarcely recognize his voice as it leaves his mouth. Where is he?! What happened?! NO no no!

Albus widens his eyes with a start, looking around the small clearing in surprised alarm. “I don’t see him. Or something that would hint of him anywhere.”

“Arthur! ARTHUR!” Merlin magically enhances his voice to carry out. The forest is silent in response, his calls echoing back to him, mocking him. A gentle breeze strokes past, grabbing the ends of his cloak and tugging. “ARTHUR!” Nothing.

“I’m going back.” Merlin abruptly turns to face a stricken Albus, who reaches out just in time to be tugged into the void alongside him as he apparates without a moment’s hesitation.

Merlin has never been so happy to pop back into existence, slamming full bodied into a startled Arthur.

They sprawl into the ground a mess of tangled limbs and pointy elbows. Merlin wraps his arms around Arthur’s bulk, latching on with a force that speaks of permanence. His eyes squeeze shut as hot relived tears pour down his face. “Oh goddess, thank you. Oh thank you.”

“Merlin?” Arthur’s voice comes out slightly strained.

“Thank you thank you thank-“

“Merlin, you’re crushing me.”

Merlin doesn’t move. “I thought- I- you weren’t there. I apparated but you weren’t there. I had your hand in mine, but you weren’t- I thought- I didn’t. Oh goddess, you’re alright. Thank the goddess you’re alright.” His voice is cracked and splintered, scratching at his own ears.

“I’m alright. You just jolted out of my hand as you and Albus disappeared. No harm done.” Arthur tries to wiggle out of Merlin’s grasp, but he just ends up in a more awkward position. He can hear Albus discreetly laughing from wherever he wound up.

“I didn’t know.” Merlin sniffs loudly. Slowly, he feels Arthur melting into his embrace.
Eventually the pieces of his heart slot back together in some semblance of functionality. He loosens his grasp on Arthur and helps him to his feet. “Sorry.” He knows he sounds pathetic, but can’t seem to muster up any embarrassment.

“What do you think caused him to stay behind? Did you let go?” Albus looks between the two of them inquiringly.

“No, I held on. It felt like he was forcibly torn from my hold.” Arthur looks down at his hand as if the answers were written in the lines.

“I’m not exactly sure. We should try it again. Small scale though. Just from one spot to another, here on the grass.” Merlin reaches back for Arthur’s hand. “Ready?”

Arthur squeezes his hand harder, as if able to come along through strength of grip. “Whenever you are.”

Merlin turns on the spot again, jerking hard out of Arthur’s hold. He appears immediately afterwards, a couple steps over, and quite alone. He grinds his teeth and looks back at the unmoved, fully intact, Arthur. “Hmm.”

He walks back over and lifts Arthur’s chin gently, peering intently into his pale blue eyes, eyebrows drawn together like curtains.

“There’s something. Still. But I have no idea what. It seems you’re resistant to apparition. Probably amongst other things as well.” His expression clears and he takes half a step back. “As annoying as it is currently, I can only count that as a good thing. Might help to keep you safe.”

“But I really don’t fancy walking there. Would take a good few days at best. And horses aren’t exactly inconspicuous in these ‘modern’ times.” Arthur looks to Albus for a suggestion, but his face lights up before an answer could be uttered. “Brooms! We could fly there!”

Judging by the glint in his eye, Arthur would very much like that method. Merlin chews the inside of his cheek.

“That might be our best option if apparation is out. Muggle means are too slow and the thestrals have several new young to care for.” Albus looks towards where Merlin knows the brooms are stored, no doubt about to summon a couple.

“Ah, no. I’m afraid that won’t work.” Merlin licks his dry lips. “Although I’m certain a broom would support Arthur in flight without issue, he’s never flown before. It would be dangerous.”

“That is a valid concern, but I can easily accommodate for him on the back of my broom. There should be plenty of room.” Albus turns to Arthur, seeking his permission.

