In a world of magic and myth, everybody's got a secret or two. Merlin turns into a child to protect Harry Potter but finds his hands full with mystery and lies. Could these strange magical twins, Jack and Elsa, be responsible for attacks on students? Who are they and what are they doing at Hogwarts? Meanwhile, little Ginny has a sketchy diary friend who has a plan for her. If only she told someone...

I've been told that this summary doesn't do the story justice. How about this:

The Gathering is the beginning of an epic series. We meet our main characters at a young age when they are thrown together with no clue of the struggles they will face or how much they will need the alliances they forge now.

Featuring expanded magic of the HP universe, taking from Gaelic mythology and themes from other fandoms. We get up to mischief with Peeves and exact long-overdue karma on
Snape. We get into Old Religion - the beliefs and the magic - expanded past Merlin canon. We explore a fairy colony, Merlin's home, and the Crystal Cave.

Get ready for some fluff, drama, humor, cheesy puns, and a flirty 12-year-old Hermione.

Notes

RENAMEDED. Previously Merlin and the Secrets of Hogwarts.

This is a multi-crossover but you only need to be vaguely familiar with Harry Potter in order to enjoy it.
Who's Merlin? Oh, he's just an ancient immortal sorcerer. I found a way to make Harry Potter and BBC Merlin canons work together.
Regarding Jack and Elsa, they have a different backstory which will be slowly revealed, so even if you're not familiar with Rise of the Guardians or Frozen, you will not miss out.
We are one year behind Harry in Chamber of Secrets timeline.

I am always open to critique. Help me make this story better by giving me your worst opinion. I can take it.

It's going to be a fun ride!
:::
I do not own characters or plots from Harry Potter books or Merlin or Rise of the Guardians or Frozen or… I guess that's it for copyright stuff. But everything else is mine ;)
Snowballs and hot dogs

1992, September 1st

Albus Dumbledore looked out the window overlooking the school grounds. Hogwarts Express was approaching in the distance. The steam followed the engine faithfully, making it look like a toy train set from this far away. Soon, a new student was going to come out of that train - a student more capable than even him - the legendary Merlin, an ancient immortal sorcerer who represented a precaution, but was his protection going to be enough?

The previous school year rang around his mind like an echo in an empty basin. Voldemort got in his school. Despite the wards and protections in place, despite a team of very capable wizards and witches ready to protect the students, he had found a way in. Aided by a Hogwarts teacher, he walked among them unnoticed and fooled them all, even Albus.

“My teacher!” Albus accused his reflection in the window. How did he fall for it that easily?

Voldemort was brought into the school by one of the teachers Albus had personally picked. That was the biggest slap in his face as if the Dark Lord was taunting him. Would this school year be any better? Could he protect Harry Potter so the boy could fulfill his destiny?

What Albus didn’t know was that the train contained more than just the usual: students, faculty and their belongings. Right beside Merlin, sat two unknowns, two magical beings pretending to be ordinary students, two wild cards which could sway the events of the coming year one way or another - magical twins whose destiny was intertwined with the immortal sorcerer.

And unbeknownst to them all, the train contained a sinister object. It was a part of a plan that was put into motion centuries before, realized but interrupted a few decades ago, and ready to be resumed now, in the hands of an innocent.

Albus had no idea how much danger his school was in.

1987

Elsa ran as fast as her little legs could carry her. Earlier, Jack had fallen through an opening in the ground and got separated from her. He yelled from the hole that they would meet at the bottom and she hoped she could find her way alone.

She couldn’t count how many times they had attempted to escape the wretched tunnels with no luck but they had to keep trying. They had to have hope that there was something better outside than the life they had. Hope was the only thing that kept them going.

The darkness was becoming thicker and she kept tripping or running into jagged walls. She fell down again painfully.

“I won’t cry,” she promised herself. “I won’t cry.”

She sat up and rubbed the dirt off her knees which were now bruised and bloody. She was hurt, lost and had no idea how to get to her brother.

She hated the darkness. It filled all of her nightmares and surrounded her during waking hours. Now, it seemed to loom over her, suffocating her, sucking up her hopes and dreams.
The twins dreamt of the wonders of the world outside but could never get there. Every attempt at escaping had always been a failure. The hags made sure of that. Their mother made sure of that. Elsa started to wonder if the exit was magically concealed and they had in fact passed by it many times, not realizing what it was.

She was sure now that they weren’t going to be able to get out today. The hags would ask them where they were again. ‘We got lost while playing’ was their usual excuse. Did the hags suspect that each of those incidents was an escape attempt? There was no way to confirm, but the number of previous attempts might be working in their favor. She hoped that the hags only thought that the two of them had a horrible sense of direction.

But now she had a new problem. She was lost and couldn’t even get back the same way she got there. If no one found her, she could starve alone in this gloomy corridor. Would she waste away in darkness?

She wrapped her arms around her bent legs and closed her eyes.

“I won’t cry. Jack will find me,” she assured herself. “I won’t cry.”

All she could do was hope that her brother would find her but how? He didn’t know this tunnel any better than she did. It was their first time here. How would he know where to go?

Panic was ready to sink its claws into her and she held it at bay only with the thought of her brother. She tried to distract herself by focusing on the loud thump of her heart. She pictured her ear pressing against his chest and wished it was his heartbeat she heard.

‘Jack, find me,’ she thought a prayer as the first tears fell on her cheeks.

She found comfort in imagining that he was with her and her hope grew to magical proportions. She always felt better when he was close. He made her feel safe.

In a few minutes, she heard quiet footsteps and looked toward the sound, afraid of what nightmare might come her way. Was it a hag? Was it something worse? Mother always warned them that dark creatures loomed in these tunnels.

She jumped up seeing something approach but then sobbed happy tears, recognizing who it was. Jack’s snow-white hair stood out in the darkness, chasing away her fears.

“Elsa!” her brother ran up to her and pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. “I heard you,” he said while squeezing her. “I heard you in my heart.”

1992, July 1st (present day)

Minerva McGonagall breathed in summer afternoon air laced with smells that spoke of freshly mowed lawn and summer picnics. She finished her errands in the city and now had a little time for herself. The school was on summer break and she enjoyed her time off. She loved teaching and devoted her life to it but even she had to recharge her energy. A walk through her favorite London park was exactly what she needed.

She wanted to take her usual route around the lake where she could watch the ducks but found her path blocked by a dog-walker who had nine dogs of various breeds and sizes with her. That was excessive. Who could control this many beasts?

Minerva did not want to encounter them, so she took a detour - a little pathway between the trees.
She was reflecting on the impracticality of traditional wizard attire in the summer when something dropped right next to her feet. She looked down to inspect the splatter of white on the ground and gasped when she realized that it was snow. Where would snow have come from in July?

A movement behind the trees prompted her to investigate the strange occurrence. As she approached, she heard laughter.

“You missed!”

She followed the young voice and found a boy with unnaturally white hair who hid behind a tree and then swiftly dodged out of the way to avoid getting hit by a snowball. The source of the assault was a young girl with long braided hair as white as the boy’s. Her hand was empty at first, then a snowball appeared in it which she immediately threw. The boy ducked and propelled a snowball back, hitting her in the forehead.

“Got you! Ten to five. I win!” he yelled and ran up to swing her around in a hug.

They both laughed but she secretly created a snowball behind his back and smashed it right into his face. He let go of her but did not stop laughing.

Minerva brought her hands together, delighted at the sight. It was common for young wizard children to be able to create some wandless magic but it was usually accidental and limited. In all of her years, she had rarely witnessed this level of control over wild magic. These two children were very skilled and she was impressed.

The girl was the first one to notice her. The boy first dismissed her but then did a double take and also stared. Minerva realized that they might have thought that she was a Muggle who had just witnessed a magical snowball fight so she approached them and tried to smile pleasantly.

“Don’t worry, I’m not a Muggle.” Her explanation did not take the shock out of their expressions. “You’re not in trouble, I just wanted to talk to you.”

The two kids exchanged looks, and some silent agreement went on between them. The girl appeared cautious but the boy looked back at Minerva with a carefree lopsided smile.

“Hi,” he said.

Seeing them up close, she noticed that the resemblance between them stretched to more than just their hair. They were both pale, had similar facial features and identical icy blue eyes. The only difference between them, besides the gender, was that the girl was about an inch taller. Minerva guessed that they were siblings.

“That was a very impressive wandless magic and I’m wondering where you learned it. I’m a Professor at Hogwarts and don’t remember ever seeing you there.”

The boy frowned at her words but then just shrugged. “It’s what we do.”

Minerva noticed that he didn’t answer her question at all and she supposed that maybe they weren’t of school age yet.

The teacher in her worried about them. She appraised them and did not like what she saw. Their Muggle clothes were clean but very worn. The girl wore a faded teal dress which was frayed at the bottom, and mary-jane shoes which were so worn out, she couldn’t tell what color they were anymore. The boy wore a blue hoodie which had seen better days, pants which were ripped on both knees and no shoes at all. He saw her staring at his bare feet and rubbed the back of his neck
nervously.

“I don’t like shoes,” he said but Minerva did not buy it.

She felt like giving a piece of her mind to their parents for taking such poor care of them.

A clattering noise sounded behind them and she looked around to see a street vendor who set up a hot dog stand in the park. The boy watched the vendor longingly and his stomach grumbled loudly.

He shifted his feet in embarrassment but then addressed his sister, “Are you hungry?”

The girl dropped her gaze to the ground and he nodded in understanding.

Minerva’s heart swelled. She didn’t get to be a mother but had witnessed this situation when visiting her brother’s family. When a mother felt cold, she’d put a sweater over her child. When a father felt hungry, he’d make food for his children. This boy had the same type of relationship with his sister and it was heartwarming to witness.

“If you don’t mind, we need to get going. It was nice talking to you,” the boy said.

“Bye,” the girl added with a little wave and followed her brother.

Before Minerva could say anything, they left in the direction of the hot dog vendor.

She had a feeling in the pit of her stomach that she couldn’t quite explain. Her intuition told her that she shouldn’t let them go just yet, so she followed them, keeping her distance. Very soon, she found that her instinct was correct.

The vendor was preparing two orders of hot dogs and put the finished food on the counter so that he could accept money from a customer. The white-haired boy walked up and took the hot dogs off the counter without saying anything or paying, and walked away casually. The vendor rather oddly did not notice the thief himself, but became very confused by the missing hot dogs and began arguing with his customer.

That little thief! Furious at what she had witnessed, Minerva followed the boy to the bench where his sister waited for the stolen hot dog.

The boy startled from seeing her in front of them.

“Hi, again,” he said with his mouth full.

The girl gave her a little smile and a wave.

“You… you just stole this food!”

He frowned and then shrugged.

“We were hungry,” he explained as if that was supposed to excuse the behavior.

“Then, buy the food. Don’t steal it!”

“What do you suggest? That we starve? We do what we have to,” he declared defiantly and took a big bite of his hot dog, daring her to contradict him.

At first, Minerva wanted to scold him further, but then the meaning behind his words struck her. She looked at how skinny they were and at their haggard clothes and felt like someone punched her in
the heart.

“Where are your parents?” she probed, trying to not sound as harsh.

“Don’t have any. Don’t need any.”

He finished his hot dog and threw the wrapper into a nearby trash can. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stared at the hot dog vendor again. Minerva guessed that he was still hungry.

“Who takes care of you? Where’s your family?”

The boy crossed his arms and leaned back. “Elsa is my family. I’m hers. I take care of her and she takes care of me. We’re all the family we need. The question is, ma’am, why do you care? Just let us be.”

He just confirmed her suspicion. They were on their own. Were these children orphans or runaways?

The girl finished her hot dog, took his hand and they started walking away.

Why did she care? Because it was the right thing to do.

“Wait,” she called out after them and walked fast to catch up, her heels making a clacking noise on the pavement. “You shouldn’t be alone, children. There are alternatives.”

The boy snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“I could help you find a good wizard family to take you in.”

“Wizard family? As in wizards?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

He seemed to be amused by this and Minerva didn’t quite understand why. They had to have known that they were wizards, right? The idea that they didn’t know seemed so strange to her.

“You do realize that you are not Muggles. Do you?”

“What are Muggles?” the girl asked curiously.

“Non-magical people. You have magic. You’re a wizard and you’re a witch.” She had a hard time believing that no one had ever told them that yet.

To her surprise, the boy snorted and tried to suppress giggles. The girl exchanged a look with him and giggled as well.

Minerva didn’t know what to think of it. They didn’t know? How could this have happened? They looked to be somewhere between ten to thirteen-years-old already. It was obvious by the ease with which they used magic that they had these skills for a while. No one noticed? Improper Use of Magic Office was usually very good at detecting underage wizardry. How did they miss these two?

She needed to get some more information out of them if she had any chance of helping so she decided to give them an offer they couldn’t refuse.

“I bet you’re still hungry.”

Two white heads snapped to attention and she tried to not look too smug.

“I’ll buy you both proper meals if you agree to talk to me about your living situation.”
They looked at each other and a silent agreement was made because the boy smiled at her and said, “Just talk? Deal.”
“Getting dull, are we?” Merlin said to the sword.

He had a file float up to it and start its work while he moved on to inspect the next blade. Today was a sharpening day. While he rarely had any use for the few weapons he kept in his cottage, it felt irresponsible to not have any.

Just a few centuries ago, he was attacked by a thief who wore a powerful ancient charm which rendered him immune to magic. For all his power, Merlin had no weapons around, couldn’t defend himself and was killed.

Granted, he didn’t stay dead, he was up and about before the swine laid his hands on the Cup of Life, but the point was that he nearly failed at protecting it. Not having any blade ready to summon, he attacked the thief with a broken teacup. Arthur would have wet his breeches if he saw that fight.

Several times already in his unnaturally long life, Merlin had learned the hard lesson that relying on magic alone was a mistake. And so, he always kept a few blades around so they would be easy to summon when the situation required it.

He felt a tingle on his skin which gave him goosebumps. One of his wards was activated, announcing a visitor. He ran up to the window and moved a curtain aside to check who it was.

He smiled when he recognized his guest and opened the door.

“Albus, my old friend!” he exclaimed and gave the old wizard a quick hug. “What brings you to my humble hut?”

Albus smiled at his ageless friend. “I thought a visit was in order but also I have a proposition for you.”

“Really?” Merlin was about to invite him in when he remembered the state of his sitting room.

There were several swords and daggers floating in the air as if held by invisible servants. Albus Dumbledore was a wizard, so the magic wouldn’t shock him, but the weapons might. Modern society was so touchy when it came to combat. Merlin stood in the doorway, awkwardly grinning, while the weapons floated to the closet where he stored them.

Albus gave him a strange look, probably wondering why he didn’t let him in yet, but waited patiently. Once Merlin heard the click of the closet door, he motioned for the wizard to enter and get comfortable.

Merlin hadn’t seen him in several years. Usually, his visits were not social. It seemed that people thought of Merlin only when they needed his help. They either needed his magic, since he was a practitioner of Old Religion, or they needed his knowledge which he had accumulated over his long life. Old Religion kept him alive for fifteen hundred years to fulfill a prophecy: when Albion is in need, Arthur will rise again and Merlin’s purpose will be realized. Until then, he had to wait.

And so he went on living, trying to not get lost in the ever-changing world. He would get involved in the affairs of modern wizards, mostly to occupy himself and give himself some purpose.
It stung him that people would visit him when they needed help and not just out of friendship. At the same time, it was painful to develop true friendships knowing that he was going to outlive everyone he cared about. But he rarely refused pleas for help. He always had a soft spot for good causes and normally gave in and assisted them however he could.

Dumbledore settled himself in and stroked his white beard. There was an curious twinkle in his eye.

“I remember that last time we spoke, you complained of boredom. I might have something to ease that problem of yours.”

Merlin leaned back in his armchair, considering the possibilities. “Well, I’m intrigued.”

“Do you remember the Potters?”

“Yes. I taught Lily Potter that protection spell and it worked but only on their son. Both she and her husband died at Voldemort’s hand.”

“Precisely. And the spell has been working continuously while the child, Harry, has been living with his blood relatives. He’s well protected there.”

Merlin nodded and wondered where the old wizard was going with this.

“So, you see, my old friend, last year Harry started his first year at Hogwarts. Voldemort has been stirring and the boy barely escaped with his life. I’m worried that his prolonged absence from his blood relatives’ house weakens the protection Lily provided him.”

Merlin considered it, tapping a finger on his lip. “Hmmm. I don’t think this spell has ever been tested to serve as a protection for such a long stretch of time away from blood relatives.”

“So, you see why I’m worried. He’s coming back to school in a few weeks for his second year. Voldemort might attempt to strike again.” Dumbledore interlinked his hands on his lap and gazed down expectantly.

“What would you like me to do? This is the strongest protection spell I know, Albus. There is no other ward I can offer that isn’t already placed on Hogwarts.”

“Well, I was thinking more of you being able to protect him from inside the school.”

“I already told you, I am not interested in being a teacher at Hogwarts,” Merlin pointed out, not in the mood to repeat the argument he’d had with the old wizard many times.

“Yes, you made yourself perfectly clear,” Albus placated, shifting in his seat. “I was thinking more of your aging spell. You could make yourself appear younger and join the school as a student.”

Merlin paled. “You want me to turn myself into a child? Why would I ever want to do that again? As you know, I’ve done it once when Hogwarts was founded and I do not wish to repeat that experience. Being a child was not fun, Albus!”

“It’s perfect, don’t you see? No one would suspect you. You could go to places where the students go, where Harry will go, so you could keep an eye on him and keep him safe.”

“Why are you so convinced that he will need my protection?”

“I don’t want to take any chances, Merlin. You know what the prophecy said - Voldemort will rise again and only Harry will be able to defeat him. It could be many years before the prophecy comes
to pass. We must keep Harry safe until then.”

Merlin frowned, not liking the plan. “I have my own prophecy to worry about, Albus. I don’t want to make any long-term commitments to you. What if getting involved with Harry jeopardizes my own responsibilities? What if Arthur comes back and I’m too busy at Hogwarts to notice?”

Albus peered at him from under his half-moon spectacles. “You’ve been waiting a millennium and a half, dear friend. Can you really not spare a few years to devote to a… a side job, we could call it? Besides, there is no reason why you couldn’t step away, should your time come.”

Merlin got up and paced in the small room. Dumbledore was right, of course. He had been waiting for so long. A few years was a blink of time by comparison.

“That Voldemort needs to be put down,” Merlin spoke more to himself than to the old wizard, remembering the evil the Dark Lord had caused last time he was in power.

Merlin participated in the Wizarding War against that nasty fanatic, anonymously, of course. He even landed a killing stun, and yet, Voldemort survived. He somehow gained immortality. It didn’t matter that Merlin’s magic was more potent. He wasn’t meant to be the one to kill him. Stupid prophecies.

What Merlin didn’t tell Dumbledore was that he was more than just bored. It had been a while since anything exciting had happened in his unnaturally long life and he had been looking for some new activity to occupy himself with, but he was also looking for companionship. Being immortal had lost its appeal about a millennium ago. By now, it felt more like a curse than a gift. He could use a distraction.

“I’ll do it but just until Harry is out of school. After that, I can’t promise anything.”

Dumbledore smiled in relief. “That’s all I was hoping for. I don’t want you to attract anyone’s attention, including Harry’s, he’s pretty inquisitive, so I suggest you make yourself eleven-years-old and start in the first year. Ask the Sorting Hat to put you in Gryffindor so you could be closer to Harry. You’re likely not going to win him over if you end up in Slytherin like you did the first time you attended the school.”

Then, he got up and pulled out a piece of parchment out of his robe and handed it to Merlin.

“My invitation and supply list,” the warlock mused. “You already assumed I would agree, didn’t you?”

The old wizard winked at him and turned to leave. “It never hurts to be prepared.” Then, he looked back one last time, having opened the door already. “Plus, I was hoping you’ll make the right choice.”

Merlin sighed, looking back at the parchment in his hands.

“Eleven-years-old again.”

As he watched the old wizard leave, a resolution formed inside his mind. Maybe it wasn’t going to be so bad. Maybe it would be fun.

“Minerva McGonagall,” she said, stretching out her hand. “You can call me Professor McGonagall.”

The boy shook her hand firmly. “Jack.”
The girl followed with a polite smile. “Elsa.”

Both hands she shook were cold and Minerva was determined to get them a proper warm meal as soon as possible.

“I can apparate you both. Just hold on to me, do not let go.”

She held both their hands tightly and apparated in front of the Leaky Cauldron. She looked them over to check their reactions. People had different response to apparating for the first time. Some would get dry (or not so dry) heaves, others would get light headed, but these kids were unaffected and seemed to have loved the experience.

“That was cool!” Jack exclaimed looking around him at where they were.

“Can we do it again?” Elsa asked, jumping up and down.

“Uh, not right now. Let’s get inside.”

As a last precaution, she paused to see if they would notice the pub. Thanks to the concealment charms placed upon it, Muggles would dismiss the Leaky Cauldron, seeing it as a broken down shop front, but the twins saw it immediately. They proceeded towards it, guessing correctly that this was where she was going to feed them. This was enough proof for her. She was now sure that she had found two wizard children.

She ordered them soup of the day and noticed that Jack kept staring other patrons right in the eye as if it was some game. Then, he leaned towards Elsa and whispered in her ear. Minerva wasn’t entirely sure but she thought it sounded like “They can all see us.” In response, the girl giggled and started doing the same thing, staring at other people so intensely that they had to look away.

They finished their meals and sat back in their chairs, sated. Elsa kept looking around the bar curiously and Jack focused back on Minerva.

“Alright. We promised we’d talk.”

Minerva was pleased. He might have been a little thief, but at least he kept his word.

“I couldn’t help but notice that you look similar. Are you siblings?”

“Twins.”

That made some sense. It explained the deep bond she could see between them.

She hated having to probe into the unpleasant topic when the children were in a good mood, but she needed some more information.

“Where do you live?”

Jack shrugged. “Here and there.”

“Do you have a permanent home?”

Jack looked at the table and played with his spoon. Else didn’t say anything either. The silence was answer enough. They were homeless. Minerva sighed. They were so young. How did they end up on the streets?

“Did you run away from home?”
Jack spun the spoon on the table for a moment but then finally looked at Minerva with intensity.

“That was not home. We’re better off now. Do not think that you can make us go back. We will never go back.”

There was determination and challenge in his eyes as he kept unwavering eye contact with her. The boy’s icy blues looked much older than they should be. Minerva’s heart broke, imagining what horrors those young eyes might have seen. Whatever living situation they had before must have been awful. What happened to them? Were they abused?

She cleared her throat and tried to settle her nerves so her voice wouldn’t sound shaky. “If it was truly that awful, I will not force you to go back.”

He nodded. “Good.”

“How long have you been on your own?”

“A few months.”

“Do you have any family? Any at all? Maybe even far away.”

“We have each other,” Elsa replied, looking at Jack lovingly. He glanced at her and gave her a little smile in return.

This was heartwarming and heartbreaking at the same time. As a teacher, Minerva had seen many different types of siblings over the years and the ones that were not afraid to show affection for each other were definitely her favorite. Just like these two.

At this point, she knew what she needed to know.

“You’re too young to be wandering the streets on your own. You should be in school. Hogwarts would be a great school for you. It could also be your home.” She paused. She was getting carried away. Could she even deliver all of these promises? “That is if you allow me to help you get situated so you could be admitted to the school.”

“What type of school is it?” Elsa asked. She looked very interested in the subject.

Jack addressed his sister while still spinning the spoon absentmindedly, “Seriously? School?”

“Come on, Jack. Please,” the girl said while pulling his arm.

“What use is a school to us?”

“It’s a magic school,” Minerva interjected. “You would learn how to control your magic there.”

“So, what would we have to do to get into this school?”

Minerva felt satisfied. He might have acted like he didn’t want to go to school but she could see how his interest perked up at the word ‘magic.’

“First of all, you need to have a guardian, someone that would be responsible for you. Once that person is determined, I would just need to speak to the Headmaster. It would be up to him if he wanted to admit you.”

“A guardian,” Jack said with a frown.
Elsa’s smile faltered and she looked at Minerva sharply. “I do not wish to live with some strangers if that’s what you’re suggesting, Professor.”

“We would find you a good family.” Minerva was taken aback by such immediate opposition. “That would be a good thing. Don’t you want to have a home?”

“Jack is the only family I want,” the girl said and crossed her arms. “I want to go to Hogwarts, I do, but…” she broke off and pouted in her chair while playing with the end of her long white braid.

“I can’t imagine that happening,” Jack said quietly.

Minerva did not know what their problem was. “Why?”

“We’re not your ordinary kids, Professor. There is no family where we would fit in. We’re… different.”

Minerva was puzzled but then she remembered how little they knew of the wizarding community. From what they’d said so far, she guessed that they were brought up by Muggles. They probably thought they were freaks because of the magic they could do.

“I think you’ll find that you’re not that different once you spend some time in a wizarding household. If all you know are Muggles, you’re in for a big surprise. I bet I could astonish you with how well you would fit in.”

The boy exchanged a long look with his sister. They did that a lot. It was as if they could communicate without words.

“Are you sure?” he asked, looking up from under his overgrown white hair. “What if we’re not wizards?”

Minerva was perplexed. She had never had to deal with this type of situation before. What would it take to convince them?

She had an idea. She wanted to prove to them that they belonged in her world. She wasn’t sure if the idea was a good one, it probably wasn’t. She didn’t know if she could trust them but she wanted to. She’d grown rather fond of the two even though she knew them for only a couple of hours. She couldn’t explain why, but she felt drawn to them and desperately wanted to help. Finally, she made up her mind.

“Come with me. You can stay the night at a witch’s house. I will prove to you how much you belong in the world of witches and wizards.”

The boy huffed skeptically but then smiled lopsidedly.

“Challenge accepted.”

Chapter End Notes

How do you like the story so far? Let me know. I love hearing from readers.
“Are you sure about this?”

Elsa couldn’t believe what they were about to do. The day started normally, as their days usually went. They scored some food, played in the park, and then the woman saw them and everything turned upside down. Being seen was a rare event. Humans normally couldn’t see them. They were made of magic after all - just two young winter spirits walking around invisible among the world of the mortals. Even when they used their magic, humans were quick to dismiss it and rationalize it. But this woman saw them as if she was like them.

Elsa got excited at first, thinking that they had found another nature spirit, but the woman revealed that she was a witch and assumed that they were like her. The idea was ridiculous but how could they explain the truth to her? Then, she bribed them with food and promises of magic school, and everything went downhill from then on.

Jack seemed to enjoy just going with it, not denying the woman’s assumption and seeing what would happen. Elsa preferred having a plan and they definitely did not have a plan right now. This whole situation was making her very anxious.

Jack shrugged and followed the professor up the stairs to her home. “Do we have a better option for tonight?”

Elsa climbed the stairs grudgingly. No, they didn’t have a better option. They hadn’t slept in proper beds since the last house they broke into which was about a week ago. She also liked the idea of having another proper meal and a bath. Yes, a long relaxing bath would be nice. Plus, she really wanted to know more about that school and how they could get into it.

She had seen human children go to school and dragged her brother with her to see what happens inside. Human kids had no idea how good they had it: a safe place to study, lots of teachers, break time for play and meals, and, what amazed her even more, hundreds of other children to play with.

She tried to play among them with her brother but the experience became very sour quickly. Being unseen was a cruel fate. She learned that yet again, she had only her brother to spend time with, not that she didn’t want to, she loved her brother dearly, but she felt jealous of the human children who had such wonderful lives. They had parents who loved them, toys to play with and wonderful days to look forward to. And friends.

She was only starting to understand the concept of friends and it fascinated her. She’d seen girls play together, and be so incredibly close as if they were sisters. Elsa had always had a close connection with her brother, it was a bond that went deep to her heart. It was much more than just a bond of blood. It was simply magical. The problem was that it wasn’t like they had a choice. But friends, as she started to understand, friends had a bond that had nothing to do with blood or magic. It was a bond made by choice. That’s why it pained her so to remain unseen by all those children. They could never be her friends.

And now, they discovered that there was an alternative. There was this wizarding world hiding among humans. If all of these wizards could see them, that meant that their children were likely going to see them as well. This was their chance. This magical school was like a godsend. It sounded wonderful and she wanted to give it a try.

So, she decided that she agreed with Jack on this. She wanted to know more about the wizarding
world. They were going to humor this witch to find out as much as they could about it.

McGonagall took out a stick, no, a wand, and waved it in front of the lock and they heard a click when it unlocked. Elsa was impressed. The witch didn't need a key to open doors.

The first thing she noticed was that there were no light switches like the ones they’d seen in all human homes. That was a shame. Elsa grew to like electricity. It was so much more practical than torches and lanterns. Instead, the witch just waved her wand and candles lit up around them.

Elsa said a quiet “Wow.” Maybe electricity wasn’t necessary when one could use magic to get rid of darkness?

The woman’s house didn’t look ordinary, that was for sure. There were many strange objects around and the portraits on the walls were alive. Elsa could tell from Jack’s grin and how he was bouncing on his feet, that he was impressed and eager to check it out.

She sighed in resignation. It didn’t take much to excite her brother.

Professor stopped and faced them.

“Welcome to my home.” She looked nervous. “Just remember, there are charms placed on all objects in this house. If you try to steal anything, you will pay dearly.” She stared them down with a scorching look to emphasize her warning.

Jack chuckled. “You don’t think much of us, do you, Professor? I guess we didn’t make a good first impression. We will not take anything, I promise.” He gave her a dashing smile and she responded with a tiniest tight-lipped smile and a nod.

“I have only one guest bedroom prepared. It has two beds. Are you okay with that arrangement? If not, I can…” the woman started.

“No, that’s perfect,” Elsa interrupted. “I don’t want to sleep in an empty room all by myself.”

Professor inclined her head. Elsa released a sigh of relief. She couldn’t stand the thought of being separated from her brother. It brought up too many dark memories. She felt panic go through her just at the suggestion of it.

The witch showed them where their room and the bathroom were. Elsa clapped cheerfully seeing a large inviting tub. The woman smiled knowingly.

“I thought we could have tea now,” she said. “We should talk. There is much you have to learn.”

They were in the sitting room, sipping tea and munching on biscuits. Professor was sitting in her chair very straight and proper, expecting the same from them, but Jack couldn’t sit still. He finally got up to look closer at the different trinkets around the room. The woman looked slightly annoyed with his poor manners but then started the conversation.

“Have you ever used a wand?”

Elsa shook her head.

The witch offered her own wand.

“You weren’t sure if you’re wizards. Here’s a way to find out. Just wave it very gently. I want to see how it responds to you.”
Elsa took the wand and was surprised to feel that it felt very warm to the touch. She could feel its magic radiating through the wood into her hand. She waved it gently and accidentally froze her cup of tea.

Jack snorted and challenged her while pointing at the cup. “But that’s nothing new. You can do that without a wand. Do something non-icy.”

She shot him a cold look, waved the wand again and the cup shattered. She gasped and put her hand to her mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn’t do it on purpose. I swear.”

Elsa looked at the wand in her hand. Although the cup-breaking was unplanned, she had to admit that the wand gave her power she never had before. She guessed that she could do lots of things with it that a winter spirit wouldn’t normally be able to do. Learning magic suddenly sounded like an even better plan.

“No worries,” the witch said, taking her wand back. She waved it and it restored the cup although the tea inside it was still frozen.

“Cool,” Jack exclaimed. “Can I try?”

“Yes,” she said, giving him the wand. “Just, wave it gently.”

Jack waved the wand and it started snowing in the room. He giggled but Elsa wasn’t impressed.

“Why won’t you do something that’s new?” she threw his words back at him.

While she was very skilled with ice, frost and snow were Jack’s specialties.

He stuck a tongue at her, smirked mischievously and pointed the wand at the frozen cup of tea. Elsa thought he was going to break it as she did, but then the ice inside the cup melted until it was a steaming liquid again.

“Ha!” he exclaimed, very proud of himself. “New enough? Total opposite of my usual magic!”

“That’s very good, Jack,” McGonagall praised and took back her wand. “So, I think that answers your earlier question. A Muggle could wave a wand all day long and not have anything happen. Unless the wand itself rebelled against being used by a Muggle and turned its residual power against such user. You can obviously create magic. You’re a witch and a wizard. It’s final,” she declared looking at each of them. “You belong in the wizarding world.”

Elsa exchanged a look with her brother and he smirked. The woman’s conclusion was a wrong one, of course, but if a Hogwarts teacher could be fooled into believing this, maybe all wizards would see them as equals? Could they truly pretend to be wizard children?

Jack went back to looking around the place and this time focused on one particular painting that was staring daggers at him.

“What are you?” the man in the painting said.

Jack blanched and moved away, pretending to be focused on something else. Elsa’s heart pounded as she looked at the witch. Oh, no. Just when they had her convinced, they were given away by a magical painting. How did the painting recognize that they were different?
“So, I’ve noticed,” McGonagall said, ignorant of the painting’s words, “snowballs, ice, snow, is that the usual type of magic you do wandless? Is there anything else that you’ve been able to do on your own?”

Elsa didn’t know how to answer that. How much should they tell her? What would sound normal for a wizard child?

“It’s all snow or ice related. That type of magic comes easy to us.”

“What about your parents or anyone else in your family? Could they do magic or were they Muggles?”

She cleared her throat and answered, “Not Muggles. From what we understand, our parents were like us.”

Elsa did not want to think about her parents. Was the woman going to push the issue? Thankfully, she didn’t and instead, she invited them to help her prepare supper.

Jack was loving how much magic the witch used for the tasks as simple as stirring a pot. Elsa could see how badly he wanted to learn it.

Professor McGonagall was really something. She opened her home to them and took a genuine interest in their wellbeing. That was something they had never experienced before.

When the night came, they cleaned up, Elsa having taken a long bath, and settled in their comfortable beds. The room was mostly dark but their eyes easily adjusted to it. The only light came from a faint streak of moonlight streaming through the window. She felt content after this eventful day. She learned a lot and had a lot think over.

“Elsa?” Jack asked in the darkness.

“Yeah?”

“I really like her.”

She did notice that Jack bonded with the woman but wasn’t sure if it was a good thing. Their current lodging was only temporary. The witch still wanted to put them in some foster family. Elsa didn’t want Jack to get too attached, but at the same time, she didn’t want to deny him the fun he was having.

“So, why do you want to go to that school?” he asked, snapping her away from her thoughts.

She shrugged but then realized he couldn’t see that. “I always wanted to go to school. There is so much to learn that you can’t find in books on your own. And we could make friends. Imagine having friends…” she trailed off, afraid to get her hopes up.

“We’re not like them. They wouldn’t accept us among them if they knew what we are.”

“I know.”

They both laid on their beds in silence but then she broke it.

“You want it too, don’t you?”

He was quiet for a moment but then sighed. “All this magic, Elsa. I’d love to learn how to wield it. They know it, they could teach us. Where else can we get an opportunity like this?”
After a pause, he continued in a much more serious tone, “If we knew magic, we wouldn’t have to be afraid. Maybe we would be able to defend ourselves against her. We could stop running.”

She sighed and closed her eyes for the night. That did sound like a good plan.

Minerva woke up the next morning and shot out of her bed. There were two homeless kids in her house. By Merlin’s beard, why did she decide to invite them in? They could have robbed her in her sleep! Sure, she told them that little lie that each object was charmed but they could have seen through it. She saw how easily Jack snatched up the hot dogs - like a professional. They were thieves and didn’t even try to hide it.

She dressed quickly and went to check on them. She lightly knocked on the door but there was no answer. She opened it and saw that both beds were empty and already made. Her heart sank. They left. Probably with her possessions. At least they fixed the beds after themselves.

She went down the stairs, depressed, thinking to prepare some tea to calm herself and nearly had a heart attack when Jack jumped in front of her.

“Good Morning. We made pancakes!”

Minerva clutched her heart, trying to steady herself. Elsa was squatted on the floor and was in the middle of sculpting some ice creature with her magic. The girl looked up from her work and smiled pleasantly.

Minerva recovered from her shock, said a quick “Good Morning” and went into the kitchen, cursing at herself internally for having so little faith in them.

A plate of fresh warm pancakes was in the middle of the table and three plates were set up. A cup of tea was already steaming ready for her. The twins came over and sat down on her both sides, leaving the middle chair for her.

“This looks wonderful, children,” she said, unsure of what else to say.

Minerva was deeply touched. She had lived alone for many years, was very much used to it and liked to say that she preferred it that way, but her heart warmed at her current company. They did all of this without magic, didn’t they?

But what put a lump in her throat was the simple gesture that they waited for her so they could all eat together. She guessed that the twins probably always waited for each other before digging in and decided to not leave her out of their little tradition. Even though they were at her home and were her guests, she felt like a part of their little family.

She thoroughly enjoyed their breakfast together. The pancakes were delicious and the twins were very pleasant to have around. Jack was quick to joke around and had an infectious laugh. Elsa was calm, intelligent and very well behaved. She had a snappy comeback for each of Jack’s teases, used to handling him.

Minerva also noticed a change in the two kids compared to the day before. They were significantly happier, less stressed out. A full belly and a well-rested night surely had something to do with that. She was happy that she was able to help them even if for just one day.

She frowned, imagining how those two wonderful children had been living on the streets, hungry, cold and alone. No, she had to help them permanently. They weren’t going back.
It was obvious that both had a strong affinity for elemental magic. She was truly impressed with Jack when he defrosted that frozen teacup. Even though they had no training, he was able to use a warming spell, just acting on instinct. That was a very good sign of a skilled wizard. He had potential and she guessed that his sister did too.

She wondered about their past and her stomach curled up in knots. There was a lot they were hiding, that was obvious. They tiptoed around the subject of where they came from and who their family was, giving her vague answers, but she believed that what they had said so far to be true. Maybe with time, she could get the full story from them, once she gained their trust.

“Twenty-seven days left until Hogwarts.”

That was all Ginny could think about as she jumped off her bed and stared out her window. The sun was up. It was a warm summer day. Twenty-seven more and she would start her first year.

She squealed, having a hard time containing her excitement. Her eye caught the poster of Gwenog Jones which hang above her desk. She stood in front of it with her hands on her hips and asked herself the usual morning question.

“What would Gwenog do today?”

The tall dark-skinned captain of the Holyhead Harpies looked back at her fiercely and punched the air with her fist.

“Gwenog would treat every day as game day,” Ginny answered.

The smell of breakfast reached her from downstairs and her stomach growled. Yes. Gwenog would eat a hearty breakfast to get ready for another exciting day.

She bounded down the stairs humming “Twenty-seven days” to the melody of “Do the Hippogriff” but when she made it into the kitchen, her world turned upside down.

Harry Potter was sitting in her kitchen! I repeat. Harry Potter was in her kitchen, eating sausages with her brothers as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

She felt her face turn a violent shade of red and an involuntary squeal escaped her lips. She immediately turned around and ran back up the stairs.

She slammed the door after herself and sat on her bed, hyperventilating.

She’d been looking forward to meeting him for a long time. She still had a hard time believing that her brother was good friends with him. She was hoping that he would introduce her once she got to Hogwarts but she never would have imagined that he would bring Harry right here to their house.

Ginny got up to look in a mirror which hung on her door and when she saw herself, a miserable moan escaped her lips. She was wearing an old nightgown, not even anything nice but one of those only-good-enough-to-sleep-in type of gowns. Her red hair was uncombed and sticking in all directions. Then, she remembered how she squealed when she saw him which must have completed the awful image. This was the first impression she gave him. She wanted to bang her head on the wall.

She went back into bed and curled up under the covers, trying to disappear.

Meanwhile, the poster of Gwenog Jones stared daggers at her.
“Every day is a game day,” Ginny said to herself. “How could I forget?”
Albus apparated to Minerva’s house as soon as he received her message. She didn’t disclose the details of what she needed him for but it sounded urgent. He knocked on her door and she came out to talk to him outside.

“Thank you for coming so swiftly,” she said.

She appeared nervous and slightly excited which was a rare sight on her and that piqued his interest.

“There’s someone I want you to meet. It’s two young children I found, twins. They have magic and I think I might be their first contact with the wizarding community.”

Albus raised an eyebrow. Whatever he might have imagined her message was about, it was certainly not this. He blinked rapidly when it hit him that she meant that those children were at her home. This was most unusual and uncharacteristic of her. It was the first time he had seen her get personally involved in a matter of students and he wondered what caused her to react this way.

“They didn’t get their invitation to Hogwarts when they were of age?”

“They are of age only now,” she said with a sigh. “There are some things that they haven’t revealed yet about their past. I worry that their childhood might have been dreadful. They’ve been on their own for a while.”

“It is most peculiar how these underage wizards escaped detection. Are you sure that they have magic?”

“Albus,” her eyes were alight with excitement, “they have a natural affinity for elemental magic. It appears to me that they’ve been practicing that type of wandless magic for a long time because they have good control over it. They have so much potential, it’s thrilling.”

Albus stroked his beard thinking it over. “Well, you convinced me. I’m curious. When can I meet them?”

He followed her inside. As soon as he saw them, he understood why Minerva took an interest. They certainly stood out. A white-haired girl sat on the floor and was working on an ice sculpture with only her hands, no other tools, and a white-haired boy stood in front of Minerva’s bookcase, studying the titles.

“You have got to check out these books, Elsa,” the boy said. “You’re going to love them. They’re awesome!”

Albus exchanged looks with Minerva.

“Children,” she said and both of them looked in her direction and eyed Albus curiously, “I want you to meet Professor Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

The boy grinned and approached with an outstretched hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Jack and that’s my sister Elsa.”

The girl waved from her spot.

Albus shook the cold hand offered. “It’s nice to meet you too,” and seeing that the girl started to get
up said, “You don’t have to get up. I’m curious as to what you’re doing there with that ice anyway.”

“Do you like it?” She looked at her project with pride. “I’m trying to copy that sculpture there,” she pointed at a Gryffindor lion standing on a nearby shelf.

After looking at the ice work, he noticed that it was indeed an accurate copy of the lion. The girl continued working on it, and unlike what people normally do, sculpt out of a block of ice, she added ice to it with her touch. At this point, she was only missing half of the lion’s head.

He sat down on the couch close to her to admire her work. “That’s very detailed. How long did it take you to make it?”

“Just a few minutes,” she said humbly.

“You’re very talented.”

The girl shrugged humbly. “I’m okay.”

“Don’t be modest,” the boy said. “You’re a great artist, Elsa.”

Albus looked at him. He saw what the girl could do and was now curious about the boy’s abilities.

“What about you? Can you sculpt like your sister?”

“Nah, ice is Elsa’s specialty and she’s a better artist, really. I only do this stuff for fun.”

“Now who’s modest?” the girl said. “Come on, Jack. Show off.”

The boy hesitated but seeing all eyes on him, he finally gave in.

“Alright. You want me to show off? I’ll show off.”

He sat down next to his sister and traced a finger on the wooden floor. Wherever his finger touched, a line of frost formed until he completed a picture of a male lion. It was a simple trick but Albus still liked it and was about to praise the boy, but then noticed that he wasn’t finished.

He kept his hands over the drawing and scrunched up his brows in concentration. Then, he slowly raised his hands palms up and the drawing stirred. Albus watched in amazement as it lifted off the floor and came alive as a three-dimensional white semi-transparent lion. The lion released a silent roar, showing off a full set of teeth and the girl giggled at the sight.

“I still don’t get it how you do that,” she looked at her brother in awe. “None of my creations can come alive like that.”

The boy smiled at her lopsidedly and shrugged. “Magic.”

Minerva was shocked. Albus guessed that she hadn’t seen this trick before. “That’s amazing, Jack.”

Albus now understood what Minerva meant before when saying that they had a lot of potential. This was powerful magic created without the help of spells or wands. These children were special. He agreed with her that they needed their attention but was now even more curious as to where such powerful children came from.

The frosty lion walked in a circle with pride and the boy stretched out both hands in front of it. The lion walked onto his hands, two paws per palm, and stood there obediently.
“Good kitty,” the boy said and looked the lion in the eyes, communicating with it silently. The lion then surprised them all by pouncing right into the girl’s face and blowing up into a burst of snow. The boy laughed and the girl looked furious as snowflakes danced around her.

“I’ll get you for that,” she said and got up but he lightly jumped over the couch, still laughing. She created a snowball in her hand and threw it at him but he ducked out of the way.

“Missed me.”

Albus suppressed a chuckle. This was what they used their magic for - fun and games.

“Children, no snowball fights indoors,” Minerva scolded them but she failed at hiding her amusement at the pair.

“Sorry,” Elsa said while still staring daggers at her playful brother. Then, she sat down to continue working on her lion.

Jack smirked, feeling victorious, and turned back to the bookshelf to take a volume out.

“These are awesome,” he said, flipping pages of Most Macabre Monstrosities. “You won’t find this in human libraries.”

“You mean ‘Muggle’ libraries?”

The boy shrugged and Albus added, “Is that what you thought before, that you’re not human?”

The boy exchanged a look with his sister, some silent conversation happened between them, but they didn’t say anything.

Albus continued, “Wizards are still human, Jack. Having magic doesn’t make you a different species.”

Jack shrugged again and looked back into the book.

Minerva invited Albus into the kitchen so they could talk away from the kids.

“Now, do you see what I meant?”

“Yes, I do,” the old wizard said, stroking his beard and sneaking glances at the children. “They’re really something.”

“What do you think about them coming to Hogwarts?”

“I would be very happy to have them but I’m curious as to their family. Where did they come from?”

“They haven’t said yet. They’re runaways, they didn’t deny that fact but they refuse to say where they ran away from. I checked with Wizard and Muggle Services and found no report of missing children matching their description. It’s like they came out of nowhere.” She sighed. “We’d need to find them someone to take them in. They didn’t like the idea when I suggested it. They want to go to Hogwarts but are wholeheartedly against being placed in a foster family. I don’t know how to convince them.”

Albus noticed that there was a hint of longing in her voice. She didn’t realize it yet, did she?

“What do you think of them, besides their magic?” he asked.
“I think they’re wonderful children. My heart aches at what they’ve been through. And it’s so heartwarming to see how much they love each other.” she looked at the twins with affection.

“I think you already know what you want to do, don’t you?” She looked confused so he prompted, “You just need to admit it to yourself.”

“What in the Merlin’s beard do you mean, Albus?”

“Do you enjoy their company here in your house?” he asked while a small smile was forming on his lips.

“I do. They’re a joy to have around, always smiling and so good-natured. They joke around and play a lot but always clean up after themselves. They even made breakfast for me. It was very thoughtful of them.”

She shifted in her seat under his gaze.

“Why don’t you just say what you want to say?” she said irritated.

He sighed and folded his hands in his lap.

“Minerva, my friend,” he said kindly. “You can take them in if you want to, even if it’s just for the summer. We can look for a permanent solution for them during the school year.”

Her eyes widened at hearing this and he resisted an urge to roll his eyes. Deep down she knew that she wanted to keep them but wouldn’t admit it to herself until he pointed it out.

He snuck a glance at the children again and felt a sense of unease. Two unknowns, powerful children with a mysterious past. He looked at her from his half-moon spectacles and considered his next words carefully.

“I would be cautious though. Find out what you can about their past. I’m not fond of secrets.”

Jack was loving it inside McGonagall’s house. He knew that they were going to be there for only a short period of time, they might even have only hours left, so he tried to take in as much of the place as he could. He didn’t understand why Elsa was only focused on her ice, putting finishing touches on it when there was so much left to explore in this magical house. It wasn’t like her to ignore a bookshelf full of volumes she’d never seen before. She was developing a sour mood and he wondered why.

The old wizard (Jack was still adjusting to using that term) left soon after his talk with McGonagall. The three of them were now in the living room. The woman sat down in the armchair very poised and proper and invited them to sit on the couch.

‘Oh, no,’ he thought. ‘She wants to talk.’

He had a bad feeling about this. She looked like she wanted answers. Just how much were they going to tell her?

“The headmaster would like you to attend Hogwarts,” she said and they both perked up. “However, we still have to decide your living situation.”

Elsa crossed her arms with a grouchy expression.

“I’m not living with some strangers,” she said stubbornly. “Jack is my family. That’s all I want.”
“You can’t be on your own, Elsa,” McGonagall reasoned. “You’re too young. I have a solution for you which you might like.” She linked her hands in her lap. “I hope you will like it, but before that can happen, I need to know that I can trust you. You’ve been holding back a lot of information. If I am to trust you, you will have to be honest with me.”

“And why should we trust you?” Elsa snapped back and Jack wondered why she was so hostile towards the woman. “You’ll just satisfy your curiosity at our expense and what do we get out of it? We get dumped with some random family, people who don’t really want us and will never understand us. We don’t want anyone’s pity and we don’t feel it necessary to explain ourselves and drag our past out for everyone to poke at it with a stick.”

“Elsa…” Jack was puzzled by his sister’s hostility but then he saw tears in her eyes so he took her hand in his, and gently massaged it until she started to calm down.

“You don’t really care what will happen to us once you give us away,” she concluded in a shaky voice.

Ah, that’s what bugged his sister. She was growing attached to the witch, and hated the thought of leaving. He had to admit, he felt the same.

McGonagall sighed. “Have I done anything to make you think I don’t care?”

“Elsa,” Jack said softly, “just let her talk. We don’t have to agree to anything yet. Just let her say what she wants to say.”

McGonagall looked at him with thanks and Elsa finally nodded in agreement.

“So, what solution do you have in mind?” he asked.

The witch shifted in her seat but still remained very poised. He wondered if she ever allowed herself to relax.

“If you’d like, you could stay with me for the summer.” Their shock must have shown on their faces because she cleared her throat and continued. “There would be ground rules, of course. I would expect a certain level of behavior from you. But before we can really consider this option, I need to trust you. You can’t be harboring all those secrets if you want me to be your guardian.”

Jack was astounded but in a good way. In fact, he would love this solution. Elsa lifted her eyes to him and they exchanged a knowing look. Yes. They were going to do it but they still needed to be careful as to what they said to the woman to not reveal what they were. As well-meaning as she was, she wouldn’t understand. Some secrets had to remain untold.

Elsa spoke up first, “What do you want to know?”

“How old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“Really? I thought you were older but you’re just the right age to start the first year at Hogwarts. Now, where are your parents?”

Elsa dropped her gaze. They had previously agreed to say that their mother was dead. It was easier that way. They were afraid that McGonagall would insist on bringing them back to her if she knew the truth. They had to stick to that story. Was Elsa too shy to lie? Well, he decided to think of it as not a complete lie. After all, their mother should have died a long time ago. She was cheating death.
“Our mother is dead. Our father left before we were born. We know nothing about him. So, as far as we’re concerned, we are our only family.”

She looked at them intensely and he knew what she was going to ask next.

“Who did you live with before you ran away?”

She wouldn’t be satisfied with silence. He had to say something so he might as well circle around the truth.

“A bad person,” he finally said. “Just... evil. Once we found a way, we escaped.” The woman was ready to spring a list of questions and he had to stop her. “We put it behind us and don’t want to drag the past out. We would really appreciate it if you didn’t push this question further.”

He tried to convey that he was not going to say more. This was all he was willing to tell her about their past. He only hoped that it was enough to erase the distrust she had for them.

She seemed to consider this for a moment. “Will you tell me the name of this person?”

Jack whispered, “Names have power.”

He hoped she would understand what he meant by it.

“Yes, they do,” she said just as softly.

Merlin walked down Diagon Alley, cursing himself for agreeing to this ridiculous arrangement. He needed to get a set of school robes, so he used the aging spell already and was painfully reminded of why he didn’t want to turn into a child in the first place. He hated being smaller than everyone, being looked down upon, fussed over and spoken to in a condescending tone.

His favorite age to turn himself into was an old age - as old as Dumbledore, long white hair and beard - the whole old package. Everyone would then respect him, treat his every wish. He could do whatever he pleased, no matter how unreasonable. He once even got a piggyback ride from a prince. He chuckled, remembering that day.

His natural age, as natural as being the same age for a millennium and a half could be, was twenty-six. He was happy that he was stuck in a body of a young and healthy warlock who was mature enough to be taken at least a little bit seriously. But at eleven years old? It was the worst age he could be. He was clumsy, skinny, his ears stuck out - the whole complete pathetic package and it was embarrassing. The greatest sorcerer to have ever lived looked like a loser.

He had his eyes peeled, looking among the crowd of wizards milling through the street. He asked Dumbledore when Harry was going to visit Diagon Alley, hoping he could bump into him and get started on some bonding. Today was the day, at least that’s what Dumbledore thought.

There was no sight of Harry yet and Merlin wondered how reliable that information was. He went down his supply list, buying each of the items he would need but none of the stores he visited contained the young wizard with a scar on his forehead.

He saw a small crowd gathered around a bookstore and entered, hoping he would finally get lucky. As he pushed his way through the mass of people, he heard whispers “Harry Potter” and perked up. The boy was here.

Merlin squeezed between the crowd until he finally saw the young wizard being forced to pose for a
picture with a pompous model. It was a book-signing, Merlin realized. Ah, the model-author wanted a shot with the famous Boy Who Lived to spread his publicity.

Merlin shook his head. He hated narcissism the most and this wizard was the very definition of it. Then, he saw a large sign “GILDEROY LOCKHART” and recognized the name. It was the author of 7 books he had on his supply list. He hated this guy even more now.

He quickly bought his books and waited at the front of the store hoping to catch Harry once the boy escaped the attention. He stood there, going over possible conversations in his head, becoming more confident by the second that he could get the boy to like him. He was a likeable guy. Everyone loved Merlin, right?

To his demise, nothing went according to plan. First, Harry and his friends got in an argument with a pale-haired boy, then, even adults got in a fight and all hell broke loose: books falling off the shelves, punches, bleeding noses, commotion of the store patrons. A half-giant broke the fight apart and they all left the shop in a hurry.

Merlin ran after them, trying to catch up and tripped over his own feet, sprawling on the ground. All of his purchases went flying in front of him. Harry and his friends disappeared inside the Leaky Cauldron and as the door closed, Merlin’s heart sunk.

“Nice. Great start, Merlin,” he praised himself sarcastically.

He decided that it was probably for the best that he didn’t catch them. Young Harry was likely going to be in a very sour mood after everything that happened in the bookstore and probably couldn’t wait to go home. No, this wasn’t the right time to make an introduction anyway. At least, that was what he told himself.

Merlin gathered up his things and kicked a pebble in frustration. He had to wait until the train ride. He was determined to introduce himself properly then. Everything better go according to plan on Hogwarts Express.
We come in peace

This summer, Minerva found something she didn't know she was missing in her life: joy. She couldn't remember the last time she enjoyed a summer break this much. The twins agreed to stay with her and didn't even fight her when she set strict house rules.

She was surprised at that because she expected a rebellion. She restricted their freedom, gave them chores, expected good manners but they never fought her on it. At first, she thought that they were playing nice because they really wanted to go to Hogwarts and figured it was a part of the deal but soon she learned that there was more to it.

Once she got to know them, she learned that they in fact, had set up strict rules for themselves. They wouldn't talk about it but from little bits of information, she gathered that they didn't just run away but were continuously on the run, hiding, and staying low. They were well acquainted with discipline and kept each other in check. It was sad that they had to learn maturity so early in life.

She found that their basic education was lacking and after probing them with questions, she was astounded to learn that they were never given any schooling at all. They knew how to read and write but never studied proper subjects, their education limited to reading and observation. However, they did remarkably well, considering how little time they’d spent schooling themselves, especially Elsa. The girl was absolutely brilliant.

They had made great progress in the few weeks she trained them but both had very different learning styles. Elsa hungered for all knowledge. She was able to understand very advanced concepts and had an amazing memory. Jack was the opposite. He liked learning new and exciting things, especially subjects revolving around magic but would easily lose focus and forget everything he’d learned.

Minerva made it her mission to catch them up on the necessary basics they would need to not struggle in school and already planned to give them extra help once in Hogwarts in whatever subject they needed it.

They had agreed to not broadcast to everyone that they had stayed with her during the summer, afraid that other students would suspect favoritism, but if asked outright, they were supposed to tell the truth - that she was their temporary guardian until a proper family was found. Honestly, she couldn’t promise that she wouldn’t favor them. She’d grown to care a lot for them.

They spent the last couple of days in London, getting the last of their school supplies and stayed over in the Leaky Cauldron until the first day of school. She got them everything they needed for their first year and was touched at their gratitude. They couldn’t believe that she would spend her own money on them and promised to repay it when they could. She wasn’t expecting any repayment, of course, worrying who they would rob to fulfill their debt. In fact, she was glad to spend her money on someone else, especially someone as wonderful as these twins.

There was one last purchase she had to make for them and so she led them through the door to Ollivander's shop. She was positively giddy with excitement to share in their experience of getting their first wands.

Ollivander was very curious about the twins, that was apparent. Every wand he had them try produced stunning effects but none so far was quite right. By their fifth wand, the shop was covered in patches of snow and ice as twin’s natural magic sprouted from every attempt. The store was starting to become very cold but the old wandmaker was undeterred, determined to try every wand in his shop if it came to it.
Jack found his wand first. It was a willow with unicorn core and it became apparent from the time he touched it that the wand chose him. As soon as he touched it, the wood frosted over, absorbed the frost and glowed. Jack closed his eyes as he felt the link form between the wand and himself and when he opened them, he smiled wide.

“Wow,” he exclaimed. “It’s almost like it has emotions or something!”

Minerva thought that it was a strange way to describe the bond with a wand. She always felt a slight rush of warmth whenever she touched her wand and could easily distinguish touching hers from others. It felt like an old friend in that sense but she never thought of the piece of wood as something that could feel.

Ollivander nodded, satisfied and muttered, “Curious. Willow is an uncommon material. A sign of a hidden potential. Let it serve you well. Let’s see which wand chooses your sister now, shall we?”

After three more wands, Elsa was starting to get impatient while Minerva tried to stop Jack from trying out his new wand.

“Don’t play with it,” she warned him. “It is not a toy. Wait until you’re in school and learn how to use it. Put it away, Jack.”

The boy scowled at her and put the wand in his pocket together with his hand so he could continue holding it in there. She shook her head, musing at how quickly he bonded with it. Well, she couldn’t blame him for his eagerness. In fact, she was suspecting that he would react that way, knowing how impulsive he was, and that was why she put off wand shopping until the last moment.

Elsa took hold of her ninth wand without any enthusiasm, already losing hope that there was one for her at all, and waved it angrily when a jet of blue sparks erupted from it, hitting the area right next to Mr. Ollivander, narrowly missing him.

“I’m so sorry...” she started apologizing but then looked at the wand in her hand. It glowed a magnificent blue and she laughed out loud. “I see what you meant, Jack. Oh, what power.”

“Walnut, Phoenix core,” Ollivander commented, relieved that he finally found a match. “Be careful with it until you learn proper spells. It can be lethal in the hands of a brilliant witch.”

Elsa turned the wand between her fingers, appreciating it fully.

“Now, we’re officially wizards,” Jack said to his sister with a wink and she beamed at him.

Ollivander’s eyes narrowed and lingered on the twins for a while like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he just shook his head and muttered something under his breath that sounded like, “Not my business.”

Minerva sighed, looking at the kids in her care. She couldn’t wait to see how they did in school. She wanted to be there when they cast their first spells and passed their first exams. Their successes were going to become her successes. This was going to be an exciting year.

Elsa was coming out of her skin but tried to look composed. After all, her brother was hyper enough for both of them. McGonagall dropped them off on platform nine and three quarters and went to sit with other teachers but not before encouraging them to mingle with the students. These were going to be the first wizard children they encountered and so they were thrilled and terrified at the same time.
She examined her brother. He had a permanent grin on his face and did not hide his interest in everything going on around them, craning his neck to see better. Wizard families were saying goodbye to each other and they were all a very strange and colorful sight. Finally, she dragged him away from the crowd and onto the train, and they sat across from each other in an empty compartment. He promptly kicked his shoes off and sat cross-legged, looking out the window at the commotion outside.

“They sure like owls,” he commented, seeing the many bird cages.

“Remember what she said. You can’t walk around the school barefoot. Put them back on,” she scolded him.

“It’s a long ride, Elsa,” he exclaimed, terrified of the thought. “Can’t I get a break for a few hours? I’ll wear them to classes. I promise.”

She ground her teeth in frustration. They’d had this conversation many times. All summer long, McGonagall tried to teach Jack to wear shoes and he fought her passionately on the subject. Elsa didn’t have anything against footwear personally but her brother hated this part of their human act.

It did not matter to them before since humans couldn’t see them, but now that they were surrounded by wizards and witches, they were fully visible and his shoeless appearance was going to draw a lot of attention. After all, they agreed that they were going to attempt to blend in.

They didn’t want wizards to have a closer look at them, afraid that they would get kicked out if the truth was revealed. Elsa was worried that her brother was too eccentric for blending in to even be possible. How could they hide among the masses when he stood out so much? Couldn’t he at least try to be normal?

Soon, a girl with long dirty blond hair walked into their compartment.

“How can I sit with you?” she asked in a dreamy voice.

“Sure.”

Jack jumped off the seat and sat cross-legged next to Elsa to give the girl room. However, instead of sitting opposite of them, she sat down right next to him.

“Your eyebrows are a different color than your hair,” the girl pointed out, leaning just a couple of inches away from his face.

Jack stared at her dumbfounded and Elsa suppressed a giggle. She’d never seen her brother speechless.

“They’re black but your hair is so white. Do you color it?”

The girl appraised him as if he was an art piece and he blinked rapidly, confused by the random question and unnerved by her pale silvery stare.

“Uh, no.”

“I’m Luna. Luna Lovegood.” The girl offered her hand.

“I’m Jack.” He shook her hand but still had a very baffled expression on his face.

Elsa felt a bit left out. Was she invisible to this girl? Was that a possibility? Or was her brother just
that much more interesting?

Luna stared at him for a while longer and once she had her fill, she pulled out a magazine from her pocket and started reading it while humming to herself.

Before Elsa could wonder about the strange girl more, they were joined by two more girls. Elsa smiled immediately at their sight. They both had a dark complexion and black hair but first and foremost, they were identical twins.

“You’re twins!” her brother exclaimed. Subtlety had never been his forte.

The girls looked at each other with a ‘duh’ kind of expression so Elsa decided to save the situation.

“So are we,” she said while elbowing him. “I’m Elsa Nix and this is my brother, Jack.”

He rubbed his ribs but did not complain. He knew that he deserved it.

The girls introduced themselves while settling in.

“Padma Patil,” the one on the right, across from Elsa said.

“Parvati Patil,” said the other one.

Elsa smiled at them both but soon realized that she wouldn’t be able to recognize which one of them was which. Oh, their school uniform had a different colored tie. She wondered why.

“So,” Jack asked, smiling at them mischievously, “how often do you play the twin prank, switching places?”

The girls looked at each other and shrugged.

“We did it a couple of times when we were younger,” Parvati said. “Not recently.”

Jack sighed and said in a serious tone, “For some reason, we could never make it work. No one believed I’m Elsa. Maybe my hair’s too short. That’s it, isn’t it?” And he ran a hand through his white hair in an exaggerated manner.

Parvati chuckled at his joke while Elsa rolled her eyes and elbowed him again.

“You’re becoming very violent, sis,” he said, rubbing his ribs.

“Jack, I love you but sometimes, you can be such a dork.”

“Aw. But I’m a lovable dork,” he gave her his lopsided grin and cranked his charm up to high and Elsa could practically hear all three girls swoon. She sighed. He was enjoying this attention too much.

“You’re new, right? I haven’t seen you two in Hogwarts before,” Parvati asked.

“Yes. First year.”

“Oh, really? I thought you looked older. I wonder which House you’re going to be in.”

“What do you mean?” Elsa asked curiously.

“Well, there are four Houses. You’re going to be sorted into one of them. You will live and attend
classes with your House. It’s going to become your second family. There’s a bit of rivalry between them but mostly we’re all friends.”

Elsa got lost in her longing to have friends. She loved her brother dearly and he was a fun company, but sometimes, she secretly wished she had a girlfriend to talk to.

She also felt jealous of Jack. Even though they both experienced the same type of isolation growing up, he had great social skills. He chatted casually with Parvati while Elsa barely got any words in. She wondered if she would ever be able to socialize as easily or if she’d be forced to rely on her brother to make friends for both of them.

The train had been moving for a good while when their compartment door opened and a raven-haired boy with ears that stuck out peeked through. He had a long look at Jack and her and then asked, “Do you mind if I join you? Everywhere else is full.”

“Go ahead. I’m Jack Nix,” her brother encouraged.

The girls introduced themselves and the new boy sat down next to Parvati.

“I’m Merlin Ealdor. It’s my first year at Hogwarts,” he finally said and Parvati looked at him, astonished.

“Your parents sure had expectations of you naming you after a famous wizard,” she said.

“Huh, I thought a name like that would be popular among you lot,” Jack blurted.

At her questioning look, he realized the mistake he made and Elsa tried to convey her thoughts to him with a glare, ‘You lot. Right. Nice way of pointing out we’re not part of their lot, Jack!’

He swallowed, fully understanding her look (not that they could communicate that way, though that would be a useful skill) and so she tried to cover it up.

“We didn’t have much contact with other wizards or witches before. We’re not familiar with the naming conventions.”

Elsa sighed in resignation. Jack was too talkative. They hadn’t even started school yet but already had to start making excuses as to why they were so different. It also didn’t help that Merlin was eyeing them very curiously. When their eyes met and she locked onto his cerulean blues, she felt momentarily stunned. His eyes alone felt like magic and she had to look away to shake the feeling off. She was imagining things.

“I’m Luna. I’m a first year too,” Luna said out of nowhere while reading her magazine. “And Jack doesn’t color his hair. I already asked. And I believe him.”

They all looked at her and then each other and there were a lot of suppressed giggles to which Luna was oblivious.

“Well, thanks… I guess,” Jack said, scratching his hair in confusion.

The train ride was long and mostly uneventful. She was glad that Jack learned his lesson and controlled his loose tongue. Parvati kept starting up the conversation anew and Elsa wondered if Jack charmed her maybe just too much. The girl’s eyes never left her brother. Merlin, on the other hand, was a rather quiet guy who seemed to prefer to smile at them rather than talk.

“Elsa, you feel that?” Jack snapped her out of her thoughts.
He was looking out the window at the darkness of the woods they passed by. She closed her eyes and recognized the power of nature magic. It was particularly strong in this forest. Powerful magical creatures had to occupy it to create such a strong impression upon the land.

“Feel what?” Parvati asked.

The two of them looked at each other and exchanged a nod. It appeared that witches and wizards couldn’t feel the strength of nature’s magic. They had to be careful to not reveal just how much they were connected to it. Thankfully, the train started to slow down, signaling that they had arrived and they were saved from having to explain themselves.

As they got out of the train, Jack and Elsa fell behind the others, feeling the forest watching them. The magical creatures they felt before came to check on the two winter spirits who had encroached on their territory.

“We come in peace,” Jack said quietly, hoping they heard the message.

The creatures did not reveal themselves but quietly observed from the shadows, completely unbeknownst to the rest of the students. Jack took Elsa’s hand and cautiously walked towards a half-giant who was urging them to follow.

“You’re going to have to put your shoes back on.” Elsa chuckled and he groaned in protest.

Ginny got off the train with a smile. Hogwarts. She was finally here. The ride itself was rather disappointing. She was supposed to ride with Ron and Harry, something she was scared of and excited for at the same time, but she couldn’t find them anywhere. She ended up riding with two first-years: Colin Creevey and Su Li.

Colin seemed to be very interested in the fact that she’d met Harry Potter. She made it sound like she knew him well but that wasn’t entirely true. While she had the opportunity to get to know Boy Who Lived this summer when he spent a few weeks with her family, she felt too shy to say anything to him.

She didn’t understand why he affected her so. She was never a coward so why did she turn into one in his presence? No, worse than a coward, more like a clumsy blubbering idiot. So, maybe it was better that she couldn’t find him on the train so she didn’t get to make a bigger fool of herself.