“Um, no. That still won’t work. I mean, for him, yes. But- I can’t fly either. Not on broom anyways. I mean, I’ve never had need, so I never learned. Didn’t seem necessary.” Merlin’s words come out stilted and awkward. Well, this is new. I haven’t had issue with any magical activity since childhood. How embarrassing. He can feel his face start to colour as they look at him.

Albus looks surprised for a moment.

Arthur’s eyebrows are drawn as he seems to be contemplating what their next obvious plan of action would be, and doesn’t like it. “You’re not leaving me behind.” He crosses his arms, his body language holding a startling resemblance to Merlin’s mother when angry.
“It would be the most efficient. We will return with haste and fill you in on events immediately.” Albus looks to Merlin for consent. Merlin looks to Arthur, the storm brewing in his expression making his opinion on this idea more than clear. He feels his heart give a flutter. *Does he just not wish to stay behind, missing a potential adventure as he was always loath to do, or is it more than that? Does he feel as I do and wish not to be parted?*

Merlin smooths his already wrinkle free robes down his front to give his hands something to do.

“A car trip migh-”

Merlin interrupts Arthur, “There is another, faster option than the non-magical means. We would still return by late tonight if all goes smoothly, but it is quicker than taking a car. Or broom for that matter.”

“Well then, why don’t we do that.” Arthur’s question holds the ring of command.

Albus looks at him curiously. “Do you intend we ride a magical creature other than thestrals?”

“I do, yes.” Merlin turns nervously to face Arthur. “But I don’t think you’re going to like this. At least, not a first.” Merlin rubs his hands together anxiously.

His vision tints gold as he casts an even larger disillusionment charm around them. The air shimmers around them for a moment, before settling into a faint glistening sheen.

Merlin closes his eyes and allows the magic to spread freely throughout his body, warming his limbs and soothing his headache. He feels it push against his skin, eager to be set free, swirling his cloak around him in a golden breeze. He lets it go, channelling it in the shape he desires. His flesh ripples out around him, melting and blurring and *stretching.*

Once he feels his form settle, feeling stable and solid once again, he opens his eyes.

Arthur’s face is white as the scales of Aithusa, his eyes unimaginably wide. Albus’ eyebrows have been raised as far as they go, his forehead wrinkling into neat folds.

Merlin stretches out his wings, bending his neck down to be eyelevel with Arthur. “It’s still only me. Just a change of body.”

Arthur’s shaken form takes a trembling step back. “You’re a *dragon.*”

“I am a warlock, and a dragonlord. But still only Merlin”

Albus counters Arthur’s step back with a step forward. “You’re an animagus.” He studies his scales, glittering like black opal in the sunlight.

“Yes, this is my second true form.” He turns his massive head back in the direction of Arthur, his golden eyes visibly glowing even in the light of day. “I can take any form that pleases me, but this was my first. Probably due to my blood as a dragonlord.”

“You’re voice- it’s…” Arthur studies his jaw, black teeth shining gold and blue as the light reflects off of them.

“It’s the same, yes. I did mention that I am the same person.” He tries his best to give Arthur a reassuring smile, but fears it comes out more menacing than comforting with the way Arthur takes another step back.
“Can you breathe fire?”

“Of course. Would you like a demonstration?”

“No!” Arthur jolts back to life, coming forwards with his hands splayed out in front of him as if Merlin would roast him alive on the spot right there and then.

“You have nothing to fear from me Arthur.” Merlin’s quickly coming to regret his decision. Goddess, I am stupid. Of course he is frightened of dragons. You saw him at the museum, what made you think you’d be any different. He doesn’t see Merlin, he sees a monster.

That thought stops him short. Yes. He is only finally seeing me for who I am. A monster. Unconsciously, a limb of his magic reaches out and kills a patch of grass beneath him before he realizes and puts a stop to it. His innards claw at him.

“What species are you? I’m not sure I’ve seen such as yourself before.” Albus continues to trail his eyes appraisingly over Merlin’s new form.

Feeling like his world might come crashing down around him, he reluctantly drags his eyes away from Arthur. “I’m not sure actually. Back when I first transformed, dragons were all uniquely different from each other. Not like now with all dragons being divided into different species groups, with perhaps a hundred or so of each, all the same. I am the only one like me. Aithusa used to tease me as I share similar traits to wyvern actually, although I always thought that was due to my initial difficulty of parting with a human form. My dragon body still holds human traits that make me look I guess a little more wyvern-y.” Kilgharrah would have a right fit if he knew.

The look of wonder of Albus’ face is almost comical next to Arthur’s frightened mask. Merlin slowly rests his scaled chin on the soft grassy ground between Albus and Arthur, his large wings relaxing down onto the ground by his sides.

“It’s ok, go ahead.” He nudges his nose gently against Albus’ now outstretched hand. He can see Arthur’s wide eyed look of utter fascinated horror as Albus runs his hand softly down the scales of his snout.

“You scales are hard as stone, but smooth as water. Nothing at all like the scales of the Welsh Green dragon I’d had the privilege of interacting with. Kind of snake-like.” Albus smiles at him, his eyes glistening brighter than Merlin’s scales.

Arthur has remained silently glued to the spot, his breathing obviously faster.

“I wish there was another way for us, but if you wish to accompany me you’ll have to accept me as your form of transportation. I’m sorry.” Merlin’s voice is as gentle as he can make it.

“I don’t- there’s not a saddle that could fit you.” Arthur visibly swallows.

“I am a creature of magic. I will not allow you or Albus to fall.” Albus requires no farther prompting. He makes his way over to Merlin’s side as Merlin does his best to flatten himself down closer to the ground.

“Well, come on then.” Albus motions for Arthur to join him, seated comfortably at the base of Merlin’s neck.

Arthur looks up at him, then into Merlin’s eyes. He rolls his shoulders and nervously rubs his hands together. “You better not drop me.” His voice is firm and his eyes narrowed.
Merlin would laugh if he felt a little more sure-footed. As it is, Arthur’s petulant words serve to loosen some of the tight knot coiled in his stomach.

As typical for his king, Arthur makes short work of situating himself, gracefully climbing his front leg up to his back as if he’d done that very motion countless times before. Merlin recalls the gangly scrambling display that was his own attempts at mounting both horse and dragon and releases a small puff of smoke through his nose.

“Could you transform into a dragon back in Camelot? Before?” Arthur sounds significantly less uncertain now, probably due to no longer being faced with his sharp front claws and even sharper teeth.

“Oh goddess, no. It took me decades to learn the trick of it. And several rather terrifying failed attempts.” Merlin shudders at the memory of the half-formed hybrid monstrosity he had made of himself. “You guys ready?”

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Bonus art:
Chapter End Notes

Chapter 35 has a new illustration by the way! Check it out if you're interested!

*update Nov 2*
I'm so sorry for taking so long a break guys! I swear I haven't abandoned this fic, nor do I ever plan to! Things have just been really crazy over here in real life. I've got a bit of the next chapter written already so I promise you things are moving along. *fingers crossed I get it finished for this upcoming week*
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Oh guys, I am so very very sorry for how long I’ve made you all wait for this. Really I am. You’ve been the perfect readers, always so kind, encouraging, and supportive. Big shout out to all of you THANK YOU!

Life over here’s been crazy busy and rather wild. I don’t know why I do this to myself. If everything goes to plan, by the end of the month, I’ll have like… one day off. That will probably be spent lesson planning, cleaning and grocery-shopping. Argh. Business has also paired with a horrible case of writer's block. This chapter was crazy hard to write. The hardest yet. Finally when it got going at like, half way, I built up some kind of momentum and finished it all in one sitting. Oh god. And I’m actually pleased with the results.

I hope I can say that I’ll never have you guys wait that long again, but the truth is I have no idea. What I can say though (again) is that I promise not to abandon this. It WILL be completed I swear to god, it will happen. I don’t know when (or how) but it will.