She liked Su. She appeared nice although with the way her head was stuck in a book the whole ride, and a textbook no less, not some interesting fiction, Ginny guessed that the girl was not going to be in Gryffindor. That girl had Ravenclaw written all over her.

Would Ginny even be in Gryffindor? Her whole family was. What if she was the first one to end up in Hufflepuff? She knew that she shouldn’t worry about it but that didn’t stop the butterflies in her stomach. She was the only girl of seven children. The same fluke of luck that made her a daughter among all sons could stick her in a different house, ending the impeccable family legacy.

“Pull yourself together, Ginny,” she told herself. “This is your year. You’ve waited forever for this.”

She shook the nervous thoughts away, ready to face the sorting. She hummed “Do the Hippogriff” as she trudged on towards the boats, ready for what may come.

This was the year of Ginny.
Minerva felt really nervous, awaiting the arrival of the first years with her children. She paused, puzzled. When had she started thinking of the twins as her children? She dismissed the thought, arguing that all of her students were her children.

When they lined up with the rest of the first-years, her heart swelled with pride. They cleaned up nicely. With the dark robes contrasting their pale complexion and hair, they stood out from the crowd in a very sophisticated way.

She had to give it to them. They knew how to act. You wouldn’t be able to tell that just a couple of months ago they were homeless runaways. Elsa’s long white hair was in an elegant braid that fell down her shoulder and Jack looked dashing in his new haircut. Minerva couldn’t bear to cut his hair too short, its color was just too unique to be wasted so she simply requested it to be trimmed so it wouldn’t look so shaggy.

The twins looked proud and excited to be there just like children of prestige pure-blood families normally do and Minerva felt a personal victory, seeing that her children looked so much better than all of the other ones. Her children. She was proud to call them that.

The sorting was going smoothly. Waiting her turn, Elsa looked really nervous although she smiled gracefully while Jack held himself confident, looking around him curiously. It seemed that all the girls were giving him a shy smile and Minerva joked to herself that he was going to be trouble.

She called Elsa first and the girl sat on the stool to try on the Sorting Hat. It didn’t take long for the Hat to shout out ‘Ravenclaw’ and her new House cheered. Elsa walked over to their table and they made a spot for her to sit among them.

‘That is very fitting,’ Minerva thought, smiling at the girl. ‘She will do well there.’

She called Jack and he approached, giving her a nod in acknowledgment. He sat on the stool for a long time, the Hat apparently having a hard time deciding and then he did something that she had never seen anyone do. Before the hat could say the house name, he took it off, got up and stared right at her.

“I don’t agree with this Hat,” he said while looking at her intensely.

“What are you doing, Jack?”

“It’s Gryffindor for you,” Sorting Hat addressed them both.

“The Hat is wrong,” Jack said firmly.

“Jack,” she said, taken aback, “then, that’s where you belong…”

“I belong wherever Elsa is,” he interrupted but kept his voice down, already aware that he was causing a scene. “I go wherever my sister goes. Nowhere else.”

“Jack,” she huffed, frustrated at the stubborn boy, “it’s not uncommon for siblings to be in different houses, even twins.”

“I don’t care what’s common,” he said. “You will not separate us.”
Albus walked up to them, now curious at what was going on.

“Whatever the issue may be, maybe we should discuss this elsewhere,” he said, pointing at the curious students and faculty who were watching the scene.

Albus took Jack to a room adjacent to the Great Hall and Minerva called the rest of the children to finish the sorting, glancing nervous looks after her white-haired trouble maker.

After all the children were sorted, Minerva brought the Hat with her and found Jack glaring at Dumbledore, not at all intimidated by the white beard. The Headmaster gave her a gentle but perplexed smile, and Minerva eyed Jack grudgingly. Why was he causing so much trouble over sorting?

“I tried to explain to him how the House system works but…” Dumbledore started explaining but Jack interrupted him.

“Professor, I cannot be separated from my sister,” he said with desperation in his voice.

“Jack, I regret not having this discussion with you earlier, I didn’t realize it was going to be such a problem but you cannot just pick what house you go to. If the Hat decided to not put you in Ravenclaw, there must be a reason for it.”

The Hat which was still in Minerva’s hands spoke up, “I’ve considered Slytherin. He’s cunning, resourceful and desires power but his dedication to stand up for what he believes in is stronger than all of those. Therefore, Gryffindor. I do not see much of Ravenclaw in you, dear youngling.”

“I don’t care about the reasons,” Jack said, exasperated, running a hand through his white hair nervously and eyeing the Hat spitefully. “I promised her I would always be there for her, that I would always protect her. How can I be there if I’m somewhere else?”

“Jack,” Dumbledore cut in, “you’re still in the same school. You can see her every day.”

“Jack,” Minerva gave the Hat to Dumbledore, walked up to the boy and took his cold hands in hers, trying to calm him down, “you would not be happy in Ravenclaw. They are hard working and value knowledge and wisdom above all. I can see Elsa fitting in there very well, not you.”

“That sounded almost like an insult, Professor,” Jack said, his blue eyes piercing hers, the sudden intensity surprisingly intimidating.

“Have you considered that it might be a good thing?” Dumbledore stepped in. “From what I’m told, you’re extremely close to your sister. The two of you have only had each other for years, am I right?”

“Yes, and…” Jack started but Dumbledore raised a finger to gesture that he wasn’t finished.

“Don’t you think it’s time to let go of her hand and let her grow on her own? Allow yourself some freedom, Jack. Both of you will miss out on a lot of experiences if you are always attached at the hip.”

“Jack,” Minerva added, “I noticed, whenever you speak of yourself, you say ‘we’. It’s time to let go of ‘we’ and find out who you are individually. Otherwise, you will hold each other back.”

Jack shook his head desperately, but the wise words were taking effect and breaking down his resistance.
“You will do well in Gryffindor,” Minerva said. “That’s also my House.”

He looked from her to the Headmaster and she could see that he had no more fight left in him.

“It will be okay, Jack. Now, sit at the Gryffindor table and do me proud.”

He said nothing but walked out of the room obediently. Minerva stood in the doorway and watched how he exchanged a look with Elsa who was puzzled and then gasped in shock when he sat down with the Gryffindors and not next to her.

“He’s going to be a handful,” Dumbledore chuckled behind her before going back to his seat.

“As if that was ever in jeopardy,” she said in resignation.

Jack sat down at the first empty spot he saw at the Gryffindor table. The kids around him looked at him suspiciously, probably wondering what the scene was about. He sighed. Blending in nicely, huh? All other kids got an applause. He messed this up.

“You wanted to go to Ravenclaw with your sister, right?” a girl with frizzy brown hair asked him.

“My twin. I wasn’t expecting that they were going to separate us,” he answered, thankful that someone broke the uncomfortable silence.

“It happens sometimes,” she said with a shrug. “Patil twins are in the same situation and they’re identical. I’m Hermione Granger,” she added proudly.

“Hi,” he nodded at her. “I’m Jack.”

Few other people at the table exchanged names but he couldn’t focus on the conversation and forgot them immediately.

He turned around to see where his sister sat and she was staring at him with tears in her eyes. His heart broke. He wanted to run over to comfort her but decided to wait until later. He tried to communicate with his eyes that it was going to be okay. She wiped her tears and gave him a forced smile. He looked back at his empty plate and did not feel hungry. He just wanted for the meal to be over so he could hug her already.

“Did I hear ‘twin’?” a tall red-haired boy asked.

Another boy that looked just like him stood up to stare at Jack and said, “Twins are taking over Hogwarts.”

Then both of them said together, “Sweet!”

Jack chuckled seeing another pair of identical twins but then his mood soured as he felt jealous that they were allowed to be in the same house when he was separated.

“George,” one of them said with a wave.

“Fred,” the other one smiled.

Jack nodded in acknowledgment but was really not in the mood to socialize.

“Try the pudding,” Hermione said. “It’s really good.”
He was about to smile at her pleasantly, appreciating her friendly gesture when he saw a ghost behind her and blanched.

He didn’t particularly like ghosts. Their connection to Death was disturbing to nature spirits.

“Oh, that’s Nearly Headless Nick,” Hermione said.


Jack tried to keep his calm although his heart was banging in his ribcage. Ghosts were most likely going to be able to tell what he was, just like the people in the moving paintings did. Was the ghost going to out him?

“It’s nice to meet you, Nick,” Jack said, attempting to sound casual.

“What’s a spirit doing here?” the ghost asked and Jack’s heart stopped. He said it. Just like that, the secret was out. Then, the ghost laughed and said, “Not my business. Carry on, children.”

Jack looked after the ghost that just floated away and then back at the kids at the table to gauge their reactions.

“Don’t mind him. All ghosts are a bit strange,” said one of the twins he’d met on the train. Was it Parvati?

Jack released the breath he was holding and smiled, trying to cover up his panic while his heart was banging so hard he was surprised no one else heard it. He checked everyone’s reaction. It seemed that no one made the connection that Nick was talking about him and he thanked the Moon for their blissful ignorance.

After the feast, the Prefects led the first years towards the Gryffindor common room. Merlin followed with unease. The whole point of him attending this school was to protect Harry Potter but Harry was nowhere to be seen. He wasn’t on the train. Merlin checked every single compartment and the boy was not there. He wasn’t at the feast. Merlin scanned every face at the table but the boy never arrived. He was growing worried. Would trouble find Harry before he even made it to school?

He thought to find Dumbledore to ask if he knew anything about Harry’s late arrival but was afraid that he would draw too much attention if he did it in front of everyone so he stuck to the plan of blending in and pretending to be an eleven-year-old boy.

He looked around at the other first-years and groaned internally. Was he really a part of this group? He really didn’t want to be a child. White hair caught his eye among the heads and he recognized the boy he met on the train.

He remembered the train ride very vividly. The compartment was full and he was going to pass it but when he saw the boy and his sister he was stunned. He hadn’t met anyone who so obviously looked magical in a long time. Not only, their snow-white hair was something unheard of even among wizards, but they felt magical.

He was surprised that the other children around him didn’t seem to recognize it. They were clearly drawn by some instinct to the twins’ power. He supposed children might just write off the attraction as charisma or natural charm. But Merlin knew, of course, what drew magical children to the twins like nails to a magnet. Both radiated raw magic which reminded him of Old Religion. Could it be that these children practiced it? He had to find out more. He made a mental note to keep an eye on
the boy which should be easy to do since they were going to share a dorm. In fact, it was going to be
easier than keeping an eye on Harry.

They walked through the painting of the Fat Lady and Merlin was pleasantly surprised. Gryffindor
common room had a very cozy feel to it. It was very homey and he found himself looking forward to
spending time there chatting away with friends on the comfy-looking couches.

Merlin’s train of thought halted abruptly. Why was he thinking like that? Where did those thoughts
come from? He wasn’t there to make friends. Well, maybe with Harry if he could find him. He
groaned internally for forgetting what his mission was. Being a child was messing with his mind. Or
maybe he was too lonely.

Merlin shook his head and followed the Prefect who showed him his dormitory. His trunk was
already there along with two others. Jack’s bed was on his right and a small mousy-haired boy was
on his left.

“I’m Colin Creevey,” the boy introduced himself enthusiastically.

Jack and Merlin exchanged names and were instantly bombarded by Colin.

“Can you believe it? We’re actually here. In a magic school. And it’s a castle. A magic castle! Did
you see the ceiling in the Great Hall? It was bewitched! Even the supper was magical. Food just
appeared by magic. It’s like a dream but I couldn’t possibly dream up all of this. I still have a hard
time believing it. Everything is amazing. There’s so much magic here and I can’t wait to learn it all in
magic classes! I didn’t even know magic was real until I got that letter that said I’m a wizard. An owl
delivered it. Can you believe it? Well, you’re here too so you must have gotten your letters too. The
whole castle is full of wizards and witches. And I saw ghosts today. And the people in the portraits
are moving. I saw so much magic today!”

“Oh, you’re Muggle-born?” Merlin asked, hoping a change of direction would stop the rambling.

“Yeah, and you?”

“My father was a wizard, my mom was a Muggle,” Merlin answered truthfully.

They both looked at Jack who was in the process of taking off his shoes and he was taken aback by
the question.

“Uh…” he scratched the back of his neck. “No, no Muggles in my family."

Then, he proceeded to dig inside his trunk without actually pulling anything out and Merlin had a
feeling that the boy didn’t want to answer more questions. Pure-blooded wizards were usually proud
of their status. If that’s what he was, why did he act like he had something to hide?

Before he could ponder on that longer, Colin brought on a whole list of questions of what it was like
to have a wizard parent and Merlin felt thoroughly overwhelmed. His family history was a sore topic
he did not wish to touch. He decided to go back to the common room, hoping to lose the overly
enthusiastic boy in the crowd but Colin stuck to him like glue and followed him around everywhere,
throwing more questions at him.

That was until both of their attentions were snapped away when they overheard students talk to each
other.

“I’m telling you. It’s the truth. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley flew in a car instead of taking the
Hogwarts Express!”
Merlin’s interest perked up and he approached the group to listen in. So, that was why Harry wasn’t on the train.

“I bet they’re getting expelled right now,” an older boy said.

“Or getting a medal for taking out that mean tree,” joked one of the Weasley twins.

“Whomping Willow had it coming,” his twin agreed and the two high fived each other with identical grins.

Before Merlin could get the whole story, the portrait of Fat Lady swung open and cheers erupted from everyone in the common room. Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked in and were immediately greeted with applause and congratulations. Merlin wanted to get closer but it was difficult to fight the crowd and by the time he got through, Harry disappeared to his dorm, the door slamming shut behind him.

Merlin stood in front of the staircase leading to Harry’s dorm, considering if this was the right time for an introduction. The closed door was sending a very clear message though. He groaned and went to bed instead. The timing never seemed to be right for him but at least Harry made it safely to school. Merlin sighed in relief. The mission was still on.

Ginny ran up to her dorm as soon as she saw Harry enter the common room. She was still all jittery with excitement from arriving to Hogwarts. She didn’t want to add Harry to the mix of her nerves. She rummaged in her trunk to get her sleeping gown out and her eye caught a leather book cover.

She pulled it out. She had found the blank journal among the books her mother bought her in Diagon Alley. At first, she thought that it was a secret gift from her mom and felt gratitude but then something felt wrong. The diary had a name faintly inscribed on it “T. M. Riddle” and looked rather old.

She was disappointed at first. It’s one thing to get second-hand robes and books but to get a used diary? That was a new low her pride had to suffer. As much as she hated the idea of it though, she couldn’t help but want it.

She never had a diary before. What would she write in it? Well, she certainly had a lot of thoughts battling each other in her head. Maybe writing them down would help her figure it all out so she could get back to being herself and enjoy the year she had been looking forward to so much.

She clutched the book close to her chest. Yes. She wanted this diary.
It's showtime

Elsa tried to be strong. Jack explained to her after the evening feast how he tried to convince the Headmaster to allow him to join Ravenclaw so they could be together but they wouldn’t let him.

“If you ever need me, you can always call me,” he reassured her.

She needed him. She needed him when she walked with her housemates to their common room and saw him walk in the opposite direction. She needed him when she was shown her bed and had no idea where his bed was. And she needed him to fall asleep but she tried to be strong.

So, she did not use the special connection they had to call him to her side. But it was killing her and she sat on her bed, unable to stop the tears.

One of the twins Elsa met on the train came to her and sat on her bed.

“My first night was hard too,” she said. “No one knows what it’s like to be separated from their twin if they don’t have one.”

Elsa tried to blink away the tears.

“We have never been apart,” she finally said. “Never.”

“It will get better, I promise,” the girl continued and offered her a box of tissues. “In the end, I think it was for the best that Parvati and I ended up in different Houses.”

“How could it be for the best?”

“Well, look at it this way. We’re identical, right? So, people tend to think of us as interchangeable - one of the Patil twins. But we’re very different people, we have different characters, skills and we like to be recognized individually, not as a whole. Being in separate Houses allows us that.”

It did make sense.

“I wouldn’t be mistaken for my brother,” she joked and Padma giggled, “but I see your point. I would probably always walk in his shadow.”

“Exactly,” Padma agreed. “This way, you get to be your own person.”

Elsa smiled, glad to have made a friend already.

“See? You’re doing great. Reason always wins,” Padma said, and gave her a hug.

“When will you children learn?” her voice boomed over them as Jack cradled his scared twin in his embrace. “You don’t follow directions, you get no candle!” Then, she added in a mocking tone, “Sleep tight.”

She slammed the door, making both of them flinch. The room fell into total darkness which turned even the tiniest sound into something menacing. Jack gulped and tried to convince himself that he was used to it. Lately, they appeared to deserve this punishment a lot.

‘It’s just darkness. It can’t hurt us,’ he reminded himself. He had to be strong for Elsa.
“It’s okay,” Jack murmured into his sister’s hair. “She’s gone. I’m here.”

“I don’t want to sleep. The bad dreams will come again,” she sobbed. “Not again. I will never ever EVER sleep again!”

Jack hugged her tighter and his childish voice held determination, “Let the dreams come. We’ll face them,” he swallowed and tried to sound confident, “together.”

Elsa sniffed and acknowledged the pact. “Together.”

Jack woke up with a start and sat upright in his four-poster bed, the dream still etched vividly in his mind. He hung his head. He promised his sister that she would never have to face nightmares alone. How was she doing tonight? Did she need him?

She hadn’t called him yet and he took that as a good sign. Maybe he should give her more credit. She was strong and smart, she was a survivor. She could handle a night apart.

Could he?

He looked around the room. It was still dark, there were probably a couple more hours before dawn and everyone in his dorm was still asleep. The dream memory of little Elsa’s terrified eyes was too fresh on his mind. He wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep now.

He took a shower and let the cold water wash over him, hoping it would wash away the dream. He stood there completely still with his head down, water falling onto the back of his head, and watched it slide in streams down his pale skin.

He already missed his sister. It had been only a few hours since he last saw her but he couldn’t help feeling this strong pull in his stomach telling him that he needed to be close to her.

He never bothered with warm water, in fact, it made him tired, but now he saw that he had a problem he never had to worry about before. The cold his presence radiated affected the condensation on the walls of the shower stall turning them into intricate patterns of frost. He stepped out and turned the water to hot, to melt the evidence of his otherness before the next bathroom occupant showed up. He made a mental note to remember to do this every time he used the shower and groaned, wondering if he could keep up with the strict list of behaviors he had to memorize in order to blend in.

It was only his first day of school. How long could he keep up the pretense? How long before he slipped up and his spirit characteristics were exposed? These weren’t ordinary humans whom he never had to fear. These people knew magic and could hurt him if they wanted to. And it wouldn’t take them long to make the connection that his sister was the same as him.

“What did we get ourselves into, Elsa?” he said to the empty bathroom.

He dressed up, stuffed his shoes in the robe pockets and left the dorm, unable to sit still. He wandered the halls, walking swiftly, not letting the moving paintings have a closer look at him. They were everywhere in the castle and the people in them who were awake eyed him suspiciously. How long before one of them recognized what he was like the one in McGonagall’s house did?

He was coming out of his skin and stepped outside onto the grounds, hoping he could calm down there, away from the watchful portraits. If he didn’t get his emotions under control, he was going to start manifesting his powers and the gig would be up.

There was a stone bench under a large tree where he sat down and dug his bare feet into the grass.
He let nature’s power seep into him and fill him up until his mind cleared. The sky started changing colors and he observed as the world began to wake up with the sun. The giant orb lazily raised itself, bathing all nature with its power. He closed his eyes and stretched out his arms to offer himself to it. It warmed him from the inside and he instantly felt better.

After a while, he could hear faint sounds coming from the castle as its occupants were becoming active so he sent out a call to his sister, letting her know where he was. She found him just minutes later, her long white hair fanning behind her as she ran up to him.

The world seemed brighter and his heart grew lighter when he saw her smile. She was okay and now so was he.

“Will you do my hair?” she asked, giving him her brush and he was glad that there was at least one thing she needed him for.

She sat on the bench with her back to him and he gently brushed her long smooth hair. The familiarity of their morning routine relaxed him and brought him peace. He braided her hair to the side, the way she liked, and when he finished, they walked together to the dining hall, holding hands.

When they entered, she gave him one last hug and whispered, “Don’t forget the shoes,” and left to her table, chuckling.

He groaned but took the dreaded loafers out of his pockets. He looked at his table apprehensively, suddenly quite overwhelmed by the sheer number of kids, some of whom were staring at him already. He recognized his roommates, sitting in the middle of the table. He took a long breath to brace himself and headed over to them to begin his new blending-in routine.

“It’s showtime.”

Ginny rushed out of her dorm to avoid the “Chatties.” That was the nickname she gave the three girls she shared her room with. All they did was talk, and gossip, and talk some more. She groaned while running down the moving staircase, realizing that she was stuck with them probably for the entire duration of her Hogwarts education.

She would have to learn how to tolerate them eventually but today was the first day of school. She really did not want to start it with a headache their chatter had a tendency to cause.

When she arrived at the Great Hall, she realized that she had to be strategic in her seating choices. If she picked an empty part of the table, the Chatties could find her and sit next to her. No, she had to sit somewhere among others, preferably boys. She’d had enough of girl voices for a moment.

She scanned the faces of Gryffindor students who had already sat down to breakfast. She didn’t know too many people yet, mostly just her four brothers who were still in school. She noticed Ron and Harry sit with their friend Hermione and considered joining them but could feel her cheeks get hot just thinking about sitting so close to Harry. Scratch that idea. She was going to sit as far away from Harry as she could.

On the other end of the table sat two first-year boys she recognized so she chose to sit with them. She shook her head, marveling at how complicated it was. Who would have thought that it takes so much planning to pick a seat.

She introduced herself to Merlin and Colin and was soon surprised to find that Colin would have fit in well with the Chatties. His mouth never seemed to close, he was always rambling about something or other. He had a camera around his neck today and was bouncing on his seat, taking the camera in
his hands and then putting it down again like he was aching to use it.

“Do you think now is a good time?” he asked them both. “Because I was really hoping to do it today. Because it’s the first day and that’s special. And… Should I?”

Ginny didn’t know what he meant by it and Merlin just shrugged. Colin took that as an approval apparently and ran over to snap a candid picture of Harry. Harry blinked after the flash blinded him and looked at Colin stunned at first, and then a little annoyed. Ginny had a sudden urge to hit the small boy in the back of the head to teach him a lesson about taking people’s pictures without their permission. Harry deserved better than that.

Colin came back, grinning wide and clutching his camera with love. He would ask Harry to sign the picture later, wouldn’t he?

“I just love taking pictures of interesting things,” he commented, “or people. Harry is the only famous wizard I know and it’s hard to believe he’s only a year older than me. Isn’t it an exciting time to be at Hogwarts?”

“Did you know that if you develop the film in the right potion, the pictures will move?” Merlin offered.

“Really?? Like the paintings? They will move by magic! Oh. My. Wand. Can you teach me?”

“I don’t know the recipe but I’m sure if you check in the library, you’ll find instructions for how to do it.”

“That’s amazing! I can’t wait. I’ll show it to my parents. They will love that! I can’t wait until I can do that all by myself. My first magic potion! Will you help me look up that potion?”

“Uh… sure.”

Soon, their little group was joined by the strange white-haired boy Ginny saw during sorting and Colin snapped his picture as well.

“Could you not?” the boy said, trying to shield himself from the flash. He paused mid-stride and closed his eyes for a moment. “Ah, that was painfully bright.”

“Sorry, Jack. It’s just, everyone is talking about you and your sister so I wanted a keepsake. Did you notice that you look as if you were identical twins? But you’re not, of course, since she’s a girl. Can I take a picture of the two of you later? And I want to show your picture to mom and dad to prove that you really have white hair and not just blond. I’ve never seen anything like it. No wonder everyone is talking about you two. It’s so cool though! I wish my hair was that cool and not this boring mousy brown. Is white a common hair color among wizards?”

Jack didn’t look comfortable with the attention and fidgeted on the spot. Ginny had to agree that she had never seen anyone with hair like that apart from elderly people. She had a quick glance at Professor Dumbledore who was chatting away at the staff table and compared his long white beard to Jack’s head. No, it wasn’t the same. Jack’s hair had a healthy luster to it which old people’s hair lacked.

“It runs in my family,” Jack said, avoiding Colin’s stare and sitting down. His frown was quickly forgotten at the sight of the food in front of him.

Colin looked disappointed so Ginny filled in the missing part of the answer. “No, Colin, it’s not common.” Then, she turned to Jack. “I’m Ginny, by the way.”
He smiled and nodded in response but didn’t say anything as his mouth was full already.

Thankfully, the food curbed even Colin’s excessive enthusiasm and the rest of the breakfast was mostly quiet. Ginny felt comfortable in their company. She grew up with six brothers and knew well that with boys food always took priority over chat. If you ever wanted to shut up a boy, you gave him something tasty.

She had her fill and snuck a glance in Harry’s direction. His colorful arrival to school in a flying car gained him some extra fans along with new haters and he didn’t seem happy with the extra attention.

From the Slytherin table at the far end of the hall, a pale-haired boy was shooting him a death glare and Ginny recognized it was that Malfoy boy who started the trouble in the bookstore. Malfoy had called Ginny Harry’s girlfriend and that was a whole new level of embarrassing. She could feel her cheeks flare up even now, just remembering it.

She glanced at the boys she was sitting with and saw that Merlin was eyeing Harry too. He seemed to think hard about something, maybe trying to decide if he wanted to walk up to Harry.

“Do you want Harry’s picture as well?” she teased.

Merlin got flustered, having been caught staring and knocked over his drink which spilled all over his food.

“I… uh… I was just wondering what it was like to fly a car.”

Maybe she would have believed that was all to it if not for the fact that he refused to look her in the eye. He was hiding something.

“Is the car still here?” Colin jumped at the cue. “I would love to take a picture of it. Oh, if Harry could pose for a picture with the flying car, that would be the best photo ever!”

“Already been taken,” George cut in, passing by them.

Fred dropped a copy of the Daily Prophet in front of them and Ginny saw a picture of a car flying over London. Then, each twin put a hand on Ginny’s shoulder and leaned in close to her.

“How are you doing Ginny? These boys giving you any trouble yet?” George asked and she could feel herself go beet-red. Why did they have to act like this?

“You treat our little sister well, boys,” Fred warned, pointing a finger at each of them. “She’s got four big brothers looking out for her.”

Ginny wanted to sink into the ground. This was beyond embarrassing.

“No one is giving me any trouble,” she said through gritted teeth. “Unless you’ll count these two annoying red-heads.”

Merlin snorted and a piece of food fell out of his mouth right onto Colin’s forehead.

“Our little sister is feisty,” Fred commented with a chuckle.

“Remember that,” George added and they finally left her to go about their business.

Colin was now gaping at the moving picture in the Daily Prophet and Ginny was desperate to get the attention away from herself so she promptly changed topics, directing her question towards Jack.
“Do you and your sister finish each other’s sentences like my annoying brothers do?”

Jack shrugged and swallowed his food. “Not really. We understand each other well though. We’ve been told it looks like telepathy but it’s not, really. We just know each other well enough to know what the other one is thinking.”

“Really?” Colin was unsurprisingly excited to hear that. “Like, what is she thinking right now?”

Jack glanced at his sister who was sitting at the Ravenclaw table and she soon turned around to lock gazes with him. It was peculiar that she knew exactly at which moment to look. She smiled and he winked at her.

“She’s having fun with her new classmates,” Jack answered. “It looks like she’s making friends already. Everything is going well.”

“It doesn’t take telepathy to figure that out,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

“As I said,” Jack shrugged, “it’s not actual telepathy. I know how to tell her mood and can guess what she’s thinking.” Then, he looked kindly at Ginny and she was surprised by his sudden focus on her. “Don’t get mad at your brothers for feeling protective of you.”

Ginny nodded and felt herself blush again. Not knowing what to say, she grabbed her things and excused herself. She’d had enough of everyone’s attention for the day. It was time to get going to the first classes anyway.
Merlin walked towards his first class looking around the castle in the daylight. A lot had changed since the time when he had attended Hogwarts as a student aged down to the same age he was now. That was a millennium ago when the school had just been founded and the castle was first built. Since then, new towers were constructed and various expansions were added. It was truly an amazing place, well worth the title of the top magic school.

He had a good chuckle as he passed by a portrait of himself which hung by the grand staircase and the older version of him winked at him from the canvas in greeting. He adjusted his Gryffindor scarf and the portrait him did the same with his scarf as if it was a mirror. Merlin left the older him laughing behind him. Few students who passed by looked at him funny wondering what he was grinning about all by himself so he tried to contain it.

He tripped at the bottom of the staircase and cursed quietly. He hated being in an eleven-year-old body. When he was that age, he would go through rapid growth spurts, each one leaving him very uncoordinated. Hormones were doing a number on him too, he noticed, as he could feel his temper flare out at random times and had to hold in his tongue.

‘Am I really, going to be stuck like this for months?’ he wondered.

It was only day one and he was becoming more and more concerned regarding his purpose in the school. He didn’t have classes with Harry. He didn’t sleep in the same dorm. Befriending people was never his strong forte. He’d always been rather socially awkward - always the weird kid who managed to make a fool of himself wherever he went. This was going to be a challenge.

Merlin arrived at the History of Magic class, following Jack closely behind with the intention of sitting next to him so he would get a chance to get to know him. He was curious about the boy and wanted to find out what he could about him. He had competition, he noticed, as two girls were tailing the boy, apparently having the same plan. He hated doing it but he really needed the advantage so he whispered a quick spell that momentarily confused the girls. They fell one step behind, Jack took a seat at the end of the classroom right in the corner and Merlin trod over to him.

“Do you mind?” he asked innocently.

The boy shook his white head and moved his bag off the seat to allow Merlin to sit.

“I don’t know anyone here but you,” Merlin said nervously, sitting next to him.

Jack was about to respond but stiffened, seeing the teacher that entered the room through the blackboard. Their teacher was a ghost. Jack attempted to shrink down in his seat.

“Are you afraid of ghosts?” Merlin asked incredulously.

“Something like that,” the boy whispered back.

Merlin shrugged. Many people were afraid of ghosts. He guessed it wasn’t that strange.

“Are all teachers in here ghosts? I seem to see them everywhere.”
“Uh, I don’t think so,” Merlin chuckled, seeing the boy’s distress.

Merlin hoped to start a conversation with him but unlike on the train, Jack was deadly quiet in the classroom and ducked his head, pretending to read their textbook.

The ghost of Professor Binns taught History of Magic in the most boring way possible and very soon Jack was sprawled on the desk submerged in deep sleep. Merlin supported his chin with his hand and felt his eyes get droopy.

Why did he agree to this torture? He could think of many much more interesting activities he could occupy himself with instead of being stuck in a child’s body, suffer through boring lectures and fail at befriending Harry.

Merlin looked over at Jack whose fingers on the desk were twitching like he was dreaming and sighed, contemplating having a nap as well.

Thankfully, the class ended. He nudged Jack to wake him up and the boy abruptly sat up straight with wide eyes and breathing heavily.

“Sorry to startle you,” Merlin grimaced. “The class is over.”

Jack looked around him disoriented and once he understood that he could leave, he exhaled with relief, said, “Thank the Moon,” and swiftly left, avoiding eye contact with the ghost still hovering behind his desk.

‘Who says Thank the Moon?’ Merlin thought.

It seemed like an odd expression. He added it to the list of curious things about the boy.

They made their way to the Potions class which was all the way down in the dungeons and Merlin sat next to Jack again, hoping there would be no objections.

“So, why are you afraid of ghosts? Any bad previous encounters?”

“They disturb me,” Jack said plainly. “They’re unnatural. They shouldn’t be.”

Merlin’s eyes narrowed, hearing this yet another very curious statement coming from the boy.

Their professor sauntered into the room and gave them all an introduction, making it very clear that he expected each of them to fail his class. Merlin rolled his eyes when he got to the part where he would teach them how to “brew glory.” Some people could be so dramatic.

“He looks a tad like a vampire, doesn’t he?” Jack whispered out of nowhere, making Merlin snort loudly.

Professor Snape paused his speech and looked at the two of them intensely. He looked furious at the interruption and Merlin finally calmed down and composed himself before he caused more of a scene.

The stony look on the man’s pale face framed by the shoulder-length black hair looked so accurately vampire-like that Merlin was fully expecting fangs to drop out of the wizard’s lips along with a trickle of blood. The visual was so stuck in Merlin’s head that he had to close his eyes for a moment to clear it and compose himself before he caused more of a scene.

The class fell completely silent and Snape reveled in the tension he created. Jack looked down at the quill in his shaking hand, realizing the trouble he had caused while Merlin finally calmed down and...
observed how well the wizard controlled his students. He had to give it to him, he knew how to strike fear without even saying anything.

“Would you care to share the joke with the whole class so we can all laugh?” Snape emphasized each word and took one calculated step towards them.

Merlin was tempted to repeat the wizard’s ridiculous introductory speech in response, but next to him, Jack lifted up his head to look at their Professor.

“No, Professor. I’m not even that funny,” the boy said. “I apologize for the interruption.”

Snape looked down at them with a sneer while Merlin was glad that someone saved him before he got himself in trouble with his sarcasm.

After another intense silence, he said, “Pity. Five points from Gryffindor,” and turned away, swinging his black robes behind him dramatically, “each.”

Merlin exhaled in relief. This guy was going to be a challenge. Could he control his snarky remarks around him?

“I get in trouble every time I open my mouth,” Jack whispered and shook his head in resignation while Merlin thought it was the opposite.

This statement seemed to close the issue as he said nothing else during the class. Well, that was until Snape started to ask students questions about ingredients and when he got to Jack, the boy had to answer, “I don’t know, Professor.”

Merlin knew the answer to each question, of course, but even though he’d learned how to brew potions from Gaius himself, who was considered the grandfather of all potion masters, he had a feeling that Snape wouldn’t let him pass this class either. He seemed to have a prejudice against all Gryffindor students and a preference for the Slytherins who attended the lesson with them.

So, the old rivalry existed to this day. Salazar and Godric were great wizards of their time but the not-so-secret animosity they felt towards each other had leaked into their students’ attitudes. Merlin remembered it from the time when he attended Hogwarts for the first time and was placed in Slytherin house. That rivalry was a definite problem back then. A problem he had attempted to resolve during his time there but never succeeded.

He had hoped that such petty differences would have been resolved with time but was proven wrong. It was a millennium later and the two Houses still hated each other.

After a lunch break, they had Herbology with the Ravenclaws and Jack broke off from him to talk to his sister which left Merlin stuck with Colin.

Unsurprisingly, Colin was fascinated by the magical plants in the greenhouse and went on a long-winded story of how each one reminded him of a different sci-fi movie. Merlin endured the boy for a while and was relieved when Professor Sprout finally shushed him.

He looked around the greenhouse and was happy to be able to recognize each of the plants inside. It looked like it was going to be another easy subject for him. He sighed, disappointed. He felt badly unchallenged. When you were a child in a school, you really shouldn’t know more about the subjects being taught than the professors. When you did, it all became incredibly frustrating. Especially when he caught the teachers doing a poor job.

Like, for example, Professor Sprout failed to warn the students to not touch the venomous tentacula
and Merlin watched with horror as Jack played with it. The plant was following the boy’s pale finger as he kept it constantly out of its grasp. Jack giggled at the plant’s unsuccessful attempts to catch him but failed to notice that it snuck up from behind and grabbed his other hand. Jack went wide-eyed with shock as the vine wrapped around his wrist and the spikes pierced his skin. Merlin was about to run to his rescue but then saw that it wasn’t necessary. Elsa held her hand above the vine trapping her brother and the plant froze under her touch. Jack freed his hand and rubbed his wrist.

Merlin was about to go to Professor Sprout to suggest for Jack be taken to the Hospital Wing to treat the wounds inflicted with venom when he paused, seeing that Elsa did something again. She put her hand on Jack’s wounded wrist and it looked as if she had coated his skin with something. After a few seconds, she let go and Jack rubbed his skin which was now clear of any wounds.

“Thanks, sis,” Jack said.

“Be careful in the future,” she said and turned her back on him to listen to Professor Sprout’s lecture.

Jack shook his finger at the venomous tentacula and only after that he noticed that Merlin was watching him.

Merlin wondered if he should mention anything about what he had witnessed. He wasn’t sure what Elsa did to freeze the plant earlier. It was only their first day of school but she could already cast powerful spells. That was interesting in itself but what was most shocking was that the girl was able to heal her brother just with her touch.

Healing magic like that was a very rare gift. Could it be possible that Elsa was a skilled healer already at this young age?

Jack pointed at the plant and warned Merlin.

“Watch out for this one. Don’t let it grab you.”

Merlin nodded, recognizing that the boy didn’t know what Merlin had witnessed. In any case, his earlier suspicion that there was something different about these twins was now confirmed.

His gasped when he realized another detail. Elsa did not pull out her wand to cast that freezing spell. They could perform powerful wandless magic.

“They know Old Religion,” he whispered to himself, looking between the twins.

Merlin’s heart constricted. He had been pushing down his magical loneliness deep inside but now it started to bubble up to the surface. He was alone, so alone in this world. As far as he knew, there was no one else left who understood the magic he wielded. The beliefs and the craft of Old Religion had faded into ancient history no one but him remembered. It was cruel to remain alive for this long, to have this knowledge he couldn’t share. He had tried to teach others how to use magic the way he practiced it but it was difficult to find people who were born with that special ability.

Even powerful brilliant wizards like Dumbledore were ignorant of this ancient magic that didn’t require wands to utilize. And yet these twins understood it and Merlin suddenly felt a kinship to them.

Merlin felt an unexplainable urge to run up to Jack to give the boy a hug, but for now, he had to settle for a nod and a smile from a distance. Fate had a way of bringing him things he didn’t know he needed. Now, fate brought him someone who understood. He wasn’t alone.
Elsa loved her first day of school. She could see how each class was going to challenge her knowledge in new ways and was looking forward to the classes she hadn’t taken yet. She caught up with Jack earlier and got a scoop on the subjects he attended in the morning but didn’t quite believe him that History of Magic was a magical sleep inducer or that Professor Snape had vampire mind control powers. Her brother was prone to exaggeration.

When she walked into Ravenclaw common room, she noticed Luna sitting on the floor with her legs folded beneath her. Luna’s long blond hair splayed around her back, fell around her arms and onto the coffee table.

As Elsa approached, she noticed that the girl was drawing on a piece of parchment. It was the face of a beautiful woman who seemed to be able to gaze back from the paper. Elsa had to admit that Luna was very skilled. She immediately felt an artistic bond with her.

“That’s really beautiful, Luna. Who is this?”

“That’s my mom,” the girl said while continuing her drawing. “She died and so whenever I want to see her again, I just draw her.”

Elsa put a hand on the girl’s shoulder. From the loving way she drew her mother, Luna must have loved her a lot.

“I’m sorry. That must have been sad.”

“It was. I was very sad for a long time but at least I still have my dad. He makes everything better.” Elsa sighed and watched the girl draw stunning details of hair curling in beautiful locks.

“I never even met my dad,” she said absentmindedly.

“Do you want to?”

“More than anything in the world but I don’t know who he is or how to find him.”

“Have you tried magic?”

Elsa stared at the girl who was still occupied with her craft. She had never thought it possible to find her father because mother refused to tell her anything about him. But maybe, when you had an impossible question, magic was the answer.

“Do you know of a spell that would help me find my father?”

Luna shrugged and looked up from her drawing with big dreamy eyes.

“No, but we are in a magic school, aren’t we?”

Elsa’s head started swirling with ideas. There were many teachers she could ask for assistance and the school had to have a library, she had to check there. She had a new project to work on.

“Thank you, Luna,” she called out, running out of the common room.

On her way to the library, she called to Jack and he met her halfway. She pulled him by the hand without explaining anything.

When they opened the door to the library, Elsa was momentarily stunned. She had never seen this many books in her life. There had to be thousands of volumes in there.
“I think you’re drooling,” Jack joked and she hit him in the arm. “So, why are we here?”

She walked inside and felt overwhelmed by the sheer size of the room.

“This is going to take some time,” she said under her breath.

The library was divided into many aisles, almost like a maze that stretched for eons. Where should they start? She noticed a woman sitting behind a desk and approached her hoping for help navigating the library.

“Hello,” she said, unsure of how to ask for what she wanted.

“Yes?” the thin woman answered, checking the two of them out with an intimidating glare.

“I’m looking for... someone and...”

“Well, then you’re in the wrong place. This is a library. You will only find books here.”

Elsa smiled and tried to sound pleasant even though it was difficult when looking at such a hostile unfriendly person.

“I am looking for a book that would help me find someone. What kind of book would you recommend? If you could just point us in the right section, that’s all...”

The librarian’s predator-like stare was proof enough that Elsa’s attempts were failing but her words cemented the notion.

“If you don’t know what book you’re looking for, how should I? Do not waste my time, children,” the woman scolded them and looked back down to a giant volume she was studying.

Elsa felt defeated but then remembered how everyone seemed to respond to her brother.

“Jack,” she whispered to him, “you try.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Just charm her so she would help us.”

“Why do you think I can charm her?”

Elsa groaned, not believing that he was so thick-headed.

“Have you not noticed how easily you won over McGonagall? Do you not see how all the girls hang onto your every word? Just go do your thing. Smile at her or something.”

Jack looked confused so she just pushed him at the librarian’s desk where he landed with a clatter.

The sunken-faced woman fumed, irritated at the noise. Jack looked genuinely lost and scratched the back of his neck.

“Hi, uh,” then he read a plaque that was attached to the desk, “Madam Pince. My sister and I, we’re lost here. There are so many books. Would you please help us?”

The woman glared at him but once her eyes locked onto him, she lost some of the hostile intensity. Jack shyly looked at her from under his dark eyelashes and her vulture-like expression started to melt. She got up from her chair and her face contorted into what had to be a very rarely used smile.
“Of course, boy. That’s my job. What’s your name?”

“I’m Jack,” he answered shyly, “and that’s my twin, Elsa.”

“Twins, how cute,” the woman said and smoothed the hair on his head. “Sure, I’ll help you.”

Jack grinned at her and the woman sighed, petting his head.

Elsa tried to contain her glee. Her brother had perfected the puppy-eye look. How could anyone resist that? Madam Pince sure couldn’t.

With the librarian’s help, they were now in the Divination section where she recommended books on scrying and finding lost objects. Madam Pince smiled at them kindly and encouraged Jack to come to her anytime he needed and then left them to their research.

With the librarian gone, Jack dropped the puppy-eyes and looked like he was fed up with the vagueness.

“Okay, Elsa. Who are we looking for?”

“Our father, Jack,” Elsa explained while touching the spines of the books to check their titles. “Mother refused to tell us anything about him but what if we could find him with magic?”

“Why do you want to find him?” He leaned against a shelf and folded his arms on his chest. The question surprised Elsa.

“You don’t?”

Jack shrugged. “I really don’t want to know.”

She couldn’t believe her ears.

“You’re not even a little curious as to who he might be or what he might be like?”

Jack’s tone was definite. “He left us with her. That’s all I need to know.”

“You’re holding a grudge? We don’t even know what the real story is. What if he’s… nice?”

Jack remained silent while she continued looking at the tomes and pulling some out to check what they were about. For the first time in her life, she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. They never discussed their father before but she always assumed that he felt the same way she did.

They had an awful mother. Even the slightest possibility that their father was better was worth the effort to seek him out and so Jack’s attitude really puzzled her.

Her brother looked lost in the library and barely touched anything as if afraid books would bite him if he dared to open them. After only several minutes, he exhaled loudly as if he had labored for hours.

“Books are your thing. I’m no help for you here. I’m useless as usual. I wasn’t smart enough to get into Ravenclaw, remember?”

He was about to leave and she grabbed his arm.

“Jack…” she pleaded but he wouldn’t look her in the eyes.
“I’m sorry.” He freed himself from her grip and left with his hands in his pockets and his head down.

Elsa felt torn. On the one hand, she wanted to run after him to find out what his problem was but on the other hand, she really wanted to start looking through the volumes. She knew that one of these books had to contain the answers she needed. Maybe a spell or a magical object or maybe there was a witch or a wizard who had some special abilities. There had to be something there. And Jack was wrong, he wasn’t useless. She wouldn’t have found this section of the library if not for his help with Madam Pince. But he was never a book-lover, that was true.

In the past, when it was just the two of them, she would drag him to the library with her and he did not complain but he didn’t have much choice then, did he? That had now changed.

She watched him walk away and with each step he took, she could feel the distance between them growing. Being in separate houses was changing their relationship. Now, that they were no longer stuck with each other but had choices of friends, she could see with even more contrast how different Jack was from her. It was painful to think about but also liberating. They were free to pursue their own interests.

Finally, she decided that she couldn’t force him to like the library if he didn’t. What mattered was that she did and she was on a mission.

Chapter End Notes

Did you know that fanfic authors love reviews? If you like this story, give me some love. If you don’t, I'll appreciate a critique.
Dear Diary

1985, Spring

The hags brought the four-year-old twins inside a small room. They usually weren’t allowed in it and Jack was curious what was inside. The room was mostly empty; it was lit by two lanterns hung from wall hooks and the only furniture was a table with three chairs. A beautiful young woman sat in one of them and eyed the twins when they entered.

Jack was surprised to see her because she was not a hag and they never got to meet anyone from the outside world before. He wondered who she was and what she wanted from them.

“Sit down,” the woman ordered, gesturing towards two chairs opposite her.

Jack marveled at her. She had golden hair flowing down her shoulders in beautiful waves, red cheeks, and startling blue eyes which sparkled like diamonds. On her head, she wore a round thing made of colorful plants he didn’t recognize. Her green robes floated around her as she gracefully sat across from them. She looked like a spark of life in an otherwise grey room.

There was something familiar about her eyes. He thought that he should know her but couldn’t remember where from.

“Who are you?”

Her nostrils flared momentarily and she pounded her hand on the table.

“How dare you!”

Jack flinched at the sound. A cold feeling filled the room and he recognized it as the familiar tingling sensation of winter magic - the same magic he always felt from mother whenever she got angry.

“Mother?”

He couldn’t believe his eyes. Why did she look so young and so different? He saw her just a few days ago and she did not look like that.

“Sit,” she ordered. Her face was beautiful and calm again.

They sat down and for a moment, he hoped that something was going to change. His mother changed. Would she treat them better?

“What happened?” he asked.

“No questions!”

She looked so scary that he had to look away. He checked with Elsa and she was just as lost as he was. They both had no idea what was going on.

Mother placed a small plant on the table in front of each of them. There was something different about this plant. The end of it spread out into delicate purple leaves. Were they leaves? He wasn’t sure.

Elsa gasped at the plant, touching it gently and dared to ask, “What is it?”
Mother scoffed, annoyed at the question but answered.

“It’s a flower,” she spat out as if the word disgusted her.

Jack took the flower in his hands and felt a tiny tingle of magic. It was very different from his mother’s power. He recognized it as the magic of pure nature, the magic of life.

“Now, freeze it,” mother ordered and looked at them expectantly.

Afraid to disobey her, Jack tried to think hard on his magic but didn’t know how to freeze it. He checked what his sister did - she scrunched up her brows and the flower in her hand slowly became hidden in a blob of ice. She put it on the table and mother smiled at her pleasantly.

“Keep this up, and I’ll give you a gift.”

Elsa looked so happy. Jack was afraid to hope for a gift but mother’s smile would be enough. He focused on the flower in his hand, willing his magic into it. Soon, the little plant was covered by white frost and he felt that he did a good job. He looked at his mother, expecting her approval but she did not smile.

“I said, freeze it, not frost it. Keep trying.”

He looked back at the little thing in his hand and concentrated even harder. A thicker layer of frost covered it, and he could feel the magic of the little plant fade. It was dying. He was killing it.

“I said, ice! Not frost!” mother yelled louder.

Mother was getting angry at him and he didn’t know what to do. He was trying, he really was, but ice wasn’t happening. He looked to his sister for help.


He looked at his mother. She still looked very angry. Such an angry look was strange on such a pretty face. He closed his eyes and tried his very hardest to pour all his magic into his hands. He felt the little plant's life die and tried not to cry. He didn't want to kill the flower but he didn't want to disobey his mother either, so he kept his eyes closed.

He willed all his power at the plant, trying very hard to freeze it. When he opened his eyes to check if it had worked, all he saw was frost covering his hands and creeping up his sleeves.

Jack put the dead flower on the table, knowing he couldn’t do what Elsa did.

“I don’t know how,” he finally admitted.

Mother stood up and said only one word which made his little heart sink and forever stamp itself in his mind.

“Useless.”

Present day.

Merlin finally caught a break away from Colin and managed to introduce himself to Harry in the Gryffindor common room. He was glad to find that the boy was easy to talk to.
They were exchanging Snape horror stories, Harry particularly liked the vampire comparison, when they were joined by Jack who plopped on the couch with a groan as if he was mortally wounded.

“Is there a problem?” Merlin asked.

Jack exhaled dramatically. “I’m bored. What do you do for fun here?”

“We play Quidditch,” Harry replied.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a game played in the air. We fly on brooms and try to get balls through hoops while Bludgers try to knock us off. And I’m the Seeker which means, I look for the Golden Snitch, which is a tiny ball, nearly impossible to see. The game will not end until it’s caught.”

“You fly on brooms? That sounds awesome. When can I play?”

“Well, first-years usually don’t get to be on the team but Madam Hooch will be giving you flying lessons soon.”

From there, Merlin took the cue to keep the conversation on Quidditch which Harry was happy to talk about. Merlin had never played the game but he had seen a number of matches and was familiar with it enough to hold a proper discussion on the topic. He was glad he found some common ground to engage in with the boy.

Merlin needed to get closer to him to be included in Harry’s escapades which, as Dumbledore warned, Harry only invited his two closest friends to. Merlin had to become that friend number three.

Everything was going well until Colin showed up and his hero worship of Harry scared the boy off. Harry excused himself, saying that he needed to do some homework and Merlin was yet again left alone with the two first-years.

“Harry is so cool.” Colin started. “He was so good at flying that they put him on the team in his first year. As a Seeker! I hear that is the hardest role. They had not done that in like a hundred years. Can you imagine? He was THAT good. I can’t wait to watch him play for the first time. I’ll bring my camera. I’ve never seen Quidditch before. How violent do you think this game gets? I heard that Bludgers hit really hard. Should we be worried about Harry?”

“Colin?” Merlin hoped to shut him up. “Uh, did you do your homework yet? I heard that Snape has gruesome punishments for students who don’t hand in their homework.”

Colin’s eyes grew wide and he ran into their dorm.

Jack chuckled. “Thank you! I don’t know what’s worse. Colin with his Harry fascination or my sister with her books.”

Then, he jumped up to crouch on the back of the sofa and Merlin noticed that he was barefoot. This seemed to be a common theme.

“Merlin, we have got to do something fun. I’m dying here.”

“You’ve been here only one day. You’re dying already?”

“You were there. You saw what our classes were like. BORING! I can’t be so cooped up in one place for so long. I need to… do something.”
Merlin shook his head. These kids each had their quirks and he wasn’t sure which one was worse. In the end, he supposed a little bit of fun with Jack wouldn’t hurt. Harry was in his dorm not doing anything dangerous at the time. He could leave for a while.

“We could explore the castle,” he suggested.

“Deal!” Jack said, jumping off the sofa and heading for the door.

“Uh, you forgot your shoes,” Merlin pointed out.

"No, I didn’t," Jack said, wiggling his bare toes happily.

Ginny sat on her bed, trying to do the Potions homework but the Chatties would not shut up. Their favorite topic appeared to be boys and they discussed each boy they had met so far in a very shallow way. Ginny tried to tune them out but wasn’t very successful at it.

Finally, the prime Chattie had gone to the bathroom and the other two went about their thing a little quieter. By then, she had finished her homework, though she couldn’t guarantee the quality of it.

Since she had some time left, she pulled out her diary. She touched the leather cover tenderly and wondered what she could write in it. Maybe she should write down a recap of her first day?

Dear Diary, she started and paused, thinking how to continue.

To her surprise, the words disappeared. She frowned and wondered what had happened. Was there something wrong with the ink?

Dear Diary, she wrote again and watched with fascination as the words were absorbed by the paper.

She looked at her quill and then at the ink bottle. They were ordinary. She had just used them earlier. That had to mean that the diary was magical.

Is this a magic diary?

After a short few seconds, the words disappeared and new words appeared on the page in an elegant script which was not her handwriting.

Well, obviously.

Ginny gasped and looked around the room. Her roommates were busy with their own homework. No one noticed that she was holding a diary that could talk back to her.

She wondered what it all meant. The diary could talk back. That meant, she could have a conversation with it.

Hi, Diary. I’m Ginny Weasley.

My name is Tom, not Diary.

Ginny giggled. Her diary was a boy.

Hi Tom. How come you can write back to me?

I’m enchanted into this diary.
Ginny contemplated what else to ask him. She had so many questions.

*Are you a made up person or*

She paused, not sure how to finish her question. What would be an alternative? Could a boy in the diary be real?

*I enchant my own diary to preserve a memory of myself in its pages.*

Ginny gasped and then turned the book over to look at the inscribed initials on the cover. T. M. Riddle. T. like Tom!

*It’s nice to meet you, Tom. Why did you preserve a memory of yourself?*

Tom thought about the answer for a moment and that just made it seem like an even more realistic conversation.

*Didn’t you ever want to leave something behind so people wouldn’t forget who you were? So people wouldn’t forget you?*

Ginny could relate to that.

*I’m one of 7 children. I know what it’s like to feel forgotten.*

*I’m sorry to hear that. What is it like to have so many siblings?*

Ginny scoffed.

*It’s chaotic. You can never get a moment’s peace and you live in a world of hand-me-downs.*

*But at least, you can rely on your siblings to be there for you, right? They are your friends?*

Ginny frowned. No, it did not feel like that.

*Unfortunately, not. Most of the time, my brothers just pick on me or tease me. They’re not my friends.*

Ginny looked at the Chatties having fun together on the other side of the room and thought about how apart she felt from them.

*I don’t have any friends.*

She regretted writing it immediately. It felt like admitting weakness.

*Then, I will be your friend.*

She read the words over and over before they disappeared and felt that it sounded too good to be true. Having a friend couldn’t be that easy but the idea certainly felt inviting. Was it possible to be friends with a boy she could never meet in person?

*Thank you, Tom.*

Ginny closed the diary with a smile on her face. Someone wanted to be her friend. The thought made her feel warm inside.

She put the diary in the drawer of her nightstand and yawned. Suddenly, she felt really tired and
decided to take a little nap before the evening feast. She fell asleep while wondering what Tom might have looked like.
Minerva patiently waited for her students to file into the classroom. This morning, she had first-year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. As the Deputy Headmistress, she was responsible for creating the class schedule and it was no coincidence that she had her favorite twins in her class for the entire year. She was very curious as to how they were going to progress in Transfiguration. It was a difficult branch of magic but she had high hopes that they would do well.

The students came in and the twins sat together. Elsa gave her a little wave.

‘Make me proud,’ she thought.

She gave the students a brief introduction to what they would be doing this year, had them take notes and gave them the first task, to turn a match into a needle. Unsurprisingly, no one was making any progress with the spell. The first class was always like this. She walked between the rows of desks to check on each student, to correct their pronunciation or wand movement. It would take them a lot of tries before they mastered that simple spell.

She noticed that one student was not even trying.

“Mr. Ealdor, please, put a little effort in.”

He said the spell completely wrong. She corrected him, he said it right but waved his wand wrong. She showed him the correct way to do it, but this time, he dropped his wand.

She was determined to be patient and have him keep trying until he got it right, but something kept happening, messing up his spell. He aimed it in the air. He held the wand backward. He performed the move before saying the spell. It was as if he was doing it wrong on purpose! Then, he got a hiccup attack, making it impossible to say the spell at all. This boy was hopeless.

“See me after class,” she told him. She had spent too much time with him already and ignored the needs of other students.

“Sure, Professor,” he answered with a smile and she wasn’t sure what he was so happy about. No student had ever looked forward to seeing her after class.

She went around the classroom, checked the children’s progress, and finally arrived at the twins’ table.

“Can I have a new match, Professor?” Elsa asked her shyly.

Minerva checked on what happened to the girl’s match and got excited, seeing that it was transfigured but then her spirits deflated. The match was still a match but it was now made of ice. She sighed and brought a new match for the girl to work on.

Jack was not making much progress either. His match slid down his desk every time he said the spell, which entertained him.

She corrected his wand movement, he tried again but waved it too enthusiastically which resulted in his match exploding into a burst of flurries. Jack put a hand over his mouth to hold in his laughter.
Minerva was not amused.

Overall, the twins’ failure was not surprising. It was only their first lesson. They had a lot to learn, just like all the other students, but Minerva was slightly disappointed that they did not show a natural talent in her branch of magic.

She remembered her first Transfiguration class. She turned that pebble into a button halfway through the lesson. It felt easy, but talent like hers was rare.

The class came to an end and none of her students made any progress. She reassured them that the elegant art of transfiguration was an exact science with no margin for error and it was going to take them time to get better at it. She tried to keep their hopes up, but internally, she was very disappointed.

It had been a while since she had no students succeed during the first lesson. Most years, she had one or two. Her personal record was five. It had been at least a decade since there were none. Was she losing her touch?

The students left and Merlin stayed behind.

“Mr. Ealdor,” she said, sitting down and folding her hands on the desk, “would you mind telling me what that was in class today?”

“I had a hard time with the spell. It looked like everyone did,” the boy said quickly.

“No. All students were trying. You did not say the spell right even once. You did not try.”

“I’m sorry, Professor. I’ll try harder next time.”

Something in his tone made her think that he found this conversation amusing. Minerva was not used to this. Most students found her intimidating which was how she preferred it. If they were mildly intimidated, they remained quiet which was how she liked her lessons.

“Do not think that I will not fail you just because you are in Gryffindor. I expect the same level of effort from students of all Houses.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She still wasn’t convinced that he took her warning seriously but she couldn’t do anything else at this point. She dismissed him and prepared for the next lesson as the students started to arrive.

Merlin was going to be a challenging student. She had to keep a close eye on him.

Merlin walked slowly down the hall, looking out the windows towards the grounds. It was a sunny day and he contemplated how much more he would have preferred to spend it outside instead of being cooped up in dingy classrooms yet another day.

The first week in Hogwarts was going smoothly. He was getting to know Harry and hoped that the boy would trust him before going off to do anything dangerous without him. Merlin also tried to befriend Harry’s friends, Ron and Hermione, to ensure he would be accepted in their circle, or a triangle as it was.

He found it frustrating that he wasn’t in the same year as they were. It made the task harder. Dumbledore’s reasoning was that too many people would start asking questions if he showed up in
the second year but as a first-year student, he was just one of many, not worth noticing. Merlin wondered if Dumbledore realized just how much of a difference it made to not share classes and dorm with Harry. But it was too late to change that now. Merlin was in the first year and had to make it work.

As part of the blending-in act, Merlin tried to pretend to not know magic but had a hard time gauging just how much he should fake it. At first, he tried to use Jack as his guide seeing that the boy didn’t know how to use a wand, but soon realized that Jack was not the right child to use as a “normal” baseline. The boy’s wand didn’t seem to respond to him the same way wands normally did to wizards. He tended to cast a lot of accidental wordless spells.

Merlin found it amusing but also very relatable. He had similar issues when he first tried to learn how to use a wand so many centuries ago. It was yet another proof of what they had in common and Merlin was itching to ask Jack about Old Religion, but worried that he was going to ruin his mission in the school. He didn’t know the boy well enough to be sure that his secret would be safe.

Colin proved to be a much better baseline for how a first-year student should struggle or succeed so Merlin watched the small boy closely and tried to recreate his results. It was very tedious and frustrating work but he was finally starting to get used to it.

He might have overdone it in Transfiguration. McGonagall noticed that he was doing everything he could to not perform the spell. He had to be more careful around her.

Merlin’s thoughts were interrupted as he collided with a mass of dark robes and landed on his butt painfully. His bookbag flew up and all of its contents fell around him.

“Watch where you’re going, ear-head,” sneered a pale-haired Slytherin while two very large boys stood on his sides like bodyguards.

“Ear-head. That’s a good one, Malfoy,” chuckled the fat one.

“Another Gryffinloser,” commented Malfoy kid while kicking away Merlin’s bag. “They’ll let anyone in that house.”

Merlin had a strong desire to teach these boys a lesson but bit it back, remembering that he needed to stay low.

‘He’s just a bully - like Arthur before I polished him up,’ he told himself. ‘Just suck it up and ignore it.’

He put his hands on the ground, trying to get up and one of the large boys kicked his arm away, making him drop to the ground again. The other one sniggered behind him.

Merlin ignored it and tried to raise himself again meeting the same fate.

“Oops,” the flat-faced one said innocently while keeping his foot ready to kick Merlin’s hand, should he attempt it again. “He can’t get up.”

The fat one snorted like a pig and Malfoy sneered silently.

Merlin was barely restraining himself. How much humiliation must he endure before he’d be allowed to retaliate? He had learned the patience of a saint in his long life but it was being tested now. The temper he thought he outgrew was dangerously close to making a comeback. His mind started swirling with ideas of how he could stop the bullies without revealing himself. For starters, the shoelaces of the bully who was looming over him looked like they were begging to accidentally get
tied to each other.

“Leave him alone,” Jack’s familiar voice called out from behind the Slytherins.

Merlin watched with quiet satisfaction as the boy went around the three bullies and extended a hand to him.

Malfoy was the first to recover from the interruption.

“Oh, wait,” he mocked, pointing out Jack to his bodyguards. “Elsa is here to save the day.”

His goonies cackled like hyenas and Merlin worried about how Jack was going to react to the older boy’s taunt. Being called his sister’s name was truly an unexpected insult. To his pleasant surprise, Jack put a lopsided smile on his face and faced the pale-haired boy.

“Was that supposed to be funny?” When the Slytherins were taken aback by his lack of reaction, he delivered his punchline. "I'll tell you what’s funny, Malfoy. Your face.”

Malfoy’s sneer turned into a venomous scowl and he lunged at Jack who quickly moved out of the way and stepped on Slytherin’s robes making him trip and fall with flailing arms.

Merlin took that as his cue. Right after Jack tripped Malfoy, Merlin locked his eyes on the feet of the two large boys and whispered a spell which tied their shoelaces together. When Malfoy hit the ground and they tried to charge Jack in retaliation, they promptly fell down with very unmanly shrieks.

Merlin watched with satisfaction as all three Slytherins writhed on the floor while Jack casually picked up Merlin’s books.

Malfoy looked at his goonies, first in surprise, then, with disgust and finally got up and shook the dust off his robes.

“You don’t want to make an enemy out of me, Nix,” he warned but it seemed that without his bodyguards to back him up, words were the only threat he offered.

Jack ignored him and put the stack of books in Merlin’s hands.

“Are you deaf or did you bleach your brain along with that hair?”

Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head in bewilderment, still not looking at the Slytherin. The insults bounced off him as if he had a protective shield around him.

“I bet he bleaches it together with his tighty-whities,” one of the goonies on the floor retorted while trying to untangle his shoes.

Merlin was puzzled. That insult didn’t even make sense.

Jack said nothing but put his arm around Merlin, who by now stuffed his books in the bag, and steered him away from the trio without a word.

Before they could walk away, Merlin saw out of the corner of his eye that Malfoy pulled out his wand. The little git was planning to jinx them in the back! Before the Slytherin could utter the curse, Merlin used his magic to slightly move the boy’s wand up, poking him in the eye.

“Ow,” Malfoy cried, clutching his eye.
“Why did you do that?” the flat-faced goonie asked while still struggling with his shoes.

Merlin snickered and casually left the scene with Jack who walked quietly next to him with hands in his pockets. Merlin couldn’t help but smile. That was fun.

“Thanks,” Merlin finally said, fixing up the scarf around his neck which came loose during the encounter.

Jack nodded and asked, “What are tighty-whities?”

Merlin snorted but before he could explain, Peeves the Poltergeist glided in front of them.


Then, Peeves locked his orange eyes on Jack and the boy’s face grew even paler than it already was. Jack grabbed Merlin’s arm and pulled him along towards their classroom. Merlin remembered how Jack was afraid of ghosts. A poltergeist was no ghost but it could be a lot more annoying.

“Wait, wait, wait, little boy,” Peeves caught up to them and Jack was forced to stop. “Don’t run away. I like naughty boys.” Then, the poltergeist looked from Jack to Merlin and said. “A big secret, I see. We’re keeping secrets. Peeves likes secrets.”

And he laughed in a high pitch malevolent chuckle. The bell on his hat swung from side to side, making a jingly sound to the rhythm of his laugh.

Merlin swallowed. Did Peeves know about him? How did he find out? Who else knew?

“Please, don’t say anything,” Jack pleaded and Merlin was surprised. Did Jack think Peeves addressed him?

Peeves chuckled again, looked between the two boys, rubbed his hands together and said in a sing-song voice, “What to do? Oh, what to do? Peeves knows a secret or maybe two.”

Merlin stood still and tried to keep a blank face as if he didn’t know what was going on while his heart hammered in his ribcage. It was only his first week. His identity couldn’t be revealed just yet. He couldn’t allow that to happen.

He thought of what Peeves was. A poltergeist was a prankster, a spirit of mayhem. So far, he didn’t appear to mean them harm. Maybe, he even admired them for tripping the three bullies. Merlin decided to go with that theory.

“I’m glad you approve of how we handled the situation,” he addressed Peeves who grinned widely. “Feel free to finish what we started. Those three Slytherins are just begging to be pranked some more today.”

Peeves looked between them and chuckled in his high pitch voice. “Bullies three, pranksters three.”

“That’s right. They need a third prankster to even the odds. Go, do what you do best, Peeves.”

Peeves cackled again and floated off in the direction of the three Slytherins.

Merlin grabbed Jack by the robes and ran down the stairs towards the Potions classroom. He hoped that Malfoy and his gang got a good pranking but also felt thankful that Peeves didn’t say out loud whatever secret he wanted to divulge. Merlin wasn’t sure if the poltergeist knew about him but he didn’t want to risk it.
They made it into the classroom and just managed to put their bags down when Professor Snape entered. Merlin exhaled a puff of air in relief. He wouldn’t want to be late to this class. He tried to bite down a smirk that was forming on his face as he imagined what Peeves could be doing to the three bullies. He hoped they got what they deserved and arrived late to their morning class, losing Slytherin a few points.

Merlin might have been a Slytherin once but he was a Gryffindor now and he felt like a Gryffindor through and through.

Ginny ran to her dorm with desperation in each step. The most horrible thing that could have happened, had happened. On her way from lunch, she got cornered by the Chatties who asked her what she thought about Harry. Her face turned such beet red that they squealed in unison, “Awww, you LIKE him!” and Ginny fled the scene to hide in her dorm.

The secret was out. The Chatties with their gossiping tendencies were sure going to start talking about this to everyone.

“What if Harry finds out?” Ginny asked herself, chewing her lip.

Why did she have to be a redhead, cursed with a face that could show each of her emotions as different shades of red? It wasn’t fair. Life wasn’t fair.

She collapsed on her bed and sighed audibly. Other girls in her shoes would probably burst into tears but she was never prone to crying. Instead, she held her sorrows locked deep within her heart, making it turn into stone. That just made it so much easier to crush it.

She just wished she had someone to talk to, someone who wouldn’t make fun of her. A friend.

She looked at her nightstand as if she could see through its wooden walls. There was a friend waiting for her inside the drawer. She slowly sat up and pulled out the diary with care.

She opened it and started writing.

*Hi, Tom. Are you there?*

*Where would I go?*

*You're right. I'm silly.*

*What's on your mind, Ginny?*

*I just wanted to talk to someone.*

*Sure, I'm here. What happened?*

*Well,*

Ginny hesitated. She was afraid to put it all in writing.