The heat of the sun is like the first step into a hot bath at the end of a long and hard winters day. Merlin closes his eyes as he glides on top of the word, heart beating in tandem with the rhythm of the earth’s magic.

He feels a gentle tug east, pushing him back on course as he veers too far into a soft looking cloud to the side of their path. Gently angling his wings, they arch gracefully through the sky, cutting wisping puffs through floating cotton.

He spares a moment to wish he could see the expression on Arthur’s face as he takes in the abstract scene that is the world from above. His neck gives a twitch as he restrains himself from turning his head to see.

Would it be a look of wonder, or horror? Does he peer down and fear the fall, heart spiking at the unnaturalness of being so far removed from the safety of land humans so rarely acknowledge. Or does he see the beauty of it, feel the cold harsh wind in his hair, feel the uninterrupted heat of the sun on his face, and get lost in the colour of the sky?

He closes his eyes briefly, the whistling of the wind an entire symphony in his head.

“How can you tell where we’re going from up here? Not that the view isn’t nice, but I’d rather us not get lost amongst the clouds.” Arthur’s voice is raspy as he shouts over the wind.

Merlin startles, his steady wing beats disrupted as he tenses unexpectedly.

Of course. Merlin bears his sharp teeth in what is probably a rather menacing attempt at a smile. The familiarity of the words cut through his musings, offering him comfort. Always the practical tactician.
Merlin briefly considers answering in a typical dragon riddle or suitably cryptic remark, but figures Arthur hadn’t enough experience with dragons to catch the humour in it. “I can feel the faint pull of the magic from the crystals. It will not lead us astray.”

“It is possible that with enough magical artifacts in one space, in this case crystals, a low pulse of magic can be sensed emitting from it, if one is properly attuned to pick up on it. Of course, over such a vast distance it is quite unheard of, but evidently not impossible. I assume Merlin is tracking a magical signature he is familiar with.” Albus’s old gravedled voice barely cuts through the harsh winds.

“Yes.” I wonder… “Albus, can you sense the magic we are heading towards?” He dips down closer to the ground, cutting through the clouds, the condensation glistening off his scales.

Albus takes a moment in silence, presumably to feel out the magical signature. “No… actually, yes. Something. But very faint. I doubt I could follow it in any specific direction. It’s more of just a general sense of- well… unease.”

“Hmm. Doesn’t sounds like… Well I’m certain you’ll notice it when we’re there. It’s quite unmistakable.”

Patchworks of different colours blanket the earth like a haphazard quilt. A scattering of trees and houses mar the image like forgotten balls of lint. Merlin gives one powerful flap of his wings, propelling them faster down towards the forest ahead. The dark line of trees trickle a sense of foreboding down Merlin’s jagged spine, the dark shadows eerily menacing in the distance.

Scanning for sings of other consciousness and finding them thankfully alone, he lands on the ground outside the forest with a heavy thump.

With an impossible amount of grace, Arthur slides down the side of Merlin’s wing, helping Albus along afterwards.

“That was- yeah. That was exhilarating. Imagine how much quicker- not to mention more effective- our patrols would have been if we could have traveled like that.” Arthur runs a shaking hand through his now birds nest of a hairdo. His cheeks are flushed and his eyes bright.

Merlin turns his piercing golden eyes to meet his. “Much more effective and timely, certainly. What with discovering the subject of your hunt, before the patrol even begins.” He punctuates the end with the vibrant glow of his magic as he shrinks back down to human form.

The look of wonder and amazement is instantly wiped off of Arthur’s face, leaving behind one of guilt.

“No, I’m sorry- that wasn’t…” Merlin’s face crumples, his good mood left somewhere off in the distant skyline. “I didn’t meant to- somethings not right.” His eyes jerk away from Arthur’s, hand raising by his side on instinct. The hairs on the back of his neck bristle. He vaguely registers Albus brandishing his wand somewhere off to the side of him. He steps in front of Arthur, facing the looming forest.