*You can tell me anything, Ginny. Anything you say will disappear in my pages never to be read by anyone.*

*Like a secret?*

*Exactly like a secret. I'm your diary now, Ginny. I keep your secrets.*
Ginny smiled. This was exactly what she needed. She breathed in and out. It was a diary. This type of thing was what you wrote in diaries.

*There is this boy.*

*Oh, it’s a boy problem.*

*Will you make fun of me?*

*Of course not. Tell me about the boy. What is his name?*

*His name is Harry Potter. He’s my brother’s best friend.*

*So, is that a problem? Your brother doesn’t like it that you like his friend?*

*I don’t think my brother knows. Even Harry doesn’t know. He doesn’t even notice me.*

*Oh, so that’s the problem.*

*Yes and I don’t know how to get him to like me. I always feel so intimidated whenever I’m around him.*

*Why are you intimidated? He’s just a boy.*

*He’s not just any boy. He’s famous. You haven’t heard of him?*

*I’ve been stuck in this diary for a long time, Ginny. Tell me, why is this boy famous?*

*He’s the Boy Who Lived. He’s the one who defeated You Know Who.*

The diary paused, leaving Ginny waiting.

*Could you explain better who is You Know Who?*

*You had to have heard of You Know Who.*

*It appears that a lot of people have become famous while I’ve been here. If no one writes it for me, I have no way of knowing events of modern times.*

*He was a powerful dark wizard. No one dares to speak his name.*

*Can you give me a clue?*

*His name starts with a V. They also call him the Dark Lord.*

The diary paused again and Ginny wondered why Tom was so hung up on that.

*I think I have heard of him. So, how did Harry Potter defeat You Know Who?*

*I don’t really know the details but he was just a baby. He survived the killing curse and it backfired on the Dark Lord.*

*That is interesting. I can see why you like this boy.*

*I don’t like him because he’s famous. I like him because he’s pretty amazing.*

*I believe you, Ginny. Now, tell me everything you know about Harry Potter.*
Ginny wrote everything she could think of. She described what she had read in the newspapers. She recounted the adventures she heard Ron had with Harry in their first year. She wrote everything she noticed in Harry which amazed her and everything she liked about him.

By the time she was finished, she felt exhausted. She collapsed on her bed and fell asleep while holding the diary in her hand.

Elsa was researching in the library when she accidentally stumbled upon a piece of information which shook her world. Her hands shook as she held the book where in plain words was listed the location of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

She slowly let go of the page. Her fingers felt stiff from the intense way she held the book. She flexed them and took a long breath to try to think. She couldn’t believe it. The whole time they were in the school, they had no idea how close they were to where they had escaped from.

“It’s freezing,” a student in an aisle next to her commented and Elsa realized that she lost control of her magic and accidentally lowered the room temperature. It didn’t happen to her often but she wasn’t surprised that it happened now. She was close to having a panic attack. She didn’t know how to undo her magic. All she could do was to leave.

She flew out of the library, heading for the Great Hall where she hoped to find her brother.

Elsa marched up to the Gryffindor table, grabbed Jack by the arm and without an explanation, dragged him out, making his fork fall to the ground with a clang. He must have sensed her urgency because he let himself be hauled out without a word.

She was glad that he didn’t put up a fight. She wasn’t in the mood for an argument with him.

Once they were in the hallway, she checked if they were alone and finally released his arm. He rubbed it and raised an eyebrow at her in question.

“Do you realize where we are?” she asked.

She could feel panic sink its claws into her and was close to hyperventilating.

“Looks like a hallway to me.”

She hit him on the arm and he winced. “This isn’t a joke, Jack. Not everything is a joke!”

He frowned and awaited an explanation in silence. She closed her eyes, took a long breath and tried to calm herself down. It wasn’t right to take out her nerves on her brother. He didn’t do anything wrong.

“We’re in Scotland.”

His eyes bulged.

“What?” he shouted so loud that an echo of it bounced around the walls and continued echoing in her head long after it had been said.

She nodded to confirm that she meant exactly what she said and he pulled on his hair with both hands.

“So stupid. So stupid,” he muttered with closed eyes. “We were going north for hours. I should’ve...”

“Then, he looked back at her pleadingly. “We should have asked her where this school was.”"
Elsa felt exactly the same. They were so excited to learn magic, they never stopped to question the school’s location. She should have. She was supposed to be the smart one. She failed them both.

Jack turned on the spot and paced in a small circle, both of his hands still in his hair.

“What are we going to do? Elsa, how close are we?”

“I don’t know. They use some kind of magic to make it impossible to put Hogwarts on a map.”

The situation was hopeless. She had no idea what was going to happen or what they should do. In moments like this, she needed her brother. He was always the one person who made her feel safe. She hugged him and he wrapped his arms around her.

“What are we going to do? Do we run?” she asked into his shoulder.

“I don’t know. Where can we run to? We’ve got nowhere to go.”

Before she could answer, a voice made them jump and Jack reflexively squeezed her tighter.

“What are you two up to?”

They turned their heads around and saw McGonagall who was standing just two feet away. They stared at her dumbfounded and she narrowed her eyes at them. What did she want?

“Follow me,” she said and walked down the hall, without looking back, expecting perfect obedience.

They exchanged a look, shrugged and did as they were told.

She led them to her office and motioned for them to sit at two chairs in front of a large desk. It was a small room with a large fireplace which at the moment thankfully was not lit. Elsa was really not looking forward to when all school fireplaces would be lit. She enjoyed cold.

McGonagall closed the door, sat in her chair and looked at them sternly.

“It sounded like you were planning to run away. Again. What is this about?”

Elsa was not done trying to calm her frantic heart and took a few long breaths. She found herself unable to speak. Were they planning to run away? She wasn’t sure. She wasn’t sure of anything anymore. It felt like her brain needed a break.

Jack’s hands were in fists on his lap but he attempted to control his temper. “You don’t understand, Professor.”

“Please, enlighten me. I do believe I am competent enough to follow.”

The woman’s lips were tightly pressed together which accentuated the few wrinkles on her face and Elsa recognized that this was her stern face. She would not tolerate any of Jack’s snark today. Her brother was able to get away with nearly anything over the summer but ever since they arrived at Hogwarts, McGonagall had assumed the role of the strict teacher and was less tolerant of misbehavior. It would take more than Jack’s charm to placate her now.

Jack exchanged a look with Elsa with a silent question. How much should they tell her?

Elsa had no idea. She hated holding back the truth from the woman who had been so kind to them. How long could they keep this up?

Jack tried to remain calm and put his hands on the desk deliberately slowly.
“We did not realize that this school is in Scotland. This is a problem.” He tried to control his voice, but Elsa suspected that he was tempted to shout it out. “We shouldn’t be here. We can’t be here.”

“What exactly is your problem with Scotland?” McGonagall asked looking from him to Elsa.

Jack swallowed. His face was composed but from his trembling fingers, Elsa could tell how anxious he was. He took a quill that was in front of him and turned it around in his hands. Her brother liked to have something in his hands whenever he was nervous. He was trying to be brave for both of them.

“We’re not safe here,” he finally said and dropped his eyes to stare at the quill.

McGonagall sighed and took a moment to consider his words.

“I’ll have you know that Hogwarts is the safest place you could be. There is a lot of protection around the castle and the grounds. No one can just wander in here by chance.” She waited a moment and added, “Besides, you’ve been in Scotland all summer long.”

Elsa’s heart fell. All summer? What did she mean? They spent the summer in the witch’s house.

“Your house?” Elsa asked when she understood. “Your house is in Scotland?”

McGonagall nodded and Elsa shouted, “Why didn’t you tell us where you took us? We’ve been here all this time? It took us so long to get away and you brought us back!”

“If you don’t remember, young lady,” McGonagall said in a stern voice and Elsa could sense that she was becoming irritated, “you refused to tell me where you escaped from. Since that location is so important to you, will you divulge it now?”

It seemed that the woman’s sharp stare could bore a hole through Elsa and she had to look away. She exchanged a look with Jack who accidentally frosted over the quill in his hand but hadn’t noticed yet.

Elsa stomach felt like it was tied into a knot and she was glad she did not eat lunch yet. They were so close to their mother right now. Did she sense their presence during the summer? Did she sense them now? Were they closer now than they were in the summer? There were too many questions in her head. She couldn’t think anymore.

Jack answered McGonagall’s question with a question.

“Professor. Just how close are we to Ben Nevis?”

He asked it calmly but with such intensity that the woman immediately understood the significance of this question.

“Not very close,” she answered simply. “About a hundred miles away.”

Jack was not reassured by that which was evident by the frost that started to build on the desk under his hand. He stared blankly at a wall, oblivious to the fact that he was losing control of his magic. The witch noticed and eyed him carefully.

Elsa’s mind was in a fog. It took them so long to escape and now they were just a hundred miles away. It was like a cruel joke.

“It’s possible that she couldn’t sense us in the summer. Her powers were too weak but winter will be
here in just a few weeks,” Jack muttered to himself. “She will surely sense us then.”

He was thinking the same thing then, how long they had until they were discovered. Elsa felt moisture build in her eyes. She liked it at Hogwarts. She didn’t want to leave.

“I’m scared,” she admitted and Jack looked at her immediately.

“We’re together. We’ll be okay as long as we stay together,” he assured her and took her hand in his.

Elsa sniffed but nodded.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, children,” McGonagall said, surprising Jack who’d forgotten she was there. “You’re safe here.”

Elsa didn’t know what to do. Was it really safe? Were the wards around Hogwarts really strong enough?

“The protections around the school,” she asked. “They protect the school from being found, right?”

“Yes. A Muggle would just see a bunch of ruins.”

“We don’t care about Muggles,” Jack said. “Magic. Can the school hide magic from those who are able to sense it?”

“Jack, the frost,” Elsa reminded him.

He looked around and groaned, seeing the mess he was making.

“Sorry,” he murmured and cast down his eyes to stare at the quill in his hand again. He turned it around in his fingers, trying to control his nerves. The frost momentarily stopped spreading.

McGonagall cleared her throat but did not comment on Jack’s outburst of magic.

“You are safe in this school with the protections that are in place. There’s a ton of magic intermingled here, so from the outside, someone who can sense it, in theory, would sense an immense amount of magic and I presume that your magic would be hidden among it.” She sighed, frustrated and stressed out her next words. “If you’d like a more definite answer, I’d need a more specific question. It would help immensely if you told me who you are afraid of. I assure you, you have nothing to fear from me. You can trust me. I only want to protect you.”

The twins looked at each other, thinking the same thing: ‘Is it time to tell her?’

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: Ben Nevis is a mountain. You’ll find out why it’s relevant later on but for now, I’ll satisfy your curiosity with this funny little find:

http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/Ben_Nevis

You’re welcome!
Jack hid behind a wall and pulled a hood over his hair, hoping he could hide in the shadows. He was nearly caught by a hag this time as she chose the same tunnel he was in. They had been planning this escape for months. If they were discovered, they would have to wait another year to try again. Mother was asleep like this only one day each year. This was the only time when she couldn’t track them. They had only this one day to get as far away as they could to stay out of her reach.

The hag passed right by him and he let out his breath. He waited to ensure the coast was clear and sent a signal to his sister so she would join him. A minute later, she was by his side, dressed in a dark cloak as well and they set out.

They had spent many winters memorizing the tunnels, drawing their escape route and planning. They thought they had found a possible way out and it was time to test it.

They made their way through the dark tunnels in silence and without a light to guide them. They didn’t dare say a word, knowing well how treacherous cave echoes could be but all plans were already laid out and nothing else needed to be said. They had about an hour before their absence was discovered and the hags raised the alarm. They couldn’t risk anything going wrong.

They reached the furthest point in the tunnel where about ten feet above them was an opening in the rock where the tiniest bit of light streamed through.

Jack’s heart pounded fast as hope built up in him. They were so close.

‘Please, if anyone is listening, please, help us. Please, let this be the way out.’

He unraveled the rope he had wrapped around his shoulder and threw it at a jagged part of a rock. He’s been training this move for weeks, knowing they would have to climb.

The rope slid down and fell on the ground with a quiet plop. He had to try again. He was going to keep at it as many times as it took.

After several unsuccessful tries, the rope finally caught the rock and he carefully pulled it until it was wrapped securely. Elsa smiled and jumped up but he gave her a warning look. It wasn’t time for celebration just yet. They were far from safe.

He climbed the rope first and then helped her get up. Then, he wrapped it around himself again, careful to not leave any evidence showing which way they went. Finally, they proceeded through a narrow tunnel.

The opening was getting smaller the further they went but also the light was getting brighter, so they trudged on with lifted spirits. First, they had to bend down, then, walk on all fours, until the tunnel became too small even for that.

Jack looked ahead of him and tried to judge the width of the opening. The light ahead was blinding. He had never seen anything this bright. And he could smell that the air was different, not the musty scent of the earth and rock he was accustomed to. This had to be it. He plopped on his belly and started to crawl, Elsa followed close behind.

He reached the end of the tunnel and squinted, struggling to see anything. The brightness was too...
great. He couldn’t see. He closed his eyes and tried to feel his way around with his hands. Carefully, he squeezed himself through the mouth of the tunnel, thanking the gods for not waiting any more years before making this trek. If he was even a bit older, he wouldn’t have fit through it.

Jack stood up and had to put a hand above his eyes to shield them from the light assaulting from above.

“Is that what Sun is?” his sister asked, standing up beside him.

His vision was starting to come back and he saw sights he never could have imagined. A strong gust of wind ruffled his hair as if welcoming him.

“We’re outside,” he breathed, trying to take in everything around them. “We must be.”

They stood there for a moment, staring at the brand new world. It was full of color and textures, new smells and sounds. He didn’t know what any of the things he saw were called but his heart swelled in appreciation. The world outside was beautiful and full of life.

“We’re not safe yet,” he remembered and grabbed his sister’s hand. “Let’s go.”

And they ran forward, ready to see the world.

Present day.

Ginny woke up and yawned widely. Finally, it was Saturday. She hoped to watch Gryffindor Quidditch team practice in the morning. She got dressed and ran out of the Gryffindor tower, invigorated by the thought of seeing Harry play.

When she got outside though, she saw Gryffindor team come back inside the castle with frowns on their faces. She asked one of them if the practice was over already and it turned out that it was cancelled. She didn’t see Harry anywhere and her spirits deflated. She was really looking forward to seeing some action. She had no other plans for this weekend.

Colin sat on the stairs with a frown and she asked him what happened.

“All I wanted was to take a picture. It was interesting, that’s all. And they got all angry at me and pushed me aside. You don’t see someone coughing up slugs every day, you know? It probably wasn’t pleasant but I’m sure he would find it funny later. And wouldn’t a picture be a great keepsake of a funny moment like that? I would’ve wanted a picture if it was me. Why don’t they get it?”

“Who was coughing up slugs?”

“Young brother, Ron. I think that broken wand of his malfunctioned when he tried to jinx someone.”

Ginny shook her head in disbelief. “That’s what he gets for trying to jinx people and also for being too much of a coward to ask mom for a new wand.”

Colin sighed and blew invisible dust off his camera.

“I was hoping to get a few pictures of the Quidditch practice but it’s just Slytherins on the field now. I don’t like them. They keep making fun of me because my parents aren’t wizards.”

“Don’t worry, Colin,” Ginny patted his arm. “You’ll get your chance to see Quidditch later. And those Slytherins are jerks. Just call me if they ever give you trouble. Gryffindors stick up for each other. Now, let’s get to breakfast. I’m starving.”
Colin’s frown lifted a little and she offered him a hand to help him get up. He followed her to the Great Hall with the usual bounce in his step and she felt glad that she was able to make him feel better. It was really unfair how Slytherins treated Muggleborns. Colin had as much right to attend Hogwarts as any other student.

When they got to the Great Hall, they found Merlin and Jack already seated.

“You’re back quickly, Colin,” Merlin said. “I thought practice would be longer than that. We were hoping to catch some of it after breakfast.”

“Practice was cancelled,” Colin answered grumpily and sat down with Ginny. “How did you all do on your Potions essay?”

“I aced it.” Merlin chuckled. “Snape looked really unhappy that he couldn’t fail it. I think, Jack, you got a good grade too, right?”

Jack nodded but uncharacteristically remained quiet, picked at his food, barely touching anything and seemed uninterested in their conversation. She wondered what bothered him but wasn’t sure how to ask it.

She realized that she was not close enough to any of these boys to feel comfortable asking about their troubles. She preferred their company over the Chatties but she couldn’t call any of them her friends. It was a depressing thought. What would it take to become friends with someone?

“What about you, Colin?” Merlin continued.

“Not so great.” Colin bit down his bread angrily. “Apparently, I missed the whole point and wrote off topic. Snape hates me just like all the Slytherin kids do.”

“Let me look over it next time. I’ll let you know if you’re on the right track,” Merlin offered and Ginny thought it was very nice of him. She guessed that was what friends did for each other.

“Friends.”

“How did you do with Snape, Ginny?” Merlin asked and she felt a sting of panic, realizing that his cerulean blue eyes were on her.

He had pretty eyes but not as pretty as Harry’s. Harry’s eyes were so beautifully green. They were fascinating. She would love it if she felt brave enough to look into those eyes straight up and… Oh, no. Why was she thinking about Harry now?

“I did okay,” she answered quickly and hoped that her cheeks did not betray her.

If they did, Merlin did not comment and she felt thankful that boys were not as nosy as girls. The Chatties would have picked up on her little daydreaming immediately and would have surely teased her about it.

Jack suddenly got up and called over their heads, “Hey, Luna.”

A short blond girl wearing a Ravenclaw uniform walked up to them and all of their eyes turned to her.

“Have you seen Elsa?” Jack asked her. “I haven’t seen her come down yet.”

“She said she wasn’t hungry,” Luna answered, looking at Jack as if she didn’t really see him but was in the middle of a conversation with someone else. “But she didn’t stay in the dorm. Honestly, she
was acting so strange, I’m worried about her. I think her ears must be infested with Wrackspurts.”

Jack frowned and looked worried. “What’s that?”

“They’re these little invisible creatures that fly into your ears and make your brain go fuzzy. If you find her, tell her to think happy thoughts. That will dispell them.”

Then, she smiled and walked away, leaving Jack scratching his head.

Ginny waited until the girl left and tried to suppress a laugh.

“That girl is loony,” she commented, shaking her head in disbelief. “Don’t worry. Your sister is fine. It sounds like one of those made up stories The Quibbler keeps producing. Mum says it’s full of rubbish.”

Jack didn’t seem reassured but remained standing, looking after Luna and switching his weight from one leg to the other.

“She’s probably in the library. I’ll see you later,” Jack said and left them.

Ginny wondered if Jack believed her. That Luna girl made him worry for no reason. It was a wonder how a loony girl like that got into Ravenclaw which was supposed to be full of brilliant witches.

“Merlin, would you help me find that potion you spoke about that would make my pictures move?” Colin asked.

“Sure, we could work on that today.”

Ginny wanted to ask them if she could join but held back. Colin asked Merlin for help. Not her. She didn’t feel invited. She wasn’t part of their group of friends. They allowed her to sit with them at the table probably just to be nice. It stung to realize that she didn’t have her own group of friends. She had no one.

“But first,” Merlin continued. “I need to find Harry for something. If practice was cancelled, I’m surprised he’s not here yet.”

“Oh, he took Ron to that big guy, the gamekeeper. Because Ron was coughing up slugs. It was disgusting but also fascinating. They were huge and slimy.” Merlin winced at the description but Colin did not stop. “I wanted to take a picture but they wouldn’t let me. Did you know there is a jinx that can do that? Apparently, Ron did and he tried to jinx some Slytherin, I don’t know why, but Ron’s wand is broken. Did you notice? And so his jinx backfired. The Slytherins were laughing. I wonder how long he’s going to be coughing up slugs. How long do jinxes normally last?”

Ginny suddenly felt nauseated. She couldn’t eat while thinking about slugs so she excused herself and left to the dorm.

Chatties were thankfully not back yet and she sat down on her bed, blissfully alone. Back home, there was always someone in the house, it was never quiet but at least she had her own room. At Hogwarts, she shared a room with three other girls so she loved these brief moments of privacy.

After a while though, the blissful silence in the room lost its appeal. She didn’t want to be alone. It was Saturday. She should be doing something fun, something with friends. Her roommates were nice but she didn’t have anything in common with them. She liked sports, they liked fashion. She liked rock bands like Weird Sisters, they liked boy bands. Maybe she would fit in better with the boys but was afraid that they wouldn’t want to hang out with a girl. Especially, a girl like her. She
wasn’t interesting enough.

She pulled out her diary, longing to talk to someone. A piece of paper was better than nobody.

*Hi Tom.*

*Hi Ginny. I’m happy you’re writing to me.*

Ginny smiled a little.

*I’m happy to have someone to write to.*

*What brings you to my pages today? Do you have something to get off your chest?*

Ginny sighed. She had so much to get off her chest.

*I just wanted to talk to someone. Sometimes it feels like you’re the only person I can talk to.*

*I’m happy to talk to you, Ginny. That’s what friends are for.*

*Thank you, Tom.*

*So, tell me. Did anything interesting happen today?*

*I was supposed to watch my team practice Quidditch but the practice was cancelled and so I’m left with nothing to do.*

*Oh, no. So you didn’t get to watch Harry play?*

*Yeah.*

*We’ll find you something to do, Ginny. Now, how about we talk about you? I want to know more about you, my dear friend.*

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Minerva sat at the staff table during breakfast and tried to keep up a conversation with Pomona Sprout. Her friend was going on about some new bulbs she just planted and Minerva had a hard time staying focused. Her mind kept drifting off to the previous day’s conversation with the twins.

These children! She couldn’t stand this. Yet again, she tried her hardest to get the twins to open up about their past, and just when she thought that they would finally divulge their secrets, they just clumped up, shut down completely, said nothing.

She had been trying for months to gain their trust and couldn’t imagine what it was that she was doing wrong. Sometimes, she wished she could use Veritaserum on them to get this frustrating silence over with. It would be easy for a couple of drops of the truth potion to “accidentally” find its way to their drinks, not that she’d thought about it or anything. No, she wouldn’t do that.

Since the twins wouldn’t say anything, she made them promise that they wouldn’t run away and if they had any other concerns, they were to come to her immediately. She assured them that her door would always be open for them. They agreed obediently and left her to her frustrated thoughts. But their promise didn’t guarantee that they wouldn’t do anything dangerous.

Once a runaway, always a runaway - she feared this logic would apply in their case no matter what they promised her.
She tried to calm down but she was indeed at the end of her rope. She was desperate.

It didn’t escape her notice that Elsa never came down for breakfast. Jack sat with his friends for a short time, but now, he got up, hardly having eaten anything. Were the twins up to something already? She couldn’t sit and do nothing.

Minerva excused herself from the table and got up. She followed the boy a safe distance away and watched him enter the library. Were they planning their escape in there?

She tried to act casual and greeted Irma Pince who sat at her desk as usual. She never liked this librarian. The woman was unhealthily obsessed with books. More obsessed with the books than her role in this school. But as she did with all fellow staff members, Minerva treated her with courtesy.

While feigning interest in a boring-looking volume Irma was reading, Minerva kept glancing at Jack who was looking through aisles and saw him finally go into one.

When she finished the small talk with Irma, she quietly approached the section of the library she saw her young troublemaker disappear in, and overheard the twins talk.

“You can get started from this shelf, while I work on the one above,” Elsa directed.

“All of them? That’s like a million books,” Jack complained.

“It’s our only hope. So, stop wasting time. You want to help or not?”

Jack grumbled something but said nothing else. Minerva sighed and quietly walked away.

Whatever they were doing, it wasn’t running away. At least, not today. This didn’t mean they wouldn’t try a week from now or even tomorrow. She couldn’t possibly follow them all day and night. What could she do?
The first time

Merlin spent a good chunk of his Saturday in the library. He was glad to see that Hogwarts had a very sizable collection with a good choice of books. The librarian proved to be of no use and he wondered why someone who disliked children would take up a job in a school.

He helped Colin find the instructions for developing magical pictures. The small boy thanked him and ran out, ready to try it out.

Merlin strolled through the aisles, curious if any of his books were there or if this library held knowledge of anything he hadn’t heard of yet. He did not pretend to know everything, but at this age, finding new things to learn was often difficult.

He paused his exploration when he saw two white heads in one of the aisles. He remembered that Jack was going to look for his sister in the library. He smiled, wondering if the boy found any Wrackspurts in her ears. He approached quietly, curious what they were doing.

The twins were sitting on the floor and several books were stacked around them. Elsa was in full focus mode. She appeared to be reading two books and making notes at the same time. Jack leaned his head on her shoulder and was slowly paging through a book, looking like he was bored with the task.

Merlin snuck up to listen in. He peeked between books in the next aisle, where he was well hidden while having a good view. The twins were quiet for several minutes and he got bored. Were they just studying? He was hoping for something interesting to happen like a secret conversation he could accidentally overhear.

“Can we take a few books and do this outside?” Jack asked with a yawn, breaking the silence.

“She won’t let us take this many books out. We have to do this here.”

Jack groaned and flipped another page.

Elsa audibly gasped and Jack lifted his head.

“Anything useful?”

She lifted one of the books up higher to have a better look.

“It’s an old spell for finding lost things. What do you think? Does it look real?”

Jack glanced over her shoulder and blinked a few times.

“Honestly, words are swimming in front of me. I can’t read anymore.”

He leaned his head on her shoulder again and closed his eyes.

“You’re unbelievable. As if I was torturing you or something.”

“Well, it feels like torture,” he mumbled with his eyes still closed.

“I’ve been doing this every day and somehow I’m okay.”

“You’re like a different species. My species needs a break.”
“Jack, you are incorrigible.”

Jack sighed. “That’s not even a real word.”

“Argh!”

Merlin had to stifle a laugh. It was fun to witness the strange relationship between them. He wondered why Jack stayed with his sister in the library if he hated the task so much.

“Fine. I’ll read it,” Elsa said sharply and Jack smiled with his eyes still closed. Sneaky kid. He still got what he wanted.

At the break of dawn, hold a lit candle and say the chant four times while facing the four directions of the world: East, South, West, North.

I call on the Sacred Elements.

Earth, come to me.
Fire, come to me.
Water, come to me.
Wind, come to me.

Hear my call and lead me to what I seek.

“What do you think?”

Jack grimaced. “It doesn’t sound like any of the spells they’ve been teaching us here.”

“I know. It sounds easy enough though. We could try this tomorrow.”

Merlin did not know if it was a real spell. He’d never heard of it but he knew well to not dismiss different types of magic. What was taught at Hogwarts was not the only way to practice. He was a walking proof of that.

Elsa wrote down in her notebook and Jack waited until she finished.

“Are we done?”

“Fine. We’ll take a break but we’re coming back later.”

Jack jumped up immediately, suddenly, filled with energy, and Merlin had a moment of panic. There was no quick way for him to retreat without being spotted.

“We have to put the books away first,” Elsa scolded and Jack groaned.

Merlin sighed with relief. This would give him time to quietly walk away.

He snuck out while the twins were turned away, putting books back on the shelves. Once he was a safe distance away, he had one final look behind him and speculated what they needed that strange spell for. Not paying attention to where he was going, he collided with someone, and desperate to not fall on his butt this time, he grabbed onto something. It was unfortunately a book cart which tipped over under his weight, spilling out a couple dozen of books.

“Watch it!”

Merlin looked up, recognizing the voice of the Gryffindor Prefect, Percy Weasley. The older boy had a mixture of annoyance and uncertainty on his face.
Then, Merlin noticed that Percy was not alone. Merlin walked into him as the boy was rushing out of a dark aisle with a girl. A little smile crept onto Merlin’s face as he understood. Percy’s face turned a shade of red which matched his hair color perfectly.

“No word of this to anyone,” the boy warned and fled the scene. The girl followed closely behind with a giggle.

Merlin put the last of the books back on the cart and shook his head. Some things had not changed at Hogwarts. The library was still the favorite snog place for teenagers.

Merlin walked back to the Gryffindor tower, already planning to follow Jack as the boy was surely going to sneak out right before dawn to try that spell with his sister, but at this moment, it was time to check back on Harry who, he hoped, was back by now.

He climbed through the Fat Lady’s portrait and looked around the Gryffindor common room. He didn’t have to look far to find the bespectacled boy. Harry was playing a game of Wizard’s Chess with Ron and Merlin sat by them to observe.

“Nice one,” Merlin commented, watching Ron take down another of Harry’s pieces.

The ginger boy was actually very good at this game. Looks were deceiving. Merlin wouldn’t have guessed that he was a master strategist underneath.

Colin ran down from the dorms, holding a stack of prints.

“Merlin, there you are! I developed them. Do you want to see?”

Not waiting for an answer, the small boy shoved the prints into Merlin’s hands and bit his lip, awaiting an opinion. Surprisingly, the pictures were of good quality, one wouldn’t think they were taken by a child, and he must have used the potion correctly as they were moving.

“These are good, Colin,” Merlin complimented and the boy beamed with pride.

There were pictures of Hogwarts Express, the castle, some magical objects, as well as several students and teachers. They represented the overall feeling of the Hogwarts experience. It was like seeing the school from Colin’s point of view: the castle was grand, the magic was amazing and the people were happy.

Merlin paused on a picture of Harry with Professor Lockhart. Harry in the picture was trying to get away while Lockhart pulled him into the frame, smiling broadly.

Colin noticed which picture Merlin was on and pulled it out of his hands.

“Harry, would you please sign it? It would mean the world to me.”

Harry gritted his teeth and said firmly while not even looking at the boy, “No.”

Colin stood frozen holding the picture and his smile slowly fell. While Merlin understood Harry’s dislike for excessive attention, he felt bad for Colin.

“I’m sure Lockhart would love to autograph it for you,” Merlin interjected, hoping to dissolve the uneasy silence.

“Yeah, I’ll ask him,” the boy said, still looking at Harry who was pretending that he wasn’t there.

Colin took the pictures from Merlin’s hands and went back to the dorm without another word.
Merlin felt torn. On the one hand, he wanted to stand up for the small boy and tell off Harry for being so cold but on the other hand, he needed Harry to think he was on his side.

“It will pass,” Merlin finally said, deciding to find a middle ground. “Colin’s excitement will wear off soon and he’ll move on to a new obsession.”

Harry and Ron continued their game and discussed detentions they had in the evening and very soon Merlin became aware that they were ignoring him. In fact, neither of them had said a word to him the whole time he was there. Maybe they even hoped that if they ignored him long enough, he would go away.

‘They’re treating me like Colin,’ he realized.

Merlin felt a sting of rejection. He didn’t think that he was annoying or disturbing them but they were making it clear that they did not want him around. He knew that he was an awkward kid, he didn’t make the best first impression but to be shooed away like a fly? What was he doing wrong?

He got up, left through the portrait hole and wandered the castle halls aimlessly. He knew that befriending Harry would take time but he just assumed that it would happen - as long as he was friendly and helpful, he would eventually be accepted into Harry’s circle of friends. He never would have expected that he was going to be pushed aside and not even given a chance at friendship. He didn’t expect that Harry was going to dislike him.

He didn’t remember making friends being this difficult before. Being a child was hard. Maybe it would be better to give up, tell Dumbledore that he was withdrawing, that it was all a big mistake. He was too ancient. He didn’t remember how to act around children in a way that they would think of him as their peer. This mission of being Harry’s secret protector was pointless.

His aimless wandering led him to the door leading to the courtyard. He went through it, deciding that he could use a walk to properly think it over. Should he give up this early?

Once outside, he found Jack and Elsa playing some kind of game throwing something at each other. Was it snowballs?

He sat down on the stairs and watched them for a few minutes. His ancient heart started to enliven again. While in this body, he felt like a child and felt a child’s need to play. He wondered if they would allow him to join. He didn’t know if he could take any more rejection in one day.

Jack was the first to notice him and Elsa took advantage of his distraction to aim a snowball right into his head. The ball crashed into his face and he stumbled back, grumbling something that sounded like, “Not fair.”

Merlin watched with amusement as Elsa laughed at her brother.

Jack finally recovered and yelled to Merlin, “Can you make snowballs? You could join us if you’d like.”

Merlin’s heart skipped a beat. Yes. He could conjure snowballs and he would do anything to be included. He just wanted to be a part of something.

Ginny woke up and immediately felt that something was wrong. First of all, she was on the floor. The hard cold tile hurt her bones and she groaned when getting up. Second of all, the floor was wet which made her robes damp.
She looked around and was surprised to find that she was in a school lavatory. The place was dark and had an eerie feel to it as if it was abandoned. How she got there and why she was on the floor, she could not fathom. She promptly left, worrying about her state of mind.

After she exited the bathroom, she recognized that she was in the second-floor corridor. The empty hall left her feeling spooked. The only sound was the shuffling of her robes and the soft echo of her footsteps. There were no students anywhere around and she wondered what was going on but then remembered that it was the weekend. Students wouldn’t be in this section of the castle now.

When she got to the ground floor, she heard noises coming from the Great Hall. She peeked inside and saw that the evening feast had just started.

“How is this possible?” Ginny said to herself.

She slowly walked inside and looked around the noisy room. The enchanted ceiling depicted an evening sky with a few small clouds lazily floating around. It was getting dark outside.

Ginny was shocked. The last thing she remembered, it was just after breakfast. She couldn’t remember what she did between that time and now. She lost an entire day.

“Hey, Ginny. Sit with us,” one of the Chatties called over.

She was about to decline, too bewildered to eat, but upon seeing all the food, her stomach growled. She skipped lunch, didn’t she?

She sat down, her back facing the wall, and couldn’t believe that everyone was going about their meal as if everything was okay. She did not feel okay. In fact, besides being hungry, she felt drained, as if she had not slept in a couple of days. Was she getting sick?

“We haven’t seen you all day. Did you do anything fun today?”

Ginny tried to fake a smile. Yes, she was probably getting sick. That would explain everything. Almost everything.

“Nothing much,” she replied quickly.

She ate in silence, making vague “Uh-huh” and “Yeah” sounds to satisfy Chatties’ questions, not really paying attention to them and was only snapped back to reality when she overheard one of them exclaim.

“What is she wearing?”

Ginny looked over at who they referred to and recognized the blonde Ravenclaw girl she met in the morning. Ginny raised her eyebrows, amused at the sight. The girl wore the strangest pointy hat which appeared to be made of Chocolate Frog Cards. It was an interesting art project but definitely not something one would wear in public.

“Who is that?” one of them asked with disgust.

Ginny shook her head. Her original opinion of the Ravenclaw girl was correct.

“That’s Luna. Loony Luna,” she said and chuckled at her own joke.

The Chatties exploded in giggles.

“You’re funny, Ginny.”
Ginny smiled to herself a little. Maybe the Chatties weren’t that bad and maybe she should start referring to them by their names.

When she got back to her dorm with the Chatties, she saw that her diary was still on top of her bed. She quickly grabbed it and hid it in the nightstand drawer under a few pieces of parchment, hoping no one noticed it. She didn’t want anyone to start asking questions about it. This diary was her secret. No one could find out about Tom.
Feels like home

It was peacefully quiet in the dorm. The only sounds were of Colin’s gentle snoring. Deciding it was safe to do so, Merlin opened his eyes and looked around. The room was dark and Jack was still in bed, sleeping soundly, his white hair blending in with the sheets.

‘I woke up in time,’ Merlin thought with relief.

Only now he realized that Jack never closed the curtains of his four-poster bed. The purpose of them was to provide a sliver of privacy, which Merlin appreciated, but Jack never used them. Was he claustrophobic? Or maybe, he was scared of the dark? Whichever reason it was, Merlin was glad of it because he was able to easily see when the boy woke up.

Merlin laid in bed for a while, wondering what time it was. He wanted to wake up early, knowing that the boy planned to sneak out of the castle before dawn. He was growing excited. He hoped that this little trip was going to answer some questions he had about the twins.

Jack suddenly sat up with a gasp and Merlin closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep.

He heard very quiet rustling sounds as the boy got up and dressed. He didn’t hear any footsteps but heard the soft click of the door closing. Jack knew how to sneak silently. Well, two could play that game. Merlin considered himself to be an expert at sneaking around castles. He’d had lots of practice at following people without being seen.

He got up and quickly left the dorm. He barely saw Jack exit through the portrait hole and ran after him, careful to not lose him.

The moving staircases proved to make following somebody challenging. One of them switched directions just as Merlin got to it. That was a problem. Sometimes, they would stay in one position for several minutes. He couldn’t wait that long. He used his magic to force it to go back in position so he could follow the boy.

He finally caught up to Jack as the boy made it to the ground floor. Jack threw his cloak’s hood on to hide his his white hair and blend in with the shadows. In fact, Merlin was surprised that the boy could move around the completely dark castle so easily. Few times, Merlin had to use his magic to help him see. Did Jack know spells like that as well? Merlin was intrigued. He wanted to know more.

A second set of footsteps sounded close by and Merlin barely hid behind a column in time as a dark-robed shape passed right by him. It was a close call.

“Let’s hurry.”

He recognized that the whisper belonged to Elsa.

The twins started to run and Merlin followed. Just after a few seconds, he realized he had a problem and again hid behind a wall as the twins whirled around to look in his direction. He was wearing shoes. While he could walk quietly in them, running was a different case. His shoes were too noisy. He cursed himself for not thinking about it earlier and took them off to stuff them in his pajama pockets.

“I think I heard something,” Jack whispered and Merlin held his breath.
“Could it have been one of the paintings?” Elsa asked. “Or those suits of armor? I’ve seen them move before.”

‘Great idea,’ Merlin thought and locked his eyes on a suit of armor across the hall from him. He whispered a spell which made the suit take a step forward with a lot of clunky noise.

‘We don’t have much time,’ Elsa whispered and Merlin heard the rustling of robes as they resumed their run.

He followed, quietly this time, and noticed that they were both barefoot. He was used to seeing Jack without his shoes but it was the first time he saw Elsa share her brother’s preference for barefoot walks. He supposed that it was easier to sneak around the castle quietly without worrying about clacking of your shoes. She was a smart girl.

The twins ran outside and he rushed to catch the door before it shut closed so that he could sneak through it soundlessly. He left it slightly ajar to avoid making noise and ran after them.

He had to admit, all the stealth and running felt exhilarating. He couldn’t remember the last time when he followed someone like this. He forgot how fun it was.

The twins stopped on top of a small hill and he found a bush to hide behind. The sky started to lighten. They barely made it before the sunrise.

Elsa lit a candle and took a small piece of parchment out of her pocket.

“We’ll say it together,” she said. “Think about our father, Jack. Think that we seek him. Ready?”

‘Their father?’ Merlin mused. Jack always avoided the topic of his family which of course made Merlin even more curious. He rooted for the twins to be successful in their spellcasting. He wanted the answers as badly as they did.

“We start from the East,” Elsa said.

They waited while the sky lightened further. In only seconds, the edge of the Sun became visible and the twins started the chant.

\[
\text{I call on the Sacred Elements.} \\
\text{Earth, come to me.} \\
\text{Fire, come to me.} \\
\text{Water, come to me.} \\
\text{Wind, come to me.} \\
\text{Hear my call and lead me to what I seek.}
\]

They turned ninety degrees and said the chant again. They repeated it two more times and when they finished the last iteration, a strong gust of wind came out of nowhere and blew their robes around.

“Did you feel that?” Jack asked.

“Yes!”

Merlin felt it too. The wind was filled with magic. He smiled, recognizing that the incantation worked. It felt like a buzzing in his body, a warm tingle which spread inside him. Elemental magic always left the best after effects.

“So, did it work? It’s supposed to lead us. How will it lead us?” Elsa asked impatiently.
As if to answer her question, a shimmer of light appeared right above them, hovering in the air like golden sand. The twins were looking around them and did not see it yet. Merlin wondered if he could help them notice it in any way. Was it time to come out of the bush? He actually wouldn’t mind that. His feet were stuck in cold mud and he was starting to lose feeling in his legs from crouching.

“I feel something,” Jack said searching around and then looked up. “Look!”

The twins looked in awe at the shimmer of golden sand above them.

“Now what?” Elsa asked and Jack scratched his head. “Lead me to what I seek!” she repeated the last phrase of the chant but nothing happened.

“We’re supposed to go up?”

“Up? First of all, how do we go up? Second of all, what can we find there? It’s just EMPTY SKY!” Elsa finished with a shout and stomped in a circle, glaring at the magic hovering above them.

Merlin was puzzled as well. He didn’t know how to help them.

“Were there any instructions in that book? Maybe there’s another spell we’re supposed to say right after it?”

“No. There was nothing else. This was supposed to work!”

The shimmer started to dim until it completely disappeared and Elsa released an angry shout. The magic was gone. She stomped back to the castle, making incoherent noises, resembling a toddler who was throwing a tantrum. She did not handle failure well. Jack followed her silently and Merlin waited behind the bush until they were out of sight.

Merlin came out of his hiding spot and wasn’t sure what to think yet. Instead of getting some answers, he had more questions.

“What’s doin’ here at this hour?” a loud voice sounded behind him and Merlin turned on the spot. The half-giant gamekeeper, Hagrid, was standing just a few feet away, a bucket in one hand and a shovel in the other.

Merlin appraised himself. He was standing barefoot in the mud, wearing pajamas with shoes sticking out of his pockets. How could he explain what he was doing outside at the crack of dawn looking like that?

“I… I think I was sleepwalking.”

Hagrid tilted his head and Merlin wondered if he was going to be in trouble, but then the big man shook his shaggy mane of hair.

“Yeh best be gettin’ back then. Off yeh go,” Hagrid waved him off and Merlin ran back into the castle.

Wednesday was an exciting day. Madam Hooch posted a notice that first-years were going to have their first flying lesson in the afternoon. Jack could barely sit still during morning classes. It would be an understatement to say that he was looking forward to it. In fact, he couldn’t think of anything else.

The time finally came and he waited with the other students at the back of the castle.
Madam Hooch, easily recognizable by her short gray hair, was approaching them and Jack couldn’t wait for the lesson to start.

Colin bounded over, positively glowing with excitement.

“Can you believe it? We’re going to learn how to fly today! I can’t wait. How high up do you think we can go on broomsticks? I’m a little scared of heights but I’m excited to fly so I’m conflicted. The brooms are already waiting for us over there. Do you think it’s comfortable to sit on a broom? Why won’t they attach a seat to it or…”

“Alright, children,” Madam Hooch said, stopping Colin’s rant. “If you follow me, I’ve arranged brooms for you. Get ready. Stand on the left side of the broom.”

Students took their positions and whispered among themselves, excited for the lesson.

“Flying is dangerous. I want you to remember that. Take it seriously. Stay close to the ground so in case if you fall off, your injury will be minimal. Don’t heed my warning, and there will be broken bones.”

Students looked among themselves, wondering if she was kidding but she was deadly serious.

“Last year, there was a broken wrist during the first minute of the lesson. I don’t want to send any of you to the Hospital Wing today. Now, when I say so, you will put your hand over the broom and say UP.”

She walked between the students and at the moment, her back was facing Jack. He put his hand over the broom to get ready and it immediately flew into his hand. He swallowed. That was not supposed to happen. The broom was not supposed to move without command.

“UP,” Madam Hooch said and Jack wondered if anyone noticed that he had a broom in his hand already.

Students started saying “Up” and out of the corner of his eye, Jack could see that Merlin was watching him. He decided to ignore the stare as if he did not just do anything strange. Maybe if he pretended that it didn’t happen, Merlin would think he was mistaken. Maybe. What else could he do at this point?

“Mount your brooms now,” Madam Hooch ordered and checked each student to ensure their grip was correct. Once satisfied, she continued, “Now, only hover over the ground. Do not fly up. Then, come back down by leaning forward.”

Jack’s broom raised him in the air. It was an amazing feeling and he struggled internally. A part of him was screaming, ‘Let’s fly!’ and the other part was warning him to follow the directions and not stand out from the other kids. If only he could sneak out without anyone noticing, he could try some real flying.

As if to fulfill his wish, Colin’s broom started to vibrate and launched him forward, out of control. Colin shrieked in horror and Madam Hooch followed on her broom, trying to catch up to him.

Jack did not wait any longer. This was exactly the distraction he needed.

As soon as he thought to fly up, he soared high into the sky and sounded out a “Whoop.” The wind roared in his ears and rushed through his hair. He loved it. Now, this was the way to travel! The broom obeyed each of his wordless commands, and soon, he was zooming backward, forward, making loops and crazy dives.
He was laughing hysterically, amused by his own silliness. He looked up and stopped laughing for a moment. It was a cloudy, gloomy day and he wanted to see what clouds looked like from above. Was it possible to fly that high on a broom?

“Jack! You were supposed to hover!”

He looked down to see that Merlin caught up to him with a frown on his face.

Jack scoffed. Couldn’t he have fun in peace?

“This is a bad idea. What are you doing so high up?” Merlin asked, looking down with worry.

“Don’t be an Elsa,” Jack grumbled and shot up high, determined to get over the clouds before Merlin tried to stop him.

He soared at an alarming speed and looked back to see that Merlin was still following him.

“Stop! These brooms are not meant for this!” Merlin cried out but Jack ignored him.

He loved flying. It was pure freedom. It didn’t feel like being carried by the broom, but rather, it was as if the wind itself was propelling him forward.

He flew into the clouds and marvelled when they did not feel like smoke. Instead, they were like a refreshingly cool mist, and by the time he finally broke through them, his skin was coated in their moisture.

He paused and hovered in place to fully appreciate the view. The tops of the clouds did not look the same as from below. They had gentle valleys and irregularly shaped mountains illuminated in shades of gold and orange.

Afternoon sun lazily hovered over the horizon. Its familiar warmth seeped into him. He closed his eyes for a moment to absorb its power. This was wonderful. It was like a hidden world above the world, full of sunshine and joy. It felt like what he thought a home should feel like.

Merlin never came up after him and Jack was glad. He wanted this moment just for himself. This was his private world. He vowed to come back as often as he could.

He descended to come closer to the clouds and stretched out his hand towards them. Their cool moisture rushed through his fingers and he felt a spark of nature’s magic. He lowered his flight even more and was now fully submerged in them, surrounded by their whiteness. It felt as if their magic called to his and he allowed them to intermingle. It felt satisfyingly right like this was exactly what he should be doing when up there.

Jack was losing his sense of direction, unable to see anything but white, so he descended. When he broke through the clouds again, he opened his mouth in surprise. It was snowing!

"Did I do that?” he exclaimed, marveling at the snowflakes swirling around him.

He had no idea that he would cause snow by touching the clouds. He'd never had the chance to before. What was even more surprising was how easy it was. Usually, it took a certain level of focus and time for him to create snow, but this was effortless.

He looked down at the blur of the castle in the distance and wondered what everyone thought of snow in September.
“Oops,” he said while giggling. At least, they wouldn’t suspect that he was responsible for this strange weather. Would McGonagall figure it out? He wasn’t sure.

The castle looked pitifully small from this height. He sighed, realizing that the moment of distraction Colin created was probably over by now. He had to get back.

He decided to finish his fun ride with a bang and leaned down on the broom which increasingly picked up speed. The flight down was exhilaratingly fast and he was having so much fun, he didn’t think about caution.

As the ground came closer and he could recognize shapes that looked like the group of students standing on the grass, he thought it was time to slow down but realized that it wasn’t as easy as speeding up. Gravity was working against him, hurtling him down towards the ground too fast. He tried to control the broom. At the last possible moment, he succeeded at avoiding crashing into the ground and instead, glided horizontally. He landed by rolling on the wet grass.

As he laid there on his back, breathing heavily and grinning wide, the first thing he noticed was that it was raining hard. It disappointed him. He never liked rain. It felt unfair that his snow was transformed into something he didn’t even like.

“Too warm for snow,” he murmured to himself, already making plans to test his snow-making abilities when the weather got cooler. He couldn’t wait for winter.

Soon, he heard pounding of someone’s feet.

“Are you okay?” Merlin asked and stretched his hand out to help him up.

“Yeah. I just need to work on my landing,” Jack chuckled.

“I told you it was a bad idea,” Merlin said, shaking his head. “Let’s go. The lesson was cancelled because of the rain.”

Jack squinted at the rain and noticed that the students were running back inside and Merlin was soaking wet and shivering.

“Why did you stay?”

“I was worried about you.”

Jack felt a rush of gratitude, Merlin was proving to be a really good friend, but he just couldn’t help himself. He had to respond with a joke.

“Aww. You care.”

Merlin rolled his eyes and motioned for them to run. They returned their brooms to the storage shed and ran inside the castle.

Jack tried to shake the rain out of his hair and noticed Merlin eyeing him.

“Did you make it above the clouds?”

“Yeah. It’s amazing! It’s a sunny day up there.”

Merlin put one hand on his hip and gesticulated with the other. “It shouldn’t have been possible. These brooms were not made to fly that high. Mine started vibrating so badly, I had to get down before it threw me off.”
“Maybe I got lucky and got a better one.”

“You have no idea how lucky you were. Let’s get changed. I’m freezing.”

Ginny came back to her dorm with the Chatties who were squealing about how cold they were. She didn’t mind a little rain, so she was very disappointed that the flying lesson was cancelled. She knew how to fly already, she’d been sneaking out with her brothers’ brooms to practice for years, but she was still looking forward to this lesson which was one of the more interesting activities at Hogwarts.

Ginny was a huge Quidditch fan and hoped to get on Gryffindor team next year. She needed all the practice she could get to become good enough for it. Even a beginner class was better than no practice at all.

She sat down on one of the couches by the lit fireplace where her chatty roommates were warming themselves. The girls were complaining why flying lessons were mandatory and Ginny wished that boys would come back already so she could talk about their experience with school brooms.

Soon, Colin showed up with a small, mostly healed bruise on his forehead from when he fell off his broom and hit his head.

“Madam Pomfrey healed it with a spell so it’s no longer bleeding. That was so cool!” he exclaimed and Ginny chuckled. Only Colin could make an injury exciting.

“I’m glad you’re better,” she said and he sat down next to her.

“It’s a shame I don’t have a photo of my first flying accident. Hey, Ginny, maybe later you could take a picture of me on a broom so I could send it to my parents.”

“Sure, Colin.”

After a few minutes, Merlin and Jack came through the portrait hole, completely soaked and Ginny waited impatiently for them to change. She really wanted to talk about Quidditch with someone.

Colin didn’t seem to know anything.

Just as the boys came down from their dorm, Lisa, one of the Chatties, asked her, “Ginny, did you see what Loony Luna wore during lunch today?”

Ginny did not feel comfortable with that nickname.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Eggshell. Earrings. She painted them this ugly yellow and they were, honestly, the most horrendous things I’ve ever seen.”

The girls started giggling and exchanging exaggerated gagging impressions.

“I heard that her father is deranged. No wonder she’s so loony. Loony Lovegood.”

The Chatties exchanged a few whispers and giggles and suddenly ran up to the dorm like a school of fish.

Jack came down to Ginny and asked her, “Why are they calling her that? It sounds really mean and Luna is a really nice person. They won’t say that to her, will they?”

Ginny’s heart sank because she couldn’t reassure him. Knowing the Chatties, the whole school
would soon pick up on this name and start calling that poor girl ‘Loony Lovegood’ and it was all Ginny’s fault. She was the one that gave them the idea for it. She did not expect that they were going to use it like this or tell others. She didn’t even know Luna and had nothing against her.

‘I am an awful person,’ she thought and felt disgusted at her insensitivity.

She couldn’t believe it. It was so easy for an innocent joke to turn into something so hurtful. Or maybe, the joke was never innocent. It was never okay to make fun of others just because they were different. She wished she could take it back but it was too late now. She was ashamed of herself.

Riddled by guilt, Ginny no longer felt in the mood to talk and returned to her dorm. The Chatties were still not done making fun of Luna and she tried to tune them out. The problem was that every time they said “Loony,” all she heard was “your fault.”

Ginny pulled out her diary and left the dorm. She felt like talking to Tom. He always made her feel better. She sat in the corner of the common room away from others and started to scribble.

*Hi Tom.*

*Ginny. I must say, I'm disappointed.*

Ginny frowned. Did Tom know about what she had done? How? Why?

*You’ve been neglecting me, Ginny. You haven’t written to me in days.*

Ginny exhaled with relief. He didn’t know. Now, the question was, did she want to tell him?

*I’m sorry, Tom. I promise I’ll write more often.*

*Every day, Ginny. Don’t abandon your one true friend.*

*I will.*

*Maybe you could carry me in your pocket and take me everywhere you go?*

*That’s a good idea.*

*Great. Now, tell me everything about what you’re feeling today.*

Ginny bit her lip. Should she tell him? Would Tom judge her? How was he going to react?

*You can trust me, Ginny. I’m your friend.*

Ginny swallowed. He was the only person she could talk to about issues like that. Maybe Tom would understand that she didn’t mean for this to happen.

*Tom, I did something awful.*

*What happened?*

*I called this girl Loony Luna and now everyone is calling her that. I didn’t mean to. What if she finds out that I was the one that started it?*

*Oh, Ginny.*
I was never a mean person. When did I become mean? No wonder I have no friends. I don’t deserve friends.

You have at least one friend. You have me.

You’re just saying that because you’re stuck in this diary.

No, I mean it. I like you. I think you are a lovely girl who is simply misunderstood.

Thanks, Tom. What am I going to do about Luna?

I’m sure you didn’t mean to hurt her.

Of course not.

It was a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes, Ginny.

It’s so mean. I don’t want people to call her that.

You’re not responsible for other people, Ginny. If they really want to be mean, they will find a way. With or without you.

Maybe you’re right.

I am. You need to forgive yourself for your mistake. Promise me you will forgive yourself.

I’ll try. You’re such a good friend.

That’s what I’m here for. You can always confide in me.

I will. You’re so easy to talk to. In real life, it’s hard to talk to people.

Then, you have no need for those people. You have me. Talk to me.

I am so lucky to have you.

Yes, you are. Now, tell me more.
The next morning, Merlin reflected on Jack’s little trip on the broom. The boy had no idea how thankful he should be. When Merlin saw how fast he was coming down, he knew immediately that there was no way he could stop in time. He intervened, using his magic to steer Jack’s broom and land him safely. It wasn’t an easy task and Jack’s landing was not gentle but thankfully, he was unhurt.

He stepped in because it was the right thing to do, but also, Merlin was growing attached to the boy and didn’t want to see him hurt. If he wasn’t there… He was afraid of what would have happened. This boy had to learn some restraint before he killed himself.

He sat down on the bed and turned to Jack who was dressing up. “Jack, you were reckless on the broom. Please, promise me you’ll be more careful in the future.”

“Yes, Elsa. Whatever you say.”

Colin snorted from the other side of the room and Merlin ground his teeth. Did this boy not have a serious bone in him? How could he talk some caution into him? Maybe he should’ve made his landing a little harder. A broken bone or two would’ve taught him a lesson.

Merlin took a deep breath and tried to think how he could get through to him.

‘He’s eleven,’ he had to remind himself. ‘And so are you. Talk like a child, Merlin, not like a parent.’

“I get it. It was fun. Dangerous, but fun. So, what was it like above the clouds?”

Colin exclaimed with a loud gasp. “You flew above the clouds? When?”

“When you created that handy distraction,” Jack answered. “Does it still hurt?”

Colin ran over to sit on Merlin’s bed, eager to hear more. “I’m fine. All healed. Tell us.”

“It was amazing. It’s like a whole new world where it’s always sunny. When you first start coming up over the clouds, it’s as if the clouds were the ground and the Sun was just coming up over the horizon. Like a sunrise! So you could create a sunrise over and over just by going up and down! Incredible. It’s so quiet and just… I can’t wait to get back up there. Did you know that there are clouds above clouds? I didn’t fly to that second layer. It was as far away from the first one as the ground. I wonder how many more layers there are.”

“You really shouldn’t fly higher,” Merlin said. “There’s probably not enough oxygen up there. You’ll faint and that won’t end well.”

Merlin hoped the boy took at least this part of his warning seriously. He was really concerned that Jack would sneak off to fly with no one there to save him this time. The boy probably thought that he was able to land on his own. “Can you take me with you next time?”

Jack smirked at him. “If you can keep up.”

“Jack,” Colin got up. “I… I’m afraid to fly that high but could you maybe bring my camera and snap a few pics so I could see it?”

Jack frowned, thinking about it. “My landing was rather… violent. It would probably break the
camera. Let me learn how to land properly first.”

“You do realize that you’re more worried about the camera than you are about yourself?” Merlin pointed out.

“I’m durable,” Jack answered and Merlin rolled his eyes.

He had to come on that next flying adventure Jack was already planning. He had a feeling that Jack was going to need that elusive ‘luck’ again. What was he if not a secret luck deliverer?

“Speaking of pictures, did you see mine yet?” Colin asked.

Jack shook his head and Colin ran to his nightstand and came back with a stack of prints. Jack sat down and looked at each picture. He lingered on one.

“It’s annoying that Elsa is taller now. We used to be the same. Do you think I can make up for it or will she always be taller?”

Merlin remembered that there was a picture in there of Jack with his sister. He didn’t know when Colin caught the twins to take their photo but it was a nice shot.

Colin glanced at the picture. “Come on, Jack. It’s not even an inch. You’re still much taller than me. Well, everyone is.”

Jack gave the stack back. “They’re really nice, Colin.”

“You know what, keep that photo.”

Colin put the photo in his hands.

“Thank you,” Jack said quietly.

“No problem,” Colin said happily and ran back to his bed.

Jack was frozen in place for a while staring at the print in his hands, which he tenderly touched with his thumb as if it was his most beloved possession.

“Are you alright?” Merlin asked. He’d never seen the boy get emotional over anything. Why now?

“I’m cool. I’m always cool,” Jack said and put the photo in his drawer.

He got up and looked down at his shoes like he was disappointed that they were still there.

“Stupid shoes,” he grumbled and winced, shoving his feet in them.

Colin lifted up the legs of his trousers to show off his socks which were mismatched. “You know, shoes would be more comfortable if you wore these babies.”

Jack huffed. “As if I need more things on my feet. At least with shoes, I can slip them off during lessons without anyone noticing. Can’t do that with socks, can I?”

“Why do you hate shoes so much?”

“Same reason why Merlin always wears a scarf.”

Colin’s eyes were suddenly on Merlin just as he was wrapping the Gryffindor scarf around his neck.
“Why do you always wear a scarf?” Colin asked. “Isn’t it too warm?”

Merlin felt uncomfortable with the question. For a seemingly innocent topic, this felt very personal. He wore the scarf because neckerchiefs were unfortunately out of fashion and he wanted to feel something around his neck. He kept waiting for them to make a comeback but it didn’t seem to be now just yet. The school-approved scarf was the best alternative.

As to why he loved neckerchiefs, that was his business.

“Because I like to,” he answered, fidgeting with the ends of the scarf.

“You’re both weird,” Colin summarized and then smiled broadly, “but I like you that way.”

They made their way to breakfast and approached Ginny who was sitting alone. She was writing in a small book which she hid in her bag upon seeing them.

“Hi,” she said quickly, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

They all greeted her, sat down around her and dug in.

Hogwarts food was great. So far, every day there was something delicious on the table. It was worth it to come here just for the food. Hogwarts House Elves were doing a splendid job. Merlin thought to point it out to Dumbledore the next time he spoke to him. The Elves deserved a thorough praise. They would love it. Or maybe, he should make the trip to the kitchen on his own?

The Weasley Twins walked by, Merlin still couldn’t tell them apart, and one addressed Ginny. “Ginny, ever so popular with the boys.”

Ginny’s cheeks flamed. “Go away!” she said through gritted teeth.

“A little respect for your seniors, sister,” said the other twin. “Just wanted to let you know that there’s Quidditch practice today.”

“If you want to see Harry play,” the first twin finished, waggling his eyebrows.

“We rhymed!” the second twin said and they high fived each other. Then, they looked back at Ginny whose face became red like a tomato.

“Why would I care?” she asked in a shaking voice.

“Come on, Ginny,” one of them said.

“We know,” they finished together a little quieter.

Ginny flinched, spilling juice on the table, then promptly packed her things and left without a word.

The twins shrugged identically and sauntered away, grinning at each other.

“What was that about?” Colin asked, looking after the Weasleys. “Anyway, I can’t wait to see today’s practice. I am going to take so many photos. I just hope I have enough film.”

“Save some film for the actual game, Colin,” Merlin pointed out and the boy agreed.

While thinking about the game, Merlin remembered Harry. What was he going to do about Harry? He worried if he spent too much time playing the role of just another student, making friends and trying to figure out the mystery of the white-haired boy in front of him, and it distracted him from his
primary mission in this school.

Voldemort could be realizing his plans and attack when Merlin was busy with something as fruitless as homework.

Could he do it all at the same time or was he stretching himself too thin?

Ginny ran into the closest lavatory and splashed her face with cold water. She couldn't understand why her brothers kept teasing her so mercilessly. So they knew about how she felt about Harry. She rambled on about him too much during the summer, didn't she? But did they have to say it in front of everyone? Didn't they understand how it made her feel? This was the most embarrassing thing in the world. Her brothers were the worst curse that could ever be placed upon her. She wished she was an only child.

She checked herself in the mirror. She was still blushing profusely. She hated her complexion.

Ginny closed her eyes and tried to calm down. Her heart was still racing and her cheeks still felt warm. She wasn’t ready to be seen in public yet.

Tom, she needed Tom. She sat down against the tile wall and pulled the diary out of her pocket.

Hi Tom. Sorry I stopped writing earlier. I was interrupted.

That's okay. So, what else is on your mind?

Harry has Quidditch practice today and I'm trying to decide if I should watch it.

Is he any good?

I heard that he's a spectacular Seeker. I want to see it for myself but now, I'm afraid.

Why?

My brothers will tease me.

Then, don't go. We'll do something fun together.

Like what?

It's a surprise.

Ginny smiled wondering what Tom had planned for her. Then, she remembered that the morning class was about to start and wrote him a quick goodbye.

Ginny ran to her Charms classroom praying that she wouldn't get lost this time. It happened more than once already, such was the disadvantage of always walking to classes alone.

She ran inside just as Professor Flitwick walked in and sat down next to Colin in the front row, as usual. The short-kids’ row.

She pulled out her things and wondered why she felt so winded. In the past, she was able to run for hours. What changed?

Their Charms Master was Professor Flitwick, an elderly wizard who was very short, even shorter than Ginny, which she found amusing. He was also her favorite teacher. He was funny and laid-back
and always smiled at her and Colin. She wondered if he had a preference for short kids. He could probably relate.

They weren’t performing any magic yet, only practicing pronunciation and wand movement. Ginny was getting slightly impatient, eager to charm something. She wanted to find out if she was going to be any good. Her mum was excellent at Charms and Ginny was always impressed with her wandwork. She had seen just how much was possible if one were skilled in this division of magic. She wanted to make her mum proud.

Colin was a nice kid. She thought that he talked too much when she first met him, but over time, she had grown used to it. He could barely sit still today. Professor Flitwick was looking for something in the cupboard and Colin took it as his cue.

“Quidditch practice. Finally. I sent a letter to my family describing my first week and some stuff about Quidditch and dad wrote back that my little brother, Dennis, got so excited, he demanded they bring him to Hogwarts to see the game. I don’t think that would be allowed, would it?”

Ginny shrugged. She had no idea.

“Anyway, I hope that he gets his Hogwarts letter too so he could join us here in two years. That would be awesome if he was a wizard too, wouldn’t it?”

“Be careful what you wish for,” she warned. “Siblings can be annoying. It’s nice you got a break from him for a while.”

“Nah. My brother is great. It’s such a shame we’re not allowed to have dogs here. We have an Australian Shepherd, Cleo, and she’s such a good dog. She’s going to be so sad when my brother goes to Hogwarts, if he does. She won’t have anyone left to play with her. She’s white and brown and has a few black spots on her face and back. It looks as if someone spilled paint on her. She’s so cute and funny. I wish I could bring her here. Why don’t they allow dogs as pets? I’ve seen cats here, why not dogs? Do you like dogs?”

“Yes. I like dogs and cats, and all animals really,” Ginny sighed imagining the dog Colin described. Cleo sounded like a beautiful happy dog. She’d love to have a pet like that. “But we’ve only had owls or rats. I think my parents felt that there were too many animals in the house already.”

“What animals?”

“My brothers,” she said rolling her eyes. Her brothers were the reason why she could never have the things she wanted.

By then, Professor Flitwick returned and put a stack of books on the floor. Then, he climbed them, sat on top of his desk facing the students and smiled kindly at them. He started his lecture and Ginny turned to attentively listen.

She tried to pay attention but her mind kept wandering off. Tom had a surprise for her. She was looking forward to it.

The library was quiet today. Most students chose to take advantage of the nice weather before gloomy Autumn clouds moved in permanently, and so they were all outside. Elsa was perfectly happy in this environment. It was easier to think in a quiet library where the only sounds were those of shuffled pages. She picked up another volume and smelled it. It had that distinct old book smell, a promise of knowledge and wisdom. She desired it all.
"You're so much better as a research partner," Elsa said to Luna quietly, bringing the heavy book to the table where her friend sat. "My brother is always complaining when I bring him here. Elsa," she tried to mimic his voice, "These books have too many pages. I need a break. Can we bring snacks? Please, please," and she finished with her version of Jack’s sad puppy-eye look, which she must have done well because Luna giggled. What Luna didn’t know was that Elsa was one of those who couldn’t refuse that puppy-eye look. Who could?

“I agree with the snack thing. Actually,” Luna put her book down and looked around them to confirm they were alone, “we should have some. This is a perfect time.”

She pulled out a small box out of her bookbag. It was a wooden box hand painted in colorful swirls. The lid made a little squeak when Luna opened it.

“Dried dirigible plum,” she said, offering it.

The box contained slices of some fruit. It had red skin and was white on the inside. Elsa wasn’t sure if it was even edible but didn’t want to offend her friend, so she took one slice out.

Luna took a piece out and bit a half of it. “It opens up your mind to enhance your awareness.”

Elsa wasn’t sure if this peculiar fruit was safe to consume. Anything that was supposed to open up your mind sounded suspicious. But after Luna finished her piece and reached for another without showing signs of poisoning, Elsa felt a little more assured that it was safe to try it.

The plum was hard to chew, it wasn’t really meant to be dried. It had a sharp flavor which reminded her of radishes but it was also sweet, and the combination of the two flavors gave her a strange aftertaste. Elsa feigned a polite smile and opened up a volume she just pulled down from the shelf.

The two of them studied quietly until Luna pushed her book closer to Elsa to show what she had found.

“How about this one?” she asked pointing at a page.

Elsa leaned over to read the short passage.

“He says, ‘I nearly wasted away in front of a mirror unable to make its reflection possible.’ It doesn’t make sense, first of all, and I don’t see how it could help me.”

“I’ve heard something like this before,” Luna said munching on another piece of dried fruit. “I think my dad mentioned it in one of his articles. Something about a mirror that would show you what you want to see.”

“I still don’t see how that is useful,” Elsa said becoming impatient. Maybe Luna ate too many of those strange plums. She wasn’t making any sense.

“You want to discover a way to find your father. That’s what you want to see,” Luna explained.

Elsa gasped. Maybe she should eat more of those plums after all. Luna was absolutely correct.

“An enchanted mirror. Where can we find it?”

“I don’t know more. I’ll write to daddy to ask him. In the meantime, we could keep searching.”

“Luna, you’re brilliant! You have the best ideas!” Elsa admitted, popped a slice of the strange plum in her mouth and flipped a page, hoping to find some more clues.
“That’s very kind of you. I’ve always believed that an open mind can hold more ideas. Take them all in and pick the best.”

Elsa looked back at her friend who munched on another slice. She was lucky to have Luna helping her. Weird plums and all.

“Are you eating in here?” Madam Pince yelled from a distance looking like a starved vulture who just found its prey. “Get out of my library!” she bellowed and the two of them froze in place.

“Oh-oh,” Luna said quietly.

The librarian then said a spell and pointed her wand at two chairs. They became animated and hobbled towards them. The girls quickly grabbed their things and fled. The chairs followed, creaking along the way, and Elsa picked up the speed. Madam Pince cried in intelligible shrieks behind them as if a murder had been committed.

They ran out of the library and Elsa braced her back against the door. She hoped the chairs wouldn’t be able to follow them now. They didn’t have hands to open the door, did they?

“I have never been afraid of a chair before!” Elsa exclaimed, catching her breath.

Luna stared at her with wide eyes and flushed cheeks.

“I have never been in trouble before,” the girl said and giggled quietly. “It’s more fun than I would have imagined. I wonder what she would bewitch if I brought in a drink. Oh, is it time for supper? I’m craving pumpkin juice.”

Luna skipped away towards the Great Hall humming a melody and Elsa followed close behind while smiling to herself. Who said libraries were boring?
Last night, a disturbing dream had tormented Elsa. In it, mother showed up in Hogwarts to drag the twins away. They were powerless to stop her and none of the teachers could or wanted to help.

"She's your mother," they said. "You're not orphans. You should live with your mother."

Elsa did not want to leave Hogwarts. She loved it here. She was learning many new things and also made a friend.

Luna was full of warmth and kindness. It was never boring with her around. Out of nowhere, she’d break into a song or start dancing and just give you something to smile about. Elsa couldn’t help but feel good in her company.

She couldn't imagine going back to her old life underground, where her only company, besides her brother, were hags and smelly goats.

The possibility of mother finding them loomed over her like a dark cloud and overshadowed every other thought. While she knew it had only been a dream this time, it wasn’t a figment of her imagination. It was foolish to think that they were completely hidden in the castle. It was only a matter of time before mother discovered them. And just like in the dream, no one would stop her from taking them away.

Elsa needed a way out, an alternative. Finding her father could be just that. If he turned out to be nice and if he wanted them, they could live with him. It was her only hope of how she could keep what she valued most right now - her life at Hogwarts.

She got up, fully energized and motivated to spend all her free time researching. It was the weekend which meant that she could devote many hours to it.

She rushed through breakfast and nearly missed the most exciting news she could have gotten.

“Apple, how lovely to see you,” Luna said.

Elsa was about to leave, but hearing that, she turned to her friend.

Luna was not talking to an apple. A small hawk-like owl sat atop of a package which it must have just delivered. Luna reached out to pet the bird on its head and the owl closed its eyes in pleasure.

“Apple?” Elsa asked sitting back down.

“She loves our apple tree. It was as if she wanted to be named after it so we took the hint.” Luna gave the owl a small sausage link as a treat. Apple took it and flew away.

“It must be daddy's response.”

Elsa finally remembered that Luna was going to ask her dad about that enchanted mirror they read about. The package on the table could contain the answer to all her questions.

To her frustration, Luna went back to eating her breakfast, the parcel lay unopened in front of her. Did she not realize how important it was?
“Are you going to open it?”

“Go ahead,” Luna replied.

Elsa promptly ripped the brown paper wrapping. Inside was a letter which she handed to her friend, and two copies of a magazine called The Quibbler with eye-catching but strange article headlines.

Luna read the letter and relayed its contents while munching. “Daddy says that he doesn’t know where the mirror is. He sent the magazine with the article about it and also tomorrow’s edition for some fun reading.”

“Tomorrow’s? How did he get tomorrow’s edition already?”

“He’s the editor.”

“That’s great. It must be fun.”

“Oh, it is. Dad is always on the lookout for the most interesting stories. He publishes things other magazines don’t dare to discuss or are too closed-minded to understand. The Quibbler is where the best stories are.”

“Do you mind if I borrow the old one?”

“Feel free to keep it.” Luna read the cover of the new edition and became excited. “Look at that. There was another sighting of Crumple-Horned Snorkack. I wonder where this time.”

Elsa excused herself and went outside. She wanted to find that article hoping it would give her some clues.

She sat down on the stairs and started reading.

*Got a friend in Azkaban? Get them a pacifier. Studies show that sucking on a pacifier lessens the long-term effects the Dementors have on prisoner’s mind.*

Elsa frowned. This did not look like the article about the mirror.

*WWN conspiracy. Stephen Cromp, known by many as Code Breaker Extraordinaire, has discovered that Wizarding Wireless Network transmits secret messages in its broadcast. Mr. Cromp claims that if you listen to the news report backwards on a blood-moon night, a secret recipe would be revealed for a vampire-repelling potion. Just one sip and you…*

That didn’t sound like it either.

She checked the headlines of a few more pages. Some of the articles were making her scratch her head while others made her laugh out loud. She wasn’t sure if they were supposed to be funny but some of the stories were so ridiculous, that was her natural reaction. But she wouldn’t give up this fast. She was going to read all of the articles if she had to.

*Tales from the Attic: If looks could kill.*

Elsa’s interest peaked. She read further and got excited. Finally, something that mentioned a mirror. She read the article and tried to decipher the actual story behind the mystery and superfluous conspiracy theories.

*In today’s edition of Tales From the Attic, we bring you a tale of an unsolved murder.*
In the late nineteenth century, all the best-trained owls came from the House of Gulbadox. They claimed that their methods were so superior, they could even train street pigeons. Their business was booming like a coughing dragon until a scandal came to light. Their best trainer, talented witch Doxy Gulbadox, went missing. She was known for her excessive sweating and ambition for becoming a Veela.

There were a lot of rumors surrounding her disappearance: a family squabble, assassination ordered by their competition, or another case of a rabid-centaur kidnapping. Their competition insisted that her disappearance was a cheap publicity stunt and she was never missing.

The family claimed that Doxy was deranged like a sneezing Kneazle, that she made up stories of having a twin sister who was a Veela and most likely ran away to find her. If she had not disappeared, they would have committed her to an asylum anyway.

Years passed, the family stopped searching, and eventually, everyone forgot about Doxy and her excessive sweating. The new head of the family, a promising young wizard by the name of Wampus Boot Gulbadox, wanted to branch out into the experimental art of training noctule bats and set out to renovate the attic for that purpose. While cleaning it, they made a discovery as frightening as being caught in the web of a cantankerous Acromantula.

In a drafty corner of the attic, which happened to be above the bedroom of none other but Wampus, covered by spiderwebs and years of dust, sat the shriveled corpse of Doxy Gulbadox. She was in their attic for all of those years and they had no idea!

An enigmatic Inspector, Zachary Bogtrotter, who others thought to be as pleasant as eating your own toes, took on the cold case. There was no apparent cause of death which prompted a murder mystery. The family swore that Doxy was killed by nothing else but a cursed mirror. When asked to provide evidence, they revealed that they gave it away to not fall for its trap. They claimed that it was the one and only Mirror of Erised said to reflect a heart’s desire and ensnare anyone who dared to look at it. Its victims supposedly went into a trance, mesmerized by a vision of what they wanted most in the world.

Inspector Bogtrotter did not buy their story but had no evidence to the contrary. And even if it was true and Doxy did in fact waste away in front of a mirror, there was still the question of who planted the cursed mirror in the attic for her to find. Our enigmatic Inspector began interviewing all involved and suspected everyone in town.

Was it a family squabble? Were Doxy’s siblings tired of her excessive sweating enough to lure her to a cursed object? Or was it their competition who, in a fit of jealous rage, decided to eliminate the threat without getting their wands dirty? The herd of rabid centaurs was unavailable for an interview and many still suspect their involvement.

But the final question was, why the family got rid of the mirror this quickly. Was the infamous Mirror of Erised ever in the drafty corner of the Gulbadox attic? What else were they hiding?

For lack of evidence, no arrests were made and the case of the death of Doxy Gulbadox remains forever unsolved.

What say you, dear readers? Do you believe that Doxy was killed by an enchanted mirror or was this a cover-up?

Elsa read the article several times and tried to put the clues together. She believed that Doxy had, in fact, died in front of a mirror. This supported what she had read about it in the library - “I nearly wasted away in front of a mirror, unable to make its reflection possible.” Elsa deduced that the Veela
sister that Doxy insisted on, was what she saw in the mirror and she sat in front of it until death took her. Doxy wanted to see a Veela sister and that was what the mirror showed her - her heart’s desire.

What mattered most was that the mirror was real. The article did not mention what happened to it. If Doxy’s family gave it away for their own safety, where would it have been placed?

Elsa was frustrated. She hoped that the article would give her more information than this. At least, she now knew the name of the mirror and had some more information about its properties. Mirror of Erised showed you what you desired. Who knew that desires could be dangerous? In any case, she had to get back to her research.

Ginny sat in the corner of the Gryffindor common room where she had a perfect view of Harry Potter who sat on the couch in front of the fireplace and chatted away with his friends. He looked so cute with the crackling fire illuminating his face, but his dark hair was a mess and she fantasized about smoothing it up.

Or maybe not. This was such a typical Harry and she liked him like this. Maybe if she lived in a parallel universe, where she was brave, she would ask him to go to the Quidditch field together and have a quick game - just the two of them. They would tumble through the air and share a laugh. It would be perfect because he was perfect in her eyes.

Another week had passed by and she barely exchanged a polite “How are you” with him. She had so many opportunities to talk to him but chickened out each time. She was such a coward, it was a wonder she made it into Gryffindor - House of the brave. Maybe the Sorting Hat made a mistake.

There was one person she had no problem talking to - Tom Riddle. Ginny recalled the previous night’s experience with her diary. Tom’s idea of a surprise was an opportunity to meet him. The magic imbued into the diary was amazing. It stored his memories, and she could watch the scenes of his life as if she was right there with him when it all happened. The Tom she normally wrote with was sixteen years old, but the Tom in the memory was only eleven. He wanted to show her what it was like for him during his first months at Hogwarts.

The Muggle orphanage Tom grew up in was never his home. He didn’t have friends there because he always felt that he was different, that he didn’t belong among them. Of course, he didn’t. He was a wizard, but Muggles wouldn’t know that.

The other kids called him a freak and excluded him from their playtime. Even the adults kept their distance and treated him like they didn’t want him there. Ginny thought it was very mean and heartless of them. He was just an orphan. He deserved better.

When he came to Hogwarts, he was lost and confused. He knew no one and everything about the wizarding world was foreign to him. But for the first time in his life, Tom felt that he was where he was supposed to be. Hogwarts became the home he never had.

Ginny felt sorry for him. His story was so sad. He had no family and was all alone in the world. She started to appreciate her life a little more. She had a large family who, as annoying as they all were, did love her. While her family’s poor finances were a constant reason for embarrassment, it was riches when compared to Tom who had nothing.

She needed to stop whining about her life. It was sunshine and roses when Tom’s were all dark lonely corners. If he was able to rise out of those corners to become a wizard skilled enough to create such a unique diary at only sixteen, maybe there was hope for her still. Maybe Hogwarts could become for her what she always imagined it could be.
The most important lesson she learned from experiencing Tom’s memory was that it was okay if she felt isolated and lonely. It wasn’t always going to be like that. She had to maintain hope that things would work out in the end. And if she ever felt down or lonely, Tom always had a way to make her feel better. She did not need anyone else.

Ginny was surprised to learn that Tom was in Slytherin. She would not have guessed that. She would have pegged him for a Hufflepuff. Friendly, helpful kids like Tom were usually sorted to that House.

He always took care to ask her how she felt and was genuinely interested in her life. He let her talk about Harry to no end. He gave her an easy friendship like no one else ever had.

Maybe what everyone said about Slytherin wasn’t accurate. Not everyone in that House was like the obnoxious Draco Malfoy who bossed everyone around and bullied all her friends. Tom was a good person. It didn’t matter that he was a Slytherin. He was her true friend.

Ginny patted the diary in her pocket and wondered if she should write something to him now. Since she saw how miserable his childhood was, she felt obligated to keep him company. He was a great friend to her. It was time to return the favor.

Albus was sucking on a new sweet he picked up in a Muggle shop. The shopkeeper promised it was the best raspberry candy he had. Albus had to admit that he agreed. The flavor swirled around in his mouth and the sweetness was just enough to satisfy his craving while not overwhelming his taste buds. They were quite addicting. He would purchase more of them.

“Yes, please, come in,” he said after hearing a soft knock.

He had called for Merlin. There were a lot of reasons why he wanted to speak with the young sorcerer. He was most impatient to find out if all was going well with Harry, but also, he wanted to keep an eye on him.

He turned around to greet his visitor. Merlin walked in and looked around the room curiously.

“I haven’t been here yet. It’s interesting,” the boy said and paused to scan the room.

Out of nowhere, the portrait of Heliotrope Wilkins spoke up, “Is that you, Merlin? Look at you, so dashingly young!”

Merlin looked up at her and it took him a moment to recognize her, but finally, he smiled and waved. “Heliotrope, lovely as always.”

The other portraits of past Hogwarts Headmasters woke up and started murmuring among each other, each one appraising the young sorcerer.

Albus didn’t know much about Heliotrope. In fact, he wasn’t sure which century she lived in as her portrait normally remained quiet. He made a mental note to look her up later, now curious of the circumstances of how she might have met Merlin. But for now, he thought it was problematic that someone recognized him. Hogwarts portraits had a tendency to talk to each other.

“May I ask all of you to not disclose Merlin’s identity to the other paintings? It’s vital that his presence here remains secret.”

The portraits all agreed and Merlin continued looking around.
“Have any other paintings recognized you?”

“Just my own,” Merlin chuckled. “Most wizards know me as an old man. It’s a shame, that’s the most useful age, but I’ve used it too often and I’m too recognizable now. I really wish they’d stop replicating that one portrait.”

Albus still had a hard time believing that this young boy was the same powerful sorcerer he’d known for decades. It was always amazing to see the results of his aging magic. There were potions some used to look younger but the results were temporary and didn’t make them younger physically. Even the Elixir of Life Nicolas Flamel created required continued consumption in order to prolong the alchemist’s life.

But Merlin’s aging magic wasn’t the same. It allowed him to physically change his age, to actually become younger or older. And the spell would hold as long as the sorcerer wanted it to. Albus wouldn’t have believed such spell was possible if he hadn’t seen it himself. He once had the chance to watch Merlin perform it. He started in his usual age, which was somewhere around mid-twenties, said the spell, his eyes flashed and his body hummed with power until it turned to that of a middle-aged wizard, complete with a short beard and longer hair. The process took less than a minute and required a minimum effort as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

But Albus had never seen Merlin turn into a younger self before. It was most remarkable how well the spell worked. The sorcerer played the role of an ordinary child very convincingly. All that power was hiding in such a non-threatening looking body. It was extraordinary.

He felt better knowing that he had a secret weapon hidden among the students in the form of a powerful wizard. It made him feel more confident, a little more prepared for what might come. But he also knew that Merlin had no real obligation to be there. Albus wanted to ensure the boy’s stay was pleasant, so there would be no reasons for him to leave prematurely.

“How have your first two weeks at Hogwarts been?”

Merlin shrugged and sat down in the comfy chair Albus pointed to. “All is well. I’m still trying to get used to being a child. It sucks being this short.”

“Candy?” Albus offered him the raspberry treat but Merlin refused.

The old wizard had a feeling that the boy was leaving out a lot of details. He sat behind his desk and looked at the young sorcerer from under his half-moon spectacles trying to decipher his mood.

“Anything not to your liking? Is the food good? Is your bed comfortable?”

Merlin smirked. “You’re spoiling me, Albus. I spent a good chunk of my life sleeping on the ground. It doesn’t take much to impress me. My accommodations are fine. Don’t worry yourself. Oh, and the food is great. I’ve been thinking to visit the Kitchens to praise the elves myself.”

“They will most appreciate it. How is Harry?”

Merlin sighed and helped himself to the candy after all. “Harry, Harry, Harry.”

His tone sounded frustrated and Albus grew concerned. “Is there a problem?”

Did Harry find trouble this early in the year? Did Voldemort make his plans known already? He had to know. What did Merlin find out?

“It’s the Phoenix!” Merlin exclaimed and ran up to the crimson bird. “I still can’t believe you
Albus felt a little smug for having impressed his immortal friend. “Yes, I did. I named him Fawkes.”

Fawkes was close to his burning day, so he didn’t look his best today, but he was still beautiful as far as Albus was concerned.

“Visit us again in a few weeks after he burns, so you could see him in full glory. He’s really quite fabulous.”

He approached his feathered friend. Few people truly appreciated how amazing Phoenixes were, but he knew that Merlin would.

“Have you had a chance to put his healing powers to test?” Merlin asked while sucking on the candy.

“Yes, on more than one occasion. His tears are very potent.”

“Nice. Good work, Albus. I’ve tried to tame one more than once, but really, these birds are impossible. Dragons are easier to domesticate.”

Albus would choose a Phoenix over a dragon any time. He was ready to start the debate but then realized that Merlin was simply stroking his ego.

“You aren’t trying to distract me by any chance now, Merlin, are you? Are you avoiding the topic of Harry?”

“Of course not,” Merlin said but then moved through the office checking out different trinkets Albus had gathered up over the years.

One shelf contained five small ceramic bowls which were stacked on top of each other. Albus had inherited these from the previous headmaster and wasn’t sure what their purpose was. The bowls had been adorned with runes he’d had never seen before. He wondered if Merlin could read them.

“Do you realize what these are?” Merlin asked.

“Regrettably, no.”

“They’re ceremonial burial bowls. It makes me wonder whose grave was robbed to retrieve them. Could be multiple graves. They might be bad luck, Albus. I wouldn’t keep them here.”

Albus smoothed out his beard while thinking. Did he have a dangerous artifact right under his nose for all those years? He supposed it wasn’t surprising. The castle was full of such objects.

“You should bury them in sacred ground,” Merlin said. As he turned, his robe caught the bottom bowl, it hobbled in place and then the whole stack toppled over and fell off the shelf.

Merlin’s eyes flashed like golden ambers and the bowls froze in the air right before crashing to the floor. Albus never understood why Merlin’s magic was so different. He had never seen anyone else’s eyes change color when they performed spells.

“That,” the boy said, breathing heavily, “would have been very bad luck.”

The bowls flew back to the shelf where they neatly stacked themselves. Merlin walked away from them backwards, keeping his eyes on the shelf, careful to not touch anything else.
Albus blinked a few times wondering how close he might have come to a magical disaster but then realized that Merlin had distracted him again.

“How about we get back to the topic of Harry, dear friend?”

He gestured for them to take a seat again but Merlin ignored it and continued walking around the room, this time keeping a small distance from the objects and studying them from afar.

“Harry is not easy to befriend,” the boy finally said. “It’s working against me that I’m younger than him. He’s mostly just ignoring me.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Albus said and smoothed out his beard. He didn’t see this coming. “Maybe he needs more time.”

So this was why Merlin didn’t want to talk about Harry. It was in everyone’s best interest that he succeeded in becoming Harry’s friend. The old wizard started to wonder if they should let Harry in on Merlin’s secret. Would it make matters better or worse? No, maybe not yet. They had to try to do this according to the original plan first.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to protect him when he doesn’t want me around.” Merlin approached the pensive in the corner. He curiously peered over it and closed his eyes. “Whoah. This is making me loopy.”

“Have you used a pensive before?” Albus asked approaching.

“No. I don’t really need it. I can read a memory by touching the vial containing it,” the boy said casually and walked away to check another item. He said it so lightly as if it was the simplest thing in the world but Albus had never heard of anyone with an ability like that.

This was typical. Merlin had a tendency to drop a clue of ability or obscure knowledge but did not part with details easily. Listening to him talk was like sitting in a room full of newspapers, each one flashing a catchy headline but being unable to turn their pages to read the full story. His immortal friend had many secrets Albus only scratched at the surface of. They had known each other for many decades but Albus still barely knew him.

“It’s very much like getting a vision, although better put together, easier to understand,” Merlin added. “Is that how you see it in the pensive?”

Albus was ready to jump from excitement but tried to contain himself. Merlin never spoke of visions before. The myths about him suggested that he was a Seer. Was it true? Albus tried to think of how he could ask it in an unobtrusive way. Would Merlin reveal this secret? He had to ask.

“By vision, do you mean the future?”

Merlin turned around and waved a finger at him. “Don’t get excited, Albus. Visions of the future are not really all that useful.”

“But you can see it?”

“Not by myself. It usually requires… help,” he finished with a sly smile and Albus understood that he was not going to hear what that help was.

“I saw Voldemort coming centuries ago,” Merlin continued with all humour gone. His eyes had a faraway look as he recalled the memory. “I didn’t understand what I saw and couldn’t stop it from happening when the time came. It’s always like that. I can never prevent what happens in the visions.
I simply get to relive them in person. All those people who died…” He looked at Albus fiercely. “Knowing the future isn’t really all it promises to be. I prefer to stay away from it. I don’t want to know.”

He came back to Fawkes and reached his hand toward him but the bird moved away and flapped his wings in warning. He was picky about who he allowed to pet him.

“I disagree,” Albus said coming closer. Fawkes made a little squawk demanding attention and he stroked his feathers. “Prophecies are useful. Harry’s prophecy gives us hope that there is a way to destroy Voldemort.”

“Harry’s prophecy doomed him when he was only a baby and cost him his parents. How many more people will die while we’re waiting for Harry to grow up? I’m… I’m torn.”

Merlin started to pace in front of Fawkes.

“The logical thing for me to do would be to search for Voldemort and find a way to defeat him. But deep down… I have this feeling that I should stay away from this matter, that I don’t belong in this fight, that fate has other plans for me.” He stopped pacing. “Am I making a mistake? Should I really leave the fight to Harry? Am I dooming him in doing so? Am I dooming us all?”

Albus pet Fawkes while he thought of what to say. “I trust in Harry. I see something unique in him. For such a young lad, he is brave and has a pure selfless heart. He inspires unwavering loyalty in his friends, pushes them to be their best. I believe in him.”

“The way you speak of him, it reminds me of someone,” Merlin said with a smile.

Before the immortal sorcerer could get lost in his memories, Albus returned to the immediate problem.

“But your talents can still be useful. It might be Harry’s fight, but we can’t expect him to do it alone. He needs friends to stand by him. He will need powerful friends.” Albus tried to convey with his eyes that he meant Merlin, who nodded, settling his doubts. For a moment there, he was worried that the young sorcerer was going to back out from his promise to help.”So, about Harry. I can’t force him to be your friend but we could arrange something else. We need to give you a chance to get closer to him.”

“What do you have in mind?” Merlin asked, helping himself to another candy from Albus’s desk and getting comfortable in the chair again.

Albus stroked his beard while thinking. Harry had pretty good instincts. He would get suspicious over Merlin if Albus tried to force the boy on him. Maybe Merlin needed a side door into Harry’s circle of friends.

“Merlin, I think you’re in need of tutoring.”

Merlin froze and asked with candy between his teeth. “What?”

“What subject would you say you are performing the worst in?”

“I don’t know where you’re going with this but I’ll play. Transfiguration. I was trying so hard to not do the spell, McGonagall now thinks I’m a lost cause,” the boy chuckled at his own joke. He probably found it amusing how he was fooling Hogwarts staff.

“Excellent. I know a perfect tutor for you.”
“Harry?”

“No. I’ll have your tutor get in touch with you. We should follow the usual channels.”

Albus started writing his note and thinking up the best way to phrase the request to entice the tutor’s cooperation. Merlin resumed walking around his office. From time to time, he’d pick something up to investigate it and make a little comment about it but mostly, he browsed quietly. Albus continuously found himself pulled away from his simple task of writing a note. Having Merlin in such proximity was a distraction. He was most curious about him. The more time he spent with him, the more questions he had. Whether in his adult or child form, the sorcerer was an enigma. Albus wanted to see the best in him but often wondered if he should be cautious. One does not become immortal without paying a price. What was Merlin’s price?

“What?” Merlin asked and Albus blinked to bring himself back to the present. Apparently, he was staring at him so intently that he didn’t notice the boy approach. That was rather rude of him, wasn’t it?

“Blubber and nitwit,” Albus blabbered trying to recover the use of his brain.

Merlin chuckled and sat back in the chair again. “Not fun getting old, huh? I like turning myself into your age, I like how people treat me then - I can get away with anything - but I don’t like everything physical that comes with it.”

A soft knocking sound surprised them and they both looked up to see who came to visit.

Minerva walked in and was taken aback seeing young Merlin there. “I can come back, Headmaster, if you’re busy.”

“Please, come in, Minerva. Merlin was leaving anyway.”

“Right. Good talk, Albus.” Merlin got up and smiled. “I’ll see you around.”

“Bye, Merlin,” Heliotrope said and the boy winked at her.

He grabbed one more raspberry sweet for the road, inclined his head at Minerva politely, saying, “Professor,” and left.

Albus sat down in his chair finishing the note to arrange the tutoring. It was very convenient that Minerva was in his office. She would be the perfect person to deliver the request.

He noticed that she was still looking at the doorway Merlin had disappeared into and wondered what stunned her so. It wasn’t unusual for him to have students in his office and he had a perfect reason for the boy’s visit.

She turned to him and finally said what was on her mind, “Did he just call you Albus?”

Chapter End Notes

Did you like the Quibbler article?
There was no need to hide a spell this simple so Merlin pulled out his wand.

“Alohomora,” he said and the lock clicked obediently.

“Good one!” Jack exclaimed and wrenched the door open.

They quickly snuck out two school brooms, watching the grounds for signs of anyone who would want to stop them, closed the shed and ran behind it.

They mounted their brooms and shot into the sky. Merlin had flown on brooms a lot. It wasn’t his favorite mode of transport but there were times when it was most practical. Needless to say, he considered himself to be an expert at flying. After all, no other wizard had as many years of experience on a broom as he had.

Yet today, he found himself left in the dust, or, more accurately, he was left in the gust as Jack soared way ahead of him. It couldn’t be possible that Jack found a school broom which was that fast. None of them were good. They were inferior models, very old and worn out. There had to be a different reason why he could fly like that.

Merlin finally caught up to the boy who paused in the air, waiting.

“I thought you said you could keep up,” Jack complained but smiled broadly.

“How is your broom so much faster than mine?”

“Lucky again? Let’s fly!”

No, this was more than pure luck. Jack shot up and Merlin followed. They were ascending fast and Merlin could feel his broom vibrate again. It reached its limits and wouldn’t fly any further.

“Jack!” he yelled after the boy, slowing down. “This broom can’t go any higher.”

If he pushed the broom too much, it could throw him off so he had to stop.

Jack turned around and flew back.

“Broom problems?” he asked looking at Merlin’s broom which was shaking uncontrollably. Merlin wasn’t sure how much longer he could hold on.

“I can’t do it. Not on this broom.”

He wanted to stick to the boy to ensure his safety but it wasn’t possible on this equipment. He felt like he was failing at everything. Was he going to be left behind again?

Jack seemed to be thinking over the same thing. “Do you want to?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll help you if you want me to.”

Merlin wondered what the boy could do. Short of a new best quality broom, there was no solution he could think of, but to be fair, he had a hard time thinking with the broom shaking and making his
brain feel like jelly.

“Well, yeah, but how?”

Jack flew closer, lining up right next to him, and grabbed his broom with his left hand. The shaking stopped immediately.

Merlin took a few blissfully steady breaths while observing the broom. It was completely balanced. How was this possible?

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. We can do this, just hold on tight. We’ll go fast this time. I was holding back before.”

“Holding back?”

Merlin barely got the words out when they flew upwards. He held onto the broom for dear life, wondering how speed like that was possible on an old school broomstick. His ears popped as they ascended rapidly and he was starting to feel nauseous. He was regretting this idea. This was a very bad idea.

The temperature dropped after they shot through the clouds. The wind whipped his robes and the frigid air assaulted his lungs. Merlin shivered and was thankful when they finally stopped.

He was holding on to the broom so hard that his knuckles were white. What in the world was he thinking? Why were they so high up in the air where it was windy and cold and where humans simply did not belong?

“Are you okay?” Jack asked, his face was lined with worry. “You look a bit pale. Maybe I should’ve gone slower.”

Merlin swallowed a few times, trying to clear his ears. Jack was still holding his broom and he realized that if the boy let go, he would fall immediately. He wasn’t sure if he could make the broom work while it was falling to Earth uncontrollably or if his magic could save him. It could be a fall to a very painful death.

“Please, don’t let go,” he said quickly to ensure the boy realized that he was holding his life in his hands.

Jack smirked. “I got you. So, what do you think?” and he motioned with his head at the scene in front of them.

Merlin tried to take in the view but felt that everything he saw was overshadowed by his fear. Sure, it was all beautiful, pretty clouds and stuff, but what price would he pay for seeing it?

It wasn’t the first time he’d been above the clouds. He’d never made this trip on a broomstick but he had flown on several dragons over the years and they liked to make a quick trip through the clouds just for fun, to his chagrin. It was always cold and windy up here and he didn’t have dragonhide to keep him warm. He had also flown on a Muggle airplane just to see what the fuss was all about. One of those experiences was enough to last him a lifetime. He’d choose dragons over planes any time.

It was different this time. First of all, he felt even less safe than on a plane. Just how much could he trust Jack to hold on to his broom? And it was only the boy’s second time flying. He was not an experienced flyer by any means. They were doomed.
But also, he had never flown above the clouds just to look at the view. Jack led them leisurely above the condensation with a permanent grin on his face. Merlin could see that the boy really loved being up there. The wind playfully ruffled his white hair and whipped his black robes about. While each gust brought a chill to Merlin’s bones, the boy seemed to welcome it, unaffected by the cold.

Then, something else caught Merlin’s eye. Now, that his pulse was somewhat under control and his mind was not in a panic mode, he paid more attention to the boy next to him. Jack did not steer his broom. There were specific ways you had to lean to let it know which direction or speed you needed but he did none of those moves.

“Jack,” he asked, wondering if the boy would answer the question truthfully, “can you tell me, how do you fly?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you tell the broom which way to go?”

“I think it,” Jack said simply, still looking out over the horizon. Then, he must have realized what Merlin’s question meant because he asked, “How do you?”

Merlin swallowed and tried to understand it. This was not how you flew on a broom. A broom could not hear a wizard’s thoughts. The way this boy could fly had nothing to do with his broom but everything to do with his magic. Maybe he didn’t even need it.

“You can fly without a broom, can’t you?” Merlin asked.

Jack laughed at him. “What? Of course not. Why would you think that? I’m not a bird. No wings, see?” He turned his back to Merlin to prove his point.

It was possible that the boy didn’t know that he was displaying an extraordinary skill. Maybe the broom helped him fly but the broom alone wasn’t capable of this - not in anyone else’s hands. The boy was still young. Just how powerful would he get with age?

Merlin had heard of one wizard who could fly without a broom, one very powerful dark wizard. And he was sure that wizard’s flying abilities paled compared to the boy next to him.

Merlin had been told that he was the greatest sorcerer of all time. He had accomplished impossible feats and proved his magical mastery, but he could never dream to be able to fly like this. Even his magic couldn’t do this. In this domain, he was bested by a child.

This revelation sprung a new question as to what type of magic said child was using. Jack and his sister displayed abilities which in a way reminded him of practitioners of Old Religion, but these abilities were unheard of. He did not understand why their magic was so different. In fact, their magic was as mysterious to him, as his magic was to Dumbledore.

After flying around for a while, Merlin couldn’t take the cold anymore so they made their way down and Jack released his broom when they were closer to the ground. Merlin observed closely to ensure the boy didn’t kill himself landing, ready to intervene again if needed. Thankfully, Jack seemed to have remembered the mistake he made last time and did not descend as fast.

It appeared that the flying method the boy was using was not as effective for slowing down. Merlin shouted at him to lean back. Maybe it helped, but in the end, Jack landed by rolling on the grass again. Merlin felt a tiny smidge of satisfaction as he gently touched down on the ground. At least he was better at landing.
They returned their brooms and Merlin locked the shed door. No one caught them. It was fortunate that they got away with sneaking the brooms out.

Merlin was glad to be on the ground again but he was also glad that he went on this little adventure with Jack. He felt something change between them. Breaking school rules together and sharing the dangerous experience was bringing them closer. He could feel that he was making a good friend. It was a good warm feeling but it came with its own pain.

He’d had many friends in his long life. It hurt worse each time one of them died while he lived on. Sometimes, it seemed like it would be easier to not get closer to others to avoid the heartache of losing them. He’d tried that too but found that lonely existence not worth living. He finally accepted that he wasn’t the type of person who would fare well alone. He needed companionship like he needed air.

When he accepted Dumbledore’s invitation, he expected to find that companionship in Harry Potter. They had a lot in common. Both had prophecies looming over their heads. Both had no close family. Harry reminded him of Arthur at times, just sans the royal arrogance. The Boy Who Lived was like the Prince of Hogwarts in a way, known by all, respected by some, feared by others. He already had powerful enemies.

Amused by this comparison, Merlin tried to remember the day when he met Arthur. He didn’t know who the arrogant bully was, but he was determined to stop him from mistreating a servant. He wasn’t afraid to call him out on being an ass and a prat. Everyone was in shock. No one dared to speak to the Prince of Camelot this way, but even once Merlin learned who the prat was, he did not back down. When he thought about it now, he marveled at how foolish he was. He was lucky that Arthur found it funny and did not have him executed. Or maybe Arthur found it refreshing that someone told him the truth of what they thought of him and his actions.

Merlin wondered if a similar tactic would work this time. Harry wasn’t a bully, so what would be the alternative daring and foolish action? He had to look for his opportunity. With luck, one might present itself.

They returned to the Gryffindor common room and both were in high spirits after their little trip.

“What were you two doing?” Percy Weasley ordered as soon as they walked in. “Nix, change now. You look disgraceful with all those grass stains. Ealdor, Hermione Granger was looking for you.”

Hermione was waiting for him in front of the fireplace with books strewn on the coffee table and Merlin wondered what she might have wanted. Upon seeing him, she patted the seat next to her inviting him to sit.

“I was told you needed a tutor for Transfiguration. You’re in luck because I know all about it. Let’s get to work. We’ll start with the theory.”

Merlin sat down and couldn’t keep a smile off his face. He was going to be tutored by a twelve-year-old.

‘Thanks, Albus,’ he thought.

Ginny woke up in a girl’s lavatory again with no recollection of how she got there. This time, she was startled awake by the shrill voice of a ghost and understood why that lavatory was always empty. The ghost called Moaning Myrtle haunted it regularly and she had no respect for privacy.

Ginny ran out of there and made her way through the castle. It was getting dark already. The days
were becoming shorter as Autumn moved in. There was a slight chill in the corridors. Or maybe, the chill was in her bones. She wasn’t sure.

On her way to the Gryffindor tower, she saw Mrs. Norris, the cat of the Caretaker, Mr. Filch, sitting on top of a windowsill, chattering at the birds outside. Ginny thought it was the cutest sound. Everyone always said nasty things about the old cat, but Ginny didn’t see any reason to. Just because her human was unpleasant, it was no reason to dislike her.

Ginny approached her and cautiously brought her hand closer to let Mrs. Norris sniff it. She gave it a good whiff and rubbed against her finger. Ginny scratched her behind the ear and heard a loud purr. Mrs. Norris was an affectionate cat. Her dust-colored fluffy coat looked disheveled but was in fact very soft. Ginny felt an urge to cuddle up with her.

“Get away from my cat!” Filch yelled from the end of the hallway and Ginny jumped.

He hobbled over in her direction, a damp handkerchief dangling in his hand, his nose was purple and drippy, completing a picture of someone who didn’t look well enough to be out of bed.

Mrs. Norris was still purring, looked in his direction and blinked affectionately. She loved him as much as he loved her.

“Take care of him, Mrs. Norris,” Ginny said. “He looks rather sick,” and she scurried away from the scary Caretaker before he could yell at her some more.

It seemed as if she had climbed a thousand stairs by the time she reached the Gryffindor common room. She probably had. Why couldn’t it be on the ground floor?

She made her way in and collapsed into an armchair exhausted. While she rested, she had a good view of her fellow Gryffindors and observed them with a detached interest of an outsider.

Harry was playing a game of chess with Ron. She wondered who was winning. She couldn’t see from her spot and was too tired to get up but he seemed to be in a good mood. She smiled to herself. She liked seeing him happy.

Merlin was sitting on a sofa close to the fireplace next to Hermione who was explaining something to him with passion. Did she notice that he looked utterly bored? Probably not. She was too busy listening to herself talk.

There was a slight commotion on the other side of the common room, closer to Ginny. Unsurprisingly, her brothers were at the center of it. A group of older students were gathered around Fred and George and talking excitedly. Ginny peeked from her seat to see what they were doing.

“Where did you get a salamander from?” an older student asked.

“We were studying them in Care of Magical Creatures class and this one looked like it wanted to be liberated,” Fred said. “They eat fire, you know. I wonder if they can eat Filibuster Fireworks.”

“There’s one way to find out,” George said.

They held the salamander firmly and stuffed a firework in its mouth. The little lizard swallowed and everyone watched in silent anticipation. Then, the firework must have ignited because the salamander launched into the air and flew across the room. It zoomed around for a while leaving behind tangerine stars to everyone’s delight and finally landed near the fireplace. The twins ran to catch it, but the lizard was fast and jumped into the fire to hide.
What is happening in here?” Percy yelled from the top of the stairs.

“What is happening in here?” Fred imitated his voice and George snickered.

“I am a Prefect. Show some respect!” Percy said with his nose raised high.

“Oh, sorry. We haven’t noticed we’re in the presence of a Prefect,” Fred commented and got back to poking at the fire to watch the salamander jump around in it.

“Ginny, are you alright?”

Ginny looked up and saw that Percy was now walking up to her. Ugh, Percy. Why did he have to find her now? She hoped he didn’t notice that her robes were still a little damp from the wet bathroom floor. She did not need a lecture from him.

Percy put a hand on her forehead.

“I don’t have a fever.” She swatted his hand away.

“You don’t look well. You’re so pale. Did you catch anything? There’s a nasty cold going around.”

“I’m not sick, Percy. Go away.”

She didn’t feel sick, maybe tired, but mostly, she was in a grumpy mood which he was amplifying.

“You obviously are. Madam Pomfrey entrusted me with these,” he showed her a vial of a Pepperup Potion, “to distribute to anyone displaying any symptoms. We need to stop this virus before everyone gets infected.”

Ginny crossed her arms and stared at him. She hated how bossy he was acting. She would not take the stupid potion.

“If you don’t drink it, I will write to mum.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Test me,” he said with his nose high.

Faced with the emotional blackmail of worrying their mum, she finally agreed to drink it.

The liquid felt warm on the tongue but once it reached her stomach, it felt hot. Within a minute, heat spread through her body, and just when she thought she would explode… she did. Steam started shooting out of her ears as if she was a kettle. All she needed was a ruddy whistle to complete the picture.

Her face felt hot from the potion and she guessed that it was red enough to blend in with her hair. She must have looked awful. It was time to hide. She tried to discreetly make her way out of the common room and ran into Harry on the way.

Ginny was mortified and cursed her rotten luck. There was literal steam coming out of her ears. Of all the people she could have run into when looking so ridiculous, it had to be Harry. He smiled at her awkwardly and she guessed that he was suppressing a laugh. She ran up to her dorm without a word and hid under a blanket.

Once the initial shock was over, she poked her head out just enough to properly breathe. This wasn’t a good day. She needed Tom.
Tom reassured her that it was going to be okay. He had an explanation for everything. She worried why she lost track of time again and woke up in a lavatory, but he suggested that maybe she was sleepwalking. That made sense. It would even explain why she felt so tired all the time.

She complained about Harry seeing her in such a comical state, a state which hadn’t abandoned her yet, and Tom suggested that it was a good thing.

_It’s good to show people our vulnerable side, like when we’re sick. It makes them care for us. It gives them a reason to feel protective of us and to care about our wellbeing._

Tom was so smart. He seemed to see an opportunity in every problem. She wished she could be as optimistic. She also hoped that he was right and Harry was now thinking tender thoughts about her.

She also described her first weeks at Hogwarts. They were going smoothly and mostly quietly. Charms was her favorite class. She was itching to do some real magic but Professor Flitwick insisted that they study theory and practice pronunciation first. Right now, they were studying _Wingardium Leviosa_ and she was excited to try it out. She wondered if she should try it on her own despite Flitwick’s warning that they weren’t ready. After all, he told her that she said it perfectly and that her wand movement was flawless. Tom suggested that maybe it was the other students that weren’t ready, that there was no reason why Ginny shouldn't try the spell on her own.

Her roommates were currently away and she was in a daring mood. She sat up and practiced saying the spell a few times without a wand. Then, she repeated the wand movement until she felt confident that she did it right each time. Swish and flick, easy enough.

It was time to find out if she was any good at this. She put a spare piece of parchment on her bed and squatted in front of it.

“_Wingardium Leviosa,_” she said the spell confidently and pointed her wand at the parchment.

Her wand felt warm and the paper flinched. She worried that she failed, but then it slowly rose up several inches above the blanket. Ginny very gently moved her wand, and the parchment moved with it. She watched it with awe and pride. She was doing magic. She was a skilled witch.

Ginny eventually lost concentration of the spell and the parchment fell back down. She jumped up on her bed in triumph and jumped back down with a giggle.

She was so wrong before. Today was a great day.

"Thanks, Tom," she said to the empty room.

“Don’t touch that!” Elsa scolded Jack and he glowered at her.

His sister was annoyingly unadventurous so he stepped away from her and let her work on her own while he looked around.

He loved Herbology because it was held outside and also because he loved all the magical plants he got to play with. All plant life held faint traces of nature magic, but the plants in the greenhouses were pulsing with it and he felt drawn to them. He liked to put his hand over each and feel how different its energy was from its neighbor.

He wandered away from other students and found a plant which had long leaves and small delicate flowers. The tag said it was Asphodel, a common potion ingredient. His hand hovered over it and he picked up two distinct trails of magic, one of which was very strong. He thought it was curious, so
he looked closer and a movement caught his eye.

He parted the leaves of the plant and couldn’t believe his eyes. There was a small winged creature hiding in the plant. Upon seeing Jack, it made a small squeal and looked like it was looking for an escape route.

“Don’t be scared. I won’t hurt you,” Jack assured.

“I sure hope not,” the creature responded in a soft voice.

Jack smiled reassuringly and moved a few leaves aside trying to get a better look.

“Are you a fairy?”

“What else would I be?”

Jack had never seen a fairy before. This one was small enough to fit on Jack’s hand, had curly brown hair which fell to his shoulders and long pointy ears were sticking out of it. He was wearing a green tunic which looked like it was made of some plant material. His translucent wings shimmered with multiple colors reflecting the light.

“You can understand me?” the fairy asked and Jack thought it was a strange question.

“Of course I can. I’m Jack. What’s your name?”

The fairy got excited and came closer, easily squeezing between the long leaves. Jack found it amusing that the fairy appeared to be as interested in him as he was in it.

“I’m Reed. What are you, Jack?”

Jack looked around to ensure that he was alone and then whispered, “Winter spirit.”

Reed gasped and put his tiny hand against his mouth. Jack hoped that fairies didn’t have anything against his kind. Seeing no negative reaction, he felt more confident and put a hand out inviting the fairy to come onto it.

Reed looked at his hand with hesitation but then climbed on top.

“What are you doing here in the greenhouse? Do you live here?”

“Don’t be absurd. I’m just looking for some supplies.”

Reed got comfortable on Jack’s palm sitting cross-legged, and they studied each other for a moment. Jack could feel a tingling of fairy magic coming off of him, like pure, delicate but potent nature magic which made him feel warm on the inside. He loved the feeling of it. He was about to ask Reed where the fairies lived when he heard that someone was approaching.

“What do you have there, boy?” Professor Sprout asked and Jack froze wondering if she would find it strange that he was holding a fairy. It was too late to pretend that he wasn’t. The witch already noticed.

“Oh, a Garden Fairy. Great catch. If you don’t need its wings, I’d like to have them. I need to make a Girding Potion and fresh wings are the best.”

She approached Jack with an outstretched hand and he brought the fairy to his chest protectively.
“What?”

“If you don’t know how to pull its wings, I can do it. Just hand it over to me.”

Jack cried out with horror. “Pull his wings? That’s barbaric.”

Professor Sprout looked at him surprised. “It doesn’t kill them if that’s what you’re afraid of. The wings will grow back.”

“Professor, how can you even talk about it so casually?” Jack asked shocked. “He’s a living creature. That’s… that’s… heartless!”

“You tell her!” Reed yelled back, giving the witch his middle finger which she probably couldn’t see from that distance.

Professor Sprout sighed and rolled her eyes, murmuring something under her breath. Then, she addressed Jack.

“Oh, nevermind. Keep the fairy,” and she walked away to continue with her lesson.

Jack clutched the fairy in his cupped hands and swallowed hard, realizing how close he came to witnessing mutilation of a fellow magical creature.

“I can’t believe this. They do this to you? They steal your wings?”

Reed nodded with a resigned sigh. “Our wings are a valuable potion ingredient for them. Unfortunately, wizards know just how to lure and bribe us so they could catch us. We fall for it too easily.”

Jack winced, visualizing the cruel practice in his mind. “Does it hurt?”

“A little. The worst is that a fairy without wings is just plain ugly. I keep my wings beautifully groomed for myself, not for the wizards. When they pulled mine out, I hid from everyone for a week. I couldn’t be seen looking like that. It’s embarrassing.”

Jack chuckled and sat down on the ground. Who would have thought that fairies were vain? He got comfortably relaxed. Fairy magic felt like a soothing song which radiated from his hands into his body. He wished he always had a fairy in his hand so he could always feel like this.

“I agree with you about the wings.”

Jack lifted his head to see Luna peering at him.

“I wish I could understand it,” she added and sat down next to him to have a look at the fairy in his cupped hands.

Did she mean that he wasn’t supposed to be able to talk to Reed? He had to ask in a sneaky way.

“Wizards don’t understand Fairish,” he directed the statement to the fairy as a question.

“No, they don’t,” Reed answered. “Only fairies can. It’s a good thing that you’re a fairy so we can talk.”

Jack flinched at the statement. “I’m not a fairy.”

“Yes, you are,” Reed insisted.
“Of course, you’re not,” Luna said and laughed loudly for an extended period of time, causing a few students to look their way.

Jack gulped. Maybe it wasn’t wise to continue this chat with witnesses around.

“She’s really pretty,” Luna said, leaning in to admire the fairy.

“He’s male,” Jack corrected, surprised that she didn’t notice. He thought it was rather obvious.

“They always do that!” Reed complained and folded his tiny arms over his chest. “Do I look like a she? Or maybe we all look the same to them? The nerve! Wizards are so clueless!”

Jack sighed. “Tell me about it,” he replied and then remembered that Luna was still next to him. He panicked, trying to think of what to say to cover it up, but she surprised him.

“It’s okay if you want to talk to the fairy some more. I like talking to all creatures too. Even objects. Or myself.” Then, she addressed Reed. “I’m sorry for calling you a she. It’s because you are one very good looking fairy.”

Reed got all flustered and batted his long eyelashes.

“Well, of course, that’s true,” he said all giddy, fluttering his wings to show them off. “Have you seen how well I groom my wings? I have the nicest wings in my colony.”

“And your wings are lovely,” she continued.

“Are you sure you don’t understand Fairish?” Jack asked.

“One fairy to another,” Reed waggled his eyebrows and Jack frowned at being called that, “she’s a keeper.”

“I’ve never seen them talk so much,” Luna commented. “I just wish I could understand it but it’s all just a bunch of buzzing noises.”

“He’s got a lot to say, I guess,” Jack replied and then glared at the fairy. “A lot of fairy nonsense.”

Reed scoffed. “You still don’t believe me. How else could you understand me? No other beings can understand fairies but other fairies! You. Are. A. Fairy.”

Reed stood up and flapped his wings rapidly until he hovered over Jack’s hand.

Jack had more questions but Luna was still sitting next to him. This conversation would have to wait until another time.

“I wonder where he lives,” he said, hoping Reed would understand that he was asking a question.

“Probably in the forest,” Luna said, watching the fairy with awe.

Reed understood. “Yes, in the forest. Can you feel my magic?”

Jack nodded.

“Then, walk on the edge of the forest until you feel it. Follow it and you’ll find your way to our colony. I’m sure the Queen would love to meet you. Farewell, winter spirit. We shall meet again.”

Reed flew away through a vent in the wall.
“Bye, fairy!” Luna said, waving.
And so it begins

It was hard to believe that Merlin had been at Hogwarts for eight weeks already. Days passed by quickly and he got used to the student routine, taking advantage of the freedom that came with being a child. He was allowed to be as silly and childish as he wanted to be. His favorite activity was to make Draco Malfoy and his goonies “accidentally” spill their drinks on each other during meal times, especially, whenever he overheard them insult someone.

Simply put, he had fun. Maybe there was a reason to do this more often, attend a wizarding or Muggle school every couple of centuries. But if he did it again, he would start a little older. Eleven was too young. He didn’t like being looked down upon and having to pretend to struggle with even simple magic.

Another weekend meant another opportunity to bump into Harry. Merlin went down to the common room and saw that the trio was sitting in their usual spot by the fireplace. They were all doing homework. It was a prime opportunity for some Harry bonding.

“Hey, Hermione. Do you have some time right now?”

“Sure, Merlin. I’m helping Harry and Ron. I could tutor you at the same time.”

Ron gave him a strange look as he walked up. He wasn’t sure what the ginger had against him.

As luck had it, someone placed a rug on the floor like a trap for him, he tripped and landed on his face. Rugs were the biggest enemy of looking cool. He promptly got up and tried to act like nothing happened. Harry got back to his parchment but was suppressing a smile.

Hermione made notes on the parchment she was working on and gave it to Ron. Almost every sentence on it was crossed out.

Ron took it back and groused. “If it’s this bad, why won’t you just write it for me?”

“But how will you learn? You need to make an effort. I won’t be taking your O.W.L.s for you, you know.”

“I hate History of Magic,” he grumbled and took out a new parchment.

“Alright,” Hermione said clapping her hands on her knees. “Merlin, what did you need help with? Last time we worked on the match spell. Have you made any progress on it?”

“Not much,” he complained. “It’s embarrassing that I’m so bad at it.”

“We all had to start somewhere. Do you have your match with you?”

Merlin put his hand in his pocket and conjured a box of matches in it. He pulled it out, took one out and put it on the table.

“Great. As we tried before, picture a needle in your head and say the spell.”

“Right.” He got ready. He pictured a match with a fluffy ending. “Acufors.”

The match sprouted a fluffy tip and Hermione made a “tsk” sound.

“You said it wrong. It’s Acufors, not Acufor.”
“You’re right. I’ll say it right.” He took out another match and wondered what he should transfigure it into. He imagined a match with no red tip. “Acufors.”

The match turned smooth as he wanted it to and Hermione nodded in approval. “That’s better, Merlin. Keep trying.”

Merlin kept at it and wished he had come up with a different subject to be tutored in. There was a limit of how many shapes you can turn one object into before you start looking stupid. He had crossed the “stupid” line about 20 matches ago.

“I’m exhausted,” Harry groaned, put down his quill and leaned back in his armchair.

“Let me see it,” Hermione took his parchment and Merlin sighed in relief. He’d had enough of the blasted matchstick game.

He hoped he could strike up a conversation. “Rough practice today?”

“Wood doesn’t let us take a break no matter the weather,” Harry answered and Merlin did a little happy backflip in his mind that his prompt worked. “It was raining buckets the whole time. It’s no fun to fly in that.”

“Wood is bonkers,” Ron lifted his head from his parchment. “How is the team looking? Do you think we have a chance?”

“We have a strong team but the Slytherin brooms are so fast, we can’t beat them by points.”

“So it’s all up to you to catch the Snitch fast?” Merlin asked.

Harry sighed. “That’s the plan.”

“That’s a lot of pressure on one player.”

“You haven’t seen Harry in action yet,” Ron said. “He can do it.”

Despite Ron’s confidence in him, Harry looked nervous.

“Merlin, get back to work.” Hermione chastised without looking up from Harry’s parchment.

He grudgingly picked up his wand and automatically said “Acufors” without thinking. The match turned into a shiny sharp needle.

Harry noticed and exclaimed, “Hey, you did it, kid.”

Merlin tried to sound enthused, “Wow. Awesome,” but inside he was cursing himself. He forgot to mess up the spell! Now, what was he going to do?

“Good job. I knew you could do it,” Hermione encouraged and gave Harry his parchment. “This will pass, Harry.”

Merlin hoped they wouldn't kick him out now that his tutoring was done for the day. So he sat quietly like a piece of furniture and looked around the common room.

He noticed that Ginny Weasley was watching them all from a dark corner of the room. He waved to her, inviting her to come over, and like a startled animal, she ran out of her corner to the girl’s dorms. Merlin wondered what was the matter with her.
Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t remember the last time when he talked to her. She hadn’t been interacting with any of them lately. She seemed different from the first impression he got of her. When he met her, she was full of energy and very excited to be at Hogwarts. She would get embarrassed easily, but was very outgoing. Now, she always sat in that corner chair with her nose in a small notebook, writing away. She didn’t talk to anyone, even her roommates. What changed for an energetic friendly girl to become this shy and withdrawn from life?

“Why do you wear a scarf indoors?” Ron asked, snapping his thoughts away from Ginny.

Merlin looked down at his Gryffindor scarf. He was absentmindedly playing with its end the whole time. Why did it bother everyone so?

“Why not?” he said with a shrug.

“It’s bloody weird, that is.”

“Ron,” Hermione scolded. Merlin was glad she was on his side.

“He could be hiding something under it.”

That was an interesting theory. Merlin had never been accused of that before.

“Yes. I bet it’s a…” Hermione gasped and put a hand to her mouth dramatically. “Oh, no. It could be a neck.” Then, she looked down at the ginger. “Honestly, Ron.”

“Ha - Ha,” Ron retorted sarcastically. “It’s no joke. Remember Quirrell from last year? He wore a turban, it was weird, right? Then, we found out, he was hiding You Know Who under it! How do we know that he’s not hiding someone under that weird scarf?”

The conversation was taking an unexpected turn and Merlin wasn’t sure if he was supposed to laugh or explain himself.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Seriously? Merlin. This Merlin.”

“He fits the profile!” Ron defended. “Quirrell was clumsy, timid, he stuttered, he made it look like he was a pathetic wizard who barely knew any magic.” He pointed accusingly at Merlin. “This kid can’t walk two feet without tripping, or dropping whatever he’s holding, it took him nearly two months to learn the simplest spell AND he’s weird. There’s something off about him. He’s faking it all just like Quirrell was!”

Merlin felt his pulse speed up. His helpless child act was unmasked! He was oblivious to the fact that people already had such strong opinions about him when he thought he was blending in well. He wished his clumsiness was faked so he could remedy that, but no amount of magic could cure his lack of coordination skills. But he could work on looking more normal, starting with resolving this ridiculous scarf mystery.

“Fine. I’ll show you.”

The trio looked at him as if they had just realized that he was there. He unravelled his scarf and let Ron inspect him. The whole scene felt very awkward and he was most uncomfortable without the scarf, as if he was naked, so as soon as the ginger was satisfied, he wrapped it back around his neck.

“You’re being ridiculous, Ron,” Hermione said. “You should apolo… AAAAAH!” She jumped up and landed crouched with her feet on top of the couch. “Control your rodent, Ron!”
Ron held out his hand close to the floor and a grayish brown rat jumped onto it.

“Poor ugly Scabbers. Did mean Hermione frighten you?”

Merlin never understood why wizards kept rats as pets. Some animals, like kneazles, were useful and loyal familiars, but rodents were just rodents.

”Ah!” Ron flinched when the rat bit him. Merlin was smidge happy about that and didn’t even have to do anything. The rat acted on its own. ”I think he's hungry. Let me get him something.”

”That thing only sleeps, eats and poops,” Hermione complained.

”Well…” Ron said as if he wanted to defend his rat but then shrugged. ”It's not a lie,” and walked away.

The whole situation with Ron suspecting him gave Merlin a lot to think about. He didn’t notice that he was being watched when, in fact, he had been watching others. Nearly all other students in his Transfiguration class could by now perform that spell. Colin had succeeded about two weeks ago and had now moved on to the next spell. Now, that Merlin was forced to move on as well - and he would “struggle” with the next assignment again so that he would still need Hermione’s tutoring - that left only two students in his class who couldn’t perform the first spell: Jack and his sister.

Merlin was very surprised that the twins struggled with it considering that both had displayed unique magical abilities. A millennium ago, when he had first learned that modern sorcerers used wands, he tried to learn that magic as well. That was one of the reasons why he decided to attend Hogwarts. He found that learning each new wand spell was extremely easy. His theory was that anyone who already knew Old Religion would experience the same ease when learning how to use a wand, yet the twins were now disproving his theory.

Ron came back and dispersed Merlin’s thoughts. He no longer had a rat with him. “What other homework do we have?”

Harry groaned. ”Defense Against the Dark Arts. I can't believe we have to write an essay about our haircare routines.”

Ron grumbled. ”Lockhart’s a joke. We’ll never learn anything useful with him.”

”Why do you think Dumbledore hired him?”

”The fact that Professor Dumbledore hired him should clear out whatever doubts you have about his competency,” Hermione said in a defensive tone. “He’s a recipient of multiple awards, you know. We’re lucky to have him as our teacher.”

Merlin was with the boys on this issue. He did not believe any of Lockhart’s wild heroic tales. He suspected that Hermione had a crush on that pompous author, like many other witches and wizards. In his opinion, Lockhart was only able to teach them about himself. Merlin just remembered, he had the same haircare essay assignment and was not looking forward to it.

“How am I supposed to write an essay about what I can describe in one sentence?” Harry continued. “My haircare routine is washing my hair. There’s nothing else to it.”

“You might want to comb it from time to time,” Hermione added and Ron snickered.

Harry smoothed his messy dark hair which was sticking up in all directions. “Fine. Two sentences. What else can I add in there?”
Hermione rolled her eyes. “Whenever you don’t know what to write, write what you think the teacher wants to read. So, whatever you think Lockhart’s opinion is on haircare, put it down on the parchment and you’ll get a good grade.”

“How in the bloody hell am I supposed to know what he thinks about it?” Ron asked.

“There’s two whole chapters about hair in Magical Me which you’d know if you had read it!” Hermione snapped.

The girl was becoming more and more defensive about her favorite teacher and Merlin hoped that the boys knew they had to tread carefully but they only further pushed the issue.

“Put something in there about checking yourself in the mirror every step of the way,” Ron said.

“And deciding on the right size of hair curlers for the occasion,” Harry added.

“Oh, and asking your own paintings for validation.”

“And offering haircare tips to everyone, especially those who don’t want to hear it.”

“Even a bald guy.”

“Especially the bald guy.”

“Honestly, you two are too childish!” Hermione hissed. “I’ll see you when you grow up.”

She picked up her things and left.

The boys made fun of Lockhart a little more before moving on to talking about other lessons and teachers. They seemed to have forgotten that Merlin was still there and he wasn’t sure how to join their conversation. At least they didn’t tell him to get lost and got comfortable around him. Maybe baring his neck for them was worth the embarrassment if it meant that he was welcome to hang around with them now. He was making progress with Harry. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

Jack was starting to get used to the routine of the Potions class: prep the cauldron, cut up ingredients, add them in, stir, check the magic… Well, the last part was never in the instructions. He could feel how the potion’s magic morphed when each ingredient was added. It was fascinating, but also, it made the brewing easier. He knew just when to proceed to the next step, when the magic of the mixture was stable or when it needed his attention. He had an advantage over other students and felt a little smug about it. He was good at this. He rocked at Potions.

“I wish he’d start a fire already,” Merlin grumbled and his eyes lingered on the dark fireplace. “How cold will it have to get before he lights it?”

He visibly shivered and adjusted the Gryffindor scarf around his neck to hide it up to his lips.

Late October weather brought in a chill throughout the castle and all students often complained about it. Jack felt very comfortable with this temperature. He was probably even more attentive because of it. Some classrooms were too warm and made him sleepy but the Potions classroom was always blissfully chilly.

Merlin moaned. “I forgot the mistletoe berries.” He looked in the direction of the storage room with hatred. “It’s even colder in there.”

“I’ll get it for you,” Jack offered.
He went inside the storage room and searched the shelves for the berries. It was dark in that part of the room so he had to rely on his sense of touch to find the recognizable wicker basket. As his hand touched different jars and boxes, he sensed a tingle of magic. It felt familiar but he couldn't remember where he knew it from. The magic radiated from a small rectangular box. He opened the lid slowly and dipped his hand in. He felt something sleek and thin inside and pulled a few pieces out. On contact, his fingertips tingled with magic and he had a suspicion of what it was. Or maybe rather, he knew what it was but hoped that he was wrong.

He brought his palm to light and stared at the pieces with crushing disbelief. As he feared, they were fairy wings. The box had to have at least a hundred of them. He could feel the individual magic of each of the wings he held, a unique signature of the fairies they were pulled from. He swallowed and it tasted like bile.

‘They really do this,’ he thought, looking at the rainbow of colors reflected in the dim light. ‘They pull their wings as if they were fruit trees, as if they weren’t beings with feelings and lives.’

He carefully put the wings back in the box and quietly closed it. It felt like he was covering a mass grave. His skin still tingled from the wing dust that rubbed off on it. The tingle seeped into his skin and spread through his body, but unlike that time when he held Reed in the greenhouse, this time, it didn’t feel warm. Instead, it made him feel like he was suffocating.

He took a ragged breath. This wasn’t okay. They shouldn’t be doing this. He considered stealing the box so the wings couldn’t be used but what would that solve? They would just attack more fairies to replace it. He imagined a store where they sold stacks of boxes like that. Then, he imagined a farm where little fairies were bred like geese, trapped and fed only as long as they kept regrowing their beautiful wings. What an awful existence that must be.

He looked away and his eyes now fell on a jar which contained what looked like an animal fetus. A few other jars like that were aligned in a neat row behind it - lives that never had a chance.

‘I need to get out of here,’ he thought.

This time his eyes found a bundle of dried bird feet.

‘Don’t look at that.’

Now, he saw a jar with hundreds of small eyes pickled in a clear juice, all looking at him.

Every time he came into this room before, he made an effort to avoid looking at these objects because they made him uncomfortable, but this time, they were all he could see.

He turned around to get away from the jars and accidentally knocked one to the ground. The glass made a lot of noise as it shattered and the liquid splashed on his shoes. Small eyes rolled around him, and once stopped, they were watching him again, judging.

“Did you get lost, Nix?” Snape’s drawl reached him from the classroom. “Should we send in a search party?”

Jack felt lightheaded. His vision swam and he braced himself against the storage rack. His stomach felt like it turned itself inside out. He was going to be sick.

Muffled sounds of laughter reached him but soon drowned in a ringing sound that was drilling a hole in his ears.

His blurry vision told him there was a dark shape before him.
Snape made an impatient ‘tsk’ sound and asked annoyed, “What did you do?”

Jack took a couple of long breaths and focused on trying to not throw up on Professor’s feet.

“I need to get outside,” was all he could mumble.

Where was air? Why was air suddenly gone?

Snape grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the storage room.

“Ealdor, take him to Madam Pomfrey before he befouls my classroom.”

Someone took Jack by the arm and they left. He saw gloomy stone walls of the dungeon which reminded him that he was underground. An onslaught of memories hit him at the same time and he fought to keep them away. It all came back, all the years trapped between rock and earth, always underground, never seeing the light of day, stale air, no wind.

‘Not now,’ he begged his mind to drop the subject. As if what he was feeling wasn’t enough, he was reminded of everything he had ever felt while underground. It was too much.

His knees felt weak and it felt as if the stone walls were growing in size and closing in on him. He picked up the pace running up the stairs. He had to get outside immediately.

When they reached the ground floor, Jack gained hope that he could hold the queasiness back. In just a moment, he would feel the Earth under his feet. But instead of going towards the door to the grounds, a hard grip on his arm steered him to the staircase.

Jack realized they were going the wrong way and pulled on his arm trying to wrench it away.

“We’re going this way, Jack,” Merlin ordered, not letting go.

“No,” he used his other hand attempting to pry away fingers holding him. “Outside. I need to be outside.”

Merlin pulled him hard. “You need to see Madam Pomfrey. You look sick.”

Another wave of nausea hit him, he felt short of breath and shivered on the inside. His legs gave out under him and he fell on his knees hard. He supported himself with his hands and closed his eyes trying to regain his strength.

‘Breathe,’ he told himself. ‘Breathe.’

“What? What’s this?” Merlin’s voice sounded surprised.

Jack took a few ragged breaths and opened his eyes. He groaned, seeing that frost started building on the floor under his hands. He was losing control. If he couldn’t contain his magic, Merlin would see just how other he was. The flash of panic restored an ounce of strength in him, he swiftly got up and ran for the door.

He heard Merlin’s footsteps behind him and ran as fast as his legs could carry him before his friend tried to stop him again. He wrenched the large door open and jumped over the stairs. He ran until he reached the grass where he kicked off his shoes.

Jack dug his toes into the dirt and raised his face to the cloudy sky. He closed his eyes and made an effort to take longer breaths. He focused on his feet touching the raw Earth, tried to feel deep into the ground, to feel the power of eternal Earth magic he stood on. It heard his calling and answered by
lending its power to him. It seeped into him, grounding him, settling his stomach and nerves. He stood there for a while taking full advantage of the power he received until he felt like himself again.

Jack opened his eyes and raised his hands to look at them. The smudges of wing dust on his fingers and the tingle of the fairy magic were blaring evidence of the horror he’d uncovered. His heart ached, remembering how many wings were in that box. He was a part of this world now. The world of wizards who reduced body parts of magical creatures to potion ingredients. Why? Because they could. Wizards felt superior to all other magical creatures. Creatures like him.

He crouched on the ground and tried to rub off wing dust on the grass. His hands were shaking and the dust would not come off. Its magic screamed at him that he was now as guilty as the wizards.

Wizards would probably treat winter spirits the same way as they did all other non-humans. He wondered what body part of his would prove useful in a potion. His stomach started to get queasy again and he decided that he really needed to stop thinking about this, at least for now.

“What happened?” Merlin asked and Jack worried what his friend thought about the frost he witnessed earlier. He put a hand on Jack’s forehead. “You’re freezing. You need to see Madam Pomfrey.”

Jack took a long breath and shook his head. “No, I’m not sick. It was just… I’m not sure what it was. I’m better.”

Merlin grabbed his wrist.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m checking your pulse. You’re too cold. We need to get inside.”

Jack didn’t know how to explain this without drawing attention to how inhuman he was. “It’s normal. I’m always cold. I’m okay, really. I’d like to stay out here a bit longer.”

Merlin did not look convinced. Jack couldn’t stand the idea of being indoors right now. He yearned to sit on this grass for hours and do nothing, just enjoy the peacefulness of this spot.

“Please, Merlin. I just need a moment.”

Merlin was unhappy about it but did not fight him anymore. Instead, he fussed over him, checked his pulse again, touched his forehead, inspected his eyes, and it all felt a little strange. Jack would have expected behavior like this from someone like McGonagall, not from a fellow student.

“What did you feel?” Merlin asked. “If you won’t talk to Madam Pomfrey, talk to me. What symptoms did you feel?”

Jack did not want to relive it all but Merlin kept insisting. He finally caved in to get him to shut up.

“Dizzy, nauseous, it was like there was no air, like I would suffocate. I had to get out of there.”

“Was it Snape? Did he say something? Did he do something?”

“What? What about Snape?”

“Jack, it sounds like you had an anxiety attack. Basically, it’s when stress and anxiety get so bad that you can feel it physically. Your body overreacts. What stressed you out if it wasn’t Snape?”