The trees look fine, the area behind them is deserted, and the day is peaceful and calm. His magic is screaming at him. His brain lashes against the inside of his skull and his skin crawls around under his clothes. His veins pump cement through his body, his fingers and toes tingling and heavy. Something inside of him screams to get away at the same time another part feels drawn to it.

He takes a step forwards and the feeling intensifies.
“Albus, are you getting this?” His voice is tense and strained. *I wish Arthur had stayed behind.*

“Something feels familiar. Wrong… but familiar. Stronger than before, but still faint. Like a bad smell.” Albus’ face is scrunched and his gaze narrowed, darting around between the trees.

“It’s a very strong presence. Explains why the area is so deserted of life. Not even bird song… I imagine even those without magic would feel a bit of it. Enough to know to stay away.”

Arthur approaches out from behind him, glaring off into the forest. “I don’t feel anything. Nothing at all. Looks perfectly safe to me.” He tilts his head towards Albus. “Smells fine too.”

Merlin gives him a concerned look. “You should be noticing something.”

“Nothing.” He moves his eyes towards Merlin without moving his head away from the tree line. “Care to move onwards? If it feels too funny for you, I can scout out ahead.”

“Sending you off alone into that is the very last thing I’d do.” Whatever that even is.

Merlin’s head pounds angrily, setting a punishing war drum pace. He swallows down on his growing unease and concern for Arthur’s safety. *Better he come along by my side than be left alone out here with this. Not that he’d ever stand for being left behind… “Stay close to me and tell me if anything seems off. Well- more off.”*

Albus and Arthur follow behind him as they start their journey into the ominous forest, the canopy of leaves blot out the sun, leaving him feeling cold.

*ARTHUR’S POV*

Merlin stalks slowly through he trees, whatever path he’s following not evident to Arthur. The rustling of the leaves overhead and the crunching of their boots on the ground the only sound to be heard. He finds himself straining his ears to catch the small footsteps of rodents, or rustling of the underbrush. Even the faintest scuttling of insects. He hears nothing.

He wonders at how long their hike will last, glancing over at Albus’ careful footsteps over tree roots and foliage. Perhaps if Merlin could magically transform himself into a horse as well, they wouldn’t have to have the poor elderly man wandering through the woods by foot. Arthur wonders if Merlin would feel insulted if he were to ask. He tries to picture him as a horse. Thick black hair, thin and narrow body. Probably knobby knees and an ungainly stride.

He ducks his head under a low branch, feeling, not for the first time, like Merlin has gotten them lost. *He says he feels the magic. Is it like some sort of magical pathway? Or can he see straight through the trees to our destination? Or perhaps it’s more like a bird’s instinct? Arthur looks around them. Minus the wildlife, everything looks normal.*

After about a half hour more of their seemingly aimless wandering, with Merlin getting twitchier with every step, peering suspiciously around tree trunks, he finally comes to a stop.

“It’s just up ahead.” Merlin’s breathing is noticeably heavy, his shoulders hunched. Concern shoots through Arthur, the need to take Merlin somewhere safe, forcibly if necessary, strikes him hard in the chest.

Arthur follows behind Albus and Merlin, ducking low underneath a haphazard archway of dead tree branches. The entrance to the cave is a black angry mouth carved deep into the side of
jagged rock. Pointed stone juts out from the uneven walls like hungry teeth.

The faint rustling of leaves in the wind die out as they enter the cave, the silence wrapping itself around them like a smothering pillow. The distant light filtering through the tree tops bathe the stone around them in a sickly green, the path ahead fading to darkness like the depths of a murky lake. Even the sound of their footsteps, which should be filling the space around them with their familiar echoing cadence, are muffled, muted and indistinguishable. He feels his boots step hard on the unforgiving stone ground, but it is as if someone shoved cotton in his ears.