Jack laid down on the grass and stared at the cloudy sky. He wasn't entirely sure if it was stress. One
moment, he was okay, but then, the fairy dust touched him and it felt like the weight of the castle collapsed on top of him. Rather than stress, he felt anger but wasn’t sure how to talk about it. Merlin grew up with other wizards. It was evident in how he talked and how natural he was among all of the strangeness of Hogwarts. Merlin was going to have a typical wizard’s opinion about potion ingredients. He wouldn’t understand.

“Yeah, it was Snape. He stresses me out,” Jack lied and continued looking at the sky.

Actually, he didn’t mind Snape. The wizard was full of himself and was rather unpleasant, but really, Jack had met much worse people. He had lived with much worse people. It was easier to think of Snape as a vampire wanna-be. He looked comical from that point of view, maybe even a little sad. Jack felt sorry for him. It had to be exhausting to be in such a bad mood all the time. That man could use some fun in his life.

Right now, Jack would’ve loved to try his version of fun, to get on a broom and feel the wind on his skin. As if hearing his thoughts, a slight breeze ruffled his hair and he breathed in the smells of damp ground it brought. He loved being outside.

‘I’m not forgetting you,’ he directed his thoughts to fairies whose magic he could still feel on his skin. ‘You matter.’

A resolve was starting to form inside him clearing the last of nausea. He was not going to participate in the cruel practices of wizards. He wished he could affect a change and save fairies from their inhumane fate at wizard’s hands. Maybe with time he would get a chance, but for starters, he had to fight this at every chance he got. His practice of magic would not involve exploitation of magical creatures. It was time someone said ‘no.’

Halloween feast promised to be spectacular. There were already rumors going around regarding what Dumbledore might have booked for entertainment. As the day was coming to an end, Merlin could feel a shift in magic.

Samhain was an important holiday for followers of Old Religion who recognized it as the time when magic was most potent and the veil between the world of the living and the world of the dead was at its thinnest. It had an effect on all magic practitioners even when they weren’t aware of it. A lot of important events tended to happen on this day. It was foolish for anyone to dismiss its importance. So he was glad that it was celebrated at Hogwarts with a proper feast, that modern magic community had not forgotten its roots yet.

He wasn’t the only one that was looking forward to it.

“I bet there’s going to be giant Jack O’Lanterns. Hagrid was growing these huuuge pumpkins,” Colin tried to demonstrate the size with his hands. “I bet he carved them up and they’ll be so big, they could even fit him inside. What else do you think will be there? What do wizards use for Halloween decorations?”

“It’s pretty similar to what Muggles do but we don’t dress up in fake wizard costumes,” Merlin answered.

“We have real ghosts in this castle,” Colin mused. “Maybe they’ll put on a show?”

“Ghosts are likely going to be busy tonight. Hermione said that Sir Nick’s Deathday Party is happening tonight.”

“Deathday Party. You don’t hear that in the Muggle world. I’m bringing my camera.”
The three of them made their way to the ground floor but Jack split off before they reached the Great Hall.

“You guys go. I’ll catch up,” he said to them going in the other direction. “I need to drag my sister out of the library before she misses the whole feast.”

Merlin wondered how Jack knew that his sister was at the library and not at the feast already but decided to drop it. He wasn’t going to wonder about Jack tonight.

Colin exclaimed when they entered the Great Hall and started taking pictures of everything. No decorations were spared. Carved giant pumpkins, each one unique, were set up all around and the lights inside them flickered playfully. The ceiling was decorated in orange streamers and live bats who flew around happily. Spooky mischief seemed to hang in the air and Merlin wondered what that mood was doing to the resident mischief spirit, Peeves. He was probably outdoing himself tonight, pranking everyone in sight.

The food was Halloween-themed as well. There were a lot of traditional autumn dishes and spooktacular desserts like candied apples, black cauldrons filled with candy, breadsticks shaped like bones and mousse-filled ice cream cones turned upside down to look like wizard hats.

Unlike on regular days, tonight, students did not stay at their house tables but mingled around. It was nice to see House loyalties put aside, even if for one night. Merlin did not like how the House system separated kids who would otherwise be friends and wondered if the school would ever be open to the idea of dropping this concept.

While he enjoyed the feast, he felt disappointed. Harry, Ron, and Hermione went to the Deathday Party and he tried to tag along with them but Hermione thought it wouldn’t be appropriate to invite himself in. He was still far from becoming good friends even with her. The tutoring sessions were not a complete waste of time though. Sometimes the trio would converse freely in his company, becoming comfortable with him, although, he still felt like a piece of furniture - ignored until needed. He wasn’t sure what he could do to have them think of him as one of them. He was still looking for his opportunity.

Merlin took a look around the Great Hall, concerned why Harry wasn’t back yet. Merlin had attended ghost parties and knew well that spirits of the dead did not serve food appropriate for the living. He expected that Harry and his friends would come to the feast soon to get some real food.

Hours passed before Jack and Elsa entered the Hall, arguing among themselves. They split up and Jack came over huffing in exasperation.

“You have no idea what it took to get her...” he abruptly stopped and stared at the ceiling with an open mouth. “Are they real?”

Merlin looked up and observed the bats, “Yes and no.”

“What do you mean?” Jack said, still staring in awe.

“Yes, they’re real bats, but no because they were conjured. They’re temporary, made of magic. You can tell by how they’re constantly flying in circles and not trying to get away. When you conjure animals this way, they are under your control.”

“Wow,” the boy exclaimed. “Do you think I could learn a spell like that?”

“It’s a little early, Jack. This is an advanced spell. Be patient. You’ll get there one day.”
“I want to try,” Jack said in an eager tone. “I have a feeling, I can do this one.”

Merlin crossed his arms and appraised the boy. He’d seen Jack’s attempts at spells and they weren’t very successful. He didn’t know where he got this confidence from.

“Have you conjured anything so far?”

“No.”

Merlin shook his head. For some reason, he was in the mood to humor the boy. “The spell is Avis. Wave your wand like this,” he demonstrated, “and keep a bat in mind.”

Jack pulled out his wand and waved it. “Avis,” he said confidently.

Few white sparks came out of the tip of his wand but nothing else happened. He tried again with the same result. Merlin chuckled. He wasn’t sure why he showed him a spell this difficult. There was no way a first-year student could figure it out.

He clapped him on the back. “As I said, you’ll get there one day.”

Jack sighed. “Well, maybe not today. But it's okay. I have other ways.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'll show you one day.”

“Merlin,” Colin asked after snapping a picture of the ceiling, “how do you know that spell?”

Merlin swallowed. He forgot that he was supposed to be a clueless first-year. “I’ve seen it done. My uncle conjures bats all the time.”

“Why?” Colin asked.

Merlin’s mind started swirling with possible explanations. “Guano, you know, their poop. It’s the best fertilizer.”

“But wait,” Jack asked, “if the bats are temporary, won’t their poop,” he giggled, “be temporary?”

Colin giggled too. “Temporary poop,” and now they were both shaking with laughter.

Merlin rolled his eyes. Oh, the maturity. He wished he had come up with some different explanation but now he had to stick to this one. “Well, if they eat real food, then, their poop is real too.”

“Reeeeal poop,” Jack repeated.

“Let’s hope the ones above us weren’t fed,” Colin said and they laughed again.

Merlin was thoroughly regretting the decision to tell them the guano story. They were now using poop puns in every sentence.

“Guano of these days we’ll make you laugh, Merlin,” Jack joked and shoved his shoulder playfully.

Merlin couldn’t roll his eyes any harder. “Poop jokes are not my favorite form of humor.”

“But are they at least a solid number two?” Colin barely finished the sentence before he cracked up.

Merlin shook his head in defeat but then smiled a little. These two were rubbing off on him.
Some commotion started happening at the staff table and he was thankful for the distraction. He thought that maybe Dumbledore was going to end the feast but instead, he introduced the evening’s entertainment.

Merlin livened up seeing the Headmaster. He was wearing embroidered purple robes tonight. Most wizards stuck to simple plain dark colors, but Dumbledore wasn’t afraid to show off his preference for a little flair. Merlin supposed that only Gilderoy Lockhart dressed with more pizzazz.

His reflections were interrupted by strange music. A skeleton walked in through the main entrance with an instrument made of bones strapped to his chest and played a melody on it by banging bone against bone. He was followed by six other skeletons who bobbed to the music. They walked up to the staff table, turned around towards the students and the music stopped. The skeletons froze in place.

Everyone in the Great Hall was now looking at the skeletons who seemed to be waiting for something. Then, the music-playing one resumed the melody and the others began dancing to it in a very animated way, dropping bones in the process and discreetly reattaching them. Students started to get up, cheer and whistle. Finally, Merlin realized why. The melody played on the bone instrument resembled that popular song, “Do the Hippogriff.” Kids were going crazy for it, especially Colin who snapped many photos of the group and was now trying to sing along despite not knowing the words.

The performance finally ended and the skeletons bowed deep. One of them lost a hand, picked it up promptly and waved it to the crowd.

The students stood up, clapped and cheered loudly. It was a perfect ending of this festive night. Dumbledore knew how to throw a good party.

The skeleton show concluded the feast and everyone started making their way out of the Great Hall, laughing and talking excitedly.

To Merlin’s chagrin, his roommates resumed their poop jokes while they walked back to their dorm. Lesson learned. He had to avoid using that word in their presence.

A large group of students were gathered in the second-floor hallway and were looking at something on the wall. Merlin approached apprehensively. He had a bad feeling about this.

“Do you think skeletons poop?” Jack asked.

“Guys, stop,” Merlin told his friends, seeing that they were giggling away and didn’t notice that something was going on.

“Did you say stoooop?” Colin joked and they giggled again but then quieted down once they saw what the commotion was about.

There, on the wall in front of them, between two tall windows and two lit torches, was a message written in red paint.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.
ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

As if this wasn’t disturbing enough, the cat, Mrs. Norris, was hanging from one of the torch brackets by her tail. She looked stiff and dead. Her eyes were frozen open in horror.

“Is that blood?” Colin whispered, terrified, and Merlin now realized that he was right. The message
was written in blood, not paint. Colin raised his camera to take a picture and Merlin stopped him. No pictures of this.

This was bad. Very bad.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood in front of the wall in a puddle of water. They looked just as bewildered as everyone else, but the way that they stood there, so separated from the group, it made them stand out. Everyone stared at them, the wall, and the poor dead cat.

The silence was broken by the snotty voice of Draco Malfoy. “Enemies of the Heir, beware. You’ll be next, Mudbloods!”

Merlin did not like this boy before but he despised him now. Chamber of Secrets or killing cats in such a manner was not a joke. Not to mention, using the derogatory slur “Mudbloods” was very hurtful. It was what blood purists called Muggleborns to indicate their inferior status. There were still those who believed that Muggleborns shouldn’t be admitted to Hogwarts, that they didn’t deserve to learn magic. Merlin wasn’t surprised that the arrogant Malfoy kid belonged to that group.

Alerted by the commotion, Filch bounded over and started shrieking when he saw his cat. Then, he very openly accused Harry, “You killed my cat!”

From the silence of everyone around, Merlin guessed that the Caretaker wasn’t the only one who thought that Harry and his friends had something to do with it.

Dumbledore arrived with other teachers, freed the poor cat and called in Harry’s trio to Lockhart’s office. Merlin wanted to go with them to be a part of that conversation but knew that the timing was wrong. He would have to catch up with Dumbledore about this later.

The students lingered by the wall for a while and slowly dispersed to their dorms. The mood of the night had drastically changed from what it was just minutes before. Everyone was scared and disturbed. They watched the shadows with caution and stuck in close groups. Whispers were passed around of theories as to what happened or what the Chamber of Secrets could be.

Merlin wondered if he should tell them but decided to wait until he spoke with Dumbledore. This was a serious situation. The students were in danger. Mrs. Norris was only the beginning.
Message on the wall

Chapter Notes

Someone once asked me this so here's the answer in case if more readers want to know:

Why hasn’t Merlin figured out that Jack and Elsa are nature spirits and aren’t even human?
1. Jack and Elsa are not ordinary nature spirits. Figuring out what they are and what it all means is part of their journey. I hope you’ll stay patient to discover that with them.
2. Merlin’s understanding of the spirit world is not 100% accurate. There's actually a backstory that goes with this topic which I cannot possibly include in this story because I already have a million subplots going on and if I add more, I’ll never finish. It might make it into Year 2 (yay). In short, Merlin doesn’t know everything.

I will explore the topic of spirits and fairies in more detail further down the road and hope that will answer the question a little better. I wouldn’t want to divulge all secrets too early. In this story, everyone has secrets, and this includes the author. ;)

Also, please, if anything doesn’t make sense, call me out on it. The story is becoming pretty complex at this point and I hope you’re not getting confused. I’m fully aware that it’s become a collection of one-shots, but I swear, I’m trying to make it all work together and fit into the big picture.

It was past midnight, Jack and Colin were in their beds still discussing the message on the wall. Merlin wanted them to fall asleep already so he could sneak out to talk to Dumbledore, but they were too stimulated about the event to wind down. If the Chamber of Secrets was indeed opened, the situation was grave. The students were in danger, so he had no time to waste and had to cheat.

Merlin said an incantation to put them to sleep and it worked instantly. Finally, he could go.

”Lemon drop,” he said the password to the stone gargoyles and they revealed the entrance to Dumbledore’s office.

He listened closely before knocking to ensure no one else was there. It would be difficult to explain what a student like him was doing out of bed at this hour.

Since it was quiet inside, he knocked.

“Come in,” Dumbledore’s tired voice said.

He was sitting behind his desk, his glasses thrown aside, both hands were supporting his head. He looked understandably troubled.

Merlin sat in front of him and broke the silence.

“Did Harry see anything?”

Albus leaned back in his chair with a heavy sigh. “He said he didn’t but I suspect that he’s hiding something.”
“Why did they kill the cat?” This part bothered Merlin. The Chamber of Secrets was supposedly about bloodline purification, not cats.

“She’s not dead. Petrified.”

Merlin huffed. “That’s strong Dark Magic. What type of creature are we dealing with?”

“No one knows,” Albus said and pinched his nose where his spectacles normally sat.

They sat there quietly, both lost in thought and unsure of their next step.

“What’s your plan?”

His old friend sat there with a depressed look on his face and Merlin felt sorry for him. It had to be tiring to carry a weight like that on his shoulders.

“I want to help,” he said, trying to reassure his friend that he wasn’t alone in this burden. “Tell me, what do you know?”

Albus sighed and nodded. “You’re familiar with the Chamber’s history?”

“Yes. It was said that Salazar built a secret chamber where he hid a monster that would rid Hogwarts of Muggleborns. In the past, I’ve searched this castle along with many others. No one could find it. Apparently, only Salazar’s descendant can locate it and release the monster. Some kind of blood magic is at work hiding its location, that’s what I’m guessing.”

“And then the legend was proven true fifty years ago,” Albus continued. “Many were petrified, one killed. The attacks stopped but I always feared the day when they would resume. Who could it be? Do we have another heir or is this the same one?”

That was a good question. Fifty years was a long time. Why now?

“You’ve gotten to know some students already,” Albus said. “Did you notice anything strange? Anyone acting suspiciously?”

At first, Merlin couldn’t think of anything suspicious. They were all just children. The Malfoy kid was a nuisance but would he be capable of something this horrific?

Then, he remembered that Jack came to the feast late. How did he know that his sister was in the library? Why did it take him so long to get her to the Great Hall? More likely, Jack had scheduled to meet his sister before the feast so they could do something together. There were a lot of questions surrounding the boy. Just the other day, Merlin saw Jack display a very strange type of magic. Frost built under his hands with no spell or incantation said. But did he really suspect him? Having strange magic wasn’t an offense in itself. He needed more proof before he started pointing fingers at innocent children.

“No, I haven’t noticed anything strange yet. I’ll keep my eyes and ears open.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were piercing him and he maintained a blank face. His old friend was good at recognizing when he was being lied to but Merlin was an excellent liar.

“Find out what Harry knows. It could be important,” Albus said and Merlin nodded.

He had to break through the barrier Harry put in front of him. The situation became urgent.

“What will you tell the students about the Chamber of Secrets? They need to know what’s going on
so they take the threat seriously. This is only the beginning. You need to start taking precautions.”

“It’s hardly a reason to cause a panic.”

Merlin disagreed. “If you don’t explain to them how grave the situation is, they will ignore all warnings.”

“We don’t really know if the Chamber was opened though, do we?” Albus spoke in a soft tone as if he was explaining some difficult concept to Merlin. “All we have is a message on the wall and a petrified cat. It could very well be a twisted Halloween prank.”

“So you’ll wait until a student is petrified, or worse, dead?” Merlin’s voice rose. He didn’t understand this reasoning. Why take a risk like that?

“It’s impractical to upset everyone before we have all the facts, don’t you think?”

Merlin got up and felt his temper rising. “You’re making a mistake. Students need to be warned about the severity of the threat.”

Albus raised from his chair and towered over Merlin. “This might be difficult for you to understand,” he said while smiling sympathetically and looking down at him, “but this is the best course of action. I’ll take it from here. You worry yourself with Harry and leave the rest to me.”

This felt all too familiar. Merlin never understood what it was about him that made people not take him seriously. He never learned how to carry himself in a way that would demand respect. It wasn’t helping that he was a child now but Albus knew who he was. It hurt that his own friend talked to him in a condescending tone. Or maybe, he overestimated his friendship with the old wizard.

“I appreciate your advice,” Albus said in a softer tone, “but you must admit that it isn’t appropriate for the current situation. You look tired. You should get back to bed. Let’s handle this one day at a time. Good Night, Merlin.”

Merlin had heard enough. He turned around and stormed out of there without a word. Dumbledore’s patronizing tone brought back too many memories. Would he always be the peasant who was unworthy of speaking up in court? He stomped down the hallway in anger. What exactly would he have to accomplish to earn some respect? He saved the world on so many occasions, he couldn’t count anymore. He conquered death. He was unmatched in all magic disciplines. And still, no one listened! And he was always right in these situations. He hated always having a reason to say “I told you so.”

The chill of the corridor gradually cooled down his temper and he started to think. If Dumbledore was going to be passive about the situation and wait until something worse happened, he felt responsible to take matters in his own hands. Someone had to.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor, found the message on the wall and looked for clues.

He rubbed a finger at the blood. It didn’t come off. A spell was cast on it so the message would be difficult to erase. Halloween prank, right. This was difficult magic, not some child’s play.

Another proof of this being serious was what happened to Mrs. Norris. Whoever would display a petrified cat by hanging it by the tail was obviously disturbed. It reminded Merlin of stories he read of serial killers. They started young. Their first victims were animals, until they hungered for bigger, more challenging prey - humans. Even if the Chamber hadn’t been opened, they might have a sociopath running around the school, itching for murder. No one was safe.
There was a puddle of water on the ground and it gave him an idea. Water was useful. People had walked through it and left behind an impression of themselves. It had been a while since he used hydromancy, but it should be like riding a bike.

He stared at the water and tried to concentrate. He said the incantation and stirred the surface with his finger. He felt a warmth go through him as the magic took hold. As the ripples smoothed out, vision formed on the surface, allowing him to view the events that transpired here.

The hallway was submerged in darkness. The torches provided very little illumination. Someone walked up to the wall and his feet made gentle splash in the puddle. He wasn’t in a hurry. He was wearing a hood, Merlin couldn’t see his face but he appeared young. It had to be one of the first or second-year students. The student was holding a dead rooster under his arm, dipped a hand in its wound and started to paint the letters on the wall with its blood.

No one disturbed the slow project. Everyone was at the feast but this one student who was alone, unnoticed.

After finishing the writing, he cast a spell on it and left. He came back without a rooster but holding a petrified cat. He tied the cat to the torch and walked away.

It was quiet in the hallway. The cat gently swung from the bracket. Its shadow moved to the same beat, its only companion in this horror moment.

Soon after, Harry, Ron and Hermione came splashing through the puddle and froze in shock when they saw the message on the wall. Their shock was amplified when they noticed the poor cat. Harry approached it and raised his hand but didn’t touch it. He looked horrified. And here, the vision ended.

The surface of the water turned back into an ordinary puddle and reflected Merlin’s face back to him.

“They missed him just by a minute!”

Harry got there too late and didn’t see who did it. The question was, how Harry and his friends knew to show up there. They came running as if they knew they were running towards it. Did they overhear someone’s plans? Did they notice any suspicious clues? Dumbledore said that Harry and his friends were resourceful. Merlin believed they could have figured out that something fishy was about to happen. But once they found the message and the cat, they had to have realized how serious the situation was. So why would they withhold that information from their Headmaster?

Merlin had his work cut out for him. It was time he gained Harry’s trust. He wouldn’t rest until this danger was eliminated.

Cold wet floor. Silence.

Ginny opened her eyes. Her cheek was touching cold tiled floor. She breathed through her mouth and the air current created ripples in a puddle of water which was the first thing she saw. She watched it for a moment. Her mind felt too muddled to form a coherent thought. For now, all she could think about was the ripple responding to her every breath.

Her body felt like it wasn’t completely there. Did she even have one?

Ginny blinked a few times and tried to make her brain work. Maybe she was still asleep. It was a strange dream.
Her cheek felt numb from cold. A shiver ran through her. She had to have a body if she felt cold.

She laid there for a while longer trying to feel something other than cold. She moved a finger. It worked. She felt it. She moved more fingers. Progress.

She tried to get up but couldn’t. Her muscles felt like jelly. Weak. She felt so weak.

She took a moment to look around. It was the wretched abandoned bathroom again. Moaning Myrtle wasn’t there yet thankfully. She was alone. Alone with the silence and the cold floor.

She hated this bathroom. She had ended up here so many times already. Why was her sleepwalking always bringing her here? The onslaught of anger restored an ounce of her strength and she tried to get up. Her arms shook under her weight but she did it. Now, one leg, the other, and she was upright.

Her vision swam and she waited for it to stabilize. She wanted to get out of there. She did not want to look at this tile anymore.

Ginny made her way out and shuffled down the dark hallway with her hand touching the wall. She kept losing her balance and had to use it for support. It seemed like the walk to the Gryffindor Tower was taking forever. She stared at her feet as she walked. Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot.

“Just keep going and you’ll get there. Keep going.”

She looked ahead to see if she was any closer. She wasn’t. She wasn’t even halfway down the hallway. Then, her eyes landed on the wall.

There was something written on it. Her brain wasn’t fully working yet so she couldn’t read it but she thought it was strange so she came up closer. She traced one letter with her finger, and noticed something peculiar. The dim light of the torch illuminated her hand. It was dirty with something red, same shade of red as the writing.

Ginny stumbled away from the wall.

It had to be a coincidence. People didn’t just write things while sleepwalking. She wasn’t the one who vandalized the school. It couldn’t have been her.

Ginny rubbed her dirty hands on her damp robes and got back to the task of walking. Just a little more and she’d be at the tower. Just a few more steps and she would get into her warm dry bed. Just a little longer.

She made it to the stairs and looked up. There were so many stairs. Muggles had invented a handy thing called an elevator. Why couldn’t wizards do something similar? She started to climb.

She made it up only on sheer willpower, not body strength.

“Password,” the portrait of Fat Lady said.

Ginny swayed on her feet and blinked slowly. Password.

“It’s a word,” she mumbled.

Fat Lady rolled her eyes. “Of course, it’s a word. Tell me the word so I can let you in.”

Ginny stood there not sure of what she was supposed to do. Bed. She was supposed to get into her bed.
“Tell me the password, dear.”


“Oh, dear. That’s not the password. Think about it. I know that you know it.”

Not bed? But she needed bed. Her soft warm bed with the cozy blanket.

“Wake up!” Fat Lady shrieked.

Ginny opened her eyes. She didn’t notice when she closed them. Fat Lady looked at her kindly while Ginny tried to remember what she was doing here. Oh, she needed to get in.

“Password, dear.”

Ginny racked her brains for the word. She just said it earlier today. Was it today? She wasn’t sure what day today was. Maybe it was all a dream.

“Wattlebird,” she exclaimed and Fat Lady let out a breath of relief.

“Get to bed, dear. It’s late,” Fat Lady said and the painting swung open.
Innocent's torment

Tom?

Hi, Ginny.

Something is wrong.

What's wrong, Ginny?

I am. Something is wrong with me.

Talk to me, what's bothering you?

Everything. The sleepwalking is getting worse. And this time, I think I did something awful while asleep.

Oh, no. What do you think you did?

I've been having disturbing dreams. I dreamt that I woke up with blood on my hands. But when I really woke up, my hands were clean.

Oh, then it was just a dream. Don't worry yourself with it.

But there's more. In the dream, I saw a wall with red writing on it. When I woke up, I found out that someone really vandalized a wall, wrote a strange message on it in red, maybe blood. Was it me? Did I do that while asleep?

Ginny, you most likely noticed the wall while sleepwalking and that's why you were dreaming about it.

I guess it's possible. But Tom, that's not all. Mrs. Norris, she's a cat, she was petrified and found hanging by her tail. It's awful. What if I did it?

Do you even know how to petrify a cat?

No.

It's just your imagination, Ginny. You didn't do it.

But Tom, it gets worse. My robes from that day... they were dirty and had rooster feathers on them. How did that happen?

I don't know. Maybe your sleepwalking took you outside.

Maybe. I hate this. Why do I sleepwalk?

I don't know. I wish I could cure you of it.

If only it was that easy. Maybe I should go to Madam Pomfrey?

Who's that?

She's our Healer.
I don’t think it’s necessary. It’s a phase - it will pass.

But it’s getting worse. I should go to her.

Ginny, I didn’t want to say it earlier, I didn’t want to scare you, but I knew someone that had sleepwalking problems.

Really? What happened?

The school Healer said that he was mad and committed him to an asylum.

No! Do you think I’m mad?

Definitely not. As to my friend, it passed, it was a phase, it was unnecessary to commit him. The Healer misdiagnosed him and as a result, he spent many weeks locked up with the real loonies. It was terrible. Even after his sleepwalking stopped, it took him a long time to convince them that he wasn’t mad. I want to spare you that awful experience.

But maybe Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t do that.

Do you want to take that chance, Ginny? Once they think that you’re crazy, they won’t listen to anything else you might have to say. I don’t want that to happen to you. I’m worried about you. Please, promise me you won’t go to her.

You’re right, I don’t want to take that chance.

Exactly. Also, it will be best if you don’t tell anyone, not your friends or brothers. We don’t want them to think you’re mad either. If they find out about your sleepwalking, they could tell Madam Pomfrey directly and you’ll be in the same situation, maybe even worse.

Thank you for looking out for me.

Of course! You’re my best friend, Ginny.

Thanks, Tom.

Is there anything else you want to talk about?

I guess... I’m just sad.

Why? Did something happen?

No, nothing happened. That’s the problem. I missed the entire Halloween feast. I heard that it was fun.

That’s a shame.

What bothers me is that no one noticed. No one asked me where I was. No one cares. I’m invisible. It’s like I don’t exist.

They don’t deserve you and you don’t need them. I will never treat you like you’re invisible. Stick with me, Ginny.

I will, Tom. I will.
It felt ridiculous to bother with the student routine when Merlin had important work to do. Someone dangerous was on the loose at the school, danger lurked over the heads of these children, and here he was, their protector, pretending to not know how to do magic.

But a part of his work was getting Harry to talk and he needed to be a student for that. So he trudged on down the stairs for another Potions class.

“You will be working on Wiggenweld Potion today,” Snape said in low voice. His lips barely moved. “Do I dare hope that all of you did your homework and already know what this potion is used for?”

He turned to the class and scanned everyone’s faces. Few kids raised their hands and he picked one Slytherin girl.

“It is a powerful healing potion.”

“Correct. Five points to Slytherin. Wiggenweld Potion can also reverse the effects of the Sleeping Draught. Open your books and get to work.”

Snape turned his back to them and walked to his desk.

Merlin scowled at him. What in the world was Snape thinking, having them work on Wiggenweld Potion already? It required meticulous attention to detail. At each step, the brewer needed to watch the mixture’s color, adjust the cauldron’s heat and be very careful adding each ingredient. It was too complex for these children. They weren’t ready.

Merlin had a feeling that something would go wrong so he kept an eye on his friends to ensure they were following directions and wouldn’t create an accidental explosion. Snape was waiting for someone to mess up, wasn’t he? He enjoyed watching them fail.

Students got their ingredients and started working on the potion. Merlin monitored how his friends were doing while brainstorming for ideas. Should he ask Hermione for tips? She knew Harry well. But how could he phrase the question in a way that it didn’t sound ridiculous? ‘Hey, what do you think I should do to make Harry like me and spill all his secrets to me?’ If only it were that easy.

Then, maybe his approach was wrong. The time for slowly befriending Harry was gone. He needed to get into Harry’s circle fast. Maybe, he had to offer something other than friendship. What did he have that Harry would need or want? Ideas swarmed in his head like agitated bees and he had to dismiss each. None of them were good enough.

Snape got up and started walking around the classroom, giving tips to the Slytherins and criticizing Gryffindors. How typical.

Merlin was halfway done with his potion and waited for it to turn red so he used the time to check on his friends. Jack was doing well. His mixture looked very stable, at least, for now. He took a look at the table where Colin worked and gasped.

“Oh, gods. Colin, don’t put that in!”

Colin was about to put ten lionfish spines into his cauldron all at once. Merlin was well familiar with this ingredient and knew what would happen if too many were used.

He was unfortunately too late. Colin looked in his direction just as the spines dropped into the mixture with a hiss. Merlin quickly ran over, ready to put out the fire under the boy’s cauldron, but it was too late for that too. The mixture bubbled violently and he barely managed to push the small boy
out of the way when it exploded.

The gooey substance splattered all over Colin’s desk, the floor, and, of course, all over Merlin.

The class erupted in a laugh while the Potions Master looked very satisfied with that result.

“It would seem your skills are limited to essay-writing, Mr. Ealdor. One point from Gryffindor for thinking you could save Creevey from his own incompetence. No amount of help will save this insufferable excuse for a wizard.”

Merlin ground his teeth in frustration while the goo dripped from his nose.

“Go back to Muggles, Mudblood. You’ll be safer there,” one of the Slytherin kids jeered at Colin and his friends snickered. Merlin took notice to remember which one it was. He was a tall skinny kid with short dark hair and small eyes disproportionate to the rest of his head. He was making a list of students who were suspects in the Chamber of Secrets message. This mini-eyed boy fit the profile.

Snape turned around and sat back behind his desk as if he hadn’t just heard a vulgar slur in his classroom. Merlin was outraged. No matter how much Snape disliked Colin, he was still a teacher. He shouldn’t allow language like that in here, but instead of putting a stop to it, Snape ignored it.

Colin looked like someone punched him in the gut. This was too much. Merlin would figure out something to make the boy feel better but it would have to wait until later. He had to deal with the situation at hand.

He was covered in the sticky goo. It was all over his face, stung his eyes and dripped from his robes. He tried to wipe it away, but it resulted in him now having the goo on his face and his hands.

He walked up to Snape. “May I be excused so I can clean up, Professor?”

Snape appraised him and something that almost looked like a hint of a smile played on his lips. Almost. He enjoyed Merlin’s misery.

‘Just give me more reason to hate you. I dare you,’ Merlin thought.

“It would be prudent if you helped Creevey clean up the mess first,” Snape said very slowly, his face was expressionless now, “since you want to be so… helpful.”

Merlin had a strong desire to tell him off but had to restrain himself. How could he help clean up when he was covered with the stuff? He was more likely going to spread it everywhere. Ah, but Snape knew that. That was the point.

‘Control yourself, Merlin,’ he had to remind himself before he said something he would regret. ‘Not now.’

He walked back to Colin’s table and grabbed one of the rags the boy brought.

He lowered to the ground and grudgingly observed Snape who was enjoying the view of his students on their knees. Snape could clean up this spill with a swish of his wand. Merlin had seen him do it whenever Slytherin kids created any messes. This man was truly downright cruel.

Merlin wiped at the spill on the floor, but it just smeared all over the place. Cleaning it this way was making it worse. It was going to take a long time to get it off. As feared, the goo from his robes dripped onto the floor creating a larger spill. He wiped at it angrily and snuck a look at Colin. He looked like he was ready to cry.
“It’s not coming off,” the boy whispered in a shaky voice. “Snape will kill me. It’s not coming off!”

It angered him to see the boy so scared. Merlin could do something to make the clean up easier, but he needed a moment when no one was looking.

He gave his rag to Colin. “Better wash them both, I’ll keep wiping.”

Colin nodded and ran to the sink.

Snape was watching him like a hawk. No, a hawk was too nice of an animal, like a mangy hyena. Or was it an insult to hyenas? Like a rabid mangy hyena with sickly pale skin and long greasy hair while it’s being ripped apart by vultures. Wouldn’t that be a sight.

Merlin smirked, amused by the lengths his imagination could get up to. It was an understatement to say that Snape was getting under his skin. He had been from day one, but today, a line was crossed. In any case, he had to be sneaky if he were to do something about it.

Merlin closed his eyes, so no one would see the flash of magic in them, and focused on the table of the Slytherin kid at the end of the classroom. He whispered a simple spell which raised the flames under the kid’s cauldron. Predictably, Snape rushed over to help control the fire. While everyone was distracted, Merlin waved his hand over the spilled potion on the floor and the desk to vanish it. He got up satisfied. Only the goo left over by his dirty robes remained.

Colin came back and was relieved. “You got almost all of it off. Thank you, Merlin. I thought I was going to spend the whole night here cleaning this up. And sorry for getting it all over you.”

“It’s not your fault, Colin.”

Merlin went back to the sink to drop the cleaning cloth and wash his face. His eyes were burning a lot now. He had to get this stuff off but it wasn’t coming off with just plain water. He couldn’t use magic in front of all of them. They all saw how he looked. He couldn’t suddenly become all clean. For now, he thought, he would use magic only to get it out of his eyes before he went blind.

“Get out of my classroom, Ealdor. You’re getting everything filthy,” Snape snapped coolly. “Creevey, clean up after your… helper.”

“Go on, Mudblood,” the same small-eyed Slytherin said to Colin in a loud whisper. “Get used to cleaning up filth. That’s all you’ll ever be good for.”

That was enough. Before more insults could leave the vile lips, the boy sitting next to him spilled the entire contents of a jar of Flobberworm mucus on his robes.

Accidents just seemed to happen with Merlin around.

Colin’s frown lifted slightly, but only for a moment before he remembered that he was still in trouble and hurried back to cleaning up the mess.

Merlin turned to leave and shot Colin a reassuring look. He was going to find a way to cheer up the boy later. First things first.

One issue bothered Merlin to no end. He was sure that Snape had heard the vulgar slur again but did nothing to stop it. This cemented Merlin’s resolve. That wizard needed to feel what it felt like to be picked on.

He whispered the curse he had in mind while proceeding to the door in a leisurely walk. He felt the
warmth of the magic course through him and invisibly make its way to its target.

He listened closely as Snape walked back to his desk - a shuffle of robes, a soft clack of shoes. He was getting closer. Just when Merlin brought his hand to the door handle, he heard the sound of creaking wood, crash, and Snape’s grunt.

The classroom became deadly quiet as students were in shock at what happened. Merlin walked out feeling a lot better. He had an inkling that from now on, legs of any chair Snape tried to sit on would have a habit of breaking under his weight.

Merlin closed the door, vanished the goo from his robes and straightened up his Gryffindor scarf. One problem down. Now, he could get to more pressing work.
Halloween events had everyone agitated and maybe a little scared. Elsa wasn’t sure what the fuss was about. So someone vandalized the school. She imagined it happened a lot in a castle filled with teenagers. What happened to the cat was sad but she was never particularly fond of it in the first place. That cat always looked at her funny. The halls were a little less creepy without it sneaking around.

Luna happily skipped next to her as they walked towards their afternoon class. The girl wore one of her art projects in her blonde hair today. It was a yellow paper flower which she tucked behind her ear. It suited her.

Elsa sometimes wished she could be as bold as her friend and proudly wear her art. The other day, she played with her ice and created a set of beautiful snowflake-shaped ice hairpins which sparkled in the light like diamonds. If she left them in her hair, they wouldn’t have melted. They were perfect and she wanted to show them off, but she chickened out at the last minute and took them off. She was afraid of the questions that would’ve followed. “What spell did you use, Elsa? Teach me.” How could she explain to them that she didn’t need a spell or a wand to create them? She had been observing the other students and saw that none of them could use their magic this way. She couldn’t let them see what she was capable of. She had to hide her ability from everyone, even her best friend, even when suppressing it felt like it was suffocating her. Maybe one day the world would get to see her art, but for now, she had to be patient and play it safe.

As they approached their classroom, she ran into Jack who pulled her in for a quick hug.

“Hey, sis.” He released her and smiled at her friend. “Hi, Luna.”

Elsa straightened up her robes. He had been acting rather odd lately. Sometimes, he was irritable and would argue over the silliest things, and other times, he was clingy. She couldn’t put a finger on what was causing his mood swings.

“Hi, Jack,” three Gryffindor girls said in unison and giggled.

Jack nodded to them with a simple “Hi” but then turned back to Luna.

“I like the flower,” he said and she smiled.

“I enchanted it,” she said in a breathy voice. “Do you want to see?”

She tapped the flower with her wand and it changed color from yellow to orange.

“Cool,” he exclaimed and gently touched the flower to check it out. “This color looks good on you.”

Elsa could see the Gryffindor girls give Luna spiteful looks and whisper to each other. One of them said loud enough for all of them to hear, “If her father had a normal job, poor Loony wouldn’t have to make her own ugly jewelry.”

Luna must have heard what they said but seemed oblivious to the insult or maybe was ignoring it. Jack turned around and was about to say something to defend her, but the Weasley girl beat him to it.

“Don’t call her that,” she said, looking at the three girls fiercely as if she was prepared to use violent means to enforce her request.
The other girls rolled their eyes and sighed.

“Seriously, Ginny. You know I’m right,” one of them said and they went inside with their noses held high.

This wasn’t the first time Elsa had heard someone call her friend ‘Loony’ and she did not like it.

“I’m sorry they’re so mean to you,” Ginny said to Luna but wouldn’t look up at her and fiddled with her linked hands nervously. Elsa didn’t know this girl and didn’t understand why she felt the need to apologize for the actions of others but was glad that she was brave enough to stand up for her friend.

“People say mean things when they feel threatened,” Luna said and smiled in a detached way as if reciting poetry. “It restores their self-esteem.”

Then, she skipped into the classroom where she sat with Su Li, a quiet Ravenclaw student who was already busy reading their textbook.

Elsa thought it was a very dignified and wise response to being belittled like that. Luna never ceased to surprise her.

They took their usual seats and waited for McGonagall to come inside. The other day, she showed them how she could transform into a cat and back into a human. Elsa was truly impressed. Amazing feats could be achieved if one knew how to use transfiguration magic well. If only she could learn it.

Professor McGonagall entered the classroom and the chatter quieted. The lesson started and despite her efforts, Elsa found it hard to focus. She was distracted. Her research was proving more difficult than expected. After reading that article from Luna’s father, Elsa thought to follow the clue of the family name Gulbadox. She hoped she could find out where they were and how she could get in touch with them. Maybe they would have some record of what happened to that mirror, where it could be now, but the Hogwarts library did not have any information on them. She wondered if any Gulbadox relatives were still even around.

Maybe it would’ve been easier to track down the person who wrote that article. She planned to ask Luna if she could get contact information from her father. There was no author listed so she hoped that he kept track of the writers whose work he published.

Sometimes, she doubted herself and wondered if she was wasting her time. There was no guarantee that the mirror would give her the answers she needed but it was the closest she got so far. She knew exactly what she wanted, what her heart’s desire was. The mirror would translate it into a vision, that’s how she understood its properties. This plan had to work. If she stopped looking for it, she had nothing else to go on. All of her research had come up fruitless. There was no spell to find someone who you knew nothing about.

Transfiguration class was coming to an end but Elsa’s match still didn’t look like a needle. Sometimes, she managed to change its appearance slightly but never enough to turn it all the way. It was embarrassing. The other students had already moved on to the next spell when she never mastered this one. She didn’t know why she struggled. In fact, she did very well in Charms, perfected spells at the same speed as the other students and so did her brother. What was different about this class?

“You two,” McGonagall said to her and Jack, “come to my office after your classes today.”

Elsa’s heart dropped down to her stomach. What would be McGonagall’s reaction to their failure? She glanced at Jack’s match. He wasn’t doing any better than she was. In fact, it looked like he gave
up trying. They were both in trouble if they couldn’t figure out how to perform this magic.

When the time came, they came into her office as directed. She gestured for them to sit and they got comfortable in the soft chairs in front of her desk. The fire in the fireplace was lit and the room felt too warm. Elsa worried that she would fall asleep if she stayed there for too long.

“I called you in here today for several reasons. First of all, I wanted to ask you about Halloween. How are you coping with what had happened?”

“What does that message on the wall mean?” Jack asked.

The witch sighed and linked her hands on the table.

“It is uncertain. It troubles me what was done to Mrs. Norris. Her petrification was a result of Dark Magic. It’s a bad sign. I want you to promise me that you will not go wandering about the castle alone. The winter is coming and it gets dark early. Until we find who was responsible for Mrs. Norris and the writing on the wall, it isn’t safe. It has never been more necessary for you to remain in your dorms and stay out of trouble. Can you promise me that?”

“We promise,” Elsa answered for the both of them. It shouldn’t be difficult to upkeep their word since she had no desire to wander the castle in the dark.

She did not expect this meeting to start this way. The witch really did care about them if she worried about their safety like this. It was touching.

“Overall,” McGonagall continued, “how has the term been going for you? Do you like Hogwarts?”

“I love it,” Elsa blurted and smiled awkwardly. It was the truth. “Everything’s great, right Jack?”

Her brother nodded but Elsa had a feeling that he was holding something back, that something wasn’t ‘great’ with him. He had been uncharacteristically quiet lately. It hit her that yet again, she didn’t know what he was thinking. She used to be able to read him like a book. Were they drifting so far apart that they were losing their ability to understand each other? She always assumed that it was a bond for life.

“I think you probably expect what else I wanted to discuss with you,” McGonagall continued and Elsa focused back on her. The dreaded topic was coming up. Her hands were becoming sweaty and she wasn’t sure if the fireplace was the only one to blame. “I worry about your lack of progress in my class. All other children in your year have completed their transfiguration of a match into a needle and have made a progress with the next spell - a pebble into a button. I can’t hold back the rest of the class just on your account. I have to move on with the material and I’m afraid the two of you are falling behind. Why do you struggle so much with this spell?”

They sat quietly, both embarrassed that they were the worst in the entire year. The worst of all four Houses. It was a horrible feeling.

“I don’t know why,” Elsa said. Moisture was building in her eyes. “I’ve been trying so hard. I’m doing everything the way you say, I know the theory by heart, but it just isn’t happening.”

McGonagall sighed and Elsa tried to not fall apart in front of her. She couldn’t accept her own failure. Before, she was sure that she could perform the same magic the wizard children could, but now, she was proven wrong. They were better than her. She hated being wrong and she hated it that she was the worst.

Jack kept his eyes down, picked at a cuticle on his finger and mumbled, “I have a theory.”
They both turned their attention to him. Elsa was surprised. What did her brother figure out that she couldn’t?

“I’d like to hear that,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

“I think…” he stopped and shyly met McGonagall’s eyes. “I mean... I know, it’s your specialty, Professor... I don’t want to offend you…”

“I won’t get offended. Say it.”

He took a long breath and said quickly, “Our magic is elemental. It’s the magic of nature. Transfiguration breaks the rules of nature and that’s why we can’t do it.”

Elsa stared at her brother with disbelief. Was he onto something?

“I never thought of it that way. But I want to be able to learn this type of magic too. There must be a way to get around that.”

McGonagall pursed her lips thinking about what he said.

“But you already use transfiguration magic.” She paused for effect and continued. “When you create ice or frost, you use transfiguration magic - you conjure it.”

“That’s different,” Jack argued. “That’s nature’s magic. Turning one object into another is unnatural. It doesn’t happen in nature.”

“Magic, in general,” she said, shifting her position in the chair, “can alter the fabric of reality but rules still apply. I believe that the rules of nature govern what is and isn’t possible because magic comes from nature, it is a part of it. Just think about this: when you use magic to vanish an object, it doesn’t cease to exist, it simply becomes part of the world, part of collective magic which is all around us. When you conjure something, it will exist for a short period of time only, you are borrowing magic and eventually, it has to be returned to the collective. These are very advanced theoretical topics and I don’t expect you to be able to understand them at such a young age, but I hope you can grasp the basic concept of them. There is nothing unnatural in transfiguration magic.”

Elsa tapped a finger on her chin thinking hard.

“I think I understand. However, I don’t fully agree. You say that when I create ice, I conjure it. But even if it melts, it acts just like water, it doesn’t get returned to the collective magic, it’s not temporary.”

“Ah,” McGonagall raised a finger in the air, “That’s because water is one of the exceptions to Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration - water can be conjured out of nothing.”

“Can other elements? Like Fire, Earth, and Wind?” Elsa asked. She was ready for intellectual debate on this fascinating topic.

“Fire and Wind, yes. There are spells for both. I haven’t heard of anyone conjuring Earth. I don’t know if anyone ever tried or what use it would be.”

“Looking at it from this point of view, would magic be the fifth element?” Elsa asked, suddenly excited about the possibilities.

McGonagall smiled at her.
“Very good, Elsa. There are scholars who suggest this conclusion but there is no consensus among the magical community. It’s just a theory.”

Elsa beamed. She was happy that her theory was compared to some scholar’s work.

“Jack, going by the theory that magic is a part of nature, we must conclude that ANY magic that is possible, is not against the rules of nature. This includes transfiguration.”

Jack looked from his sister to their Professor. He didn’t look convinced.

“It’s not that simple. I think some magic is wrong. Did you read further in our Transfiguration textbook? Did you see what some of those advanced spells call for? You transform an animal, a LIVING creature, into a non-living object. How can the rules of nature allow that? It’s unnatural. It’s wrong.”

“You are so stubborn!” Elsa yelled. “Will you just get over it? You lost this argument.” She exhaled a puff of air in an attempt to calm down. As far as she was concerned, her brother’s point was inconsequential. “What Professor is trying to explain to you is that magic is governed by the rules of nature. If specific magic is possible, it means that nature allows it. Let’s move on. How can we improve at this, Professor? What can we do?”

“I’d like to practice with you until you grasp it,” McGonagall answered. “I’ve been watching you. You’re close to achieving the transfiguration. I think you just need some one-on-one instruction.”

Elsa was glad that McGonagall wanted to give them extra help. For a short time, she was afraid that they would be kicked out of her class for performing so poorly, but now, she gained hope. Having a close relationship with the Transfiguration teacher was definitely an advantage.

She practiced the spell with McGonagall while Jack sat next to her with his arms crossed and pouting. Why was he so stubborn? Before they came to this school, he said that he wanted to learn magic and now he refused to even try.

She wasn’t making any progress and his uncooperative grumpiness was making the task even more frustrating. She wanted to be good at this. There had to be a way.

She glanced at her brother, remembering what he said, “Our magic is elemental.” Wizard’s magic was different. A wizard using a wand could produce a different type of magic than an elemental being like them. Maybe he really was onto something. Maybe she needed to channel a different source of magic than her own in order to cast a non-elemental spell, something stronger.

McGonagall was wrong in thinking that there was no use for the element of Earth. Elsa had long ago learned with her brother how to draw on the power of Earth, how to gain strength from it. Maybe, that was what she needed - a little boost of power.

“Professor, I would like to test a theory. Could we move this lesson outside?”

McGonagall was taken by surprise and Elsa knew why. This type of request sounded more like something Jack would ask for. He always preferred to do everything outdoors and for a good reason. They felt better and stronger when out in the open air.

McGonagall agreed and they went into the courtyard. The witch looked slightly uncomfortable out there. She probably never held lessons outside but she humored the request. She put a match on a stone bench and stood nearby to observe.

Elsa breathed in the cool air and felt her body relax. Winter was coming and it felt wonderful. She
focused on the ground under her feet and reached deep into it with her mind until she felt its power. She felt warmth in her wand and knew that she was on the right track. Once she had a solid hold over the power, she cast her spell.

The match took on a silverish color and Elsa jumped from excitement. She made more progress than she had in the two months she’d been trying to do this spell.

“Good job, Elsa. Keep trying.”

Elsa continued the exercise and went through several matches before she cast the spell successfully. She finally transfigured the match into a beautiful, shiny needle. By then, she felt that she was an expert at transferring Earth’s magic into her wand.

This was a new revelation. The concept was fascinating and Elsa wondered what other uses it would have. Would all other spells be more effective if she tried them this way? She couldn’t wait to try.

Her brother was sitting on the ground cross-legged, not looking at them. He occupied himself with a silly task of slowly tracing a line of frost on the ground with his finger, careful to not touch any grass. Elsa wanted to help him. She didn’t want him to be left behind.

“Jack.” She crouched next to him and whispered, “tap into the Earth’s power, channel it through your wand. That will help you cast the spell.”

He stopped tracing frost on the ground and froze in place.

“You can do it. If I can, so can you.”

He nodded but did not look as excited about this discovery as she thought he ought to be. Most of all, he looked sad and it worried her. She wanted to talk to him about it but didn’t want to do it with the Professor looming over their heads so she patted his hand and got up.

McGonagall dismissed her, telling her that she would work with Jack alone now, and Elsa went to her dorm to practice the spell on her own.

She felt confident and powerful. She could do this. She could wield the elements. Now, her next challenge was finding a way to tap into Earth’s power while inside the castle. It was going to be more difficult but it shouldn’t be impossible. What was a castle if not a collection of rocks?

Minerva shivered slightly and pulled her cloak tighter around her. It was chilly today. Definitely too chilly to hang outdoors. She didn’t understand how the twins were not bothered by this weather. She guessed that they were in denial, ignored being cold just for the sake of spending time outside. She would try to keep this conversation short so they could all go back in.

She sent Elsa inside already after the girl finally cast the spell. Minerva scolded herself for not reaching out to them earlier. It wasn’t until that untalented boy, Merlin Ealdor, cast the spell perfectly that she realized that the twins were the last ones who couldn’t. It was neglectful of her to not coach them earlier. They were under her care, after all.

She watched Jack as he sat on the ground with his head down, not acknowledging her.

She was beginning to worry. While his sister was easy to talk to, Jack had been closing himself off from her, holding back. She wondered if he still thought of running away. She had to keep an open conversation with him, make him feel that he could confide in her. These two were too young to be on the run again. She had to do whatever she could to help them overcome whatever issues they
were facing now.

“Your sister was able to cast the spell, Jack,” she finally spoke up but he didn’t react.

His silence was unnerving her and she wasn’t sure what to do with herself. She felt strange, towering over him like this, but she was most certainly not going to sit on the ground with him like an undignified hag. His bare feet had to have been cold. Would she ever get him to drop this inappropriate habit?

“Why don’t we sit over there?” she pointed to a bench nearby. “I’d like to talk over what’s troubling you. And, on Merlin’s beard, put those shoes on.”

Jack got up and walked over to the bench, grabbing his shoes on the way but not putting them on. Honestly, it was embarrassing to be seen with the stubborn barefoot boy but she tried to bite down her pride. This wasn’t the time for a repeat of the “shoes are mandatory” argument.

“Professor,” he was watching his foot swing under the bench and spoke slowly as if he practiced this line beforehand, “is it possible for me to stay at Hogwarts if I fail Transfiguration? Or will I be expelled?”

Minerva was flabbergasted. Why would he ask a question like that?

“Jack, there is still time to learn. There is no reason for you to assume so early on that you will fail. I’m confident that you’ll make progress with the right attitude just like your sister did.”

“I spoke to older students. They said that the final exam is turning an animal into an object. I will not do it, Professor. You will have to fail me.”

“Why will you not do it?”

“I will not end life.”

“The animal can be returned to its previous form. You don’t need to worry about ending its life.”

He snapped his head up and exploded. “How can you talk about it as if it’s no big deal? Would it be okay to practice that spell on a witch or a wizard, Professor?”

“No, it would not...”

“How would you like to be turned into a…” he interrupted her “into… into a bench? If you wouldn’t, then how can you do it to another living creature?” His voice rose. “Does a witch have more right to live than a rodent?”

“Jack...” She didn’t know where he was getting these strange thoughts from. It was making her head spin. “I beg your pardon? Are you comparing me to a rodent?”

“Witches and wizards are worse than rodents. A rodent wouldn’t do that to a fellow living creature.”

“How dare you?” she exclaimed and had to restrain herself. She was just a moment away from slapping him in the face. Her body language must have shown it because he flinched away from her.

Minerva exhaled a puff of air and it was visible in the cold. She wouldn’t hit him, no matter how much he deserved it for his rudeness, but she was fuming inside. In all of her years of teaching, she had never been challenged in this way. Did he honestly think that he understood the ethics of Transfiguration better than she did?
She did not recognize the boy sitting in front of her. She thought she knew him. Where was the loving, protective brother, the fun-seeking silly troublemaker whose biggest offense was an aversion to shoes? She had never seen this audacious, radical side to him. Was he going through what parents referred to as the rebellious stage? She did not like it one bit.

“Mind your attitude, Mr. Nix. You will serve detention for your disrespect. You lost two points to Gryffindor.”

She raised from the bench. She was afraid of what she might do if they continued.

“This isn’t the last of this conversation.”

Minerva walked away trembling. Was it from anger or cold, she wasn’t sure and it made no difference. The boy’s problem was deeper than a need for an attitude adjustment. There was something fundamentally wrong with his views on magic. Comparing witches and wizards to rodents. What was in that head of his?
Karma’s a curse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring 1987

The shadows moved through the dark corridor walls as Jack swung the lantern to the rhythm of his march. As he turned the corner, he saw hag Rhine walking in his direction. Her white goat happily led the way. He stared the hag right in her black soulless eyes. He found it was better to not appear weak in front of them.

The goat’s bleat distracted him and he momentarily lost eye contact. Right at that moment, Rhine reached her gnarly fingers in his direction. He stared her down again and slowly moved away from her reach, scraping his arm on the uneven rocky wall. She licked her lips and smiled, revealing only two bottom teeth. He kept walking backwards to keep an eye on her until she disappeared from view.

He didn’t understand why the hags had been acting so strange lately. They kept sneaking glances at him as if they were waiting for something. Elsa said she didn’t notice anything weird. Was he just imagining it?

As he got closer to his destination, he slowed down. He didn’t want to go in but there was no fighting this. No one said ‘no’ to mother.

Every spring, mother returned with the same plan - to teach them to increase control over their winter magic so they could use it as well as she did. He was tired of it. He actually liked how little time she spent home during winter. It gave him a chance to play, do whatever he wanted, be himself, but then each year, winter would end and mother would come back with the same project: more lessons, new challenges for him to fail.

It wasn’t helping that he seemed to always disappoint her. He never learned how to create ice and mother finally stopped trying to force him to, finally accepted that his powers would always be different from his sister’s, that he would always be the weaker twin. He thought that it would mean the end of the lessons, but no. Mother still called him in.

‘Be strong this time,’ he thought.

He had been repeating this to himself the whole winter. He promised himself that no matter what mother said or did, he was not going to cry so she couldn’t make fun of him. He would never let her words get to him again. He believed in himself. He could do this.

He stopped by the arched doorway which he recognized by the strange symbols carved into it. He couldn’t read them but knew that they marked the training chamber. He reluctantly knocked and went in, hoping the lesson would be quick.

Mother sat on a large stone bench which was carved to look as if it was a throne covered by icicles. In the winter, she made herself a real ice throne but the rest of the year she had to settle for this imitation.

The throne was now draped with a large brown and white pelt. It reminded him of one of the goats he saw in the pasture room a few months ago. He felt sorry for the poor animal.
“You wanted to see me?”

“Sit.”

Mother was young again. Both, Elsa and he wanted to know how she did it, how she made herself young every spring. He overheard hags talk about it. They were jealous and wanted to know her secret, but mother didn’t tell them either. She had guarded this secret for many winters, long before the twins were born, and wouldn’t make an exception for anyone.

He dared to look her in the eye to judge what mood she was in but it was hard to tell today. She appeared mostly bored. He supposed her mood would be determined by how well he did. No pressure.

She pointed at a small box placed on the ground and he shuffled to it unenthusiastically.

“Did I say shamble like an injured sloth? Ugh. What have I done to deserve this?!”

He sped up and sat down cross-legged obediently. This was not a good start of the lesson.

While mother’s side of the room was illuminated by sets of candles on plates, the center of the room was rather dark so he set his lantern on the ground next to him. It always made him feel a little better when there was a light source close by.

“What’s a sloth?”

“When will you get it in your head? No. Questions.”

Jack stared at a crack on the floor, afraid that if he looked at her again, she would get even angrier. He knew, of course, that she hated questions, but sometimes, he couldn’t help himself. He was curious. What could a sloth be? Was it a breed of a goat? Maybe it had short legs and that’s why it was slower. Why was it injured? Maybe it was trying to jump over the fence but couldn’t because of the short legs. He imagined this sloth to be a slow short-legged goat who’s less jumpy than the other goats.

Mother crossed one leg over the other and rearranged her gown so it would elegantly fall around her. She sure liked to prove how beautiful she was, but he didn’t know why she tried so hard. She was surrounded by hags. It didn’t take much to look beautiful around here.

“Your sister was able to complete the task in front of you last year already. I am anxious to see how much she’s improved this winter. What have you accomplished?”

Jack looked at his fingers and picked at a piece of skin that was sticking out. Elsa created a replica of mother’s ice throne this winter. Her creations were becoming very accurate and very impressive. He was never going to be as skilled as his sister, but he learned something new as well. It was something that he figured out by accident. He wondered if it would be enough to impress mother and get her to say something nice. Maybe if he tried hard enough.

“I learned a new trick,” he said and a tiny hope flickered in his heart.

She leaned back in her seat and ran her slender fingers through the shaggy fur. He flinched, thinking how much better the goat would have preferred to be stroked when it was still alive.

“If you could not disappoint me at least once, that would be most refreshing.”

His mouth felt dry as he suddenly wished he hadn’t said anything. She was expecting something big
but his trick wasn’t anything like that. She was probably going to laugh at it. She never liked anything he had ever done.

“Is that what you wanted to show me? How you can sit and do nothing?” she mocked him. “That’s not new. I’ve seen you do that trick plenty of times.”

Jack took a long breath in and out, and braced himself. He had to do it. Mother was waiting. He looked at the ceiling, focused on specific points of the uneven rock surface and willed for tiny freckles of frost to form there. He held onto them for a few more seconds so they would properly shape and let go. The tiny frostflakes slowly floated down mimicking falling snow. He did it! A small smile crept onto his lips. It was a cool trick.

It took him a while to get it right. At first, the flakes were too large and fell down too fast. If they were too small, it didn’t look like snow. He had to strike just the right balance of size for this to work and felt proud of his achievement.

Mother had shown them real snow. Every winter, she would make it snow in a large cavern so they could see what winter looked like. They loved it. It was the best playtime they ever had. She said that she could create massive blizzards when outside. He would love to see what they looked like. They sounded exciting but she never took them with her. She promised that if they were good students, one day she would and they would create winter outside together. Would he ever be a good student?

Mother stood up and approached. “Do it again.”

He repeated the steps and more frostflakes floated down from the ceiling. It wasn’t as nice as mother’s snow, it lasted only for a few seconds before they all fell down, but he thought it was cool. He was happy with himself for having figured it out.

She held her hand out and caught a few flakes.

“It’s not snow. You’re using frost?”

He nodded in response and tried to judge her reaction but her face didn’t betray it. He wasn’t sure if she approved of his method or not. Was she pleased that he learned something new on his own or was she going to be disappointed again because it wasn’t actual snow?

“You got my hopes up needlessly then,” she declared and went back to sit on her throne. “You’re supposed to grow your powers, not invent new tricks.”

Jack wondered what she could have meant. He understood that by using his magic on plants, he could kill the life inside them, but he never had to catch them. He knew better than to keep mother waiting so he lifted the lid of the box and froze while staring at it.
The box contained something he had never seen before. He put his hand inside and very carefully pulled it out because contrary to what mother said, it wasn’t trying to get away. He gasped, finally recognizing what it was. It looked very similar to a drawing in Elsa’s book. The colors were different, but it had to be it.

“It’s a butterfly,” he said full of wonder.

“And you’re a genius,” mother said, but her tone sounded like she meant the opposite. “Now, kill it.”

The butterfly had black wings, long antennae, and skinny legs. It stood on his finger with its wings folded up. He couldn’t believe how pretty it was, so delicate and pure. It was amazing. And then, it opened its wings. On the other side, they were a blast of colors, red and blue and yellow, a stark contrast to the different shades of grey which surrounded him. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Only now it hit him - it moved, it was alive.

His body became as rigid as the cold smooth stone he sat on because he finally understood what mother meant. She wanted him to kill this defenseless creature.

He brought his finger up to the hairy body of the butterfly and it flapped its wings slowly.

Was it scared?

He had to obey mother.

There was a drop of blood on his finger from when he pulled on his skin earlier.

Did butterflies have blood? Did they feel pain? What would it feel when he used his magic on it?

He had to do it. Mother was waiting.

While the butterfly couldn’t speak, he felt as if it was begging him to not do it.

Was he imagining it? Maybe, but he knew it deep down that it wasn’t right. It didn’t feel right. He didn’t have a right to end its life.

“Why?” he asked.

Why did mother want him to kill this innocent animal? What would that achieve? He already knew how to use his frost. Why should he use it on this poor creature? What kind of lesson was this?

Mother sounded annoyed.

“Questions. Always questions. It’s so simple, even you should be able to understand. Kill. It. It would be easier if you could freeze it like your sister, but really, I don’t care how. If you can only produce frost, use as much frost as you have to. Frost it until it dies.”

Jack could feel a shift in his mind. It was as if a lantern that was always dark had finally been lit up. A thought that he never dared to have occurred to him - he didn’t have to do everything mother told him to do.

He slowly raised his eyes and looked straight into hers.

“I won’t.”

Mother’s face changed from the previous look of annoyance to a blank mask.
“What did you just say?”

No one said ‘no’ to mother. He gulped. He just did.

‘Stay strong. You can do this,’ he told himself.

Jack felt scared of the way mother was looking at him but did not back down. The lantern shone brightly within him.

“I won’t kill it.”

Mother’s stare looked like she was about to unleash his worst nightmares at him but he did not look away. He knew deep down that he was right. This was the right thing to do no matter how angry it made her.

“What do you think you are?” she said quietly and it sounded scarier than if she had yelled it. “What do you think you are? I did not labor all those years with you for my enjoyment. You exist to follow my directions. If not for me, you wouldn't exist at all.”

Jack felt tears sting in his eyes but refused to let them come out. He would not cry in front of mother.

‘Be strong,’ he told himself again.

He knew that his magic could kill, but just because it could, it didn’t mean that he should use it like that. He would never kill life.

“I will not kill animals. You can’t make me do it!”

The room was so quiet, he could hear a pulse in his ear. He disobeyed mother. He was in so much trouble. What punishment would she give him?

She raised from her throne and stared down at him. Her tone was sharp like a blade, each word cutting into him, making him flinch.

"Insufferable brat. An embarrassment to my name. I should just be done with you right here, right now. If not for your sister…”

She swiftly glided up to him and grabbed him by his shirt so that her face was only inches away from his. Her words were harsh but didn’t affect him as much as they would have in the past because he knew that he was right and she was wrong. Mother was a bad person. Knowing that gave him the strength to not cave in no matter what threat she used on him.

She tilted her head like she was trying to make a difficult decision.

"Hags keep begging me to give you over to them. I always refuse their requests, thinking that their vile hands are unworthy of my children, but you just might be an exception.”

There was a strange look in her eye. Whatever she meant about hags, it sounded like he would be separated from Elsa and that would be the worst thing in the world. He couldn’t imagine how to live without his sister. She was the only good person in his life.

Out of nowhere, mother started laughing as if giving him to hags was a punchline of a joke. She smoothed out the shirt she had wrinkled as if she suddenly cared what he looked like. She was thoroughly confusing him with this mood change. Laughing was meant for funny moments but she didn’t look like she was having fun - she still looked rather scary.
“But fret not, child,” she continued in a softer tone, “it’s not today. One day you will get a chance to be useful to me. In the meantime, I don’t even want to see your face. Get out of my sight.”

“Yes, mother.”

He left, grabbing his lantern in one hand, and hiding the butterfly in the other.

As he walked to his room, the little critter flew away. He hoped the pretty little thing could find its way out. This was no place for such delicate creatures.

The closer he got to his chamber, the more he started to realize that this wasn’t a place for him either.

Mother’s words kept ringing in his head. She didn’t take well his refusal to kill animals. He hadn’t seen her this angry since… he couldn’t remember. Most of the time, she was just annoyed with him but this was different. And why did she laugh? That wasn’t like her.

He walked in, closed the door and sat on his bed.

Elsa was playing with dolls she made out of rope. The rope was tied at the end, that was the head, and the tip of it was spread out to resemble hair. He didn’t know how she always found ways to create new things out of old things. She was good at that just like she was good at everything else.

He observed her as she played, hoping her imaginary world would bring him comfort but it didn’t. Instead, all of his worries piled up on top of each other. The hags wanted to take him away. Mother was probably right now thinking of a new way to punish him. And she would keep forcing them both to do bad things. No matter how much she insisted on it, he wasn’t stupid. He knew that this wasn’t the end and he hadn’t won that argument. She would keep trying and already admitted that she had put Elsa through the same exercise last year. It hurt to think that his sister was forced to kill animals for mother. Why did she insist on such awful lessons?

He pulled up his knees and hugged them. He was scared of what would happen next. But most of all, he’d had enough of feeling helpless like this.

“What’s wrong?” Elsa asked.

He was strong until now, but now that she asked him, he couldn’t stop the tears anymore.

“Elsa, I can’t do this. I can’t do any more lessons with mother. It’s wrong. She wants to make us do bad things so we would become like her.”

“We won’t.”

“How can you be sure? She keeps forcing me. I’m afraid… Elsa, we are like her in so many ways, it could happen. And I can’t. I don’t want to turn into a monster like her.”

“You won’t, Jack. You are nothing like her.”

“But what about you? She’s doing it to you too, isn’t she?”

It angered him that mother had already started the process of turning his sister into a replica of herself. He couldn’t imagine a world where Elsa was no longer the loving gentle sister he knew but a cold and heartless monster. Who was he kidding, he wasn’t safe from that fate either. Would he have the strength to disobey mother again? Would he recognize every lesson that was wrong?

Elsa sat down next to him. She still had her rope dolls in her hands and they limply laid on her knees.
He wished he could be a doll and live in Elsa’s imaginary world instead of this one.

“I’m scared to disobey her,” she said quietly.

He knew that. Elsa wouldn’t use her magic against animals on her own. It was all because of mother.

They sat on the bed together. He didn’t know what to do or how to change their fate. He wished there was something he could hope for but there was no one who could help them. They only had each other.

Jack sniffed. “I don’t want to live like this. I can’t, Elsa. I can’t anymore.”

Elsa set her jaw. She had one of those serious looks on her like she was thinking hard, and then she smiled.

“We’ll run away.”

“What?”

“We’ll find a way. We’ll run away and we’ll grow up to be who we want to be, do what we want to do. We will not become like her.”

Jack wiped his eyes and tried to imagine if it was possible. He knew that there was a world outside. Mother would sometimes disappear for days, so did the hags. And they would come back with things, things that couldn’t be found here. Most of the time, it was food, but sometimes they had these mysterious objects. There was a world out there where these objects came from.

“Outside… Can we really do it?”

“What other option do we have?”

If mother could somehow get outside, so could they. There were many tunnels in the mountain. If only they found the right one, they could escape.

“We’ll run away together.”

“Together.”

Jack woke up with a start. The remnants of the dream lingered on his mind. It was a memory of the day when they decided that they had to escape from their mother. He often wondered if Elsa really wanted to run away or if she only did it for him. She didn’t have as much of a problem with mother as he did. Would she have been happy to stay? Well, maybe happy wasn’t the right word. Mother was never a loving person. She probably wasn’t capable of love, but at least, she treated Elsa well, rewarded her, praised her. Maybe Elsa would have found some form of happiness eventually.

No. He shouldn’t question their decision to escape together. Elsa was definitely happier now than she ever was there. She had friends and access to more books than she could read in her lifetime. This school and this life were perfect for her. He was sure she didn’t regret leaving mother.

It was time to get ready for another school day. Merlin was already up, Colin was refusing to wake up and covered his head with a comforter. These were his friends. He never knew how much he wanted to have friends before he met them. The thought of losing them made his chest feel tight. How long did he have left with them?

Yesterday’s argument with McGonagall hung over his head along with the question: What now?
What could he do to prevent getting kicked out of Hogwarts? The whole reason why he ran away from mother and dragged his sister along was to avoid being forced to do what he believed was wrong. He didn’t want to live the way mother wanted them to. The history was repeating itself. There were practices at this school which were required by all students which he didn’t agree with, which he thought were plain wrong. He didn’t escape mother’s wrong teachings just to fall into wrong teachings elsewhere.

But this time, he didn’t want to run. He had many reasons to stay. Two of them were right here in the room with him.

“Rise and shine, you two,” Merlin ordered. “It’s a brand new day, and I have a feeling, it will be a good one. We’re going to the Great Hall right now.”

“I had such a strange dream,” Colin said, yawning. “I lost my cat and was looking for him in the woods. I couldn’t remember his name so I called him by my dog’s name. How do you forget your pet’s name? Anyway, you know what’s weird? I don’t have a cat.”

Jack wished he had dreams like that, but all of his usually centered on mother, either memories or cruel products of his imagination. Would there ever come a day when he was no longer scared of her? Or maybe it wasn’t her he was scared of. Though he tried to not think of it, he still feared that no matter how far he ran, he couldn’t escape his fate and would turn into a monster just like she wanted.

“I just remembered,” Colin mumbled and clutched his covers tightly, “I need to finish up homework. I’ll catch you guys later.”

“No,” Merlin said firmly and threw the covers off of Colin. “You are getting up. Bring the homework with you. I’ll help you if you need it, but we need to get there immediately.”

“Why?”

“Well… I’m really hungry, and I need you there with me.”

“Why?”

“Just come with me. Are you my friends or not?”

They made their way to the Great Hall, but instead of sitting in their usual spot in the middle, Merlin steered them closer to the staff table. He seemed to look for a specific spot with a specific view but wouldn’t explain why. Instead, he grinned wide and rubbed his hands together as if he was anticipating something. He was usually a pretty serious guy so this behavior was odd. Jack had never seen him so eager before.

“What are you so excited about?”

“Me? Nothing specific. I guess, I woke up excited. I can’t wait to see what the house-elves prepared for us this morning. Maybe there’s porridge today. I love a good porridge.”

“You’re excited about porridge?”

“Yeah. You’re not?”

Jack shook his head and decided to ignore the strange behavior. He had more important things to worry about than Merlin’s giddiness.
There were very few students in the Hall. At the staff table, the huge gamekeeper was already seated along with Professor Sprout and Professor Dumbledore. Colin got started with his homework and Merlin helped him out.

The food started to show up on the table and Jack stabbed a stack of fried tomatoes with his fork. McGonagall was going to join the other staff soon. Maybe he would ignore her for now. He couldn’t bear to think about her and their argument.

More students and staff started to arrive and he expected the Hall to become louder with the noise of talking and clanging of silverware, but the noise was subdued. Everyone was still shaken up after Halloween. Even McGonagall seemed concerned. If the teachers were worried, the situation was probably serious, but was it as serious as his problems?

Jack put an elbow on the table and supported his head with his hand. Food didn’t taste right today. He wasn’t kicked out yet, but he knew that he wouldn’t last in this school much longer. They were going to kick him out and not for the reason he feared before.

He didn’t tell Elsa what happened yet. She sat at the Ravenclaw table and chatted with Luna. He was glad that she looked happy. She could stay in school so at least one of them would get to continue this experience. Where would he go? He had nowhere to go and couldn’t imagine living somewhere alone.

“Jack, is something wrong?” Merlin asked and Jack couldn’t even muster a fake smile.

“You’re not eating porridge,” he pointed out to deflect attention from himself.

“Oh, yes. You’re right. There it is!” Merlin said and put his other plate to the side to make space for a tureen.

Merlin kept glancing at the staff table while he talked. It was as if he was waiting for something.

“So, tell me. What’s bothering you? And don’t say that it’s nothing. You’re a bad liar anyway.”

Jack cough-laughed at that. Bad liar. Right. How about this little bit where he wasn’t even human? What would his friends think if they knew what he was capable of? Would they accept him or treat him like a monster?

“Nothing much. But there’s a chance I might be getting expelled.”

“What?” both Merlin and Colin exclaimed.

Saying the words made it sound even more real. Maybe he should stop talking, he didn’t want to think about it anymore, but now that he started, his mouth didn’t want to close.

“I only got here. I can’t believe I’m getting expelled for who I am and not for what I am…”

“What are you talking about?” Merlin asked, turning to him.

Jack took a long breath in. He shouldn’t have said that. He needed to stop saying what he was thinking. On the other hand, Merlin was actually a good listener and usually had pretty good advice to offer. Maybe he would understand.

“McGonagall is pissed at me. Remember how I get in trouble when I open my mouth? I did it again.”
“What did you say?”

“Well, she demanded to know what I was thinking, wanted to adjust my attitude or something. And then, I don’t know, I told her what I was thinking, which was what she asked for.” He ran a hand through his hair a few times, messing it up. “Why do people ask to hear your thoughts if what they really want to hear is their own opinion and not yours?”

“Jack, what did you say?”

“Transfiguration is unnatural.”

Colin choked on his bread. They both checked if he needed assistance but he took a swig of his drink and coughed. He was okay.

Merlin shook his head and turned back to Jack.

“I imagine that got her angry.”

“No. That wasn’t it. She was trying to change my mind about it. Somehow, the conversation included rodents and she thought I called her a rodent. I didn’t. I don’t even remember what I said.”

The corner of Merlin’s lip lifted as if he found it funny but there was nothing funny about this situation.

“What did she do?”

“Points from Gryffindor and detention.”

“That’s not the end of the world. It sounds like she already punished you. You’re not getting expelled.”

“But Merlin, the thing is, nothing changed. I don’t want to argue with her anymore but that doesn’t change the fact that I still think the same way. It’s just wrong what they want us to do in that class. I refuse. I won’t do those spells. I won’t be able to pass Transfiguration and they will kick me out.”

“Maybe that’s not the only way.” Merlin pointed his spoon at him but then his eyes widened and a smile formed on his face. “Uhm, We’ll discuss this further just… Colin, Jack, if you’d humor me for a moment. What do you think of Professor Snape today?”

They all looked at their Potions Master who was making his way to his usual seat which was close to the Slytherin table. He was his usual dark and moody self.

“He looks like he’s in a bad mood but he’s always in a bad mood,” Colin answered.

“Keep looking, Colin,” Merlin said and appeared to be excited again. “You too, Jack. Just tell me what you think of Snape this morning.”

Jack had no idea what had gotten into Merlin but paid more attention to Snape who pulled out his chair and sat down. Immediately, the chair broke under him and he fell down, making a lot of clatter as plates and drinks toppled on top of him.

Colin laughed out loud along with several other students but then shut up immediately, seeing that Snape raised himself with a murderous look on his face. Everyone in the Great Hall was now watching the staff table and whispers were passed around.

Snape said some spell which put the chair back together and sat down, now slowly and carefully.
Within seconds, the chair broke again with the same result and a few more laughs sounded in the Hall. Snape got up promptly and looked like he would curse the next person to laugh. The noise died down again. Everyone was watching, waiting in silence.

Snape waved his wand angrily and the broken chair flew against the wall where it shattered. He pulled a vacant chair from the seat next to him and sat in that one. That chair broke too, sending his feet in the air above the table and he cursed out loud. This time, the whole Great Hall boomed with laughter, including some of the staff.

Snape got up and looked around viciously, but this time, the laughter did not die down. Even the Slytherins were going at it. He raised his chin high and stomped out of there.

Colin was bent over the table and was laughing so hard, he had to take a break to breathe.

“Hide your chairs,” Fred Weasley, sitting near them, commented loud. “Snape’s got a new superpower.”

“You mean, he’s the Amazing Chairman?” George asked.

This put Colin back in a laughing fit along with the other Gryffindors. He finally calmed down and wiped tears out of his eyes.

“Oh, guys. This is the best day ever. I needed this laugh.”

“You’re welcome,” Merlin said with a toothy grin.

“What?” Colin leaned in and whispered, “Did you do something to his chair?”

“No, no, no, no. I did nothing to his chair. But I did drag you here early today, didn’t I? So we got to see it and not just hear about it.”

“You’re right,” Colin said and clapped him on the shoulder.

“So, now, if any more Slytherins bug you in his class, just remember how ridiculous he looked when his feet dangled in the air.”

Colin smiled broadly but then pouted.

“Oh, Merlin. How I wish I had my camera! Can you imagine if I had captured the whole thing? All three,” he started to chuckle again, “broken chairs?”

“Oh, dollops!” Merlin smacked the table with his fist playfully. “That’s a shame. Maybe next time.”

Jack chuckled and also tried to remember this moment. Snape’s feet helplessly dangling in the air was a great memory to have.

Over at the staff table, the teachers were whispering to each other and were as amused by Snape’s chair problems as the students were. Professor Flitwick fixed the last chair Snape used and then carefully lowered himself to sit in it. The chair did not break. He got up and walked back to his seat while pursing his lips. Professor Sprout got all giddy and tried it too. The chair had no problems. It seemed to be a Snape-only issue.

Then, Jack’s eyes fell on McGonagall and he remembered his predicament. He was dreading his next Transfiguration class. Maybe he could skip it, just not show up, fake being sick or something. He just didn’t want to face her.
“I didn’t forget about your issue, Jack,” Merlin said. “Maybe I can help you. Tell me more about what’s going on.”

Chapter End Notes

The twins’ mother has her own story - The Well of Youth. The flashback scene you read here has her POV in Chapter 5. Check it out for a behind-the-scenes look at what was going on here.
“Too many classes today,” Merlin complained while going down the stairs to the Potions classroom.

He needed time to think, to plan, to investigate. The school was in danger and what was he doing? Sitting in a classroom, pretending to be clueless.

“I know what you mean,” Colin murmured and looked around him with worry.

Ever since Halloween, Slytherins had been even nastier than usual to Colin and other Muggle-born students. The small boy didn’t know yet why. Merlin decided to tell his friends today. The legend of the Chamber of Secrets was not a secret so there was no need for him to hide what he knew about it. It was safer for Colin to know what danger he was in.

Dumbledore was quiet about the event. He said nothing to the students beside an assurance that whoever attacked Mrs. Norris would be dealt with. Merlin did not like how lightly the issue was treated. If he were the Headmaster, he would have handled it very differently, but he couldn’t do anything about that so he focused on what he could do - find who was responsible and keep his friends safe.

His mood lifted when he noticed just how miserable Professor Snape was. The grumpy Potions Master remained standing during the entire lesson. He sauntered around the tables, his hands forming a triangle in his front with only the fingertips touching. His usual chair was nowhere to be found. He probably vanished it in a fit of rage. Merlin was specific in his curse. Only chairs would break under Snape’s weight. If he sat on a table or leaned on a desk, nothing would happen. But Snape wasn’t the type of person who would relax on top of a desk. He was all about appearances, there was a specific image he wanted to convey, and lounging on furniture was not part of it.

Merlin was thinking over the best way to make the wizard understand why he was cursed. The purpose was to teach him a lesson, get him to change his ways. Merlin considered leaving a message, instructing him to treat all students equally, no matter what House they were from, and to punish those who used inappropriate language in his class, which any respectable teacher would have done. But he wondered if he should wait a while, let the message You’ve been cursed sink in a little deeper, have more effect. Also, he didn’t want the message to be associated with the Chamber of Secrets message, seeing as both events happened at such close proximity of each other.

A lot was happening at the same time and Merlin hoped he could juggle it all. An additional task was bestowed upon him by the white-haired boy who stood next to him right now. While thinking over which first-year student could have been responsible for the events on Halloween, Jack was the first that came to his mind because the boy showed up to the feast late. His reluctant suspicions increased when he noticed Jack act very uncharacteristically over the next couple of days. He suspected that the behavior was a result of guilt or fear of being caught, but then, the boy surprised him in the most unexpected way.

While probing Jack for an explanation as to what bothered him, he discovered that he was upset about the morality of magic practiced at Hogwarts. It was the most refreshing problem. The boy reminded him of himself when he was young. Merlin used to be very opposed to harming innocent creatures and wanted to protect them all. With time, he had been placed in many situations where his principles were tested. Each experience further expanded the gray zone with “the ends justify the means” philosophy and he grew insensitive to issues which used to bother him. It was nice to be reminded of what mattered. The boy was right. All life mattered. If there was a choice, the option that caused less harm to others, human or not, should be chosen.
Considering the innocence of it all, Merlin dropped his suspicions of Jack and wanted to help instead. After mulling over the idea of what he could do, he finally came up with the best option - he would introduce him to Old Religion. He explained it to the boy last night. Jack was so relieved, he actually hugged him. It was touching to know that he could lift the boy’s spirits.

Jack didn’t know yet that Merlin wasn’t just helping him. He also hoped to achieve something he was close to giving up on - passing on his knowledge. It was all going to work out well for both of them. He would kill several birds with one stone and was excited for it.

The timing was not ideal. With the Chamber of Secrets threat looming over them, it wasn’t the best time to split his attention into multiple directions, but he had to make it work. He was going to do it all.

The sound of breaking wood and an angry grumble snapped Merlin back to current time. Snape apparently leaned on a chair of one of the Slytherin students and it broke. Merlin stifled a snigger and Snape shot him a warning look. His face was a mask of permanent contempt.

“He’s still breaking chairs?” Jack whispered and Merlin tried to remain calm even though he was in stitches on the inside.

He might have cursed him to teach the wizard a lesson, but he couldn’t deny how fun it was to watch. The effect was even more comical than expected. This was one of his best long-running pranks.

After the lesson, when they walked towards the Great Hall, Colin kept recalling the look on Snape's face when the chair broke.

"He looked like, Oh, no. I didn't even sit in it. And then he looked like, Are they laughing? They're laughing at me! And then his face was like, I'll kill you all with pieces of this broken chair. And I couldn't take it anymore. I had to look away before I really laughed and he made me drink my Herbicide Potion as punishment. I don't know how long this chair thing will last but I love it."

They arrived and took their usual spot in the middle of the Gryffindor table.

"He didn't come," Jack said, craning his neck to see the staff. "He hasn't shown up for the last few meals. You think he doesn't eat anymore?"

Merlin felt a lot of satisfaction at the thought that Snape was afraid to show up in public.

"He probably eats in his office, while standing."

While they ate, he told the boys the story of the Chamber of Secrets and warned them about the danger it posed.

Colin was understandably disturbed.

“Slytherins must know. That’s why they’ve been extra mean the last few days.”

“I’m guessing that someone told them already.”

Jack’s eyes were lit up with fascination.

“I wonder what’s inside the Chamber.”

“Wouldn’t the monster be old and shriveled up by now?” Colin asked.
“Nah,” Merlin said. “With enough magic, some creatures can live for thousands of years.”

“Maybe it’s a skeleton, like one of those we saw during Halloween feast.” Colin’s eyes widened. “Merlin, it makes sense! One of the skeletons opened the Chamber of Secrets!”

Merlin imagined a clackety skeleton walking through the Hogwarts halls, opening secret chambers and leaving messages on walls.

“How can you write in blood if your hand falls off every couple of minutes?”

“Maybe the Chamber is invisible and that’s why no one found it?” Jack asked thoughtfully.

“No,” Colin said, trying to be serious but failing, “Mrs. Norris was the monster and the message meant that the monster has been slain.”

Jack gasped and slammed both hands on the table.

“Whoever opens the Chamber becomes the monster!”

Colin wanted to laugh but then didn’t.

“That actually sounds plausible.”

“Right? Some kind of spell that gets released when you open it.”

Merlin had no idea what monster or spell was contained within the infamous Chamber. Anything was possible, even clackety skeletons.

“Where do you think this Chamber is? Could we go look for it?”

“Jack, don’t even think about it,” Merlin said while pointing his fork at the boy in warning.

Unfortunately, the fork wasn’t empty and the potato which Merlin had stabbed with it earlier shot out of it. Jack dodged it and the spud flew over his shoulder, landing under the Ravenclaw table.

“Missed me,” Jack chuckled and threw his own potato at Merlin who swerved out of the way.

Behind him, a Hufflepuff girl got hit with it in the head.

“Food fight?” Colin asked hopefully and Jack’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

Jack loaded a spoon and launched a carrot missile at the small boy. Colin grabbed a sausage in each hand and threw both at Jack and Merlin. Merlin managed to avoid getting hit, but then, Jack swatted the one thrown at him and it bounced off of Merlin’s nose.

“What have I done?” Merlin lamented.

His protests were of no use as the boys now hurled various vegetables at each other and other Gryffindors. The Weasley twins joined in and threw chicken bones back at them. Jack protected himself with his plate and used it like a ping-pong paddle sending bones flying around. One fell into Colin’s pumpkin juice with a splash. Colin retaliated by throwing a half-eaten lamb chop at the twins, but he missed, and it fell onto the plate of a girl sitting nearby. The girl threw a whole chicken leg at Colin and Merlin caught it in midair with spectacular finesse.

“Ooooh,” everyone nearby sounded and Merlin felt slightly smug.

And then, someone splashed him with the stew and he didn’t care who it was. It was time to pull out
magic. He made chips float and fired them at both boys like from a machine gun. Jack dipped his hand into a bowl of mashed potatoes and threw it blindly around. Some of it hit Colin in the eye and stayed on like a white eye patch. Colin closed his eyes and grabbed random items and threw them without aiming. Plates flew around like frisbees and Merlin noticed that Peeves the Poltergeist had joined them at some point and was cackling in his high pitch voice. Was that who splashed him earlier? Merlin conjured a pot of oil above the spirit and emptied it in a slow fashion. He soon regretted it when Peeves shook off his hat, sprinkling them all with oil.

A recognizable clacking of heels sounded among the sounds of laughter and Merlin took action.

“Teacher alert!” he hissed.

He vanished the bits of food from their robes, hands, and faces, and threw a hex at Peeves to send him away. The boys were still laughing and didn’t even notice what he did for them, so he quickly vanished the mess on the table as well.

The clacking stopped.

“What is happening here?” McGonagall asked behind him.

“Nothing, Professor,” Merlin answered with an innocent smile. “We were just passing food to each other.”

His friends snorted simultaneously and he hoped they didn’t mess up his perfect excuse.

“Passing?” she asked and looked around, searching for evidence of the fight.

There wasn’t any though. Everything looked in order. Everything except for the chicken bone which was still inside Colin’s mug. He hoped she didn’t notice.

She looked at Merlin intensely like she wanted to punish them with no evidence but then a hint of a smile played at the corner of her lip.

“Impressive cleanup,” she said calmly. “Do try to behave, boys.”

They watched her walk away and Merlin released the breath he was holding.

Colin tried to take a swig of juice from his mug, noticed the bone and pulled it out. Watching the drops of pumpkin juice slowly fall off the bone did it for Merlin and he bent over in a fit. He loved how fun it was to be a kid. Adults were missing out.

“We should pass food more often,” Jack said to Colin. “If that’s what it takes to make him drop the serious face.”

The Weasley twins walked over and clapped them on the back.

“We’d like to offer our congratulations on your first official Great Hall food fight.”

“Excellent technique.”

“Flawless execution.”

“Graceful finale.”

“Next time, let’s scale it up to other house tables.”
“We can assist you with that.”

“You know where to find us.”

The twins walked away and Merlin wondered if he was going to take them up on their offer. He wouldn’t mind a repeat.

Regrettably, it was time to go.

“Herbology awaits,” he grumbled and got up.

“Did you do that?” Colin asked him as they were walking out.

“Do what?”

“The mess disappeared before McGonagall got to us. Did you do that?”

Merlin hoped that the boys were so lost in their fun that they wouldn’t notice but Colin was an observant kid, wasn’t he?

“Yeah. I’m good at vanishing stuff.”

“That’s really cool. Thanks.”

Once they were in the corridor, by coincidence, Harry Potter walked just a foot away from them and a strange thing happened. A Hufflepuff student was approaching them, coming from the other direction and looking at his feet. Harry said “Hello” and the other boy jumped startled, turned around and ran away.

Harry froze in place, confused by the strange reaction.

“What did I do now?” he asked no one in particular.

“Is that boy Muggle-born by any chance?” Merlin asked and Harry looked surprised that someone answered his rhetorical question.

“Yeah, that’s Justin. He’s a second year.”

“Hiya, Harry,” Colin said excitedly.

“Hi, Colin,” Harry said quickly but his attention was on Merlin only. “Why does it matter that he’s Muggle-born?”

Merlin shrugged. “There’s a rumor going around that you opened the Chamber of Secrets so he’s probably scared. You didn’t, right?”

“I had nothing to do with it!” Harry’s voice slightly rose. Merlin hit a nerve.

He put up his hands. “I believe you. I’m on your side, Harry.”

“What does any of this have to do with Muggle-borns?”

A brilliant thought struck Merlin. This was his way into Harry’s circle of friends.

“Meet me in the common room after dinner. I’ll tell you all about the Chamber.”

“He knows the whole story, Harry,” Colin added enthusiastically. “You wait till you hear it. It’s
fascinating. I have so many theories now. I can share them with you once Merlin fills you in. I don’t know if you’re the Heir. Are you? Would you even know? We could all be related to him after all. Hey, Harry, for all we know, I could be related to you through some ancestor. We could be cousins!”

Harry’s body language made it look like he wanted to get away as soon as possible as if he could catch some disease from Colin. His eyes darted both ways as he searched for a way out and he said quickly to Merlin, “Tonight, you will tell me everything,” and scurried away.


Merlin watched the boy walk away and felt like he could dance from joy. He finally found how he could get closer to Harry. The way in was in offering something Harry wanted - Merlin’s knowledge. But maybe he shouldn’t bring Colin with him.

After dinner, Merlin waited for Harry in front of the common room fireplace where the trio liked to hang out. He was in high spirits. Everything was working out for him today.

Nearby, Percy Weasley tried to comfort his sister who looked miserable. Her eyes were red and puffy. She looked as if she hadn’t slept in a week.

“Don’t worry, Ginny. It will soon be over. Whoever did it to Mrs. Norris will get caught and expelled from the school, I’m sure of it.”

The more he talked, the more frantic the girl became. His words were not reassuring her at all.

“Do they have any clues as to who did it?” she asked in a shaky voice.

“Once they do, I’m sure they’ll tell us, Prefects, first, and you’ll be the first person I give the good news to. You look tired. Go to bed early today.”

Harry arrived with Hermione and Ron and walked up to Merlin.

Ginny hung her head and shuffled to her dorm. Percy’s eyes lingered on Ron for a moment but then he huffed and left, holding his head high. The tension between the two brothers was clearly visible.

“All is taking it all rather roughly,” Merlin commented.

“She loves cats so she’s upset about Mrs. Norris,” Ron said with a shrug. “I didn’t know she was this attached to that nasty beast but I guess it passes for a cat as well.” Ron looked after Percy who just disappeared from view. “I can’t believe that git of a brother took away five points from Gryffindor for nothing. We weren’t doing anything wrong.”

“That doesn’t make sense. What did he say the points were for?”

“He wanted us to stay away from the corridor where it happened.”

”Speaking of, Harry said that you know about the Chamber,” Hermione got straight to the point.

All three leaned in and were waiting. Merlin got comfortable and began. He was happy to share the tale with them.

”It all starts a millennium ago with Salazar Slytherin. While he was a skilled wizard and a good teacher, he was very prejudiced. I don’t know the details, but I believe that a loved one of his suffered at the hands of Muggles and as a result, his heart had nothing but hate for them. The times
were hard for those who possessed magic. Muggles persecuted wizards out of fear. In revenge, wizards like Slytherin persecuted Muggles. This conflict is the reason why we go to such lengths to hide our existence. No one wants a return of that war, especially since we’re the minority.”

“Let’s get back to Salazar. You can imagine that someone like him was not accepting of students who came from Muggle families. He considered them unworthy of being educated in the school he co-founded even if they were born with magic. He did not accept Muggle-borns into his House and wanted the other founders to follow his ideology.”

“The other founders did not agree with his views and this started a great disagreement between them. When he accepted that he couldn’t win his argument, Salazar eventually left the school. But before leaving, he left something behind, something that would complete his mission to cleanse the school of those who were unworthy. He built a secret chamber underneath the castle and hid something inside that when released, would rid the castle of Muggle-borns. No one ever found this chamber even though many looked. The legend says that Salazar enchanted the entrance so that only his heir could find it and unleash whatever is inside.”

“What’s inside the Chamber?” Harry asked.

“Some kind of monster, I imagine.”


“A thousand years is an awfully long time,” Ron cut in. “How come no other Heir opened the Chamber in all this time?”

“Who said they didn’t? In fact, the Chamber was most likely opened just about fifty years ago.”

“What?” all three of them asked in unison.

“There was a string of attacks on Muggle-borns,” Merlin answered. “Also petrified. One died and then the attacks stopped.”

“I thought the point of it was to rid the castle of all Muggle-borns. Why did they stop on just one?”

“Maybe Slytherin’s Heir was about to be caught? I don’t know.”

“Who could it be this time?” Hermione asked, lost in thought.

“Let me see,” Ron said. “Who do we know that believes in that whole blood-supremacy thing?”

“Surely, you don’t mean Malfoy.”

“It makes sense. His whole family has been in Slytherin for many generations. They pass the secret from father to son and every few decades one of them opens the chamber.”

“I’m not convinced,” Merlin cut in. “The way he was acting when Mrs. Norris was discovered - if he was the one that did it, he would’ve stayed quiet so no one would suspect him.”

“I wouldn’t dismiss him that easily,” Harry said. “You don’t know him like we do. Malfoy is still a suspect but we need proof if he’s the Heir or not.”

“He won’t admit it to us,” Hermione said. “He’ll only tell someone he trusts.”

“What can we do?”
Hermione thought for a moment and seemed to have an idea she was struggling with. “There’s a way but it would be difficult, and dangerous,” she looked around them if anyone else was listening, “and it would break so many school rules.”

The boys waited for her while she thought over her plan. Merlin wondered if Hermione was always the brains of the operations in the adventures this trio got up to.

“Are you going to tell us or what?” Ron said impatiently.

“Polyjuice Potion.”

“What’s that?” Harry and Ron asked together.

“Snape mentioned it in class. It’s a potion that will make us look like someone else. We could look like his Slytherin friends and then Malfoy would tell us everything.”

Harry was skeptical. “Are you sure that potion is safe? I don’t want to end up stuck looking like some Slytherin.”

“Of course it is,” she dismissed his concern. “The difficult part is getting the recipe. It’s in the book called Moste Potente Potions which is in the Restricted Section of the library.”

“How do we get it? Madam Pince won’t allow anyone in there unless they have permission from a professor.”

“I’ll get it for you,” Merlin offered, seeing a way to cement his involvement. “But under one condition.”

Ron looked at him skeptically.

“You’re just a first-year. You think they’ll let you in?”

Merlin smirked.

“Leave it to me. I have my ways.”

“What’s your condition?” Harry asked.

Merlin rubbed his hands together. He’s been waiting two months to get to this point.

“We’re doing this together.”
Revolution in plans

Jack woke up smiling. He wasn’t getting kicked out of Hogwarts. Merlin was his savior. He wanted to hug him again, but last time, his friend got awkward after the hug - maybe he should ease up on it a bit. What could he do? A hug was his instinctual reaction to feeling happy. So now, he had all this pent up joy inside him which wanted to spill out. He got ready quickly, told his friends he’d see them downstairs and ran out.

He ran outside to the back of the castle where the greenhouses were. It was still early so no one was there yet. He kicked off his shoes and his feet made crunching noise on the frost-covered grass. Today was probably the coolest day of the season so far. He wondered if there was a difference between the frost he created and the natural frost on the ground right now.

He plopped down to sit cross-legged and created some of his own frost. It looked the same, its magic felt the same. It was fun to compare them but it wasn’t enough. He wanted to do more, something bigger. He had all this energy inside him that just wanted to be let out.

He got an idea for what he only got to do twice in the spring before it became too warm. It was definitely cold enough now.

Jack dug his hands into the cold ground and focused on the Earth’s power. He looked up at the clouds above him and willed them to listen to him. Soon, the clouds became a different shade of gray and a light flurry started. He waited until it intensified and let go. Now that he started it, the snow would continue on its own.

“I did it!” he screamed, jumped up and ran in circles in the snow letting out happy shouts.

He ran with his arms spread out and watched the snow swirl around him. With a wave of a hand, the snow moved and he made it dance around him. He wondered just how much he could control it. As an experiment, he put out his hand and tried to control the snow above it to swirl in a small circle. Soon, it looked like a tiny tornado contained within his hand.

Fascinated with the idea, he let it grow until it enveloped his whole person. Now it was a human-sized tornado with Jack at the center. He lost control over it and it dispersed.

“Cool!” he exclaimed. Maybe one day he could grow it larger.

Snow started sticking to the ground and all surfaces received a white dusting. He ran up to a stone balustrade and scooped up some powder. He couldn’t make a snowball out of it though, it was too dry and fell through his fingers. It didn’t matter. He hopped on top of the balustrade and kicked the white dusting off to the rhythm of a made-up song.

He stopped when he felt a familiar pull. His sister sent him a signal asking where he was. He responded with his location. It was actually a wonderful idea to get her here. They could play in the snow together.

After a minute, she showed up at the door and he ran up to her.

“Elsa, it’s cold enough. It worked.”

“You did it?” She put her hand out to catch a few snowflakes.

“Yeah!” He grabbed her hands and pulled her along. “Let’s play!”
She smiled and looked like she wanted to join him but then pulled him back. “Jack, Transfiguration is about to start. We have to go. We’ll come back later.”

His smile fell. Classes? He had to attend classes?

“But it’s snowing,” he tried to appeal to the winter-spirit inside her.

“I know,” she looked just as bummed as he felt. “You can do it again later, right? Come on. We don’t want to be late.”

She pulled him indoors and he reluctantly gave in. He hung his head and shuffled after her.

They walked inside the classroom just as McGonagall got there. They sat down and she stared intently at them. Her eyes lingered on him a lot more than on Elsa. She looked infuriated. What was her problem? He wasn’t late.

She walked up to him and whispered in his ear intensely, “Where are your shoes!”

Jack gasped and looked down. Yup. His toes were happily free. “Oops. Can I go get them?”

Next to him, Elsa put her face in her hands and shook her head. “Seriously, Jack?” she whispered in disbelief. “You forgot?”

McGonagall’s lips were very tight as she mulled it over. “Where did you leave them?”

Jack swallowed and said in a small voice. “Outside.”

She looked out the window at the snowstorm beating against the glass and looked absolutely outraged.

Instead of answering, she grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the classroom.

“I must take care of an urgent matter,” she said to the class in a very controlled tone. “Class, read chapter five in the meantime,”

Once out in the corridor, she closed the door and dragged Jack further away. “I cannot believe that I have to say this, but why on Merlin’s beard did you leave your shoes outside? Did you take them off while out there? In the snow???”

Jack didn’t know what else to do so he just nodded.

“The amount of trouble I have with you,” she murmured with closed eyes.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” he said quietly. He didn’t get it why she always made such a big deal out of it.

“Where? Where did you leave them?”

He led her outside. The snow nicely covered everything now and he felt proud. He did that. He was a proper Winter Spirit now.

“Please, tell me you know where you left them,” McGonagall sounded desperate.

Jack walked into the snow and it crunched under his feet very satisfyingly.

“My snow,” he whispered to himself.
“Oh, no. Don’t go there barefoot.”

She ran after him but he smiled at her. “Cold doesn’t bother me, Professor. You really shouldn’t worry.”

She did not look like she believed him though.

He looked around at the ground. He hoped that his shoes would be noticeable under the snow but they were not. It all looked very smooth.

He could try to lift the snow off the ground. He’d never tried to control this much snow at a time and wasn’t sure if it was possible. He looked back at McGonagall. Should he do it in front of her?

She must have interpreted his look for a plea for help because she pulled out her wand.

“Accio shoes,” she said firmly.

Three shoes flew out of the snow and landed in front of him. Two were his, and one looked like a girl’s shoe. He picked them all up but was a bit disappointed. He wished she hadn’t done that spell because he wanted to try that snow trick. Did he have enough power to do that? Maybe it would work even better if he tried to use a wand. That was a cool idea. He would try this later when he was alone.

He was pulled by the hood of his robe as McGonagall dragged him inside.

“Don’t just stand here like this! You’ll get frostbite.”

“A frostbite?”

She said it like it was a bad thing but it sounded fun. Frost didn’t have teeth but maybe he could make teeth out of frost. Who would he want to bite with frost teeth?

“It’s when your toes freeze and have to be cut off!” she said sharply.

Once they were inside, she brushed the snow off and fussed over him.

“Professor,” he said, trying to stop her, “I’m serious. Cold doesn’t bother me.”

She yanked the shoes out of his hands and waved her wand at each with a spell which dried them off. Then, she shoved his two in his hands and threw the spare one on the floor in anger.

“Thank you,” he said quietly and stuffed on the loafers. That spell she used was still working, making them uncomfortably warm. He hoped it would wear off eventually.

She didn’t say anything else to him but straightened up and walked back to her classroom.

They walked in and he quietly slipped into his seat. She started the lesson as if nothing had happened but the whole time, she avoided looking at him. He wondered why she was in such a bad mood. So he left his shoes in the snow. Why was it such a big deal? Then, he remembered that she might have been mad at him because of that rodent incident. He hoped she would get over it soon. He did.

During the practical part of the class, he was the last student who had a matchstick on his table. He looked over to Elsa’s shiny needle with jealousy.

“It’s not so easy indoors,” she whispered to him. “We need to be closer to Earth to channel it. So instead, use the castle.”
Jack had to admit that she was right. The castle was like a sponge, magic was imbued in the stone walls, even in its air, and it felt as if it was alive. He could always feel it. In fact, sometimes it overwhelmed him and he felt like he would lose his mind if he didn’t go outside. If he could just tap into it, he could use it. He tried to focus, closed his eyes and thought about the pulsing of the magic around him.

He cleared his mind and the noises of the classroom faded into the background. He opened himself up to feel everything around him. He could feel the magic of each individual person in the room. He felt his sister, whose magic was just like his, he felt other students and McGonagall. He also felt one source of magic which was very different from the others. Merlin always felt like that. Jack didn’t know why he felt so different but he suspected that his friend had some serious secrets of his own. It wasn’t his business.

Then, he probed further and felt different small objects around the classroom. These were the magical objects on the shelves which were up against the wall. He was getting closer.

He spread out until he felt it. It was like an unmoving source, grounded, grand, and everlasting. Very powerful magic rested within these walls. He struggled to tap into it. It wasn’t as easy as channeling the Earth. It resisted him, and he felt as if it touched him back, probed his magic, checking who dared disturb its slumber. Whatever the castle magic felt in him though, it must have been satisfactory because the uneasy feeling of being examined eased up and he was allowed to interact with the power.

His wand became warm and he knew that it was time. He opened his eyes and focused on the match in front of him.

“Acufors,” he said confidently.

The match transformed into a needle. He picked it up and poked the sharp end with his finger. It was a real needle. He did it. He really did it.

Someone put a pebble on the table and he looked up. McGonagall was right in front of him. Was she watching him the whole time? He felt a little uncomfortable about that.

“The spell is Fibufors,” she said calmly. “Same wand movement.”

Did she really expect him to do the button spell? He knew that the rest of the students had been working on it for a while. He’d been so depressed in this class lately that he tuned out, didn’t pay much attention when she taught the others how to do this. He wasn’t confident about this spell at all.

“Try it,” she said.

Elsa put her hand on his in encouragement. She was counting on him and he didn’t want to disappoint her. If he could do it, she definitely could too. She was better at this stuff anyway. He had to succeed for his sister.

He closed his eyes again and tried to clear his mind of all doubts. He reached out to connect to the castle’s magic, and this time, it welcomed him easily and lent its power to him without a protest. He opened his eyes and focused on the pebble while picturing a button in his mind.

“Fibufors.”

The spell worked. A shiny black button sat on the table and he stared at it in amazement.

“You did it,” Elsa exclaimed and gave him a quick hug. “I knew you could do it.”
McGonagall cleared her throat and he hesitantly looked up at her. She nodded in approval but her face remained that of a strict teacher.

“I’m glad you improved your attitude, Jack. This doesn’t change the fact that you have detention. Come to me after this class, and I’ll explain it to you.”

“Yes, Professor.”

She turned to walk away but then stopped. “What changed your mind about transfiguration magic?”

He wondered what he should tell her. Well, there was no need to keep it a secret. They were going to have to talk to her about this soon anyway.

“My friend, Merlin, helped me understand that you wouldn’t force me to do something that was against my religion, even for school exams.”

“Your what?”

She blinked a few times and Jack attempted to not smirk. She was not expecting that.

“What religion is that?”

“The Old Religion.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“So?”

She glowered at him and he tried to maintain an innocent look on his face even though he was doing a victory dance inside. Merlin was right. Playing the religion card was the way out. It was perfect.

“We’ll talk about this later,” she said and walked away.

Elsa leaned to him and whispered in his ear, “What is going on?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“You better,” she whispered fiercely. He had a feeling that she did not like that she was hearing of his plan only now. He’d only found out about it. It wasn’t like he was hiding it from her.

By the end of the lesson, they were both caught up with the other students and could perform all the spells. McGonagall told him that he could serve his detention this weekend with Professor Sprout who needed help in the greenhouses. Jack thanked her and left feeling very cheeky. She had no idea that he loved spending his time in the greenhouses. This detention thing wasn’t so bad after all.

During lunchtime, he invited Elsa to sit with his friends. Luna tagged along as well. They all sat at the Gryffindor table and Jack dug into his food. He missed breakfast and was starving.

“I’ll let Merlin explain.”

“What am I explaining?”

“The thing with the Old Religion,” he said between bites. “Elsa wants to know.”

“Oh, yes. You should know. So, Jack said he was in trouble with McGonagall because she didn’t agree with his belief that animals shouldn’t be used in transfigurations. Since that type of
transfiguration is exactly what it takes to pass this class, he was afraid that he was doomed to fail it. You’re with me so far?”

Elsa nodded. Colin leaned forward attentively. Luna picked on some food with her hands.

“So, I asked him some more questions about what else he believed in” Merlin continued, “and decided to help him. What we need to make the teachers respect his beliefs is to call them by a different name. If he calls his beliefs a religion, they will have no choice but to take it seriously.”

Elsa put her hand up, interrupting.

“Wait, that’s what you meant by Old Religion? Are you telling me, you’re making up a religion just so you can avoid doing a spell? That’s too much, Jack. Even for you.”

“But it’s not made up!” Jack said. “Tell her, Merlin.”

“I practice Old Religion.”

Elsa stared at Merlin in surprise and he smiled at her kindly.

She blinked a few times but then looked back at Jack.

“You’re adopting Merlin’s religion just to get through one class?”

“Here’s the thing, Elsa,” Merlin butted in. “He’s not changing any of his beliefs. Old Religion is the belief in the power of nature, in the magic of nature. Ancient Druids believed that nature deserved to be revered and protected, that all life was precious. That is what Jack believes as well.” Jack nodded repeatedly to confirm and Merlin continued, “Jack has been practicing the values of Old Religion in its purest form, equivalent to the Druids’ ideology, without knowing that he was.”

Merlin paused for the words to sink in. Then, he continued, “I am ready to back him up and take his stance regarding Transfiguration.”

“And Potions,” Jack added.

Merlin paused and Jack knew why. He hadn’t told him yet what bothered him about Potions, but if they could use Old Religion to change requirements of Transfiguration, they had to try the same there.

Merlin continued, “We’ll talk to McGonagall and we’ll probably have to talk to the Headmaster. Snape will be harder to handle but we can try. I don’t know what the specific laws are, but I think that the school is required to accommodate our religious beliefs. I am confident that we will succeed in this. Now, the question is, what about you, Elsa?”

Elsa’s eyes grew wide.

“Me? You want me to practice your religion?”

“It’s up to you. If you have no problems transfiguring animals, feel free to continue doing what you’re doing. But if you want to join your brother… I think he would like that. I will gladly share what I know with whoever wants to learn.”

“Will you guys have, like, masses and stuff?” Colin interrupted them. “I’ve never heard of this religion. I have soooo many questions.”

“No, no masses. If we wanted to be very traditional, there are rituals and sacred places where Old
Religion is at its strongest, where you can feel it in the air.” He turned back to Elsa. “Elsa, it’s not a religion in the meaning of what people usually think when they hear the word. It’s… I guess, in modern times it’s seen as an old pagan belief. That doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Most of all, it is about magic. There were times when all magic practiced in these lands was Old Religion magic. Times have changed. The way magic is used has changed. I’m one of the last people who practice the old ways and make the effort to maintain the balance of Earth’s magic. Does this sound like something you want to learn, Elsa?”

Elsa kept sneaking glances between Jack and Merlin. Jack wanted to jump up and say, “Yes, she’s in, she’s with us,” but she had to make that choice.

“I suppose, I see where you’re coming from and how we fit into it,” she said slowly. “But at the same time, I don’t want to miss out on learning transfiguration spells.”

“Elsa, think about it,” Jack said. “Just how useful is it going to be to transform a rat into a teacup? Can you think of practical use for this? You won’t be missing out all that much.”

“It would come in useful in a room full of rats,” Colin offered.

“Here’s where I’m concerned,” Elsa said, tapping a finger to her chin. “These spells are small and maybe not so useful but that is because future spells will be more complex. We need to learn the easy ones before we can get to the difficult magic. You saw how McGonagall can transform into a cat. Can you imagine if we could do something like that? We won’t be able to learn it if we never transfigure animals.”

“You want to be a cat?”

“It doesn’t have to be a cat.”

“You could turn yourself into a hugger. You’d be so cute.”

“Argh. I don’t want to be a hugger, Jack!”

“What’s a hugger?” Merlin asked.

“I’ll show you later,” Jack answered with a wink, already looking forward to showing his friend his favorite animal.

Elsa crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him angrily.

“Do you remember how we planned to stay low, to not draw attention to ourselves?”

Jack shrugged. “I think it’s too late for that. We stand out no matter how hard we try.”

“You’re really doing this?”

“Yes.”

“You really believe in this so strongly that you will go through all the trouble with the school and will even drag your friend through the same thing?”

“Yes. And… you?”

Elsa sat quietly and bit her lip. Jack had a feeling that she didn’t want to do this. It was disappointing but not very surprising.
She touched his hand. “I understand why you feel so strongly about this, but…”

He squeezed her hand in response. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m forcing you into it. I want you to want it for yourself.”

“You can think about it,” Merlin said. “It’s not a one-time offer.”

“I don’t know about you, Elsa,” Colin spoke up, surprising them all, “but I am sold. Can I join too?”

“I would like to learn too,” Luna said in a soft voice.

Elsa pouted her lips and looked at them all.

“I don’t want to be the only one left out of this. What exactly are you planning to teach us?”

Merlin smiled.

“If you’ve got the talent for it, I can teach you real magic.”
Minerva sat at her desk and tried to understand the paper in front of her. The essay was written so poorly, she would write a recommendation for this Hufflepuff student to be admitted to the extracurricular English class. She had already made a similar request for her twins. Elsa seemed particularly appalled at the thought and Minerva tried to convince her that it was a very common problem for home-schooled children.

She pondered if English should be a part of the core curriculum for all first-years and optional for the following years. This argument had been discussed repeatedly. Over the last few decades, children had arrived at their school with poorer and poorer basic writing skills. She would bring it up during the next Board of Governors meeting. But change was difficult. The Board liked to keep things the way they were. She needed to get the support of influential Board members if she had any hopes of success.

Someone knocked on the door and she welcomed the distraction. Honestly, she was bored.

“Come in.”

Merlin and Jack walked in.

“Good Afternoon, Professor,” Merlin spoke up. “If you have a few minutes, we’d like to discuss something with you.”

She motioned for them to sit in the two chairs in front of her desk. Merlin appeared confident and relaxed and looked around her office with a detached curiosity. Jack looked nervous and just stared at his hands in his lap.

“Professor,” Merlin started, “we brought this request to you first but I imagine that we’ll have to speak with the Headmaster as well. It is about the curriculum of the Transfiguration class.”

Minerva did not like where this was going. Did this boy dare complain about her teaching methods? It wasn’t her fault that he was so bad at this subject. Some wizards did not have the natural aptitude for this difficult branch of magic.

“Some of the spellwork required in this class is against the values of our religion and we would like to be excused from practicing it.”

Minerva’s eyes locked onto Jack. This sounded like what he said before. What was this boy up to?

“Let me guess,” she said shortly. “Old Religion?”

“Precisely. Our religious beliefs forbid senseless harm done to other living beings. Practicing spells on animals just for the sake of practice is against the values of our faith.”

Minerva tapped her finger on her desk absentmindedly. She didn’t take her eyes off of Jack who sat quietly and wouldn’t look at her.

“Mr. Ealdor, no matter what your faith is, do not think that you can get special treatment just to get through a class you are struggling with.”

“That is not my intention at all, Professor. I fully accept that you would give us assignments of a similar difficulty which did not require the use of animals.”
The boy thought he had everything covered.

“Mr. Ealdor, if we were to proceed as you request, that would require me to give you assignments from the second-year curriculum. Seeing as you struggle with current tasks, how do you imagine to keep up?”

“I have an excellent tutor now,” Merlin said with a smirk. “I am confident that my performance in your class will improve.”

Minerva shifted in her seat. She had never been put in this situation before and wasn’t sure what the appropriate reaction was.

“Jack,” she said and the boy reluctantly lifted his eyes to her, “what is this? You or your sister have never said anything about practicing any religion.”

“The question never came up,” Jack said quietly.

This was all too neatly wrapped up. Were these two boys making it all up? The only way to find out was to probe them further until they slipped up. There is a limit to how well someone can invent a story like this. It was all in the details.

“Is there anything else you require that your religious practices demand?”

“We need to have a similar talk with Professor Snape,” Merlin said.

Minerva couldn’t imagine how they could succeed in that task. Severus was not a tolerant man.

“I do not imagine that you will be able to avoid preparing certain potions.”

“We could substitute some of the ingredients,” Jack offered.

Minerva sighed at the boy’s cluelessness. “It isn’t that simple, Jack.”

“We’ll take it one potion at a time,” Merlin said, leaning back in his chair.

The boy’s confidence unnerved her. His attitude bordered on arrogant.

“At this point, I believe we should speak with the Headmaster. This isn’t a simple matter that I alone can decide. It may have an impact on your O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. examinations. A request like that would have to be submitted in writing to the Board of Governors by your parents,” she looked at Jack, “or guardians.”

Jack hunched his shoulders. Minerva was his acting guardian for the time being. Did she want to draw attention to this boy? The Ministry wasn’t accepting of those who had a shifty background. A pair of twins who came out of nowhere and demanded special treatment would not sit well with the officials. Minerva wasn’t even convinced that they were orphans, but she checked recently, and still, no one reported them missing. Yet they escaped from someone. This meant that whoever was looking for them did not want to alert the authorities and that just made her worry even more. Just what type of trouble were they in?

“That is not a problem,” Merlin said with a smile. “My uncle can make the request personally to the Minister if that’s what it takes.”

“Then, your uncle is probably the best point of contact,” she said. “I will bring up this issue to the Headmaster. I will let you know his decision.”
She got up and opened the door for them.

“Mr. Ealdor, I would like to meet that uncle of yours so I may discuss this and other matters.”

“I can arrange that,” Merlin said with a sly smile and she had an uneasy feeling that he was humoring her but she didn’t understand exactly how.

“I suggest you both bundle up for tomorrow’s game. I recommend winter attire.” She looked firmly at Jack. “This includes shoes.”

Jack nodded while Merlin sniggered. She supposed the boy’s roommate had already noticed his barefoot obsession.

The boys left and Minerva couldn’t shake an uneasy feeling. Later, she visited Irma Pince and asked for help locating information on Old Religion. Irma finally found a book in ancient rune which spoke of Old Religion magic. Minerva dived right into it.

Her comprehension of runes was rusty, she hadn’t read anything as old as this book in a long time, but she gathered from it a description of the customs and practices of ancient Pagans. This included the worship of multiple gods, silly rituals, and questionable magical practices, such as rites involving human sacrifice. She put the book down. It disturbed her to think that these children wanted to observe such barbaric customs.

The magical community had evolved above such crude methods a long time ago. Some things shouldn’t be revived.

She had an awful suspicion that the Ealdor kid was the instigator here. Was he trying to brainwash her Jack? She had been watching him and every time she laid eyes on him, something tickled her intuition like she was missing something important. But his arrogant confidence was what irritated her the most. What did he have to feel so confident about? His spellwork was barely above passing, he didn’t come from one of the prestigious families, it even appeared that he was an orphan. She had to find out more about him. If he was going to be a problem, she’d rather be prepared.

When Saturday came, everyone was excited to see the game, especially the children who had never seen a Quidditch match before. Colin was in an excitement overdrive which he attempted to satisfy by jumping on his bed.

“Merlin, you said that Old Religion is about magic. Is it different magic from what they teach us here?”

“Yes.” Merlin was glad to talk about it. “It’s wandless magic.”

“Really? Can you show me some?” Colin plopped down and sat on the edge of the bed expectantly.

Merlin considered what to show them. He didn’t want to do anything too spectacular, he was supposed to be a child after all, but he had to show them something impressive enough to keep their interest. He decided to do what he used to be able to do as a child before he even learned what Old Religion was.

The books on Colin’s bed floated up and the boy startled. They swirled around him, he giggled and fished one out of the air.

“You did that during the food fight! I remember. I thought it was Peeves.”
“Yes.” It felt so good to not have to hide his magic from his friends anymore.

“That’s like telekinesis! How many objects can you move at the same time?”

Merlin looked around him and lifted everything off the floor, all the furniture, rugs, trunks, shoes and dirty robes Colin had dropped on the floor. The little boy squealed and grabbed hold of the bedpost as his bed rose up. Jack looked down to the floor from his floating bed and giggled. Merlin lowered everything back to where it was.

“Since we’re sharing, Jack, do you mind showing us what you can do?”

“You’ve seen my magic already.”

Jack held out his hand palm up and a snowball formed in it. Merlin observed the boy closely and noticed no flash of magic in his eyes. This was curious. If he wasn’t using Old Religion magic, how was he doing this?

“I forgot that you can conjure snowballs.”

Jack smirked. “Actually, they’re frostballs.”

He threw it forcefully at the wall where pieces of it stuck. Then, the leftovers of the ball started to spread out as intricate swirls of frost. The white tendrils adorned the stone wall as if someone was painting them with an invisible brush. Jack was controlling it by sight.

“Frost is my thing. I can make all sorts of things with it.”

When he dropped eye contact, it stopped spreading. Merlin remembered seeing frost on the floor that day when Jack panicked in the Potions class. He didn’t know the boy had this much control over it. This was more than usual wandless magic that children displayed. It was as easy for the boy as moving objects was for him.

“Your sister too?”

“Elsa’s specialty is ice. It took her a while to get the iceballs right. When we were small, she didn’t have good control over it yet so some of her iceballs were solid.” Jack chuckled. “It gave me extra motivation to not get hit. But she’s really good at it now.”

“You guys can do such cool magic,” Colin said. “I feel so left out. I don’t know any tricks like that.”

“Surely, you’ve done something by accident,” Merlin said. “They wouldn’t have discovered that you’re a wizard otherwise.”

“I mean, yeah, some strange things have happened but I didn’t know it was magic and I didn’t have control over it like you guys.”

“Tell me about the strange things.”

“Alright. This one time, we were camping and my dad was trying to start a fire but all the wood was wet and it wouldn’t light. My little brother started crying because he wanted to make smores. My parents started arguing with each other about how they should’ve planned better. My dog got overly excited from all the hand waving they were doing so she started barking and running around. And it was so loud and chaotic, I just wanted it all to stop. And I screamed, and suddenly, there was fire. And not just at the fire pit. It was like a ring of fire around me. I nearly burned down our tent. I don’t know how I did it. I tried it again later and it didn’t work anymore.”
Merlin smiled at the boy encouragingly. “That is awesome.” He rubbed his hands together. “We have something we can start with. Colin, it looks to me like you may have a natural affinity for fire spells. We can work on them, but maybe not in the dorm. We’ll find a safe space for you to practice in. And you, Jack, you must have an affinity for water.”

“Water?” He shook his head. “No, just frost and snow.”

“Both are water.”

The boy didn’t look convinced but Merlin was sure he could make it work. This was a very productive morning.

“Well, since I don’t have to hide it anymore,” he had his robes flow out of the trunk and neatly arrange themselves for him on his bed.

Colin chuckled. “Feel free to use whatever magic you want in front of us.”

“So, Colin and I have elemental affinities, right? What is your affinity called?” Jack asked.

“It doesn’t have a specific name so you can just call it telekinesis if you want. It’s one of those basic abilities some wizards are born with. Some can do it better than others. I could do it even as a baby.”

“So, that’s not Old Religion?” Colin whined. “I thought you were doing an Old Religion spell for us.”

“Old Religion runs through my veins so that was it, but if you’d like something more spell-like,” Merlin cut off and thought over a few simple spells, trying to choose one. Then, he pulled up the smoke from the fireplace to make a display of it.

“Hors, beride þá heofonum,” he said and the smoke took the shape of a horse which reared and galloped up to the ceiling where it dispersed.

“Horse, ride the sky,” Jack said behind him and Merlin turned around stunned.

“You understand Old English?” He grabbed the boy’s shoulders and shook him. “Jack, that’s incredible. You have no idea how much easier it will be for you to learn the incantations. They’re all in Old English.”

“I can’t actually speak it.”

“But you understood. Where did you learn it?”

Jack shrugged. “Maybe my mother spoke it sometimes. I don’t know. I’ve heard it.”

“Your mother spoke it? In a conversation or incantations?”

“Maybe both?”

Merlin let go of the boy’s shoulders. He couldn’t believe it. It was yet another proof of Jack’s strange connection to the Old Religion. He had to find out more about his family.

“Why are you looking at me funny?”

“Jack, Old English is a dead language. No one converses in it. People stopped using it about a thousand years ago.”
Jack swallowed but then shrugged. “Apparently, you’re wrong about that.”

Merlin laughed. “Apparently.”

“This is all fascinating, but look at the time,” Colin pointed at the clock, “we need to go if we want to see the game.”

They all dressed up in their winter cloaks. Merlin wrapped himself well and put on his warm hat. Colin bundled himself up in multiple layers and looked as if he was inside a balloon. And on top of all of that, he strapped on his camera. Jack was dressed as if it was twenty degrees warmer.

“Jack, it’s going to be freezing in the stands. It’s like an early winter out there. You really need more than a cloak.”

Jack sighed and mumbled, “Why is everyone so concerned with what I wear?” He dug in his trunk and pulled out a Gryffindor scarf. He threw it on without care and waited for them in the doorframe.

“Are you guys ready?”

Merlin wanted to fix the boy’s scarf but seeing the defiant look on his face, he decided to drop it. If Jack wanted to freeze his head off over there, he was welcome to. Maybe that would teach him a lesson.

All students and staff showed up to see the first Quidditch game of the year. The excitement of the spectators was contagious. The three of them found a spot in the stands among the scarlet and gold sea of other Gryffindors who proudly displayed their House colors. As their team came out of the changing room, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs joined in the cheers while Slytherins booed.

“Is it always like this?” Colin asked over the noise. “The other Houses are cheering us.”

“It’s because they want Slytherin to lose,” Merlin screamed in response. “There’s no love for Slytherin here.”

On Madam Hooch’s whistle, the players flew up and the crowd roared. Merlin followed the figure of Harry who flew up above the other players.

“I can’t see anything,” Colin complained but attempted to take a few pictures anyway. “They’re so far away.”

Merlin conjured a pair of binoculars in his pocket and gave it to the small boy. It was actually a good idea so he repeated the process so all three of them had a pair and could look at the game in detail.


One of the Weasley twins flew over and hit the Bludger in the direction of a Slytherin player but it came back up. He hit it again, and again it came back, racing at Harry. Harry kept trying to get away from it but it followed him as if it wanted to hit him specifically.

“Are Bludgers supposed to follow one player around?” Colin asked.

“Something’s wrong,” Merlin murmured.

“They’re killing us,” Jack complained, watching the game. “Slytherins are so much faster. They keep scoring and scoring.”

It started to rain which made it more difficult to see and Merlin had to use his magic to be able to...
follow Harry who zoomed through the pitch at full speed. The same Bludger was still following him. This wasn’t normal. That Bludger was being controlled.

Merlin tried to lift the enchantment but someone held a constant powerful grip on this spell and it didn’t feel like wizard magic. It felt different, very close to Old Religion magic. Since he couldn’t overthrow the spell, he had to attack the person responsible in order to break it. Who among the crowd would have abilities like this?

There was no time to waste. Merlin used his mind’s eye to slow down time so he could find the culprit before Harry got hurt. Who did he know that held different magic?

Merlin checked on Jack who was sitting next to him. The boy was watching the game and wasn’t even looking at Harry. He did not look like someone who was in the middle of a powerful spell. What about his sister? Merlin scanned the seats until he located her not far from them. She talked excitedly with her Ravenclaw friend. It wasn’t her either.

Meanwhile at the pitch, Harry was ahead of the Bludger but barely. It was catching up and the boy was getting tired quickly.

Merlin continued checking the stands. Who else could it be? The twins were the only people here who he saw exhibit Old Magic. This time, he looked lower and spotted something at the entrance of the changing room. He looked through his binoculars and recognized the creature as a house elf. The elf’s hand was up and his face was full of focus. He was definitely controlling the Bludger!

Merlin ran out of the stands, down the stairs, and made a cut in the fabric which made up the wall of the Quidditch pitch. He slipped through and sprinted as fast as he could underneath the stands. He made a cut in the fabric again as he made it to the changing room and tackled the elf to the ground. He quickly looked for Harry, who, finally free of the Bludger, just in this moment had caught the Golden Snitch. The crowd erupted in cheers and Harry landed safely.

Satisfied that the boy was okay, Merlin turned his attention to the elf he was straddling.

“Why?” he yelled.

Why would this elf attack Harry? Did someone order it to?

Someone ran in through the slit in the fabric he had created. It was Jack and Colin.

“What is that?” Colin exclaimed, panting.

“This is a house-elf,” Merlin answered and tightened his grip on the small creature. “Who sent you?”

The elf squirmed and moaned but said nothing. Colin snapped a picture.

“I repeat, who sent you? Who do you serve?”

“Dobby’s master didn’t send me, sir,” he answered in a high-pitched, pitiful voice. “Dobby came on my own, sir. Only Dobby will needs punishing.”

It made no sense for a house-elf to act on his own in this manner and Merlin wanted to ask more questions but then, he heard a commotion and knew that he was running out of time. The players were coming back to the changing room. He dragged the elf with him back through the fabric slit to hide under the stands. The two boys came after him.

He held him tightly, binding him with magic. Elves used Old Magic, and so they were able to
apparate within Hogwarts when wizards weren’t. He wanted to ensure this one didn’t get away.

“Are you a Hogwarts elf?”

“No, sir.”

“Who do you serve?”

“Dobby will never say,” the elf proclaimed and stuck up his chest proudly.

“Merlin?” Colin spoke up. “Why exactly are you interrogating an elf?”

“He was the one who sent that Bludger at Harry. Why did you try to kill Harry?”

“Not kill, sir. Dobby would never kill the great Harry Potter.”

“Why did you attack him, then?”

The elf squirmed under his hold and Merlin could feel his attempts at disapparating. Merlin’s magic was stronger and bound the creature in place.

“Dobby never met someone like sir. Who is sir?” Dobby must have understood that he was being held with powerful magic and now stared at him with his huge eyes.

“I’m Merlin and you will answer me, Dobby. Why did you attack Harry?”

The elf shook his head and whined in distress. This wasn’t working. Merlin had an idea how to make it talk.

“You know what? Jack, could you fetch Harry for us?”

“Sure,” Jack answered and disappeared in the slit of the fabric.

The elf moaned and Merlin kept his grip tight. He had a hunch that the creature would say more when confronted by his target.

Jack came back with Harry who gasped when he saw the elf.

“Dobby? What are you doing here? Merlin, get off him. He’s just a house-elf.”

Merlin huffed in frustration. “This just-a-house-elf here sent that Bludger after you.”

“Dobby! That Bludger nearly knocked me off my broom. You could’ve killed me!”

Dobby whined and shook his oversized head. His ears flopped pitifully. “Dobby would never kill Harry Potter. Dobby wants to save Harry Potter.”

“How was that saving me?”

“Dobby thought if Harry Potter was hurt, he would be sent home. Harry Potter shouldn’t have come back to Hogwarts this year. Dobby tried to stop him from getting on the train but it didn’t work.”

“That was you!!!” Harry screamed and took over for Merlin in holding the elf by his rags. “You blocked the entrance to Platform nine and three quarters! I couldn’t get on the train so I flew a car with Ron. I nearly got expelled because of you! And now, you tried to hurt me during the game. Dobby, you better get out of my sight before I kill you.”
He let go of the elf who smiled weakly.

“Dobby is used to threats, sir.”

“Why do you want Harry out of Hogwarts?” Merlin asked.

“Dobby only wishes to protect Harry Potter who is a beacon of hope for all of us lowly creatures. When He Who Must Not Be Named was in power, house-elves were treated like vermin. Dobby is still treated like vermin but Dobby has hope, sir, that Harry Potter will bring about a new world. Horrible things will happen at Hogwarts this year now that the Chamber of Secrets is open. Dobby must protect...”

Dobby stopped, gasped and ran to a wooden support beam where he beat his head against the frame to punish himself for slipping up. “Bad Dobby. Bad Dobby.”

Harry stopped him from hurting himself. “What do you know about the Chamber of Secrets?”

“Dobby mustn’t tell!” the elf squealed.

“Dobby, you must tell us what you know. This is important,” Merlin urged. “People are in danger.”

Dobby started crying crocodile tears. “Dobby can’t say. Dobby can’t say.”

Harry kept shaking the elf in an effort to get some information from it but Merlin knew that they got as much as they could from the creature.

“He won’t tell us,” he told Harry in resignation. “House-elves are bound to keep their owners’ secrets. He came to you from his own free will, but his owner’s word is his law. He cannot break it no matter how much he wants to.”

Harry stood over the elf and stared at it intensely as if hoping he could pull the secrets out of the creature’s mind. While Merlin had that ability, it wouldn’t work on a house-elf. He could only invade a human mind. This elf knew about the threat of the Chamber of Secrets. Maybe he overheard a conversation his master had about plans against Hogwarts?

“Do you know whose family he serves?” Merlin asked.

“No,” Harry answered and folded his arms.

Jack crouched next to the creature. “Why is he dressed like that?”

The elf was wearing a rag that resembled an old, dirty pillowcase with holes for arms and head.

“It’s a mark of enslavement,” Merlin answered. “When his owner presents him with clothes, he will be freed.”

Dobby sobbed and blew his nose on his pillowcase.

“Harry Potter, sir, must leave Hogwarts,” he gave Harry his last plea.

“I’m not going anywhere, Dobby. This is my home,” Harry snapped and walked away from them to resume the celebrations with his team.

Dobby whined to himself and pouted. Merlin felt sorry for it.

“It feels awful to know something but be unable to do anything about it, huh? Is there anything you
can tell us that would help us? Anything at all?"

Dobby shook his head and sobbed. "It’s not safe at Hogwarts, sir. Dobby failed at protecting the
great Harry Potter.”

"I’ll protect him, Dobby. You have my word,” Merlin said and tried to convey to the elf that he was
capable of keeping his word.

"Dobby is thankful, sir,” he said and bowed respectfully.

Merlin inclined his head in response and the creature sobbed. House-elves were truly interesting
magical creatures. They possessed Old Magic, pure, simple but effective. He felt connected to him
and guessed that the elf felt the pull of his magic as well.

Then Dobby’s huge eyes were fixed on Jack who was studying him intently the whole time.

“I’ve never met an elf before.”

“Dobby never met…”

“Yes. We haven’t met yet.” Jack interrupted. “I’m Jack. Jack Nix.”

Dobby stared at the hand which was offered to him and his eyes became larger than tennis balls. He
was surprised to be offered a handshake by a wizard. He slowly extended a shaking bony hand
while humming to himself as if trying to soothe his nerves.

“Dobby is honored to meet Jack-Jack Nix.”

Jack chuckled. “Just one Jack.”

“Sir is a student at Hogwarts, sir?”

“Yes. I am.”

Dobby looked at the boy in wonder and awe. “Sir uses a wand, sir?”

“Yes.”

“House-elves are not allowed wands, but we don’t needs them, sir, to do our work.”

“Why are you surprised that I use a wand?”

The elf looked in all directions and said quietly. “Only wizards are allowed, sir, and Jack-Jack
Nix…”

“Hey,” Jack interrupted and touched the end of Dobby’s long ear, “your ears are huge. Do you have
a greater hearing because of them?”

The elf looked confused. “Dobby doesn’t know, sir.”

Colin snapped a picture of the two. “My parents won’t believe me. A real elf. He’s not like what I
thought they are.”

“Right?” Jack turned to him. “He’s much cooler than I imagined them.”

Dobby looked intently at Merlin. “May Dobby go, sir?”
Merlin understood that the elf was asking for the magical binds holding him to be released so he let him go. He couldn’t get anything else out of him. But at the same time, he couldn’t dismiss the knowledge that the elf had. Just in case, he touched the creature’s shoulders - Dobby squealed in surprise - and whispered an incantation which marked the elf in such a way that Merlin could find it. Maybe he couldn’t get the elf to talk, but now, he could follow it to its master.

The elf turned back to Jack. “Dobby will greatly cherish meeting Jack-Jack Nix. You brings me hope, sir. The great Harry Potter and sir are a sign of good things to come for magical creatures, especially weak ones like Dobby.”

Jack extended a hand for a goodbye. Dobby looked like he would faint from the honor of being offered a handshake twice. He shook the hand with both of his and disapparated with a loud crack.

Jack startled and looked around. “Where did he go?”

Colin laughed and helped him get up.

They left the stands and raced to the castle to outrun the rain. Merlin had a lot to wonder about. He wondered why Jack made such a strong impression on the elf. Did Dobby feel in the boy the same magic he felt in Merlin? He wondered whose family the elf served. Harry suspected the Malfoy boy of opening the Chamber of Secrets. Their family was certainly wealthy enough to have house-elves. Was Harry correct in his suspicions? Merlin had to get a move on that plan with the Polyjuice Potion so they could proceed with their interrogation of the young Malfoy. And he would also follow Dobby’s trail as soon as he had a chance to.

“Merlin, what was that thing that Dobby said about wands, that only wizards can use them?” Jack asked.

“The law states that only wizards and witches can bear wands. Non-human creatures like elves are strictly banned. It’s been a controversy with the goblins. They’ve been fighting that law for centuries.”

“But why are they forbidden from carrying wands?”

Merlin wasn’t sure how to answer it. “They have their own magic. I think the wizarding community wants to keep the wandlore a human-only privilege.”

Jack mulled that over for a moment. “So they’re afraid of what elves or goblins would be able to do with wands?”