Arthur takes a deep breath in to say something, anything, to cut through the silence like Excalibur through enemy forces. “Something is off.” His voice sounds like it comes from a great distance, distorted and unnaturally quiet. He swallows to clear his throat.

Albus looks back at him, his brows scrunched to meet the top of his half-moon glasses. His mouth moves as if forming words, but is accompanied by a distinct lack of sound. Merlin continues his journey, seemingly unaware.

Arthur takes another steadying breath, gives Albus a look of resigned courage, and continues along the winding path.

It hits him, after several dozen more steps, that he can make out the ground in front of him. He can see the uneven rock walls around them and can clearly make out the sharpened peeks that make up the roof overhead. He can see the colour of Albus’ cloak, see the texture of the fabric and the gentle way it swooshes around his feet. Where is the light coming from? This far into a cave, it should be darker than a buried crypt.

He tries to spot if Albus or Merlin had conjured a light without him noticing. Nothing. He looks around as they continue their steady pace, but cannot pinpoint the direction the light is coming from. With no hint of a source, it’s as if the light is emanating from the walls itself. Arthur feels his skin crawl.

As they progress, the light seems to be getting brighter. The pale green hue from the forest long gone, replaced with a cool blue, solidifying the feeling that they are deep under water.

Arthur squints his eyes as gradually it becomes too bright to see, he staggers forward narrowly missing a rock underfoot. He blinks several times, eyes watering as they slowly adjust to the increased light, just in time to come to a belated halt, half a breath away from toppling into Albus rooted on the spot in front of him. He places a hand on Albus’ shoulder to steady himself, peering around at their new surroundings.

The narrow cave walls have opened up into a strikingly large roughly domed clearing about the size of Camelot’s throne room. Sharp and angular crystal formations jut out from every surface, more glittery and intricate than even King Alined’s jeweled crown. Arthur’s mouth opens in amazement. The cavern would bear a strong resemblance to ice, if it weren’t for the impossible amount of iridescent colours shimmering in dizzying patterns. The majesty of the place takes Arthur breath away.

To his left, Albus seems to be equally as captivated, his eyes wide behind his narrow glasses.

Arthur almost misses Merlin, his bright golden glow of magic blending him efficiently into the glowing crystal background. He carefully steps over the larger crystal formations embedded into the ground, the line of his shoulders tense and rigid.

“Something is very wrong.” Merlin’s soft tenor echoes jarringly around the space, sounding
disproportionately loud and startling after such thick and uninterrupted silence. Arthur peers around for the threat, adjusting his stance and keeping his back to the entranceway. His eyes slide from one brightly coloured surface to the next, clueless on what to look for.

“Someone has been here. Broken through the wards. Tainted it…” Merlin turns slowly on the spot from his place at the centre of the dome, his gaze locked onto the structure around them, brows pinched and expression mutinous. He holds his hands out parallel to the wall, golden magic encompassing his entire form, fully consuming the blue of his eyes and washing away all other colour on his person. Soon, the crystal walls themselves go from simply reflecting the gold of Merlin’s magic, to emanating it themselves.

As more of the cavern is bathed in the vibrant warm light, Arthur becomes aware of a faint ringing sound in his ears. The high pitched buzzing increases in volume in tandem with Merlin’s magic to an almost unbearable point. Arthur finds is hands covering his ears without making the conscious decision to do so.

Just as he opens his mouth to start shouting, oh god, just make it stop, his ears suddenly pop, followed by dead silence. Blearily, he opens his eyes, slowly lowering his hands.

Taking in his surroundings once more, Arthur’s breath freezes in his lungs. He has to physically restrain himself from recoiling away. Thick black sludge oozes out from the walls, emerging from the crystals like dirty sweat, collecting and dripping down the ceiling into gelatinous puddles on the ground around them. Arthur supresses a shriek as a sizeable amount splats against the side of his head and rolls down his back.