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

“What would happen if one of them was found with a wand?”

“They would be tried in court. Jack, why are you asking all of this?”

Jack smiled nervously. “Just curious.”

Merlin felt as if there was more to it but before he could ponder on it, Colin pulled his arm.

“Merlin?” the boy asked.

“Yeah?”

“At the Quidditch pitch, what did you cut the fabric with? Do you carry a knife with you?”
Everyone was very curious today. Merlin racked his brain for an explanation. He showed the boys some magic but didn't want them to realize just how much magic he could do. “The cuts were already there.”

“Really? That’s weird.”

“Yeah, right?”

“But also convenient.”

“They were.”

It wasn’t the first time that Colin had called Merlin out on something. He was an observant kid. That was probably why he was a good photographer - he noticed details others didn’t.

Merlin returned to the Gryffindor tower and plopped down into an armchair. It was time to devise a plan to get that book for Harry. Polyjuice Potion wasn’t the best solution, he knew of much faster glamour spells, but this was what the trio wanted to do so he would help them. Now, he just had to sneak into the Restricted Section of the library. Piece of cake.

Today was such an awesome day. Colin saw an exciting Quidditch game, where the balls flew on their own as if they were alive, and met a magical creature that looked like an ugly, skinny doll with an oversized head, huge round eyes, and ears so weird and big that it should be called an elephant-elf instead. An elephelf! He wondered if there were other types of elves besides house-elves. He would ask Merlin. Merlin knew everything. He was like the Yoda but with much cooler Force.

Whoah. He just realized, all Jedis were wizards and the Force was simply magic. Star Wars was like Wizard Wars but in space!

The day was far from over. He was pumped and ready for more fun.

"Where are you going, Jack?” he asked, seeing him put on his shoes, which he only did when he was leaving the Gryffindor tower.

Jack was always nice, but there was an air of mystery around him. Colin couldn’t quite put a finger on it, but something always felt a little off about him, like he was Clark Kent on the outside but an alien underneath.

"I have detention with Professor Sprout for the rest of the day. See ya later.”

Jack ran out and Colin frowned while looking at the empty dorm. He wanted to do something.

He went out to the common room looking for friends. Harry was celebrating the victory with his teammates. It was so amazing to see him at the game. He watched him practice before but it was nothing like the action of the game. Harry zoomed and zigzagged like a flash of lightning. He had so much more skill than the other players. He even nearly fell off his broom but hang on upside down like Spiderman. It was awesome.

Colin walked up to the group and tried to join in the post-game fun but they were all taller than him and didn't even notice him. He tried to say something but his voice wasn't loud enough.

Oh, well. He could catch up with Harry later when he wasn’t surrounded by everyone.

He found Merlin getting up from an armchair. He looked like he was ready to do something fun.
"Whatcha doing?"

"Actually, I've got something important to do. I'll be back."

Merlin left the common room through the portrait hole. Must be some important Yoda business. Maybe later they would have some fun together. He wondered if Merlin had seen Star Wars. Would he get the Wizard Wars reference?

Colin looked around at who else he knew there.

Ginny Weasley was walking down from her dorm and he ran up to her. Ginny was always fun and had a snarky sense of humor although recently she’d been quieter.

"Hiya, Ginny. Doing anything fun?"

The girl didn't respond and walked right past him. She was pale and expressionless.

"Are you okay?"

She reminded him of zombies from Night of the Living Dead. That was a good movie. He wished there was a TV around. He’d love to sit down with a bowl of popcorn and watch a fun sci-fi flick with his friends.

She also went out through the portrait hole.

All of his friends were busy today. What would he do?

Colin sighed and decided to do the responsible thing - homework. He stuffed his bag, including his camera - you never knew when something interesting would happen - and went out.

The Study Hall had very few people there today. He didn't want to be alone so he sat down next to a Hufflepuff boy he'd seen in the hallway with Harry.

"Hiya, I'm Colin Creevey."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley, pleasure," the boy answered with a posh accent.

Colin pulled out a parchment, quill, ink and his copy of Travels with Trolls.

Justin showed him his own copy of the same book. "Allow me a guess. Professor Lockhart assigned you an essay on troll etiquette?"

"You too?"

Justin chuckled. "I'm working on it right now. We can share notes if you'd like."

"Great, thanks."

They worked together and Colin immediately came to like the older boy. They had something in common - both were Muggle-born. To his disappointment, Justin didn't have an appreciation for sci-fi movies. Still, they got to compare their experiences of learning how to adapt to this new lifestyle.

"My mother was displeased that I didn't go to Eton College," Justin said. "She’s been buggin’ me about transferring there. They were going to accept me last year, you know, but I like it here. This
summer, I gave her Lockhart’s books to read and she’s starting to understand just how much of a
career I can have as a wizard.”

“Professor Lockhart is incredible, isn’t he?” Colin exclaimed. “Isn’t it amazing how he defeated all
of those dark wizards and dangerous creatures? He is totally like a Jedi but more famous.”

“Yeah. I wish to become as famous as he is.”

“’You could.”

“Several Hufflepuffs became Ministers for Magic, you know. That would be a jolly good career for
me. My mother would be proud.”

“Maybe I could become a famous magical photographer,” Colin mused. ”My name could become as
known as Henri Cartier-Bresson. I love his candid photography. That’s what I usually do, just try to
capture people when they’re not expecting it. Those shots come out the best. I’d love to share my
photography with others. Do they do gallery showings in the wizarding world?”

“’I haven't the faintest idea.”

Colin supposed a fellow Muggle-born wasn’t the best person to ask. He would ask Merlin later.
Merlin seemed to know everything.

“Speaking of, I have a ton of photos to develop today. Do you want to join me right after we’re done
here? I’d love the company.”

“Sure thing.”

They finished their essays and went to the Art classroom which had a dark room built to the side for
this purpose. Colin lit the candle which emitted a safe red light.

He taught Justin the steps. The first few steps were the same as developing any Muggle film. The
only difference was the last step when you dipped the photo in the Photo Potion which magically
animated it.

Everything was going smoothly until he got to what appeared to be a photo of an empty hallway.
That seemed strange. He was sure he hadn’t taken a shot like that. He dipped it in the Photo Potion
and watched how the image of the Nearly Headless Nick slowly appeared on the surface. Nick
tipped his feathery hat and then tipped his head for effect. Justin chuckled seeing the animated photo
of a ghost but Colin blanched.

He just remembered something strange that he noticed a few weeks ago when developing a photo of
Jack and Elsa. When he saw it, he thought that he imagined it but maybe he didn’t?

With shaking hands, he found the part of the film where he captured the house-elf.

“What’s wrong, Colin?” Justin asked, noticing that something bothered him.

Colin didn’t know how to answer so he continued. He found the frame he was looking for and
waited patiently for it to develop. It was taking too long. He had to confirm that he didn’t imagine it,
that it really was acting the same.

And it was. The print showed only Dobby in it and when Colin dipped it in the potion, Jack
appeared. It meant that Jack was… Was he a ghost? He wasn’t like Nearly Headless Nick. So what
was he?
His worst suspicion was proven, but he didn’t know what it meant. He had to tell Merlin. His friend would know how to interpret this information. Merlin knew everything.

He packed up his things, said goodbye to Justin and ran to the Great Hall. It was dinnertime already and he found Merlin sitting with, who else, Jack.

“There you are. I was wondering what you were up to,” Merlin said and patted a seat next to him in invitation.

Colin wanted to talk to Merlin alone so he waited. Now, he remembered how Jack could speak a language that was dead for a thousand years. Maybe someone had just raised him from the dead? Was he like some kind of a freaky zombie? This was the world of magic. Anything was possible.

He sat and warily observed Jack who had just stuffed his face with potatoes. His white hair gleamed in the light of the candles that floated above them. Did all ghost zombies have white hair? Oh, no. This meant that Elsa was another ghost zombie. There were two of them in this school. One in front of him and one behind him. He felt surrounded.

“What?” Jack asked with a full mouth and Colin busied himself with filling his plate.

He stared for too long. That was so careless of him. How could a ghost even eat? Didn’t zombies eat brains? Maybe Jack was something else then. Whatever he was, it wasn’t normal, it wasn’t human. He always knew there was something off about the twins but he never could have expected it was this bad.

It was terrifying. He didn’t know what the creature in front of him was or what it was capable of. He better be careful and not anger him. He’d seen the magic Jack could do for fun. What type of magic would he do if someone angered him?

Colin waited for his opportunity and finally, it presented itself. Jack got up and ran over to the Ravenclaw table to talk to his sister. Colin went into action immediately.

“Merlin, I have something important to tell you.”

“Yeah?” Merlin asked while picking at his food. “What’s up?”

“It’s about Jack. There’s something seriously wrong…”

He was interrupted as Harry Potter walked up to them.

“Did you get it?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” Merlin smirked and tapped the breast of his robes like he had something hidden there.

“Let’s go,” Harry said.

Merlin stuffed the last bite in his mouth and got up.

Colin grabbed his sleeve. “Merlin, you really need to hear this.”

“You can tell me tonight,” his friend said and left with Harry.

Merlin left. He didn’t get to tell him. Alright. He would tell him later. He could wait a bit longer.

He tried to eat but couldn’t shake the creepy feeling of knowing that something unnatural was behind
him. He kept sneaking glances over his shoulder to where Jack sat with his sister. They weren’t even looking in his direction but that didn’t stop his imagination from telling him that they could sneak up on him from behind at any second. He couldn’t eat anymore. He dropped his utensils, grabbed his bag and got up. He didn’t want to be in the same room as those two. It was all too much.

He left the Great Hall. Where could he go? If he went to the dorm, Jack would show up and then he would be alone with him until Merlin was done with whatever he was doing with Harry. No, he had to delay arrival to the dorm. He didn’t want to be alone with a zombie ghost.

Colin wandered the hallways aimlessly, not sure where to go. The rainstorm had turned into a thunderstorm. The rain beat the windows relentlessly as if determined to break them one drop at a time. The unlit corners of the dark corridors seemed to slither in front of him. It was unnaturally quiet and then he heard a shuffle. The hair on his neck stood up and he wasn’t sure if it was from the cold.

“Hello?” he said weakly and was met with more silence.

Lightning flashed and illuminated the dark hallway for a second. There was nothing there. Nothing to be scared of.

The thunder roared and Colin startled. He was so silly. Of course, the sound would follow the light with a few second delay. Why was he so jumpy?

Maybe he should go back to the Gryffindor tower. He could wait for Merlin in the common room. There were usually people there so he wouldn’t be alone. That sounded like a better plan than walking here in the dark.

He turned around and thought he saw something disappear behind a corner. He wondered what it was so he quietly approached. He heard a faint sound and his curiosity took over. Merlin mentioned Hogwarts house-elves when interrogating Dobby. Maybe he was about to catch one of them? He brought up his camera, ready to take a photo. He wanted to know if they were going to look the same as the elf he met today and if they would also wear pillowcases for clothes.

Another thunder sounded in the distance as he turned the corner with his camera ready. He clicked the shutter and the world came to a stop.

The camera’s flash illuminated the hallway and a second later Colin collapsed to the floor.
Every librarian's nightmare

Few hours earlier

After everyone got back from the game, Merlin sat in the common room thinking over different ways of how he could get Moste Potente Potions book from the Restricted Section of the library. He could try to summon it from a distance but worried if there were any enchantments that would prevent him or get him in trouble. It would be safer to just go in there and get it. The challenge was to sneak past Madam Pince. He needed her distracted for a couple of minutes. He’s been in a fun mood lately - might as well make this comical.

When he got to the library, he summoned a large pot from the kitchens. Conveniently, it was already filled with a bubbling stew.

“So sorry, elves,” he whispered knowing that they were probably going out of their minds trying to figure out what happened to it. He planned to return it before the evening feast.

He enchanted the pot so it grew four short iron legs and made it walk past the librarian’s desk.

She caught sight of it out of the corner of her eye and stared at the pot for a moment in bewilderment.

“Who… What…” she stuttered and slowly rose from her chair.

He made the pot tip to the side so that the stew almost spilled out. Madam Pince released a guttural cry and ran for it, her wand outstretched. Merlin turned the legs of the pot into wheels and made it zoom between the bookcases. The librarian chased after it and Merlin used this moment to slip into the Restricted Section.

Seriously, if they wanted students to stay out of here, they should’ve put a locked door or something in the way and not just a red rope. It was too easy.

Beyond the rope, the Restricted Section span across several gloomy isles. He looked around at the tomes and wondered how many of his books they had in here. He had published many, some under a made-up name, and some as a ghostwriter for famous authors. Bathilda’s History of Magic, which was required reading for Hogwarts students, was one of the examples. Although, Bathilda took a few liberties to change his manuscript based on what she was sure was true. He had no proof of what really happened but his word, and unfortunately, in the eyes of history, the events were often written by the victors and the facts got lost in political translation. He couldn’t do anything about that.

He was tempted to start taking out the books just to see what was inside them. Several emitted a pulse of magic and seemed to call to him but he resisted. He didn’t want to risk getting caught by spending too long in there. He decided to call the book by name to find it.

“Moste Potente Potions.”

He heard a slight shuffle in the next aisle and followed the sound to where on the bottom shelf, one book jerked as if it cried, “‘Tis me. You called?” He gently pulled the old moldy volume out and listened. No alarm sounded. No enchantment bound him or the book. He realized that the whole mystery of this section of the library was a ruse to keep the younger students out. Feeling smug about how easy it was, he turned back and jumped over the rope to the main part of the library.

As smooth as he wanted the jump to be, his gangly legs did not cooperate. He tripped and fell taking
the rope down with him. Several students looked his way and he quickly hid the book under his robes.

Time was of the essence now so he quickly got up and tried to get away, only to be pulled by the hood of his robe.

“What were you doing in there?” A Slytherin Prefect demanded. “Did you have permission to be there?”

Merlin stammered, “Of course I did.”

“Show it to me.”

“Madam Pince has it.”

The Slytherin dragged him along and Merlin racked his brains for a way out. How could he be so careless to get caught? There were so many better ways he could have handled this task. If only he knew there were no alarms or protective enchantments in place, he could have summoned the book from his dorm!

Over on the other side of the library, Madam Pince struggled with the pot of stew. She had bound it in ropes so it wouldn’t get away and kept throwing spells at it, trying to stop Merlin’s enchantment. The pot struggled in its hold and kept spilling bits of stew around.

This gave him a brilliant idea.

“Madam Pince?” he asked.

“You better hope she really has your permission slip or there will be dire consequences,” the Slytherin spat with an evil smirk.

“Not now, children,” she snapped and threw another spell which did nothing to the naughty pot.

“It’s about that,” Merlin said to her. “I saw this boy place an enchantment on that pot of stew.”

“What?” the Slytherin whirled around and grabbed Merlin violently. “You little…”

“You let go of him, boy,” Madam Pince cried and approached them both. Her thin, sunken face was fierce and unforgiving. “You dare befoul my library? You dare endanger my books?”

The Slytherin kept his hold on Merlin and tried to explain. “It’s not true. He’s just saying it…”

“I WILL NOT HAVE THIS LIBRARY TURNED INTO A JOKE SHOP!!!”

She looked as if she was ready to transform into a giant man-eating vulture. The boy paled, and Merlin felt the hold on his robes loosen.

“B-b-but… I didn’t…” the boy stammered.

“YOU THINK IT’S TRIVIAL TO DESECRATE THESE VOLUMES? YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY, YOU DEPRAVED BOY?”

Using the distraction, Merlin slowly squirmed out of the boy’s grip.

“I didn’t. I swear…”
“YOU PUT CENTURIES OF IRREPLACEABLE KNOWLEDGE AT RISK FOR A CHILDISH PRANK!!!”

The Slytherin boy cowered in fear as the librarian shrieked of the crime he had not committed. Merlin slipped out unnoticed and closed the library doors with relief, effectively drowning out the sounds of screams and begging.

It was a close one. Did he feel guilty for getting the boy in trouble? Maybe a little, but not too much. It was important for him to get the book out of the library for Harry by whatever means were necessary. His mission was more important than a few house points that Slytherin was about to lose undeservingly.

Harry found him during the evening feast and Merlin tagged along with the trio to show them the book.

“We’ll go to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom,” Hermione said, leading the way. “No one will bother us there.”

When they opened the door, they saw Ginny Weasley stand in front of a sink, looking down.

Hermione gasped, said a quick “Sorry,” and they all backed right out of there before Ginny noticed that three boys had just invaded a girls lavatory.

Merlin could feel his cheeks burn and guessed that he was as red as Ron and Harry were right now.

“I can’t believe you had us go in there,” Ron complained while they snuck away.

“I don’t know what she’s doing there. No one in their right mind would willingly want to spend time with Myrtle.”

“Let’s just use a classroom,” Merlin offered and opened the first door he found.

They walked inside what looked like an unused classroom. They put four chairs around one table and sat down.

Merlin pulled out the book and placed it in front of Hermione. She touched it reverently and paged through the different recipes. Disturbing drawings adorned the pages, illustrating effects of the different potions and warnings of their side-effects.

“Found it,” she said and started reading the instructions. “Complicated, more complicated than any potion I’ve ever made.”

They waited as she analyzed what they were going to need. “Shredded skin of boomslang and a powdered horn of a bicorn will be tricky to get.”

“Do you mean we’re going to have to steal it?” Harry looked worried. “From Snape’s private stores?”

Hermione ignored him. “And we’ll need bits of the people we’ll be turning into.”

“I’m not drinking Crabbe’s toenails,” Ron protested, shaking his head.

“Do you want to find out if Malfoy is the Heir are you too chicken to go through with it?”

Hermione looked at the boys fiercely and they fidgeted on the spot.
“I’ll help you get the ingredients,” Merlin offered. It seemed that thieving for Harry had become his occupation.

Hermione nodded while looking at Harry and Ron, waiting for them to fall in line.

“I can’t believe you’re the one that’s pushing us to break school rules,” Harry answered with a smile and Hermione’s mood lightened up.

She continued reading the instructions, “We need a full moon and twenty-one days to stew the lacewings…”

“So about a month,” Merlin sighed.

“A month!” Ron exclaimed.

“It’s our only option,” Hermione summarized.

“But not toenails, right?” Ron worried again.

They spent the rest of the evening in that classroom scheming and devising the plan among them. The idea was very crude and Merlin knew of several better ways of achieving the same result but couldn’t suggest any of them without the trio noticing that there was something off about him. So he went along with it, glad to be included. There was potential for multiple parts of their plan to go wrong and he felt that they were going to need him.

He came back to the dorm when everyone was asleep already. He was exhausted in a good way. It was a very productive day. Everything was going exactly as it should be.

It felt as if he had just fallen asleep when he was shaken awake by cold hands.

“Merlin, wake up,” he heard Jack’s voice.

He grumbled and pulled up the cover more tightly around himself. “Why are your hands so cold?”

“Sorry about that.” He shook him again. “Merlin, I’m worried. Wake up.”

Merlin opened one eye grudgingly. He wanted to sleep some more.

“I woke up early,” Jack said, “because… Because I woke up, and Colin’s bed was made. He never makes his bed. Merlin, did he come back last night with you?”

Merlin tried to shake the sleep off his mind. What was this about Colin?

“What?”

“I thought Colin was out with you since you were both nowhere to be found. Was he?”

The boy’s voice sounded urgent but Merlin had a hard time deciphering what he meant. His brain was not awake yet.

“Colin wasn’t with me last night. I was with Harry.”

Jack bit his lip and stared at Colin’s bed. “So he never came back last night?”

It was as if someone threw a bucket of cold water at Merlin. He shot out of his covers and looked at Colin’s neatly made bed. When he came back, he was so tired, he didn’t look at who was in bed and
who wasn’t.

“Merlin, he’s Muggle-born. You don’t think…” Jack’s voice cracked and he couldn’t finish the sentence.

Merlin quickly threw on a pair of trousers and shoes and ran out, Jack followed. He led the way to the Hospital Wing and threw its doors open.

Right there on a wire-framed bed was a statue of Colin Creevey frozen in a strange position as if he was holding something. Merlin ran up to him and checked his vitals.

“He’s alive but petrified.”

“No…” Jack said in a small voice next to him. “Not Colin.”

The longer Merlin looked at the stiff body of the boy, the more his blood boiled. Colin, the happy, easily excited, nicest and most innocent boy he’d ever met was the first human victim of the Chamber of Secrets. It was happening - Muggle-borns were being attacked and this sweet boy, his friend, was the first one to go. And Merlin failed to protect him.

Madam Pomfrey walked in, looking tired after the eventful night she must have had.

“You can’t do anything for him, boys,” she said kindly. “We’ll make a Mandrake Restorative Draught and bring him back but it’s going to take a few weeks. Mandrakes are not ready yet.”

Jack sat down on the bed next to the boy. “Can I stay with him?”

“Yes, but there is really nothing you can do. I’ll take good care of him. I promise.”

“Can I help?”

Merlin didn’t stick around to hear the rest of the conversation. He ran out of there in the direction of Dumbledore’s office. By picking his friend, Salazar’s heir guaranteed that Merlin was now taking it very personally.

He knocked and walked in without waiting for an invitation. He froze in place when he saw that he interrupted the Headmaster with the Heads of Houses whose eyes were now all on him.

“Oh, sard it!” he swore at the mistake he just made.

Snape looked annoyed, Sprout and Flitwick looked puzzled to see him there, and McGonagall looked so outraged as if he had walked in there naked. He resisted an urge to check if he really was wearing his trousers.

“I will see you afterwards, Merlin, if you’d kindly wait outside?” Dumbledore said.

“Yes, sir. Forgive me for intruding,” he blurted and turned back around.

He paced in front of the gargoyle entrance to the office and tried to calm down his nerves. He couldn’t get over the feeling of failure that overwhelmed him. He knew what danger Colin was in and still left the boy to wander the castle halls alone like a tasty bait for the Chamber monster. He had to make this castle safe again and he had to act fast before more children were attacked.

The teachers came out from the Headmaster’s office and McGonagall gave him a harsh look.

“That was incredibly rude, Mr. Ealdor,” she said sharply. “You’ve made it a habit to act rudely in
He hoped that she meant the intrusion and didn’t understand the swearing. “Yes. I was… I was
distraught… because of Colin.” He didn’t even have to fake it.

Her face softened a little. “The Headmaster will see you now.”

“Thank you, Professor,” he said hastily and ran up the narrow staircase.

He walked into the office cautiously, fully expecting “Where were you?” type of questioning. He
deserved it. What use was he if he couldn’t even keep his own friends safe?

“You don’t have to say it,” Dumbledore said while petting his Phoenix.

Merlin wasn’t sure what he referred to so he silently walked up to him.

“You must be dying to say ‘I told you so.’” Dumbledore continued.

“No. I’m not,” Merlin sighed. “I didn’t want this to happen. I’d love to be wrong for once.”

He reached out to pet the bird but Fawkes squawked and moved away.

“Still doesn’t like me.”

Dumbledore walked away and sat behind his desk where he rubbed his temples. “Have you got any
leads?”

“I think one of the younger students is behind it but don’t know more than that. Harry wants to do
his own investigation so I’m helping him.”

“I’m glad at least that is working out. Keep him safe while he’s sneaking around.”

“I will but what about the rest of the school?”

”The Heads of Houses will instruct all Prefects and Head Boy and Girl to help keep the students
from wandering alone. The staff will take turns patrolling the corridors. But most of all, we need to
find out who is behind this.”

“Yes, we do.”

They sat in silence for a while. The seconds ticked by and Merlin nervously patted the table with his
thumb.

“You had a house-elf visit yesterday,” he remembered. “Dobby, not one of yours. Have you heard of
him?”

“House-elf? No. What was he doing here?”

“Interfering with the game. That elf knows something, probably overheard his master talk about the
Chamber but wouldn’t tell me anything. You know how they are with loyalty. Can’t get them to talk
directly against those they serve. If only we knew who his master was, we would have a clue.”

“I will ask around if anyone has heard of Dobby but I wouldn’t get my hopes up. A good elf is an
invisible elf. It’s possible that no one but the master would know his name.”

“I put a tracking mark on it. I’ll attempt to follow it today. Maybe I can discover its master.”
“Good luck then. I’ll cover for you if it takes you more than a day.”

The old wizard’s face became serious again. He shifted in his seat as if getting ready for something unpleasant.

“Merlin, by happenstance you wouldn’t know anything about the curse that has been placed upon Severus Snape?”

Ah, that unpleasantry. Merlin tried to keep a straight face. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Albus sighed and linked his hands together in front of him. “Reverse the curse, Merlin. You’ve had your fun.”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “These types of curses have a tendency to land on people who deserve them, Albus. When he stops deserving it, we can talk.”

Dumbledore huffed. “I think you’ve been a child for too long because you’re starting to act like one. You can’t go around cursing my staff just because you don’t like them.”

All humor gone, Merlin tried to stand as tall as his child body would let him. He was actually wondering if he went too easy on Snape who not only tormented his students but trained the next generation of bullies by example. Merlin only got started on teaching the lesson to his dear Potions Master.

“I will not stand by and do nothing when innocents are being mistreated.” He poked his finger in the old wizard’s direction. “Be glad broken chairs is all he got. Maybe I was in a good mood that day. You do not want to see me in a bad one.”

Merlin’s nerves were already on edge but this conversation tipped him over. He could feel his temper flaring and worried that further talk would make it worse. He had no time for arguments with Dumbledore.

“We’re done here,” he said curtly. He had more important things to do than explaining his plans for Snape. “I’ll look for Dobby.”

For some reason, he felt a need to remind Dumbledore who he was dealing with. So he disapparated right in front of him in a cloud of black smoke and a whirl of wind.

Over in the girls’ dormitory, Ginny looked at the poster of Gwenog Jones which she hung on the wall at the start of term. Ever since her parents took her to the game of Holyhead Harpies a year ago, she had been obsessed with Gwenog and strived to be just as brilliant, strong and successful both in Quidditch and in life. But time proved that she was nothing like her. She was weak physically and mentally. Gwenog would be ashamed to have a fan like her.

You’ve set too high expectations of yourself. It's okay to be ordinary.

Tom’s words kept ringing in her head. Were her expectations too high? She used to have all of these hopes and dreams. Now, she remembered them all as if they belonged to someone else. She couldn't find enough of that old Ginny inside herself. She was less.

She got in the habit of crying herself to sleep, quietly, so her roommates wouldn’t notice, clutching her diary to her chest, her only friend. Tom comforted her with kind words and encouragement, but it wasn’t enough to keep her spirit up. It seemed that each morning, she woke up feeling even worse,
more drained.

Then, there were the days when she’d wake up in the wretched Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Myrtle usually ignored her and sobbed to herself in her stall. If only the ghost was any more pleasant, Ginny would bond with her. They were both sad and lonely, but it was impossible to hold a conversation with her. Myrtle would get offended for the most stupid reasons. Like this one time, Ginny commented that she liked her hair and Myrtle exploded, “That’s what people say when they mean your face is ugly!” and wailed so loud, Ginny was afraid she would alert the whole castle and get her in trouble.

She was on her way to the Great Hall, pondering whether Myrtle was just as annoying before she died when two monsters ran out right in front of her.

They were taller than her, covered in red-brown shaggy fur but looked mostly like humans. After the initial shock wore off, she looked closer at their faces.

“George? Fred! What in the ruddy gnomes are you doing?”

“Waiting for you, isn’t it obvious?” one of them said, she couldn’t tell which one because of the fur.

“How do we look?”

“I’ll say we’re dashing.”

She rolled her eyes at them. They looked like mangy, red-haired Yetis. “Watch out. If Professor Lockhart notices you, he’d like to sell you his hair care products now that you have so much of it.”

The twins sniggered and playfully nudged her shoulder but she really wasn’t in the mood to laugh.

“Oh, cheer up, Ginny. We’re just playing.”

“We know that you’re sad because of what happened to your friend.”

Ginny’s breath caught. Oh, no. They mentioned Colin. She had been avoiding thinking about him all day. Last night was one of those nights when she lost track of time and woke up in Myrtle’s bathroom barely able to move. It was just as bad as on Halloween, maybe even worse. Both times someone ended up petrified exactly during the span of time when Ginny was sleepwalking.

Tom assured her that it was a coincidence but she wasn’t so sure. What if she was the one who was behind the attacks? Colin was her friend, one of the very few people who were unconditionally nice. His cheerful chipper always made her feel better. Why did it have to be him?

“Oh, no, Ginny. Don’t cry.”

She wiped her eyes and gritted her teeth. She would not cry and she would not put up with her brothers. She had to get away from them.

“Can you go bother someone else,” she complained.

“Already done. I put a stink pellet in Percy’s bookbag.”

“He deserved it. He keeps knocking our points.”

“It’s like he doesn’t want us to win the House Cup.”

“You know, he’s been up to something lately. He acts so secretively.”
“Doesn’t share.”

“We must find out what it is.”

One of them scratched his hairy arm. “Do you think Madam Pomfrey has an antidote?”

“Let’s find out.”

The twins finally left her alone and she continued on her way.

Ginny’s eyes still felt misty as she thought of poor Colin. She turned around and instead of going to the Great Hall, she went to the Hospital Wing to visit him.

Minerva sat down to talk to the Headmaster. As usual, he dealt with work-related stress by filling his body with sugar. He offered her a bowl of Muggle candy and she took one politely but it was too sweet for her taste. She wished he would keep other snacks in his office. There was nothing better than a couple of soft biscuits to munch on with a warm cup of tea.

“As per your instruction, we’ve established a schedule for nighttime patrols,” she got down to business. “All staff will help. We’re trying to keep the panic to a minimum but advised the older students of the severity of the situation so they would help implement an earlier curfew.”

“Good work, Minerva. As always.”

She appreciated his kind words but they were unnecessary. She would do a thorough job without praise just as well. Her heart ached thinking about the danger her pupils were exposed to. She maintained a calm, controlled facade, but underneath, she was scared for them all. It was her duty to protect them and she failed one little boy already. But there was no use in worrying. She had responsibilities to attend to.

“Thank you. I’m here also with an unrelated matter which I didn’t get to bring up before. If the time is not right, we can delay this discussion.”

“I’m all ears.”

“It is rather unprecedented. Two students came to me, asking for special consideration due to their religious beliefs.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What type of special consideration do they need?”

“They want to be excused from performing Transfiguration spells that involve animals.”

Dumbledore nodded his head thinking it over. “Interesting. No one has requested this before. What religion do they practice?”

“They call it the Old Religion.”

He froze and she could tell that the words had a profound effect on him.

“Have you heard of it?”

He blinked a few times and nodded. “I have. Who are those two students?”

“Merlin Ealdor and Jack Nix. I assume that Elsa Nix partakes in this as well although I haven’t spoken to her yet.”
Corners of his mouth lifted a little in a small smile like he knew something she didn’t. She did not like being kept in the dark.

“Headmaster, if you know anything about this practice, I would greatly appreciate your input. I am rather concerned.”

“I’m well aware that Ealdor family practices Old Religion. I know them well.”

“Ah,” she smoothed out her gown. “This explains why Merlin was so crass to call you by your first name.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Indeed. I’m afraid it will be a difficult habit for him to break.” He took another of his sweets and sucked on it for a moment while thinking. “You should allow them what they request as long as it’s within reason.” He leaned on the desk and gazed at her intensely. “My own request is that I’d like to know who is in their group and what activities they plan to engage in.”

“I think it is most wise, Headmaster.” She was glad he brought this up. “It worries me what I’ve read about the ancient practices connected to this faith.”

“Feel free to ask Merlin if you have concerns. He loves talking about it.”

She found it strange that an old wizard like him had such a casual relationship with an eleven-year-old boy. On the other hand, Albus Dumbledore was full of eccentricities. She supposed he was allowed yet another one.

She got up to leave and pondered on how this school year was proving to be even more challenging than the last one. An ancient legend was awakened. Petrified patients in the Hospital Wing. Religious clubs sprouted up. What else would they face?

No sooner than when she thought those words, there was a loud noise behind her, and she turned around fast with her hand already in her pocket, ready to draw her wand.
Baby dragon

When Merlin disapparated from Dumbledore’s office in a cloud of black smoke and a whirl of wind, he was showing off. There was no denying it.

He quickly regretted it as he felt the castle’s wards press against him, holding him in. The wards were cast to disallow anyone to apparate within Hogwarts but they were no match for someone like him. He fought through them until he was free. Soon he found that it was a mistake to use this spell while in anger as now he had to spend even more effort trying to gain focus and lock down on where the house-elf’s mark was. He should’ve done that beforehand. It took a lot of persistence, but thankfully, he was able to follow the trail.

He had just as much trouble getting through the wards of the building where the elf led him to. He regained solid form, tried to steady his breath and took a look around. He was inside a large room, a hallway of sorts with shiny marble floors and a tall ceiling. He apparated some distance away from the elf to not alert the creature of his arrival, but to his chagrin, the room wasn’t empty. Few people looked around wondering where the wind came from.

Merlin quickly ran behind a column before they noticed him. It worked in his favor that they didn’t recognize the whirl of wind as a teleportation spell. Modern wizards were only used to what their version of apparition looked like and that was also what they set up wards against. Their ignorance of Old Religion spells allowed Merlin to overcome any ward. They couldn’t keep him in or out of anywhere.

But breaking through the wards tired him. It was foolish to track the elf unfocused and distraught. It took so much of his energy, he felt exhausted already.

Only then, he remembered that he was half-dressed. He had trousers on but his top was a pajama shirt with a disco-dancing baby dragon and words ”BURN! BABY, BURN!” on it. He thought it was funny when he bought it, but now, he wished he was wearing something else, just anything other than this. No wonder Dumbledore had a hard time treating him seriously when he showed up looking like that.

He tried to use glamour to make his pajama appear more shirt-like but it flickered and fizzled out back to the baby dragon. He was too tired to perform major magic. In fact, he didn’t even have his wand with him and it would have come in handy about now. As much as he hated to admit it, wand magic had its use. When he felt depleted like this, he would have no problem performing wand spells. Oh, his temper really did a number on him this time. He was completely unprepared.

“Who cast that spell?” a woman who sounded like an authority figure asked the bewildered secretary.

“Some guys from the Department of Mysteries just passed by with a large crate,” he offered and that seemed to be a satisfiable answer because no more questions were asked.

Merlin smacked his forehead. He was in the Ministry of Magic. Oh, what a place to be found in wandless and wearing baby dragon pajamas.

While he was stuck there, waiting to regain his strength, he might as well look for Dobby and his master.

He snuck around, hiding behind columns and statues until he saw the elf.
Dobby was standing in a corner, picked on his dirty pillowcase and sobbed quietly to himself. Merlin crouched and waited for the elf’s master to show up but no one came to claim him. Hours passed and Merlin grew tired of waiting, but he didn’t want to leave - the master could come out at any moment.

An awful thought struck him. What if Dobby’s master forgot to pick up his servant on his way out? Dobby would wait until he was called. How long would that be? Merlin’s stomach gave a mighty growl and he wondered if he should wait longer or give up for the day.

"Who might you be, young fella?"

Merlin whirled around and his knees buckled, weakened from being in a crouched position for so long. A middle-aged man with flaming red hair looked down at him curiously.

"Are you waiting for someone?"

The damage was already done, he was discovered and the only thing left to do was to get away before trouble found him. He looked around him for ideas and saw a witch disappear in a green flame.

"I came out of the wrong fireplace."

"Oh, dear me," the man said with a kind smile. "I'll help you get back."

The ginger man led him in the direction of the large fireplaces which were on the other side of the room. Merlin snuck a glance at the wizard and noticed a resemblance to the Gryffindor red-heads.

"Are you Arthur Weasley?"

"Yes, I am," he answered. "You've met my children, I presume?"

"Yes. I'm in the same year as Ginny."

"Gryffindor?" Merlin nodded and the man smiled. "Give her greetings from daddy, will ya?"

They stopped at one of the fireplaces and Mr. Wesley handed him some Floo powder.

"Just talk clearly this time."

"Will do. Thank you."

Merlin cast a last glance at the elf who stood alone, waiting. He would have to come back and check on him another day. Hopefully then, Dobby would be home, wherever that home may be.

“Albus Dumbledore’s office,” Merlin said when he threw the Floo powder and hoped that the Headmaster wouldn’t have visitors at the moment.

He was thrown out the other fireplace and landed sprawled on his belly right at the feet of the old wizard. Luck had it that the fireplace was lit so he spread ash and embers around when landing.

“Sorry about that,” he said, picking himself up.

He vanished the mess and attempted to shake the soot out of his clothes but it was pointless. He needed a thorough bath. Dumbledore did not hide his amusement at the scene.

“I found Dobby,” he tried to explain himself, ignoring the old wizard’s bemused expression. “I waited for hours and his master never showed up.”
“What were you doing with Floo powder, Mr. Ealdor?”

Merlin froze. “Oh, sard me,” he breathed out.

That was the voice of McGonagall behind him. Nothing went right today. He groaned and looked to Dumbledore for help.

Albus looked down at him. “Sard me?”

“Look it up.”

The old wizard’s eyes twinkled with humor but he offered no help. Merlin supposed he served himself up for ridicule like a pig for a banquet - made a dramatic exit and came back like a fool in dirty baby dragon pajamas.

Merlin turned around and plastered an innocent smile on his face.

“I should go,” he said and tried to make a quick getaway. “I’m sorry for interrupting.”

“What were you doing?” she asked incredulously.

“Yeah, I figured, they’ll never find me here.”

The wrinkles on her face deepened while Dumbledore turned around to hide his stifled laughter with a cough.

“Minerva, would you please escort our young friend here to the Gryffindor tower so he may clean up?”

She looked like she wanted to say something but then put a hand on Merlin’s back and pushed him out the door.

Once outside the Headmaster’s office, she stopped him. Her gaze oozed disapproval.

“You’re lucky the Headmaster tolerates your behavior. He told me that he’s friends with your family and that should supposedly excuse your casual demeanor, but you should remember that you are a student at this school. You will address him respectfully and will not show up in his office unannounced like this anymore. You have embarrassed the House of Gryffindor and me. Am I making myself clear?”

Merlin inclined his head respectfully.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She pursed her lips and contemplated what to do with him. In the meantime, Merlin’s stomach growled in warning and he didn’t care how she wanted to punish him. He was ready to double over from hunger. He hadn’t eaten since the day before.

“I can’t believe I have to say this, but Floo powder is not to be used for playtime, Mr. Ealdor. How
did you find a fireplace that was connected to the Floo Network?”

He shrugged. “Lucky.”

She looked like she wanted to interrogate him but his stomach chose this moment to make a very loud growl and Merlin was too tired to even feel embarrassed about it.

She steered him to the tower and he gladly went along. He stumbled as McGonagall pushed him and tried to remember to move his feet in synch. He couldn’t remember the last time he was this exhausted by magic and wondered why he felt so spent when all he did was a teleportation spell and breaking through two powerful barriers. Then, it dawned on him that he did all of that while holding the aging spell. It had been months. Maintaining it for such an extended period of time was taking a great toll on him.

He missed being in his adult body. He missed how easy everything was, how unlimited his magic reserves felt. For the time being, he was stuck like this and had to get used to the consequences, starting with no more big shows of magic.

When he got to his dorm, he eyed his bed longingly and considered just collapsing in it. But he was filthy and starving. So he took a quick shower and somehow found the energy to make it downstairs.

When he got there, the evening feast had just started. He found Jack sitting in their usual spot and joined in.

“Hey, don’t disappear on me like that,” Jack said in an accusatory tone. “You had me worried.”

Merlin shrugged, too tired to come up with an excuse. They ate in silence - conversation didn’t feel right without Colin there. The absence of the missing part of their trio was painful. He kept sneaking glances to where Colin usually sat next to him. Such a sweet boy to befall such a cruel fate.

Finally, Jack excused himself to talk to his sister and Merlin had a sense of deja vu because the same thing had happened yesterday. And now it hit him that he forgot the most important part of the previous evening.

Colin looked scared and was trying to tell him something.

“It’s about Jack,” the boy said.

Colin found out something and was silenced before he could tell anyone.

Merlin swiveled in his seat to see where the white-haired twins sat together, whispering secret plans to each other. He suspected the boy before because he was missing right before Mrs. Norris was petrified. Why exactly did he drop his suspicions?

He was a fool to fall for Jack’s charisma and drop his guard. He wanted to believe that his friend was harmless so much that he ignored the signs plastered right in front of him. Now, as a result of his weakness, an innocent boy paid the price.

The last couple of days had been crazy. Ever since Colin Creevey was petrified, the whole school had been on edge. Someone tried to sell Elsa an amulet that would supposedly protect her from harm, but she knew better than to fall for the fraud. Just from touching it, she could feel that it was a plain stone, it didn’t hold any magic. Besides, would she even need one? She wasn’t a Muggle-born. She wasn’t a witch either but no one knew that. She felt no need to cower in fear. What would that achieve anyway? Fear was a useless emotion.
Her brother was distraught and blamed himself for what happened to his friend. She tried to assure him that he couldn’t have done anything to prevent it, but he wasn’t easily persuaded. Guilt was yet another useless emotion. If only she could make him see that.

If he wasn’t under enough strain already, his roommate, Merlin, had been making it worse. Per Jack, his friend was acting strange around him, upset by what happened to Colin in his own way and taking out his stress on her brother. The fear was getting to everyone and had a compounding effect. It was like an infection causing mass hysteria, spreading from student to student, becoming more potent with each day.

Elsa wanted to help her brother and thought that a good solution would be to occupy them with new research.

When she learned of Jack’s plan about Old Religion, she thought he was going overboard, but once she learned that it meant that Merlin would teach them some new magic, she got excited. Jack went with Merlin to McGonagall and started the process to have the school accept their religious beliefs, everything was going smoothly, but then, Colin was petrified and Merlin’s attitude completely changed. Several days have passed since then, and Merlin could not find the time to move forward with their plan. Now, he had been spending all his time with Harry Potter’s gang and wouldn’t be bothered with anything else.

Elsa wanted to find out for herself what the problem was so when she saw Merlin in the hallway, she walked up to him.

“Hi. I’m really sorry about your friend.”

Merlin looked at her with his eyes narrowed and she wondered if she had ever done anything to make him dislike her. She didn’t know him well but her brother seemed to like him, so she tried to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Jack mentioned that you showed him some Old Religion magic few days ago and I was just wondering when you were planning on teaching us.”

“Oh, that,” the boy said and scratched his head. “This isn’t the best time with everything that is happening.”

Elsa blinked a few times trying to recover her train of thought. This was the attitude Jack was talking about.

“Well, or maybe it’s the best time exactly for that reason. Jack said how he wished he had been there to protect Colin but how exactly could he protect him? He doesn’t know any spells strong enough. When you spoke of it, it sounded like you know some advanced magic, useful magic. Or was that all just talk?”

Merlin frowned and she wondered if she pushed him too hard, but she stood her ground. Someone had to give this boy a good talking to.

“It wasn’t just talk. I want to teach you, but you’re going to have to be patient.”

She did not appreciate his patronizing tone or how he was dangling his knowledge of the subject in front of her like it was a carrot teasing a hungry goat. She did not like being under his mercy.

“Don’t forget, Jack needs your help to talk to Professor Snape. We started the process, we can’t just pause. That would make it look like we weren’t serious.”
“I’ll try to find the time, but I have more important things on my plate right now.”

“Some friend you are,” she said bitterly. “You gave my brother hope that he was going to be alright and then you abandoned him. Nevermind. I will help him if you won’t.”

Merlin had no response for her, but instead stared at her in a strange way that made her feel uncomfortable like he was searching for something in her eyes, so she ended that disappointing conversation.

She spent the next couple of days researching Old Religion with Jack so that they wouldn’t be clueless about it. Having Merlin there would be the best because as a real practitioner of the faith, he could answer professor’s questions about it, but if he was going to act so don’t-bother-me-now, then they had to figure this out alone.

There were no records on Old Religion in Hogwarts library that they could find. Since Merlin mentioned ancient Druids, they decided to research them instead but that search brought small results. Apparently, ancient Druids believed in passing on knowledge in a word-of-the-mouth method and did not like to write it down, or maybe too many of them were illiterate. In any case, it wasn’t much but she thought they gathered enough information to appear as true practitioners.

The more Elsa read about it, the more she wanted to be a practitioner of Old Religion. She was enthralled by the idea of possessing it all: her own brand of nature spirit magic, Hogwarts magic, and Old Religion. If she could wield them all, she would be unstoppable.

They found one book which contained Old Religion spells and she got excited, thinking they wouldn’t need Merlin after all, only to find that the spells were written in ancient rune.

“Do you think Merlin can read this?”

Jack looked over at the page and shrugged.

“It’s possible. He knows Old English. Hey, remember when Mother would talk in a different language sometimes? That’s what it was! The fact that we’re familiar with it will be useful for the incantations.” He leaned in closer and whispered. “Merlin says that this language has been dead for a thousand years. Do you think Mother is that old?”

A shiver went down Elsa’s spine. She couldn’t imagine how anyone could be that old but she supposed that it was possible that Mother had been doing her spring rejuvenation which extended her life for a thousand years already. Maybe longer. But why? She wondered who would choose such cursed existence.

“Who would want to live that long?”

A new thought occurred to her. It was possible that there was a spell in Old Religion that would help her find their father and she wouldn’t even need Mirror of Erised anymore. Maybe even the spell book she had found contained it. But they needed Merlin to translate it and he wasn’t cooperating at the moment.

Research into Old Religion was a welcome break from her usual research for the Mirror of Erised. Luna’s father turned out to be of no help. He didn’t keep a record of who submitted the article about it.

In an act of desperation, Elsa wrote a letter to Gulbadox family and gave it to a school owl, hoping that the bird would be able to find them by some magical means. Two days later, the owl came back and angrily threw her letter back at her. The events in the article had happened over a century ago.
Was it possible that there were no surviving Gulbadox descendants?

After that fiasco, her last hope was finding where people would send dangerous artifacts. She was running out of places to look. It felt like she had read half of the library by now. So it was with welcome thoughts that she dived into the knowledge on the Old Magic and Druid practices. It distracted her from feeling like a failure.

Once they read what they could about ancient Druids, they talked to McGonagall, counting on her help with Professor Snape.

"What exactly do you plan to achieve with Professor Snape?" she asked them.

"Some of the ingredients we use in Potions are just so horrid," Jack said. "If we could substitute them for something more humane…"

"Do you realize that you propose to change potion’s recipe? What makes you think you know the subject well enough to do this? You’re only in your first year."

"She has a point," Elsa admitted but her brother seemed pretty confident about his plan.

"Elsa, do you remember that Elixir book?"

"Yes."

"There were a lot of tips in there which apply to Potions. They work. I’ve tried them"

They had very few books available to them when growing up and the Elixir book was the most intriguing of them but it was also difficult to decipher.

"See? All those times I told you to reread books paid off."

He smiled, refreshingly not afraid to admit that she was right. "Yes, it did. Have you tried using what you remember from it?"

"No, I've been following the recipes from our textbook."

Jack gave her a sly smile. "Really? I'm doing something better than you?"

"Who said that you're better? My grades have been excellent."

"So are mine and I've been modifying every potion recipe according to the Elixir book notes."

Elsa gaped at him. She couldn’t believe that he was so brazen about it.

"Jack, this is intriguing but," McGonagall sighed, "I don't want you to get your hopes up. What you’re trying to achieve is unprecedented."

"I need to try."

“Very well,” she drew herself up and straightened a crease on her long gown. “I’ll speak to Professor Snape and arrange the time. I suggest you two prepare what you’re planning to say to him in the meantime.”

While having a word of their Head of House was going to be useful, Elsa knew that this was a battle they had to fight on their own.
She spent hours in the Ravenclaw common room, racking her brains for the best way to approach the unapproachable Potions Master. Luna came over and squatted on the floor with her drawing materials.

“Luna, when I said you can borrow my shoes, I meant both, right and left.”

Someone stole all of Luna’s right shoes, leaving her with only the lefts. While they looked for them, Elsa offered her a spare pair. Luna seemed to be very relaxed about the whole situation. If it was her, Elsa would’ve turned the place into a war zone to find out who did it.

“They’re a little large, you’re taller after all,” Luna said in a chipper tone. “It’s better to have at least one well fitting shoe if two are not available.”

Elsa stared at the one yellow and one gray shoe and wasn’t sure how else she could convince her friend to wear a matching pair. She supposed it was better than her brother’s barefoot obsession.

A group of second-year girls passed by and openly laughed upon seeing Luna. Elsa wondered if they were the thieves. The girls noticed her ferocious stare, sobered up and left the common room. They looked guilty. This was worth investigating.

Right after, another girl went down from the dorm and Elsa’s mood brightened up.

“Padma,” she waved to her favorite second-year friend to come over, “you know Professor Snape better. If you had a request for him, how would you go about it?”

Padma paused and approached slowly with a wistful look on her face. “What is this about?”

She looked down at Luna and made an incredulous face as if she had never seen an oddity like her before but did not comment.

“I’m helping my brother with something. He has a special request for Professor Snape and if it was any other teacher, it wouldn’t be a problem. Everyone falls for his charisma and gives in to all his whims. It’s annoying, really, how effectively he can charm people.”

Padma had a dreamy look in her eye. “Your brother is really cute. I couldn't resist his request either.”

Elsa thought she would hurl. “You too?”

Padma sighed, staring into nowhere. “If only he wasn’t younger…”

“We’re your age, you know? We’ll be twelve in December.”

“Really?” Padma perked up. “So it wouldn’t be weird.”

Elsa groaned. “Why does everyone like him so easily? I don’t think people react to me this way.”

“You’re a little intense,” she said with a shrug. “They’re probably intimidated. It’s not a bad thing.”

This was an interesting piece of information and Elsa already made plans to analyze it in more detail later, but for now, she had to get back on topic before Padma got lost in daydreams about her brother.

“So, Jack’s charm will not have a chance against Professor Snape. It’s up to me to find a way to get him to listen and give us a chance. What would you recommend?”

Padma twirled a lock of dark hair on her finger and took a moment to think. Elsa hoped she wasn’t
still fantasizing about her brother.

“Yes. Snape.” She sighed like she’d prefer to get back to the previous topic. “Underneath the moodiness, Professor Snape is an intelligent man. Appeal to that. It wouldn’t hurt to stroke his ego a bit - very subtly. For example, just ‘accidentally’ mention how excellent of a teacher he is.”

Padma’s suggestion gave birth to a slew of ideas and Elsa was over the Moon happy that she had a tip on dealing with the moody Professor.

“Thank you.”

“Good luck and,” Padma giggled, “mention me when you speak to your brother.”

Elsa rolled her eyes. “Sure.”

When they came to the Potions Master with McGonagall, he nearly laughed at them, nearly. Elsa supposed he forgot how to do that properly decades ago.

“Professor,” Elsa tried to follow Padma’s advice, “we wouldn’t have suggested alternate ways of preparing potions if we didn’t have confidence that it can be done. Isn’t the art of potion-making a science? Where would science be if not for experimentation?”

The corner of his lip twitched but the rest of his face did not betray any emotion so she wasn’t sure what he thought of her appeal. She hoped that he found her argument sound and would give them a chance. That was all they needed.

Professor McGonagall excused herself to attend to her duties and they were left alone with the Potions Master.

”Just so that I can fully comprehend the extent of your” he licked his lips, “request, do divulge, which ingredients offend your religious sensibilities?”

Jack took out their textbook and pointed at a long ingredient list. “Things like fairy wings, unicorn horns, or any part of an animal that wasn’t naturally shed. If obtaining the ingredient harmed an animal, especially if it’s a magical creature, then I will not use it in a potion.”

Snape looked a little bit too pleased with everything Jack said and Elsa wished that her brother didn’t put so much emotion in his words. Snape seemed to be the type of person who found emotions to be a weakness.

Elsa’s mind reeled at that thought because that was her view on emotions as well. Did she really have this much in common with this wizard? She appraised him, from his intimidating posture, permanently sneering expression and an aura that screamed, “Beware!” Was this how people viewed her? She was opposite of him as far as looks went, and she didn’t think anyone thought her to be a vampire (Jack was still convinced that he was secretly a bloodsucker), but she tended to agree with Snape. Even his meanest insults had sound reasoning behind them and she thought that he could be quite funny sometimes.

“You think you two dunderheads can rewrite a work of famous potioneers?”

“We wouldn’t dare do this on our own, Professor;” Elsa added, remembering the second tip Padma offered, “not without the guidance of an excellent teacher.”

His eyes lingered on her and a corner of his lip lifted a little. Elsa couldn’t believe it. Was that a
smile? Did he actually smile at her attempt at flattery?

“I find your ridiculous request so utterly absurd, I’m willing to let you try just so I can watch you fail. You will prepare the Antidote to Common Poisons right now and,” he paused for effect, “test it on yourself.”

Elsa swallowed. ”What?”

Snape looked smug. “Not so confident now?”

Jack took a long breath. “I can do it.”

“Then don’t waste my time, get on with it.”

Jack took the lead on the preparations and Elsa helped. Several times, she noticed that he deviated from the recipe.

“You’re supposed to wait thirty minutes.” She pointed to where it said so in their textbook.

“The exact time depends on the heat and cauldron thickness and that isn’t exact, is it?” He put his hand over the cauldron and tilted his head thinking. “It’s nearly ready. Maybe one minute”

She was bewildered why he was doing that. “You’re taking a big risk.”

“No, I’m not. I can feel it. You can’t?”

She hesitantly put her hand over the cauldron. It felt hot and her instinct told her to take her hand back but she waited, trying to feel what he described. She felt a tingle of magic and took her hand back. He could tell it was ready from such a small tingle?

When they were small, Jack turned feeling magic into a game. She thought it was stupid. She didn’t see what use it was, but now, she understood something her brother must have recognized early on. You could manipulate magic better if you could feel it.

“I used to make fun of you for touching everything,” she remembered. “You were fascinated by the magic in things and I thought it was a stupid hobby.”

He chuckled. “I did it even more to annoy you. Now, I feel it everywhere. Each person, object. Sometimes, even the air has magic in it.”

”You trained yourself in this skill.”

He smirked at her. “Instead of making fun of me, you should’ve joined me.”

She knew this about him, she’d seen him interact with objects and always scoffed annoyed that he never dropped that silly hobby. It was just another one of her brother’s quirks. But underneath the game was the practice of a refined skill. He allowed himself to feel it all, to grow sensitive to even the slightest trace of magic. She wondered if she could still learn this skill or if it was too late for her. It took him years. Did she have that type of patience?

“What is it like to feel magic this deeply? Are there side effects?”

He ground his ingredients in a pestle while deep in thought. “It gets overwhelming sometimes. That’s why I like to go outside to clear my head.”

“This is all fascinating,” Snape’s drawl sounded behind them and Elsa jumped. His tone dripped
with sarcasm. “Would you care to explain what you’re doing to this unfortunate valerian root?”

Jack was happy to explain. “When mashed together with wormwood oil and moondew, they will have the same magical properties as a unicorn horn. I just have to time it right.”

Snape’s lip twitched. “I have heard of this technique but it is extremely unreliable. Its result is most difficult to replicate. You’ll completely change the properties of your brew if you fail.”

“I imagine others describe it as difficult because one has to wait for the magic to be at its optimal and if they can’t sense it, how would they know if they timed it right?”

“But you can?”

“Yes.” Jack lifted his eyes to their professor and released the full force of his innocent gaze on the man. The grumpy professor seemed frozen in thought for a moment and didn’t betray whatever he was thinking.

“Carry on,” he said, barely moving his lips.

Jack got back to squishing his ingredients and finally decided that the mixture was ready. He put them in the cauldron and slowly stirred.

Elsa watched with fascination. He looked like he knew what he was doing. It was interesting to watch him work on something that wasn’t just play, to actually be serious for a change. She supposed he was growing up.

She passed him the mistletoe berries and he stirred them in one at a time. He put his hand over the cauldron and concentrated. Then, he pulled out his wand, waved it over the pot and lingered for a moment, feeling the magic.

“It’s almost stable. Try,” he encouraged her. “Can you feel it?”

She put her hand over it and could sense magic but didn’t understand. “What do you mean by stable?”

“Right now, its magic feels like it’s trying to decide what it wants to be. It’s like a mood, up and down, good and bad…” He hovered his hand over it again and waited.

Snape was right next to them and observed their brew. “Nix, you managed to get the color right but you might be overcooking it at this point.”

“Almost,” Jack whispered.

He closed and opened his fist uncomfortably and Elsa imagined that he was close to burning himself, but he endured it, determined to get his potion right. Then, he smiled in satisfaction, snapped his hand back and turned off the fire.

He hid his hand beneath the desk and covered it with a layer of frost to cool down his skin.

“It’s ready.”

Snape stirred the potion gently to examine its consistency. Without a change in expression, he walked away from them and disappeared behind a mysterious door which was usually locked.

Elsa exchanged a look with Jack. They were both clueless as to what their professor was up to.
Snape came out holding a vial in his hand. He walked up to them with a hint of a smile on his face.

“Since you are so confident with your potion invention, you should be as confident in its effectiveness. Ms. Nix, if you will, drink this entire vial.”

“What’s in it?” Jack asked.

“Poison, what else?” Snape answered with a bored expression. “This is how we’re going to test your potion’s effectiveness.”

Elsa had to admit that as crude as this method was, this was a very practical way to test an Antidote to Common Poisons.

Jack looked at their professor intently, finally understanding the severity of the risk his potion experiment posed. “Fine. I’ll drink it.”

“No, dear Mr. Nix,” Snape said as if he was bored. “Your sister will drink it and you will cure her with your potion.”

Jack gripped the edge of the desk. “No. I should be the one…”

“Ms. Nix, are you ready?” Snape ignored her brother.

Elsa stared at the vial and felt momentarily too stunned to respond.

‘Logic. Logic over fear,’ she thought to herself.

Snape was testing their resolution as much as actually testing the potion. She could guarantee that he had an antidote ready to give her, should Jack’s potion fail. Was she sure enough to take this risk? There was also an additional risk that Jack’s potion was poison in itself with unknown effects and the common antidote Snape had wouldn’t counteract it.

“You don’t have to,” Jack whispered to her.

His eyes shone with fear. She would have felt the same if the roles were reversed. And she was sure that should the roles be reversed, Jack would have taken the risk for her. If she backed out now, it would undo all they had achieved with their professor today. He wouldn’t give them another chance. This was it.

She gritted her teeth and made up her mind. She would do this for him.

She took the vial from Snape and regarded it. She had to trust in her brother’s skill and also that their teacher wouldn’t make her drink it if he didn’t have confidence that he could cure her. He was intimidating and dark in many ways but she didn’t believe that he was evil.

She turned to her brother, said, “You owe me,” and drank the whole thing.

She closed her eyes, feeling heat run down her throat and spread in her stomach.

“Professor,” Jack asked in a worried tone, “what type of poison did you give her?”

“Pure aconite extract.”

“But that’s lethal!”

“Precisely,” Snape said slowly, “so your potion better work.”
Elsa tipped the vial and swallowed it in one go. She closed her eyes, feeling heat run down her throat and spread in her stomach. It immediately started to burn and she doubled over. She could hear Jack and Snape saying something in the background but the sound was drowned out by a ringing in her ears. All of her senses were screaming at her. An intense pain gripped her insides and she fell on her knees.

Jack shoved something to her mouth. “Drink,” he said urgently. “Drink, Elsa.”

She swallowed the liquid from the glass. It felt warm and smelled foul.

“More,” he insisted when she squirmed away from it.

He brought it to her lips again and she hesitated. Her insides were still burning and now, her mouth felt like a trash can on a warm day. But she finally drank the rest of it and gagged. If her body was capable of it, she would have retched but a slight paralysis was already taking hold as her body was shutting down.

She laid down on the floor in a fetal position and breathed through her mouth as her body convulsed in pain. Jack kneeled next to her, smoothed the hair on her head while saying something but she was too busy dying to listen.

There was no flash of memories as death drew near. It was only pain, a fire that obscured every thought, that grew larger within her, and consumed the world around her. She hoped the world burned with her. The world deserved it. The world was cruel.

Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, the burning gradually subsided and was replaced by a vile feeling, like her stomach was slowly being painted in that nasty potion she was forced to drink. She took a few shaky breaths and was glad that the convulsions were gone. By now, she only felt queasy.

She sat up and Jack hugged her fiercely.

“Your potion is disgusting,” she tried to chuckle.

He held her so tight, she felt as if her bones would break but she didn’t mind. She rested her forehead on his neck and took comfort in the coolness of his skin. The heat was going away. She was feeling better.

“I can’t believe he gave you aconite,” he whispered in her ear. “I wouldn’t have let you drink it if I knew. I’m so sorry. This wasn’t worth risking your life.”

She squeezed him back in response in a gesture of assurance that he wasn’t at fault. It was her decision to drink the poison. She could barely believe that it really happened and just moments ago, she felt so close to death. It sounded too extreme.

“This is all very touching,” Snape said sarcastically, “but I suppose it worked. Rather fast too. A normal antidote would have taken at least twenty minutes by which time she would have been unconscious already.”

Jack trembled in rage.

“Control your anger. He’s testing your nerves,” she whispered.
Jack finally released her and touched her face. “How are you feeling? Can you get up yet?”

“Yeah.”

He helped her up and she hung onto his arm for support. She felt exhausted and just wanted it all to be over.

Snape’s face was expressionless as if nothing unusual had just happened, as if he didn’t just nearly kill one of his students. They waited as he examined the potion in more detail and barely glanced at her to confirm that she was in fact cured.

“This will do,” he declared in a bored voice. “You may practice your experimental humane methods in my class if you wish, assuming you accept the consequences of your likely failures. It would be most foolish to think that today’s success is guaranteed to be repeated each time. I don’t care what you worship. You will not get special treatment if your method fails. A fail is a fail.”

“I understand, sir,” Jack said in a very controlled tone.

“I am most curious about where you learned these methods.”

“Back home, we had this Elixir book which had a lot of notes and tips on different brewing techniques.”

“Who was the author?”

“I don’t know, sir. It was handwritten.”

Snape’s brow twitched like he was intrigued. “A family recipe book then?”

Jack shrugged. They never asked whose book it was. It could have been their mother’s or it could have belonged to one of the hags. They were afraid that if they asked questions about it, it would be taken away from them so they kept their questions to themselves.

“I’m not familiar with the Nix family line,” Snape drawled. “Any known potioneers among your ancestors?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Snape walked up and put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “You show adequate potential in this discipline and I recognize a lot of Slytherin characteristics in you. I wonder if you were sorted right.”


That was news to Elsa but they never discussed their sorting. The Hat sounded rather cryptic in her head when she put it on and she always wondered if it knew what she was. It seemed like so many creatures could tell that they weren’t human and only humans were oblivious to it. The Hat could actually see inside their minds so it was very likely that it knew. It didn’t betray them though. It sorted them just like human children, allowing them to become a part of this school. She wondered what type of being the Hat could be classified as. It was clearly much more than just an enchanted object.

“With your ambition, Ms. Nix,” Snape now looked at her, still holding Jack’s shoulder, “likewise, I think you would have done well in my House. The Hat should have put you both in Slytherin and you wouldn’t have been separated. This could still be arranged.”
Elsa blinked rapidly and tried to wrap her head around what he just said. She wondered if it had ever happened before that students changed their House affiliation over two months into the term, and more so if Professor Snape had ever been the one to arrange it. Did her brother manage to charm the most unlikable teacher in their school?

“Thank you for the offer, Professor,” Jack said, “but it will be easier if we stay where we are.”

Elsa agreed with his wish. She was proud to be in Ravenclaw. However, it was a curious idea as to what it would have been like if they had both been in Slytherin, just how different their school experience would have been then.

“Oh, well. Leave then,” Snape said and patted them both on the back.

They walked out of the dungeons with much better spirits. She couldn’t believe that they managed to convince him.

Jack led her to the courtyard where they sat on the grass. He knew what she needed.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that. And thank you. No one else would have done for me what you did.”

“You would have done the same for me.”

“In the blink of an eye. And I do owe you. Name your favor whenever you’re ready.”

“I’ll save it for a special occasion.”

She took her time absorbing the power of the Earth beneath her and felt like herself again. The air was crisp and refreshing and it smelled like the beginnings of winter. This reminded Elsa that it was past Samhain already and their mother was starting to get her winter powers again. The mountain peaks in the distance weren’t snow-covered yet but she expected them to become so any day now. From the tales of her mother’s powers, she knew this would signify the reign of the Queen of Winter. Would her powers extend all the way to Hogwarts?

Elsa worried if they were truly safe from her or what she would do once she found them. She would be furious, that was clear, but what would she do? She had never punished them physically, she always threatened so, but in the end, she would only resort to punishment by fear and separation. But they had never defied her in this way before. They crossed the line of misbehavior and she might just cross the line of appropriate punishment as a result.

“It’s a shame we don’t have Potions together.” Jack was playing by drawing frost on the ground and Elsa decided to push her thoughts of Mother aside and get back to the present. “So, I guess, I’ll make notes when I’m brewing, so you could use them when it’s your turn. That’s if you want to do it my way?”

“I’ll gladly take your notes.”

He smiled lopsidedly, clearly satisfied and proud of himself. It was the first time when he was truly better at something than she was. She was proud of him too.

“Snape is your fan now,” she joked.

“Jealous?” he smirked at her.

She shoved him playfully and he shoved her back and soon they were wrestling on the cold ground.
Suddenly, he got up and his eyes sparkled wickedly. “Want to make an early winter with me?”

How could she refuse a request like that? After a day like today, she badly needed some fun.

She focused on lowering the air temperature while he called in snow clouds. Once it started snowing, they ran around spreading their magic in the courtyard. Jack adorned all walls with his frost and it climbed up in beautiful tendrils. She started icing over all surfaces and crafting beautifully carved icicles. Then, she locked her eyes on the fountain in the center of the courtyard.

The fountain was rectangular in shape with four birds of prey guarding each corner and four columns which supported an arched roof. The water was turned off for the season but she didn’t need it. She recreated the water coming from the center of the frozen pool in majestic frozen streams which curled at the ends. Her ice was pure, translucent and shimmered with magic. Jack caught up to her plan and waved his hand to clear the dusting of snow from the stone sculptures and replaced it with frost which coated the stone like beautiful white lace.

They continued working on the fountain together making it grander, more intricate, and magnificent. She had been hiding her ice magic for so long now, it was the most freeing feeling to let it out and create something this beautiful with it.

She kept adding more details to the fountain until she ran out of space. She walked a few steps away to where Jack sat cross-legged in the snow, admiring her creation.

“It’s beautiful,” he commented.

She felt proud of it as it was the largest ice work she had ever done. “Honestly, I wish the fountain was bigger so I could do even more.”

“Maybe next time, you’ll ice the whole castle?”

She laughed. “I don’t think everyone inside would’ve liked it.”

“Then, make your own ice castle.”

She gasped at the thought. She didn’t have the confidence that she had enough power to build something that large but a vision of a majestic ice castle formed in her head and she wanted to make it come true. It wouldn’t be as large as Hogwarts, it didn't have to be, but it would be tall and ornate. There would be a giant chandelier with thousands of sparkling ice crystals, and a double staircase leading to the bedrooms inside. Everything inside would be made of her purest ice. She could manipulate it to have a different density that resulted in different shades of blue and white. That castle would scream Ice Magic.

“Maybe one day,” she mused.

Jack got up and stood with his legs apart as if he was bracing himself to hold something heavy. “I want to try something.”

She watched and waited as he concentrated. He spread his arms out and then, turned his palms up and all the snow in the courtyard lifted up of all surfaces. Even the snowflakes that were previously falling down heavily, hung suspended in the air. She had no idea that Jack was this powerful. His winter powers always seemed to be so gentle and nonthreatening but he was becoming a force of nature.

Upon seeing that he achieved what he wanted, he smiled lopsidedly and released the snow which fell down with a dusty poof.
“Your powers are growing,” she said and threw herself in his arms.