Scrambling, he ineffectively tries to wipes some off the back of his neck, but the thick clumpy substance clings to his skin. He stares at the black smudge on his hand as it slowly sinks into his flesh and disappears, leaving his whole hand feeling tingly and numb.

Albus quickly puts his hood up, his wand gripped tightly in his hand, pointing aimlessly and uselessly around the room.

“Don’t let any of it touch you.” Merlin bends down to inspect a pile of the stuff on the ground next to him, nose scrunched up in disgust.

“Bit late for that.” Arthur’s voice is thin and wispy as he stares down at his numb hand.

Merlin looks up sharply, alarm written all over his features as he quickly straightens up and comes over to Arthur. Albus waves his wand in a circular motion and a smaller, blue shimmering dome appears over their heads. A clump of black goo drops down, but this time, hits and slides down the magical wall instead of their unsuspecting heads.

Merlin inspects Arthur with barely concealed panic. “You touched it?”

“It dropped on me.” Arthur tries to move his hand, but the muscles disagree with him.

“Where? Your hand?” Merlin grabs Arthur wrist and yanks his hand up close to his face, eyes once again glowing.

“Yeah. My hand… and all down my back.”

Merlin’s bright eyes widen and dart up to meet his.

“That is very dark magic.” Albus waves his wand in Arthur’s direction. “We need to get you to St Mungos.”
“How do you feel?” Merlin looks as if he’s ready to catch Arthur at any moment should he fall.

Arthur looks back down at his hand and tries moving it again. Nothing. He tries moving his feet. His arms. His head. His breath comes in faster and faster as he finds himself frozen on the spot. He feels as if something is sliding around under his skin and baldly wants to scratch at it. His eyes twitch.

“How?” Merlin’s voice holds more terror than he’s ever thought possible. His stomach feels leaden and acidic at the same time.

“Nnngh” Arthur’s feeble attempt at speech leaves his throat sore.

His before immobile hand starts to twitch. Arthur tries to make it stop, but it moves seemingly on its own. Fingers wiggle and the hand reaches-

Suddenly his head throbs, struck by the mightiest of gongs. The piercing, pounding and throbbing headache would leave him useless if he weren’t already so. The sight of his hand in front of him doubles and blurs.

Merlin and Albus’ frantic calls blend into background noise, indistinguishable and vague.

He feels eyes on him. The indescribable sensation of being watched. Stared at and scrutinized by an omniscient force. The pain in his skull intensifies unimaginably.

Trapped in his own head, he screams, the sound bouncing around in the spaces of his mind. Time itself seems to freeze.

Then, just as Arthur nearly gives up consciousness, it stops. The pain in his head retreats to a dull ache, and his limbs start to tremble as the choke hold on his body is released.

He doubles over as his stomach gives a violent jab. Arms catch him before he falls completely to the ground and back into the black sludge. He feels his insides twist around in a tangle and immediately starts retching.

Thick and lumpy black globs make their way out of his body, searing his throat and causing his eyes to water. Finally free of the bile, he takes a trembling breath and meets Merlin’s tear hazy eyes.

“Oh thank the great goddess above, Arthur.” Merlin’s hands firmly grip Arthur’s shoulder in no doubt what would have been a crushing hug if not for the streaks of black down Arthur’s front.

“Seven fiery hells, what was that?!” Arthur’s voice rasps out weakly and tasting foul. He stares down in disgusted horror at the glob in front of him. “Thanks for getting rid of it- how did you get rid of it?” His eyes dart between Merlin and Albus imploringly.

“We didn’t.”

Arthur blinks at them. The words hang in the air between them. He blinks again.

“It’s still in me?” He feels like puking again at the thought.

“No, no. It’s gone.” Merlin’s eyes flare golden as he gazes up and down at Arthur, and for all Arthur knows, probably seeing straight through him.

He slumps in immense relief. He feels like the black goo around them is watching them. “But how?”

Merlin bites his lip and looks between him and Albus. “I don’t know.”
Arthur swallows down against the acidic flavour in his mouth.

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