She felt proud of her brother. She hated it when their mother always called him weak. No one would call him that now.

He swung her around while holding her tight. “So are yours. Isn’t it amazing? Can you imagine what we will be capable of when we grow up?”

“We will become as powerful as Mother.”

Jack’s face became serious. “No, Elsa. More powerful,” he pulled out a wand from his pocket, “because of these.”

Albus looked down from his tower upon the courtyard below where two children released amazing magic. He planned to go down there once they left to see in detail what they had done.

He remembered back to the day when he met them. They showed him little wandless tricks and he was impressed. He wanted talented children like them among his students. He was looking forward to getting to know two more child prodigies before retirement, but in the back of his mind, he always knew that the twins were more than what met the eye.

Now, looking at the magic they could do when no one looked, when they were allowed to be themselves, his theory was proven much further than what he could have expected. He had never seen anything like it. Their wandless magic was amazing.

He left his office and climbed the stairs to the small room which was home to the Book of Admittance. He wanted to look at it again.

No one alive fully understood the magic it was imbued with. The Quill of Acceptance had no ink and yet it could write. Pages magically added themselves as needed, and there were thousands of them by now.

What was understood was that the book considered the population within a certain radius (although that radius seemed to change to unknown pattern), which included Northern and Western Europe, and looked for children who exhibited magical abilities. The child’s name was inscribed by the Quill of Acceptance on the first occasion when the child used magic. That’s how the school knew which children were to receive their invitation. The Book and the Quill were the gatekeepers. No child had ever been admitted to Hogwarts whose name was not in the Book.

Most wizarding children displayed magical abilities by their seventh year. In the rare case, it could happen as late as their eleventh birthday.

Yet the twins’ names did not appear in the book until the day when Minerva found them.

On the day when she introduced them to him, he came here, curious why they never got their invitations. He found the Book and the Quill in an odd sort of argument. The Book snap shut and the Quill tickled it to get it to open. After what appeared to be a sufficient time to put up with that torture, the Book gave in and allowed the Quill to write:

_Elsa_
_Jack_

In the most peculiar fashion, it did not list their last names. There had not been a single name entry like that in centuries. Who in the modern times did not have a last name?
Dumbledore approached the ancient book and flipped the pages by magic, he didn’t dare touch it. He had done this before so he knew where to look. In the very beginning of the book, around page five was an entry:

_Merlin_

This entry was made at the time when the Founders were still alive and teaching at the school, right before Merlin attended it - about a thousand years ago. Merlin at that time was around five hundred years old. The day when the Quill wrote his name on this page couldn’t have been the first day when he exhibited magic. Instead, Albus deduced that the name was written when Merlin decided to attend the school.

Maybe their understanding of how the Book worked was inaccurate?

It bothered him that he didn’t understand what connected the twins with the immortal sorcerer. All three of them definitely used their magic long before their names were written down. It was as if the Quill and the Book made an exception just for them.

As if this wasn’t enough to give him a headache, Merlin had chosen to teach Old Religion to these kids. That meant that he recognized something in them, something like himself.

Albus had tried to perform Old Religion spells in the past but could not make them work no matter how hard he tried.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Merlin tried to console him. “Nowadays, I rarely ever find anyone who is born with the ability. It’s worse than looking for a needle in a haystack, Albus. It’s more like finding one specific snowflake in a blizzard.”

Time passed quickly at Hogwarts but this week seemed brutally long. First, tragedy struck - Colin was petrified, then, Merlin got all moody and secretive. Jack felt that he was being pushed aside as Merlin didn’t have time for him anymore. Jack didn’t say it out loud but he felt a little hurt by this new indifference, especially when Merlin demanded to know where Jack was when Colin was attacked as if he wasn’t asking himself the same question every hour of every day. The extra guilt was really not necessary, Jack felt plenty of it already. He should have ensured that Colin didn’t walk alone that evening. He was a useless friend.

He visited Colin nearly every day whenever Merlin would disappear with his new friends, the Harry Potter Fan Club. He never realized how much he liked Colin until he was no longer there. Was this what people meant by that expression, taking things for granted? He took for granted the happy atmosphere that Colin created. Who would have known that the boy had so much influence on their trio, that without him, it was all falling apart. Colin had a superpower. His happiness was contagious, he infected everyone around him with his enthusiasm and positivity. Why did it have to be him?

So, when Merlin actually engaged in a conversation this evening, Jack was glad to have his friend back, even if it was only for a short time before he ran off to Harry Potter again.

They walked back from the evening feast and Merlin seemed to be even more clumsy than usual. This time, he tripped so spectacularly, he landed on a suit of armor which fell apart with a lot of noise.

“Seriously, Merlin. Your clumsiness is magical.” He wanted to laugh but didn’t want to be mean so he helped him up instead.

“I’m starting to think that it truly is,” Merlin said while putting the suit back together. “It’s Friday the
thirteenth today, and it’s like the unlucky forces are trying to prove that there is no limit to how many times one person can trip in a day.”

He finished the puzzle that was the suit of armor but was left with one piece. He scratched his head, wondering what he might have messed up, then just put it in the suit’s hand and casually walked away.

“I was wondering,” Merlin said when they started climbing stairs. “I can’t quite place your accent. Where are you from?”

“Not far from here actually.”

“Scotland?” Merlin sounded like he didn’t believe him. “Which town?”

Jack felt a little nervous at the questions about himself. “It’s... not in any town.”

Merlin’s eyes were piercing him as if he could see into his soul and it warned Jack to be truthful. He had a feeling that his friend would be able to tell if he lied.

“You don’t have a Scottish accent.”

Jack shrugged. He had no explanation for his accent so he thought it best to deflect further questions. “So where are you from?”


Jack had no idea what Welsh people sounded like. Merlin sounded to him like most students in the school, although, sometimes, a strange pronunciation would slip up in his speech, especially, in moments when he got excited.

Down the hall from them, tall grumpy Caretaker was chasing Peeves with an old mop. The poltergeist threw an ink pellet at him, cackled and disappeared. The man grumbled something about the mischievous spirit and shuffled in their direction, dragging the mop behind him like his victim. His hair was sticking out in all directions and he looked like he hadn’t slept in a few weeks. Out of nowhere, he lunged at a group of students.

“What are you so happy about? Was it you? You petrified my cat! I’ll have you in shackles...”

The kids gathered their things and got away from him.

The man had been accusing random people of the crime and it was becoming rather annoying. What happened to the cat was gruesome but his behaviour was irrational at this point.

“So, Jack,” Merlin asked and Jack looked away from the unstable man to focus on his friend, “how did it go with Snape?”

Right before he could answer, Jack saw out of the corner of his eye that the Caretaker was about to walk into him. He jumped out of the way flattening himself against the wall while the man passed by, muttering under his nose, completely oblivious to the fact that he almost walked into him.

Jack looked after the man, shocked at the close call he nearly avoided. The Caretaker couldn’t see him so he wasn’t a wizard! If Jack let the man walk through him, he could never hide that fact. He would be exposed right here in front of everyone. How could he have been so careless to allow that to nearly happen? He got so used to being around wizards and witches, he forgot to get out of the way, assuming that everyone in this castle could see him. Pretending to be human had become so
easy that he was forgetting that he wasn’t.

Merlin eyed him and Jack realized that his arms were still spread on the wall. He straightened up and tried to hide the shock his face must have held.

“Wow. Filch almost walked into you. Maybe his eyesight is going, huh?” Merlin joked and Jack tried to chuckle at it.

“Yeah,” he said, looking back at the tall man who was now terrifying a group of Hufflepuffs. “So, what’s his story? He doesn’t look like much of a wizard.”

“My guess is that Filch is a Squib, so yes, that’s a good description of him.”

“What’s a Squib?” Jack hoped he could resolve the mystery of what a Muggle was doing in this school.

From the look Merlin gave him, he had a feeling that he just asked something that was common knowledge. He seemed to do that a lot.

“A Squib is someone with wizarding parentage but who was born without magic.”

Now, it made sense. He was essentially a Muggle. “Are there more Squibs in this school?”

“Probably not.”

Jack sighed with relief. He could manage to avoid one man but he had to warn Elsa as soon as possible.

“So, why do you think he’s a Squib? How can you tell them apart?”

“Peeves. A wizard would just throw a spell at him but a Squib is as powerless against a poltergeist as a Muggle.”

It was annoying how knowledgeable Merlin was about everything. Jack always felt like an idiot next to him. Maybe he was an idiot. McGonagall told him he had to start attending the extracurricular English class. He didn’t get it. He already knew English. Why did he have to learn it more? The only consolation was that Elsa had to take it with him. They were both embarrassed and decided to keep quiet about it and not let their friends know.

Merlin kept glancing at him as they made their way to their dorm and Jack tried to ignore it. He kicked off his shoes and sat down on his bed. He wasn’t tired yet. He’d love to do something fun this evening and wondered if he could keep Merlin in the dorm or if his friend was about to step out for another “tutoring session.”

Merlin lingered in the doorway while looking at Colin’s empty bed. The boy’s side of the room used to be cluttered with his things, he was notorious for dropping things on the floor, and now, it was too clean and organized as if he was never there.

“Jack, I’ve been meaning to ask you.” Merlin sat on his bed so they were facing each other.

Jack raised an eyebrow, wondering what it was now. Merlin had been asking him a lot of questions lately.

“You said that you’re a pureblood, right? But how come you’re not familiar with wizarding terms? I’m not calling you a liar or anything. I’m just curious why.”
Jack never said that he was a pureblood but he also didn’t deny it as he couldn’t tell them the truth, and now, he had no idea how to explain himself. Merlin looked at him expecting an answer and Jack’s mind was blank. What lie would satisfy Merlin’s curiosity? He stumbled over words in his head until a coherent sentence formed.

“I didn’t grow up in a traditional wizarding household.”

Jack thought his explanation was pretty clever, it was the truth after all, but to his disappointment, Merlin wasn’t satisfied with it.

“In what way?”

Jack started to wonder if he made a mistake earlier on, if he should have pretended to be Muggle-born, but then, Colin would probably catch on that something was off about his story. It was so frustrating to always have to come up with reasonable excuses. Why couldn’t he be a normal kid with a normal story like all of those lucky ordinary children?

He smiled uneasily, trying to cover up his nerves. “I don’t know. From what I hear, other wizards live differently from how we lived.”

“What was so different?”

Jack’s hands were getting sweaty and he rubbed them off on his thighs. He looked around him for a way out although he knew that there was no escape from this. He had to give Merlin something so his friend wouldn’t leave.

“I guess… we were isolated, didn’t have contact with others.”

Merlin seemed satisfied with this answer. “That would explain why you don’t have a Scottish accent.”

Jack exhaled in relief and immediately wished he hadn’t. The sound didn’t escape Merlin’s attention.

“Why are you always so afraid to talk about yourself?”

Jack rubbed the back of his neck and wished he could become invisible at will. He wanted to talk to Merlin but why was he the topic?

Merlin noticed his discomfort. “I want to get to know you, that’s why I ask.”

Then, he smiled as if he got some brilliant idea. He pulled out a rolled up piece of parchment from his side table and handed it to Jack.

“Let’s play a game. Whoever is holding the parchment can ask the questions. We’ll take turns - an answer for an answer. Your turn - ask me anything.”

Jack bit his lip. He didn’t want to be subjected to more questions and be under the pressure to come up with more excuses, but at the same time, he was very curious about Merlin. His friend wasn’t like the other kids, that was clear. Jack didn’t ask him about it, hoping that Merlin would one day explain when he was ready, but that didn’t stop his desire to know. In the end, curiosity won over caution.

“Do you have any siblings?”

“Unfortunately not. My parents split up before I was even born.”

That was sad. Jack couldn’t imagine how horrible his life would’ve been if he didn’t have a sister.
He passed the parchment.

“Do you have other siblings besides your sister?” Merlin asked.

Oh, Jack fell right into this one. He had heard of Mother having children before they were born, but that was centuries ago, so he never met any of them. It was safer to say he didn’t so he shook his head.

Merlin smirked. “You don’t look very convinced in your response.”

He was too observant. Jack really had to learn how to control his body language to lie better.

He thought of a way to recover. “I never met my father. He could have children for all I know.”

Merlin put his elbows on his knees. “My father was absent as well. I met him but then he died the next day so I never really got to know him.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

His friend’s eyes glazed over and he seemed to look nowhere in particular. Jack supposed this was a sad topic.

Merlin snapped out of his reflections and gave the parchment back.

Jack mulled for a moment what he wanted to know about his friend. The most obvious question was ‘Why do you feel so different from other kids?’ but that was too strange of a question. As far as he knew, wizards couldn’t feel magic of others the way he could so he settled on a different magic question.

“Is Old Religion the only type of magic your family practices?”

Merlin smirked. “My uncle knows wand spells too but prefers Old Religion. It’s more powerful magic, Jack. If you knew it, you’d use it too.” He extended his hand for the parchment and asked immediately. “Why didn’t your mother teach you Old Religion spells?”

Jack was taken aback. “I don’t know why you’re so sure that she knew it.”

Merlin smiled wistfully. “Why else would she know Old English? Was she a linguist, a scholar, an archeologist or someone fascinated with ancient texts?”

Jack scratched his head trying to think. Mother never struck him as someone who was much into books or studying. “I don’t think so.”

Merlin tapped his finger on his knee. “Another good indicator - did she use a wand?”

“No, she didn’t.”

While she didn’t need a wand to use her magic, she had a different tool - a small hammer. She never showed them how she used it but he guessed that the hammer had some magic which allowed her to shape the inside of the mountain, to create tunnels, chambers and even furniture out of stone. But he couldn’t tell this detail to his friend without explaining that his house was actually a mountain.

Merlin leaned back, propping himself on his arms. “Even more proof. Maybe she didn’t practice Old Religion but everything you’ve told me points to her being a practitioner of Old Magic of some sort. So the question is, why didn’t she teach you more than just how to use frost?”
Jack looked down at his hands, picked on his cuticle and answered quietly. “She tried, that was the only thing I was capable of doing.”

He really wanted to stop talking about this. He did not need a reminder of how he always disappointed her.

“That’s obviously not true,” Merlin scoffed, not noticing how much the topic bothered Jack. “You’re doing well at Hogwarts. I’m really surprised she didn’t branch out into other disciplines. It’s like she wanted you to be an expert at frost and frost only.”

Merlin had no idea how right he was because yes, Mother wanted Jack to master his affinity for frost. She wasn’t interested in teaching him new things, only growing his magical ability.

Jack wasn’t sure why, but he noticed that his control over magic substantially increased once he escaped with Elsa. In fact, he could bet Mother would be impressed if she saw what he could do now. He had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, he wanted to show her how powerful he became all on his own without her stupid lessons, but on the other, he would be most happy if he never saw her again.

“Hello,” Merlin was waving the parchment in front of his face. “Earth to Jack. You there?”

Jack blinked and remembered where he was.

“I said that it’s your turn. Ask away.”

Jack took the roll and hoped he could stay on the topic of Old Religion and keep it away from himself. “What’s your favorite Old Religion spell?”

Merlin thought about it for a while. How many spells could he know?

“I like healing spells because of how awesome it feels to help someone. It makes me feel useful like there’s some purpose to all this magic I possess.”

“Are they difficult to learn?”

“It depends. I’ll show you some other time.”

Merlin took the parchment back and cleared his throat. “What’s your opinion on Muggles?”

That was a huge leap away from their previous topic.

“I don’t know much about them. I observed them for a short time. Their lives are so different. They have no idea how easy they have it.” Jack broke off, suddenly aware that he was encroaching on shaky territory. He’d rather get back to talking about spells.

Merlin appraised him carefully but continued their sharing game. “I grew up around them. Some of my best friends were Muggles. What do you think about this whole blood-purity thing?”

Jack had no idea what the deal with the blood-purity thing was so he shrugged. He’d heard the term before and assumed it had something to do with not having Muggle parents but didn’t understand why it mattered.

“I think,” Merlin offered while surveying him closely, “that magic chooses which human to be bestowed upon. While it has a tendency to be passed on in blood, blood alone is not the only determining factor.” His voice became more urgent. “In fact, I think that many wizarding families
Jack shrugged again. He didn’t know what “inbred” meant or why Merlin was so eager to talk about it. His friend eyed him carefully and Jack felt that he was being studied.

Merlin continued, “Generations of inbreeding can have disastrous effects. Birth-defects, lower intelligence, mental instability, that type of thing. There’s quite a lot of that among pure-blood families.” Then, he raised his hands up and smiled. “I hope I’m not offending you.”

Jack felt that it wasn’t really genuine. Maybe it was even the opposite. Was Merlin purposely trying to offend him to solicit a reaction? This was all frustrating because Jack didn’t understand what he was talking about and didn’t know if he should have been offended or not. He considered asking but had a feeling it was one of those things that everyone knew and he was going to sound like an idiot again. No, he wouldn’t admit that he didn’t understand. He wouldn’t give Merlin more reason to think less of him.

He wanted to change topics so he held his hand out for the parchment. Once it was in his hand, he realized that he didn’t know what to ask so he blurted the first thing that came to his mind.

“Do you have any pets?”

Merlin chuckled. “I’m friends with one very special dragon but she’s not a pet. They’re too intelligent for that.”

That was an impressive animal to be friends with. Jack remembered seeing a dragon on Merlin’s shirt. He must have been an avid fan of the creature.

Merlin had the next question ready to go even before he took the parchment back. “What do you think about Muggle-borns attending Hogwarts?”

“What is there to think about?”

Merlin’s questions seemed to focus on the Muggle business as if he had an agenda.

“Do you think that children of pure-blood families have more right to magic education than Muggle-borns?”

Jack blinked and this time felt offended. Why would his friend think so lowly of him?

“Of course not. I think that anyone who possesses magic should be given a chance to learn how to wield it. The whole nonsense of pure-blooded or Muggle-born is stupid. You’re all human. What about all of those who are not and who would like to learn?”

Jack stopped and nearly choked on his own words. He didn’t say that right. That stupid tongue of his always said the wrong thing. He hoped Merlin didn’t notice his mistake.

“Nonhumans?” Merlin tilted his head curiously. “What type of nonhumans do you think should be allowed into Hogwarts?”

“I mean,” Jack stumbled over words, “I don’t know what else is out there, but I was just thinking about elves and goblins. You said so yourself, they want to learn wand magic but are forbidden by law.”

Merlin smiled. “I don’t think house-elves would want to. They’re not very ambitious. Goblins would love to be allowed wands but I can’t imagine them going to school with all of us.”
“Why not? It’s a large school.” Jack felt very defiant at the moment. How did Merlin know this about elves? Did he ask their opinion? It seemed like wizards wanted to keep magic education away from house-elves just so they would remain weak enough to be their slaves. “And what about other beings? There must be others who possess magic who would benefit from education like this.”

Merlin chuckled at him. “It’s funny that this is the topic you’re passionate about. Alright, let’s have a fun full-on debate. Let’s take vampires - they can be civilized when they want to be but do you really think it would be safe to have them walk dark castle corridors alongside us?”

He paused and Jack had nothing to add. He wasn’t like a vampire. No one had to be worried about their safety with him.

“What of Merpeople?” Merlin continued. “We’d need to switch our classes to be held underwater. It would have been an interesting experience, but really, don’t you think a school designed specifically for them taught by them would be more suitable? The same argument can be made for every magical creature.”

Jack stared at his friend, wishing him to understand just how wrong he was. If only he could say it.

“Truly,” Merlin went on without a break, “you must see that their needs are different from ours and specific to each species, and sometimes, their presence could be dangerous to the human students. If they want to learn magic, they need to make their own schools. It’s not up to us to dictate their education.”

He said it so lightly, and so sure of himself as if he was an expert on the matter. He was completely convinced that the possibility of a magical creature who could walk among humans, posing no threat to them, and having the same needs as them was impossible. Was Jack’s kind really this rare?

“You think you know everything, don’t you?” Jack’s voice shook against his will, betraying his emotions.

He needed to end this conversation before he said any more blunders.

He ran out of there, ignoring Merlin’s call to come back, jumped the staircases five steps at a time and sprinted down hallways, heading for the grounds. His vision swam and he wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He didn’t want anyone to notice him so he kept on walking away from the castle. Merlin laughed. He laughed at it all like it was nothing. “The same argument can be made for every magical creature.” No. Not every creature!

Jack’s head was buzzing with things he wanted to scream at his friend.

‘What about someone like me? Where do I fit in your whole theory? What if you belong to a race that is so rare, that you never met another one like you and probably never will? So how can there be a school created just for you? Why can’t I be given the same chance you get? Am I not a child too?’

He fell on his knees and sobbed, letting out his anger at the invisible hands of ignorance which crushed his hopes. It was obvious, wizards saw nonhumans as something beneath them. Was his whole life going to be like this? He had to hide everything that he was and couldn’t even voice his thoughts for fear of being discovered and cast away like a criminal. He was unwelcome in their world, but what other choice was there? He could walk among humans, knowing well that they could never truly know him or leave them all behind and walk forever alone. Why were those his only choices?

He raked the ground with his fingers and welcomed the pain when his skin caught on something
The ache in his heaving chest was worse than any physical pain he could experience. It was inconsolable and it always would be because he would always have to hide what he really was. Even from his friends.

“You do not belong here,” someone said behind him and Jack sobbed harder.

Wasn’t this a perfect summary for it all? Where did he belong if not in the world of magic? He’d come to think of Hogwarts as his home but what type of home was it if he couldn’t even be himself in it!

“Stop this magic!” the deep voice sounded again and Jack rubbed his nose on his sleeve.

Was this a real voice? Was someone really here with him? He blinked the tears out of his eyes and took a look around him. He gulped. Where was he?

He was surrounded by a thick line of trees which obscured all light. The leaves shimmered with faint magic. It smelled wonderful, like earth, herbs, and water. Little insects buzzed around him, checking him out but not daring to land. The place was teeming with the magic of life, the magic of nature. This was the Forbidden Forest. Home to many magical creatures, creatures he could feel all around him.

He sniffed and turned around to see who spoke and immediately wished he had imagined the voice.

A fierce looking creature stood on four legs and looked at him in an aggressive grimace. His lower half resembled a horse. The top was human-like but there was something goat-like in his features, especially because of his short beard. His long brown hair fell on his bare muscular chest. He wore no clothes, only a metal necklace swung from his neck and his torso was wrapped in a leather strap to hold up the arrows on his back. He looked powerful and vicious.

He was a centaur and his arrow was pointed right at Jack’s heart.
“You do not belong here!” fully armed centaur said while towering over Jack who sobbed on the ground, completely unaware of the danger he was in.

‘Oh, dear goddess,’ Merlin thought to himself. How did this day go so terribly wrong?

From the day after Colin was petrified when he started to suspect Jack of involvement with the Chamber of Secrets, he’s been trying to uncover the boy’s lies. As much as he hated himself for it, he even tried to break into his mind, only to get nothing. It perplexed him because he had never encountered an Occlumens like him. He found it suspicious at first, wondering why someone this young would already be trained in the art of closing his mind, but with time, he realized that the boy wasn’t doing it consciously.

It didn’t even feel right. Usually, when Merlin tried to break into someone’s mind but their walls were up, he could feel those walls and could attack them further. But with Jack, he couldn’t feel the walls at all so he didn’t know how to break in.

Then, he got to speak to his sister and hoped that he could break her walls, only to find that she had the same innate ability. These twins were proving to be a lot more challenging than he expected.

So he decided that the only way to get the truth out of the boy was to have him volunteer it. He noticed in the past that Jack would let unspoken words slip up whenever he was upset, he had no filter on his mouth, so today, he tried to get the boy to reveal his stance on blood-purity to gauge whether it resembled someone who would want to open the Chamber of Secrets. He even offered a little trivia about himself to appease the boy’s curiosity and it worked - he kept him talking even though Jack was clearly uncomfortable talking about himself. He thought his plan was infallible.

But the boy didn’t fall for his suggestion that all pure-blooded families were a bunch of inbred losers. He disregarded it in the most aloof manner, as if it didn’t concern him at all, and instead got passionate about the topic of education of magical creatures.

Merlin was puzzled where that came from but it upset the boy so much that he ran away.

Merlin followed him stealthily all the way into the Forbidden Forest. He was most intrigued if Jack was about to meet an accomplice or maybe even the Chamber monster itself, but instead, he wandered into the forest aimlessly and collapsed in sobs so genuine, that they pulled on Merlin’s heartstrings.

There was no grand plan in the forest. The boy simply wanted to get away so no one would see him cry.

Merlin still wasn’t convinced of Jack’s innocence but he couldn’t help but feel guilty for making a child cry. He pushed him too hard. It was difficult to be tough on someone this young. And yet he wasn’t done. He still had not found out enough, he would have to repeat the process later. He would have to be the bad guy again.

While the boy cried, frost spread under his hands uncontrollably and marked his presence to the forest. The forest reacted.

Within minutes, a centaur galloped right up to the unsuspecting boy who was too lost in his lament to notice and Merlin quickly masked his presence with glamour to not alert the creature of a spectator.
The centaur watched the frost creep up nearby tree trunks and his lips curled up in anger, revealing large sharp teeth.

“Stop this magic!” he yelled, drew his bow and aimed at the boy.

Merlin was ready to stop the arrow, should it be fired.

Jack finally came to his senses and noticed the threat. His breath was still hitched after his crying fit but the clear danger sobered him up.

“I said, stop this magic!” the centaur warned, probably for the last time.

Jack looked at the frost he created and blanched. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I lost control.”

“Your kind is not welcome here.”

New tears dropped down the boy’s cheeks. “I’ll leave. I’m sorry. I didn’t look where I was going.”

The boy got up and glanced around him. He was utterly lost.

The centaur hoofed the ground impatiently, kicking bits of snow mixed with dirt. “Look at this! You and your kin have meddled with the balance. You have no right! This is your warning. We will interfere to protect nature’s order if we have to.”

Jack looked at the ground with a pout, “I won’t do it again. I promise.”

Merlin wanted to know what the conversation was about. What did the centaurs know about this boy? Were they talking about the Chamber of Secrets? How did that affect the Forbidden Forest?

The centaur made a move forward, his arrow was still fixed on Jack who put his hands up.

“I’m leaving. I’m leaving.”

Jack started walking in a random direction, the wrong direction if he wanted to return to the castle, and tripped over a root. He fell forward into a brambly bush.

“Ow. Ow. Thorns.”

It seemed that today’s bad luck wasn’t limited to Merlin’s increase in clumsiness.

The centaur lowered his bow but didn’t put it away yet. His tail flicked back and forth.

“I’m leaving.” Jack scrambled out of the brambles and hobbled on one foot. “Don’t shoot. I just…”

He tried to walk but collapsed with a cry of pain. Merlin instinctively wanted to help but remained in his spot. Of course, Jack didn’t wear shoes. There was still snow on the ground! Running into the Forbidden Forest barefoot was a new kind of stupid.

The centaur put away his bow and arrow and approached the boy.

“I’ll leave,” Jack said with desperation in his voice and new tears in his eyes. “You don’t have to hurt me. I got your message.”

“I do not wish to hurt you, foal,” the centaur said in a much calmer tone. He picked up a long stick off the ground and offered it.
Jack eyed it cautiously, but seeing that it wasn’t a threat, he took the stick and used it to support his weight so that he could walk.

“Thank you.”

“This way,” the centaur pointed in the correct direction.

Jack slowly hobbled away and the creature hung close by. Maybe to ensure the intruder left, maybe to ensure no more harm came to the foal, who knew?

Merlin followed and the centaur turned around to look right at him. He checked the glamour he surrounded himself with. Centaurs were very perceptive creatures but he should have been undetectable in these surroundings. His glamour worked particularly well in places like this crowded forest.

Seeing no one there, the centaur continued following the boy on his slow journey.

“Why did you release your magic so soon?” the centaur asked while they walked.

“I’m sorry,” Jack apologized again and Merlin tried to keep closer to ensure he could hear the conversation. “We just wanted to have some fun, and it’s so pretty, isn’t it? And we just… you have no idea how long we’ve been waiting. This is our first winter outside.”

“It is not your season yet. You need to be patient and wait your turn.”

“I know. We’ll be patient,” Jack said with a resigned sigh. You could hear the pout in his voice but at least he wasn’t crying anymore.

Merlin was increasingly getting frustrated. He felt that he was missing a major part of the puzzle in order to understand their conversation.

“Was it you?” Jack asked a little more lightly. “When we arrived at Hogwarts, I could feel someone watching. Was it your herd?”

“Yes. We felt magic approach, but it wasn’t just yours.”

Merlin gulped. They wouldn’t be talking about him now, were they? He checked his glamour one more time. It was still there. No one would be able to see him or sense his magic. But it was tiring to hold it for this long.

“We have been observing since then. Many events are foretold to come, some of which you will be a part of. Darkness hangs over Hogwarts.”

Jack sighed. “Yeah, that darkness took my friend. Did your foretellings tell you who did it or how it can be stopped?”

“Divination does not work this way.”

Merlin snorted. Wasn’t that the truth. Knowing the future was never useful. He didn’t know why the centaurs even bothered looking for it.

The centaur looked in his direction and Merlin scolded himself for forgetting to do a muting charm. He fixed that right now to avoid being heard by sensitive centaur hearing.

Jack finally made it to the tree line. Night had fallen already and the grounds were quiet.
“Thank you for walking me here.” He hesitated and watched the lights of the castle in the distance. “Do you think it’s foolish to walk among them?”

“Fate brought you here, young one. You have a role to play in the events that are come to pass.”

“Could you be less cryptic?”

“Farewell,” the centaur said and galloped away, leaving Jack alone at the edge of the dark forest.

He slowly made his way towards the castle. Merlin felt exhausted from using the glamour and looked forward to a nice warm bath to relax in. He followed the boy and snuck inside the castle with him.

Jack discarded his stick, limped in, and found a bench to sit on. The evening feast was over and the castle halls were submerged in semi-darkness. Merlin figured it was so dark, he could drop the glamour and hide away in the shadows instead. He contemplated leaving but was curious why the boy just sat there instead of trying to make his way to the dorm, or maybe better the Hospital Wing, looking at the state of his bloodied foot. The healer in him lamented at the severity of the infection that was going to develop if that wound wasn’t cleaned soon.

Several minutes passed when a quiet shuffle of footsteps brought a promise of some answers.

“What are you doing here?” Elsa’s angry whisper carried in the silent corridor. What was she doing there?

“Sorry, I know it’s late but I could use your help. Please?”

“What did you do?” she asked and lighted her wand tip with Lumos. Before he could say anything, she unexpectedly hugged him.

He returned her hug but seemed surprised. “What?”

“You can’t hide it,” she said in a gentle tone. “Your eyes are puffy.”

Jack seemed to shrink in on himself. Ah, so she could tell that he was bawling his eyes out not long ago.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” he answered quickly. “I’m fine. I just lost my cool for a moment.” He chuckled. “Get it? Lost my cool?”

She released the hug and sighed. “You and your puns. So what do you need from me?”

He grimaced and pointed at his foot.

She brought the wand light to it and gasped. “What did you do?”

“I tripped,” he said with a shrug.

The wound looked even worse when illuminated. There were deep lacerations all covered in mud, bits of twigs and leaves. Merlin felt like strangling the boy for not even trying to cover it before traipsing through the forest. As a result of the continued abuse the wound received, it was still bleeding after all this time.

She put her wand on the floor, where it was still lit, and took his foot in her hands. Merlin got
excited. It was worth it to stay if he could see Elsa’s healing skills again.

He expected a glow of magic or an incantation being said but none of that happened. Instead, something that looked like a layer of ice covered the foot as she held it.

Jack moaned in relief. “That feels so good.”

“Will you finally get in the habit of wearing shoes?” she asked impatiently while hovering her hand over the wounds. His skin absorbed the ice and she created a new layer on top of it. It was the most unusual healing technique.

“I didn’t plan to go there. I would have otherwise.”

She scoffed, not satisfied by his response. Finally, she let go of the foot and tried to rub the dirt off her hands. “Done.”

“Thanks, sis.”

His foot was still dirty with blood and mud but it appeared to be completely healed. Merlin couldn’t tell what type of healing magic she used but it was very effective.

“Let’s get out of here before we’re caught. Filch is patrolling this area,” she said sharply.

“You don’t have to worry about Filch. He’s a Squib. They’re just like Muggles,” he said and got up to test his foot. Satisfied with how it felt, he took her hand and they ran off.

Merlin came out of his hiding spot and walked up to where Jack’s foot was resting before. Specks of blood remained on the floor along with mud. She was indeed a gifted Healer and he wondered if she would tell him what incantation she used. He was always open to learning new healing spells.

“Look what we have here,” a voice sounded in the dark.

Merlin looked up and recognized the Slytherin prefect he had met in the library, the same one he framed in order to get away. How did the boy sneak up on him? Bad luck wasn’t done dealing with him yet.

“Now, you’ll get what’s coming for you,” the boy hissed and grabbed his arm so hard, it would surely leave bruises.

He dragged him to the dungeons and knocked on a dark door.

“Enter,” Snape drawled from the inside.

They entered a dim-lit space and the boy shoved Merlin towards the center of a gloomy room which smelled like mold. Shelves lined the walls stacked with revolting jars and multicolored vials. There was a desk at the back of the room but no chairs. Merlin tried to keep his smirk to a minimum. He bet the wizard hated all chairs by now.

Snape stood with his back to them and was perusing his inventory.

“Good Evening, Professor,” the Prefect said. “I caught this one on the ground floor, right by the front entrance.”

“Marvelous, Cassius,” Snape said barely audibly and picked one of the jars.

“Professor, it’s the same one that framed me at the library.”
Snape froze and slowly turned around. His eyebrow twitched when he recognized Merlin.

“Ealdor,” he surveyed him from head to foot and a triumphant look crossed his face, “there’s mud on your shoes. What were you doing outside at this hour?”

Merlin looked at his shoes. They were filthy and so were his robes. It was too late to vanish the evidence. Oh, well. He was caught anyway, might as well make this interesting.

“I was jogging,” he said with a shrug and Snape’s lip twitched.

“Jogging?”

“I like to keep my body in shape.”

“Surely, even a dimwit like you knows what time it is.”

“It gets dark early now but I wouldn’t want to miss my workout.” He patted his flat belly. “Don’t want to get pudgy.”

This was ridiculous, he was skinny like a twig, and he fought to keep the smirking to himself.

“You own roommate was a victim of the danger the school is facing and you’re taking the curfew this lightly. Typical Gryffindor arrogance!”

Merlin’s desire to smirk disappeared at the mention of Colin.

“Where did you get the enchanted pot?”

“Pardon?”

“Are you deaf as well as slow? Where did you get the enchanted pot that you released in the library?”

“I had nothing to do with it.” The lie glided from his tongue with ease.

“It was him!” Cassius shouted. “He did it and framed me for it.”

Merlin put a look of surprise on his face. “I truly thought you left the pot there. Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe it was another Slytherin Prefect.”

Snape’s lips lifted slightly in a snarl. “You should know that I do not tolerate liars, especially those who blame others for their own deeds.”

Cassius wasn’t done in his prosecution. “He was in the Restricted Section. I caught him. I caught him!”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t in the Restricted Section. I simply tripped and fell into the rope. That rope is a hazard.”

Cassius looked like he was going to pop a vein. He pointed a finger at him and shouted, “That’s not what he said before! He said he had a permission slip!”

“I thought you asked me if I had permission to be in the library. I apologize, I misunderstood.”

“Do you take me for a fool?” Snape hissed and Merlin decided to not answer that question. “Cassius, you may go. I will deal with him.”
Cassius looked like he wanted to say something more, but then Snape gave him a tiny nod to confirm that justice would be dealt. A vile grin framed the boy’s face, making him look like an evil clown, and he walked out, leaving Merlin alone with the presiding judge, the Honorable Greasy Git. Snape walked up to his desk and got ready to sit down out of habit, but then remembered that there was no chair and so he turned around.

‘Don’t smirk. Don’t smirk,’ Merlin repeated to himself.

“Typical Gryffindor troublemaker. It is a sad stereotype which you embody.” He turned to him and locked eye contact. “What did you steal from the Restricted Section?”

His black eyes were so piercing that Merlin put up barriers around his mind just in case if this wizard tried to break in. Was Snape a Legilimens? He would ask Dumbledore later. For now, he pictured himself singing in the shower so the git would get out of his head.

“I did not go in there, Professor,” he answered calmly.

“I’ve had enough of your lies for one evening. Fifty points from Gryffindor and a week of detentions with me. Show up in my office at six sharp every evening, starting tomorrow. And Ealdor,” he paused for effect and finished with a quiet threat, “don’t be late.”

“Yes, Professor,” Merlin said with a slight incline of his head.

He walked out of there grinning. Getting detention somehow made him feel like he really was fitting in with his student persona. He would definitely have something to bond over with Harry now. Harry hated Snape with utmost devotion.

As soon as he arrived at the Gryffindor common room, he was attacked in the form of a tight hug.

“I was so worried.” Jack released him and looked him over. “I didn’t know if I should tell anyone that you were missing or not. I didn’t want to get you in trouble but you were gone so long! I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Merlin narrowed his eyes on the boy. He played the worried look very well.

“I was out looking for you actually, and I got caught.”

“What? Me?” Jack’s eyebrows knitted in worry. “I’m sorry, I had to clear my head earlier, that’s why I ran out. You got caught?”

Merlin sighed. “Yes. Now, I have detention with Snape to look forward to.”

Jack winced. “Maybe it won’t be so bad. He can be reasonable, you know? We managed to convince him to let me change the recipes.”

“Really?” Merlin didn’t bother assisting Jack with the task because he thought it was futile. He had a hard time believing that Snape would ever agree to something like that. Besides, he didn’t feel like helping someone who he suspected of a brutal attack on their friend.

“It wasn’t easy though.” Jack’s expression darkened. “It was scary actually. He had Elsa drink poison to test if my antidote worked.”

Merlin stopped in his tracks and exploded, “He did what?”

“Aconite. He could’ve chosen something less lethal if you asked me.”
Merlin’s hands trembled. Snape tested deadly poison on students. Tortured them and made them feel grateful for it. That man was a monster.

“Judging from how casually you talk about it, I take it, she survived?”

“Well, yeah. It worked quickly.” Jack kicked the rug under his feet. “If he had told us what was in that vial, I never would’ve agreed to let her drink it.”

They went to bed and Merlin pondered on how badly the bad luck of Friday the Thirteenth always seemed to affect him. It was like the universe was against him in so many ways. The whole day was a failure.

“Merlin,” Jack asked in the dark, “do you think that more people will be attacked like Colin was?”

He didn’t answer anything out loud.

‘You tell me, kid,’ he thought to himself. ‘You tell me.’

The common room was fairly empty this Saturday morning. Some Gryffindors were sleeping in late, the Quidditch team was out training, others already got started on homework. One of the latter was Merlin, who had yet another tutoring session scheduled with Hermione.

It was suspicious that he was still struggling with it. Jack thought his friend would have figured out the button transfiguration by now. He was going to sit down next to him, but it was so close to the fireplace, he decided against it.

Further from the heat sat Hermione Granger who was violently brushing her hair. It looked like she was in full-on combat with it. He worried who would come out victorious and what it would mean to the loser.

“I can untangle it for you if you’d like,” he offered.

She stared up at him with an open mouth and he wondered if he had said anything wrong.

“If you think you can do anything about this mop, why not. I give up.”

He happily sat down with one leg folded beneath him and took her brush. She sat with her back to him and he tried to untangle her brown wavy mess. Her hair was very different from his sister’s. It was dry and frizzy where his sister’s was smooth and silky. The brush kept getting stuck in it and would probably break if he continued. Simple combing was not going to work but he had an idea.

He ran his fingers through her hair, releasing a faint amount of frost on them. He combed the worst tangles out with his fingers and resumed brushing. As expected, the hair became slightly damp and he was able to run the brush through it easily now. Hermione sat patiently as he did this and occasionally gave tips to Merlin who looked utterly bored.

“You untangled it,” she said when Jack finished. “Wow. You have magic fingers.”

He chuckled because that was a very accurate explanation of what he did. “You have no idea. Do you want me to braid it for you?”

“You can braid hair?”

“I’ve always done it for my sister.”
She beamed. “Yes. Let me get a hair tie.”

She ran to her dorm and he waited patiently. Seeing that she was gone, Merlin sagged in his armchair. He looked like he needed a break.

Hermione ran back down holding a hair tie and two mirrors.

“Merlin, get back to work. That pebble doesn’t look anything like a button. Ensure you’re pronouncing it right.”

“Sure thing, Hermione,” Merlin replied with a forced grin.

Hermione sat down with her back to Jack again. “I really like how you combed my hair. It didn’t hurt at all.”

“Combing shouldn’t hurt. Just wet your brush next time or ask me. I’ll gladly do it for you. So, how do you want it braided?”

“I don’t know. You choose,” she said in an excited tone.

Jack assessed the situation. She had a lot of hair. It would make sense to start in more than one spot at a time and then join it all together.

“I’ll think of something. If you don’t like it, we can always do it over again differently.”

He got started and easily fell into the routine he’d done with his sister for years. He missed it. He missed her.

“Since when do boys braid hair?” a voice sounded above him and he looked up.

It was Ron Weasley. Jack didn’t like his tone. It felt like he was implying something mean.

“You’ve got a sister, don’t you? You never helped her brush it?”

Ron scoffed. “Ginny wouldn’t want me to do her hair any more than I would’ve wanted to do it.”

“But have you offered?”

Ron frowned and his ears got red. That’s what Jack thought. He felt sorry for Ginny for not having a brother who would take care of her.

Hermione quietly chuckled and Ron walked away, but not before giving Jack a stink-eye.

Jack found it amusing how easy it was to get under that redhead’s skin. He should do it more often.

He continued working on Hermione. It was taking a long time but he didn’t mind. The familiar feeling of hair between his fingers felt soothing, even if the hair wasn’t the same.

“How is your sister?” she asked.

Jack barely saw her nowadays. He felt like he had to fight for her attention. Books were apparently more interesting than him. “She’s always in the library obsessed with her research. I think it’s unhealthy but she won’t listen to me.”

“Maybe I can help her find what she’s looking for? I know Hogwarts library very well.”
“Probably not.”

“Try me.”

“Fine. Do you know where we can find Mirror of Erised?”

Hermione turned around and he barely held on to the braid.

“It’s at Hogwarts.”

Jack blinked. Did he hear that right? “What?”

“At least it was just a few months ago. It was stored in the underground chambers. I bet it’s still in the castle. What do you need with the mirror?”

He could finally get his sister out of the library.

“She’s convinced that she can use it somehow. So it’s real? You saw it?”

“I didn’t. Harry and Ron did. Harry said that he could see his whole family in it - including his dead parents and grandparents. How does your sister plan to use it?”

“I have no idea. Thank you, Hermione. I can finally get her nose out of those books.”

All of those weeks Elsa spent researching and the mirror was right under their feet. All they had to do was talk to the right people. Good things came out of braiding hair. He should do it more often. He returned to his task with a much lighter heart.

Hermione sighed and asked quietly. “Why is Merlin struggling so much with that spell? I’m the worst tutor ever.”

“I don’t think so. I have a theory on what he’s doing.”

She tried to look back at him and he had to stop her before she ruined his work.

“What do you mean?”

“I bet he can do that spell already. Merlin is pretty good at every single class. I don’t believe that he’s struggling at all.”

“Then, how would you explain this?” She pointed at the pebble Merlin was working on, which simply changed color but not shape.

Jack leaned in and whispered in her ear. “I think he fancies you.”

“What?” Hermione exclaimed loudly.

Startled, Merlin looked in their direction. His eyes lingered on Jack. He was probably jealous because Jack was sitting so close to the girl. He made a mental note to assure his friend later that he was no threat.

“Why do you think that? Did he say anything about me?” Hermione asked quietly.

Jack leaned in and whispered, “No, but why else would he put up with tutoring for something that he can do perfectly well on his own? He wants to spend time with you.”
“Awww,” Hermione cried softly, “that’s really sweet. What should I do? What would you do, knowing something like that?”

“I would use this information to have some fun. I’d give him the worst possible task just to see how dedicated he is, how much he’s willing to put up with. I think it would be hilarious.”

“You want me to prank him? That’s so childish.”

Jack released a long sigh. No one appreciated how genius his ideas were. “You two have something in common then - toogrownupness.”

“Actually, that’s not a real word.”

“And you just proved my point.” He tied her braid at the end and looked at the result of his work. “You’re done. How does it feel? Not too tight?”

Hermione touched her braid inspecting it. He hoped she liked it. It looked great. She stuffed one of the mirrors in his hand and used the other one to check herself out.

“This is brilliant, Jack. Thank you!”

She turned around and spontaneously hugged him. He wasn’t expecting that but he didn’t mind, it was nice to be hugged. He returned it but she let go quickly, maybe too quickly.

“I’m glad you like it.”

Hermione glanced back at Merlin. She played with the end of her thick braid, took a long breath and spoke up. “Merlin, you’re probably done for today.”

He sagged back in his armchair and nodded at her. “I like the hair. Suits you.”

Hermione blushed profusely, ripped the mirrors from Jack’s hands and ran out of there without another word.

“What did I say?” Merlin asked, looking after her confused.

Jack grinned at his friend. He was sure he did Merlin a favor by telling Hermione. She seemed happy knowing that Merlin liked her. Maybe she felt the same? This could be the start of a cute young romance.

Jack relaxed on the couch and crossed his arms behind his head. These two were perfect for each other. He was a great matchmaker.

It was the weekend but instead of relaxing after an exhausting week, Merlin trudged on to the dungeons, not looking forward to detention with Snape. As much as he didn’t feel like going down there, it was oddly satisfying to know that the greasy-haired Potions Master had nothing better to do on a Saturday night.

The dungeons were the coldest part of the castle, and as expected, the fireplace in the Potions classroom was not lit. Merlin predicted that and dressed appropriately but still felt chilled, prompting him to tighten the scarf around his neck.

Snape seemed to be disappointed that Merlin arrived on time. He pointed to a small wooden crate set up on one desk.
“You will dice the pungeous onions, all of them, and pack them neatly in these jars.”

Without saying anything else, he walked to the other side of the classroom, where he was working on what looked like grading essays. He was as far away from Merlin as the space allowed to avoid the onion fumes. Since he couldn’t sit, he had magically elongated the table’s legs, so that he could work semi-comfortably.

Merlin bit his lip, trying to not chuckle. His curse was such a simple prank but it was so effective at making the grumpy professor’s life difficult.

He looked inside the crate where hundreds of small, elongated onions waited for him. He could cut them up by magic but Snape would undoubtedly give him another unpleasant task if he finished too quickly. He supposed he had to do it the hard way.

He started dicing and the onion immediately gave off a sharp pungent smell which he knew was going to stay on his skin. That was probably what Snape wanted, for him to stink for weeks. Merlin wondered if the Potions Master realized that the odor would disappear once washed off with a Bundimun Solution easily found in the greenhouse. He wasn’t concerned with the smell.

Finished with the first onion, he stuffed it in a jar and continued to the next. To pass the time, he distracted himself with some planning.

During Herbology class, Merlin wandered off to where the many pots of mandrakes stood on several tables. He approached them to inspect the crop. Fresh mandrakes were badly needed now to prepare the Restorative Draught which would cure Colin. He blanched at seeing them. These roots were still babies. It would take months before they were ready for harvest.

He politely asked Madam Sprout if she had tried to source more mature roots. She answered that she tried but all of her contacts did not pot any this year. It was only by a sheer stroke of luck that she planted them this summer, in order to show them to a few classes which had not experienced working with them yet. In fact, she did this only every few years, as the roots were rarely ever required.

Luck. Luck would have been if she had planted them in the spring. They would be ready for harvest right now. Instead, Colin was going to be stuck in a petrified state for months waiting for the nasty roots to grow up.

Angry at the injustice of it all, Merlin started plotting alternative treatments. He had a compendium of healing knowledge in his archives. Maybe something in there could help the boy. He planned to go today to check but then found himself out of time.

He hated being pulled in so many directions at once. He spent time with Harry’s gang, to ensure that he was still involved and kept in the loop on what they were doing. He had to follow Dobby to its master - a task he thought was going to be easy but proved otherwise. He kept his eye on Jack and his sister who seemed to have an emergency meeting today in the library. He tried to listen in, but was spotted and had to pretend to study instead.

The studying pretense was the worst time waster. He hated having to fake not knowing these subjects and spend such a large chunk of his day in classes. It was getting on his nerves.

Ah, but maybe he was wrong. Studying wasn’t the worst. The ultimate waste of time was what he was doing right now - cutting up fetid onions. The noxious fumes irritated his eyes to no end and he had to blink the tears away. He dumped the onions in a jar and snuck a look at Snape who was a safe distance away from the putrid smell.
The Potions Master shifted his weight from leg to leg, tired from the day-long standing.

‘Serves you right,’ Merlin thought spitefully.

He rolled his shoulders and turned back to the task at hand. He got on with the next bulb and tried to release his frustrations on the onion. He chopped it harder than was necessary and could barely see for his teared up eyes. And like the clumsy oaf that he was, he cut into his finger.

“AAHHH!”

Merlin grabbed his finger instinctively and the knife clattered to the floor. But touching the wound with his hand stained with the pungous onion juice was a disastrous idea. It stung so painfully, that he saw stars.

Once he could somewhat see, he ran to the sink and tried to wash the juice away. He hissed when the water hit his wound. His whole hand throbbed with burning pain.

While Merlin was screaming in pain, dropping utensils and noisily turning on the water, the Potions Master did not even look in his direction. He must have known that his student had just gotten hurt on the job. He was going to just stand there and do nothing?

Merlin wanted to do a small test just to confirm what level of cruelty he was dealing with. He could heal himself right now but he needed this wound for his test so he only whispered a simple spell which numbed the pain.

He was sliced up badly. He somehow managed to cut into three fingers at the same time at an angle, and the blood was flowing freely in bright red streams. He cupped his bleeding hand with the good one and waited until blood pooled inside his palm. Then he walked up closer to Snape.

“Excuse me, Professor,” he said in the most polite tone he could muster. “I need help.”

Snape lazily shifted his eyes in his direction and Merlin chose this moment to tip his hand so that blood would dramatically stream down to the floor like a crimson waterfall.

Snape’s eyes followed the red liquid and his expression was bored like he was being bothered with the most mundane request.

“First aid kit is in the cupboard,” he drawled and went back to his papers.

Merlin blinked a couple of times, trying to steady himself. It’s one thing to ignore a cry of pain but to see your student bleed in front of you and do nothing…

Merlin stiffly walked to the cupboard and brought out a first-aid kit. He loudly dropped it on Snape’s table and even opened it for him.

“Just keep it hygienic if you can manage it. Don’t contaminate the contents,” Snape said without looking up.

He wasn’t going to help? In that case… Merlin closed his eyes to hide his magic and said a little spell which made him bleed even stronger than before. Then, he proceeded to take things out of the box with his bleeding hand, marking everything in red. He applied dittany extract to cleanse it, although it was pointless when it was bleeding so much, and wrapped it tightly in gauze, which immediately became stained in red. Now that the damage was complete, he released the bleeding spell and clotted the wound.
By now, his blood was everywhere. It stained all supplies in the box, painted the box itself, it was on
his robes, on both of his hands, probably on his face from when he tried to rub his eyes. It dripped
from the table onto the floor, where he stepped into it, smearing it properly. But Snape did not look
up until a stream of it slowly approached his papers, guided by Merlin who stood by waiting for the
Professor to notice the carnage.

Snape picked up his papers before they got stained and finally took a look at the bloody display on
his table.

“Did you slaughter something in here, Ealdor?” he asked accusingly.

Merlin lifted his red-stained bandaged hand. “It was bleeding a lot.”

Snape’s usual mask of indifference changed to shock for a moment and Merlin had to remind himself
to not smirk. He was supposed to be in pain so he grimaced and held his wounded hand tenderly.
His eyes met the Professor’s and they were frozen in a staring war. Merlin closed off his mind just in
case and held on tight.

Was he trying to break in? A skilled Legilimens could invade your thoughts without your knowledge
if you didn’t know how to recognize it. The trick was in the eye contact. If that was what Snape was
trying to do right now, he must have noticed that Merlin was shielding himself.

“You’re going to contaminate the onion mixture with this,” he motioned at Merlin’s hand as if it was
a disgusting freak of nature. “Come back tomorrow, same time. Get out of my sight, before you
befoul this place even more.”

Merlin stood there for a moment longer and ground his teeth. No, he wasn’t done. Snape failed the
test spectacularly. He gave him several chances to show even the slightest tinge of compassion but
the Potions Master was too blinded by his dislike of Merlin to do the right thing.

A new idea formed in Merlin’s mind and he involuntarily smiled.

“Thank you, Professor,” he walked away and whispered a new curse to put on top of the old one.

To not draw suspicion to himself, he did not activate it yet. It was swirling around its target, waiting
for him to say the magic word and make the Greasy Git’s life a living hell.
Oops. I did it again. I'm really bad at this "save a draft, post it later" thing. I somehow never published Chapter 22: The Way In. It's there now so if you read further than that before today (July 14th), you might want to check it out. I'm sorry for making you jump all over the place like that.

The following morning, Merlin knocked on the door of the girls’ lavatory.

"Anyone here?" He poked his head inside.

No one answered so he went in.

It was the most depressing public lavatory in the castle, complete with yellowed tiles, chipping paint, and faucets missing knobs.

Moaning Myrtle floated above her usual toilet and quietly sobbed.

"Another boy," she complained and prepared herself to launch at him.

He was really not looking forward to the cold feeling of a ghost passing through so he plastered a pleasant smile on.

"Myrtle, but I'm here to see you."

"You are?" Her stance completely changed from an aggressive, vengeful spirit to that of a shy flirty girl.

"Of course. There are no other pretty teenage ghosts in this castle. Who else could I be looking for?"

He tried to sound genuine but his smile was hard to maintain once he heard snickering coming from the last stall.

Myrtle curled her hair on her finger while smiling shyly and then her face contorted into a vicious snarl. Her mood swings were frightening.

"You laugh because you're jealous," she screeched, looking in the direction of the stall where the snickering got louder. "No boy could possibly visit the ugly Myrtle. I'm a girl too! Even if," she sobbed, "a dead one."

She floated in circles under the ceiling while wailing her sobs. Her shrieking intensified until with a high-pitched scream, she dived into her toilet, splashing Merlin with the water.

His only consolation was that these toilets were never used. At least he hoped so.

With the ghost out of the way, he walked up to the last stall and pushed the door open.

Three amused faces looked up at him, and seeing how wet he was, roared with laughter.
He pulled out his wand and tried to remember a spell that was safe to use in front of these kids. He hadn’t been using verbal wand spells much before coming back to Hogwarts. His memory was like a giant cabinet with many drawers. He had to close some drawers to access others. He couldn’t keep them all open at the same time or the cabinet would lose balance and fall over which he guessed would be equivalent to losing his mind. The drawers containing names of wand spells were so rarely used, they were covered in cobwebs and rat droppings, but it was about time to clean them up and shuffle inside for something useful.

“Targeo,” he said the spell and the water dried off.

There was no more space for him inside with the trio so he stood outside with both hands braced on the stall’s walls. He was amazed that the three of them fit in there, or that they wanted to squeeze around the toilet at all.

“How’s the stewing going?”

“Perfectly,” Hermione answered and stirred the lacewings.

He craned his neck to inspect the mixture. The color and consistency were good. He had been monitoring her to ensure she followed the recipe and didn't create a poison by accident. The potion’s potency would greatly depend on the brew’s quality.

“It looks great. You’re really good at this.” He meant the compliment. He was impressed with the skill of this young witch.

Hermione’s cheeks blushed a vivid pink and she cleared her throat. “About the missing ingredients.” She still wouldn’t look at him.

“I’ll get them,” Merlin smirked. “You can count on me.”

“We could create a diversion to help you,” she offered.

Ron smiled wickedly. “We’re making Swelling Solution next Potions. Let’s put Filibuster fireworks in Crabbe’s cauldron.”

Harry sniggered while Hermione nodded in agreement. Where these kids crazy?

“You are all mad. That’s going to cover everyone in boils!” Merlin exclaimed.

“Snape has an antidote, I’m sure,” Hermione dismissed him.

“No way. I’m not getting innocent kids hurt for this. Believe me, he doesn’t care enough to lift a finger to help a student in need. I wish you had been there when I was bleeding in front of him.”

Hermione immediately looked up with concern in her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he smiled at her and she lightened up. “I’ll get even. Don’t worry.”

“Get even?” Harry asked jokingly. “Who can get even with Snape?”

Merlin changed his expression to the mask of absolute lethal sincerity. “Do you doubt the Legendary Merlin?”


Hermione elbowed him in the ribs.
Merlin snorted and crouched down to their level. “Alright, a Ron, if that’s what you wish to call me.”

The trio joked around in the toilet stall and Merlin’s eyes lingered on Harry. There was still an important question he didn't ask the boy - how Harry knew to show up in that hallway on Halloween, but he couldn’t ask yet. He felt like he was at a trial period - his friendship and trustworthiness hadn't been tested yet.

He didn’t know yet how he was going to sneak past Snape to break into the locked storeroom but he was resourceful. He'd broken into Gringotts bank in the past without the goblins figuring it out. He could handle this task easily. It was time to show them what kind of Merlin he was.

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Elsa held her brother’s hand as they sprinted up the stairs and easily fell in synch with his stride. This brought back memories. They used to sneak around together all the time.

She was over the Moon happy when he told her what he found out from Hermione Granger. The Mirror of Erised was right here in this school! Ah, if only they had asked around earlier… But there was no use for regrets. They could finally get on with the search for their father.

“Third floor. Lead the way.”

Jack grinned wickedly and pulled her along. He was having fun. She couldn’t deny that she was excited as well.

“I spoke to Hermione today and she filled me in on the whole story,” he said while they ran down the long corridor. “Apparently, the three of them had quite an adventure down there last year. She said the entrance is at the end of this corridor. It’s a room with a trapdoor. From there, we go through a few chambers and the last one is where the mirror was.”

“I just hope it’s still there.”

“Let’s find out.”

The corridor seemed to stretch for eons. With each step, the anticipation grew. She wanted this so badly. She was ready to get out of the library and begin her own adventure, get her own happy ending. They arrived and she pulled on the handle, but it didn’t budge.

“How exactly are we supposed to open it?”

Jack pulled out his wand. “I learned this one from Merlin. Alohomora.”

They heard a click and she tried the handle again. This time it moved and she hesitated. Her heart hammered, ticking away the seconds. This was it. Everything she wanted was right here. She was so close! Jack nodded encouragingly and she bit her lip. It was time.

She pushed the door open and it swung with a loud creak. The room inside was empty. The only light was the one that streamed through the door. They walked inside and he pointed at the floor. There was a wooden trapdoor in the center of the room, as promised.

Jack grabbed the round handle and lifted the door up.

“SURPRISE!!!”

A flash of colors flew out of the hole and they both jumped back. The trapdoor snapped shut with a
deafening bang which could be heard for miles, announcing their location to whoever was patrolling
the area.

“I got you! I got you!” Peeves the poltergeist flew around the room and cackled in his high-pitched
tone.

Jack grabbed her hand and they ran out of the room before someone caught them. Peeves followed
them jeering “Caught you!” behind them.

This was the worst timing to meet the resident spirit of mischief. They were almost there!

He flew in front of them and they abruptly stopped. Peeves sat in the air cross-legged, a floating
promise of trouble if they ignored him.

“What were you two doing?”

“We’re just exploring,” Jack lied quickly.

Peeves rubbed his hands together and grinned very widely. “Exploring? Peeves is exploring too. I
want to explore what you are.”

Jack shrugged. “We’re students.”

Peeves cackled. “You are two naughty spirits! What type of spirits? Peeves never seen spirits like
you. You will tell Peeves or Peeves will start singing a lovely song about you.”

Elsa glared at the poltergeist with her hands on her hips. She was not going to be blackmailed by a
floating little man wearing a jingly hat.

“Listen, here, Peeves. Leave us alone or else!”

Peeves laughed so loud, the echo of it bounced off the walls of the long corridor. He started singing
and swaying his head side to side so the hat would jingle to the same rhythm.

You might threaten Peeves
You might fight and win
And Peeves will spill the secrets
Of the white-haired twins

Elsa’s confidence deflated. He wasn’t in the least intimidated by her and was now making too much
noise. Someone could hear! She tried to stop him but he floated away and kept singing his stupid
song.

Jack stepped forward. “What do you want, Peeves?”

“Answers, wee spirit. Peeves wants to know.”

Jack exchanged a look with her and she didn’t want to give in. She spat, “This is a secret for a
reason. It has to stay secret.”

Peeves floated above her and said in a sing-song voice, “Secrets, secrets, secrets. Peeves loves
secrets.”

“Yes, we’re spirits like you, Peeves,” Jack hissed quietly. “Don’t give us away.”

Peeves glided to him with a toothy grin. “Peeves belongs to this castle. What do wee spirits belong
to?"

Elsa bit her lip. How much did they want to reveal? She didn’t trust the poltergeist to keep their secret. On the other hand, he’d known all along what they were but never said anything to the wizards. The ghosts of the castle also had not betrayed them. She always wondered why. She had a lot of questions. Maybe it was time for some answers.

“I’ll tell you,” she said with a sweet smile, “but I have a question too.”

Peeves squealed in delight and posed in the air as if he was laying down on a couch, supporting his head with his hands.

“How do you know that we’re not ordinary students?”

Peeves sniggered. “Silly wee ones. Spirits glow.”

He turned to lay on his belly and kicked his feet in the air playfully.

Elsa tilted her head and walked around the poltergeist, examining him thoroughly. When she paid attention to his skin, she saw the faintest reddish glow. It was always there but at the same time hidden.

“You’d miss it if you weren’t looking for it,” Jack whispered and then stared at her intensely. “Yeah, I think I see it.”

He blinked rapidly and averted his eyes. She tried to see the same on him. It was difficult, like using a different part of her eyes, a muscle that was never exercised. But when she concentrated, she saw her brother’s skin emit the slightest sheen. Her eyes stung and she closed them briefly to get relief.

“We’re going to have to practice this one,” she said and smiled. She had a new skill to work on.

“Your turn,” Peeves cackled.

“We belong to nature,” Elsa spoke quietly, just in case if there was anyone nearby. “It’s nice to officially meet you.”

Peeves made a couple of flips in the air while wheezing in glee.

“Wee nature spirits! Wee nature spirits!” He floated up close to Jack. “Peeves can sense mischief, a lot of mischief.” He poked Jack’s chest. “Here. Mischief in wee spirit.”

Elsa wasn’t surprised that Peeves was attracted to her brother but then, a realization hit her - Jack’s mood was what drew the poltergeist.

“ Seriously, Jack? You were feeling so mischievous that you called him here?”

Jack scratched his head. “Is that how this works? You’re drawn to mischievous thoughts?”

Peeves nodded and Jack looked at her apologetically.

“It’s not like I can do anything about it.”

Peeves kept grinning and his black eyes glinted. “I have a deal.”

“What’s the deal?”
“Peeves will keep a secret but we will let this mischief,” he poked Jack’s chest again, “loose. Need more mischief.”

Jack frowned and Elsa hoped that he realized that a deal like that wasn’t going to be just fun and games. It sounded like the poltergeist wanted to use him.

“You’ll get me in trouble, Peeves,” Jack complained.

“No trouble,” Peeves said in an innocent voice. “Peeves knows how.”

Jack looked like he was going to agree and Elsa put a hand on his shoulder to pause him.

“There have to be rules to this mischief-making. You can’t just use Jack whenever you feel like it for whatever you feel like.”

“Deal,” Peeves said with a grin.

“And Jack will get to choose what type of mischief you do, you can provide ideas but it’s up to him if he wants to use them. He’s in charge.”

“Deal-Deal!” Peeves floated up to Jack with an outstretched hand. “At least once a month. Hoggy Wartwards needs mischief every month. Recommended dose.”

“That’s a lot of work,” Jack said, not taking the hand yet. “What do I get out of that?”

Peeves cackled. “Not work. Never work. Fun!” He floated closer and cupped Jack’s hand in both of his in a gesture much gentler than Elsa would have imagined the mayhem spirit was capable of. His smile looked genuine this time.

“You get a spirit friend, wee one.”

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Sunday morning, Merlin knocked on Dumbledore’s door and waited to be invited this time.

“Come in.”

He walked in and looked around if there was anyone there. He’d had enough of blunders, at least for a few days.

“It’s just us, my friend.”

“Hi, Merlin,” Heliotrope called from her portrait and he politely waved back.

He walked up to the Headmaster who just picked a record from his collection and put it on a magically powered turntable.

“Albus, I’d like to use your fireplace if you don’t mind.”

“Where are you off to now?”

“I want to try something for Colin. It’s a long shot but… I’ll fill you in once I get back.”

Dumbledore slowly motioned with his arm to the fireplace while chamber music filled the room. Merlin guessed that it was Mozart although he couldn’t remember the name of this composition.
“Be my guest. How long will you be gone?”

“I’m unsure. Could be a few hours.” He smirked. “I’ll try to get back before my detention with Snape.”

Albus looked up from his spectacles. His eyes were full of judgment. “What did you do?”

“Got myself in trouble, nothing new.” Merlin winked.

He was glad that Dumbledore didn’t ask him why he needed a fireplace and didn’t disapparate right from the spot. He didn’t want to admit to how weak the aging spell was making him. He relied on his reputation and the perception of unlimited power. If he didn’t have that, he was truly no one. Just another nobody whose greatest bragging point was the ability to wake up from the dead.

He threw in the Floo powder and stepped into the fireplace. It was lit so he was going to get dirty again. At least he was prepared this time and wore dark robes.

“Home.”

He appeared in the large, clean fireplace he had built with his own hands. His home smelled familiar and inviting like a warm soup on a cold day. When he stepped in, lights flickered on in the lamps he had enchanted to sense his arrival. Everything looked just the way he left it, patiently waiting, ready to welcome him back.

Merlin had lived in this small cottage for several centuries now. He had to repair various parts of it over time. Some of it was held together only by magic. It wasn’t large or fancy but it was his. It was more than just home. It was an archive and a vault. The wards he put on it guaranteed the safety of the precious keepsakes he’d accumulated over his long life.

He tried to not hoard, but it was amazing how many things one could get emotionally attached to given enough time. He limited himself to keep only those items which held the best memories, of the best people that passed through his unnaturally long life.

He walked past a shelf where the oldest of those items sat enclosed in clear magical boxes which emitted a faint glow. There was the royal seal of Pendragon, given to him by Gwen, the only memorabilia he had left of Arthur. The ring gleamed and it felt as if it winked at him in recognition. There was a broken white shell from Lake Avalon, in memory of Freya, his first love. He hadn’t seen her in a long time. He should visit her lake soon. And on the lower shelf was his first Grimoire passed on to him by Gaius when he was still a boy. He protected it as best he could but the pages inside were crumbling. He didn’t dare to even touch it.

He used to have more keepsakes from times of Camelot but they got lost in the clutches of time so he held on to these with reverent care. In fact, the boxes were enchanted so tightly that only he could touch them.

His fingers grazed the edge of the shelf and he noticed that a thick line of dust covered his treasures so he promptly vanished it. He wanted to clean his whole house, it was sad to see it so stale, but he had limited time on his hands. He couldn’t waste it on sentimental cleaning.

On the wall, right above the stone fireplace, hung the staff of the Sidhe. The original wood had long ago eroded so he fashioned a new one a couple of centuries ago. The magic in the blue crystal was still as potent though. Sidhe magic was truly as eternal as they were. He looked fondly at the staff, remembering all the times he had used it. Not as much over the past few centuries, he’d learned spells just as powerful as the staff by now, but it still had a use. Just like a wand, the staff could be
used even when his own magic felt depleted.

He lingered while looking at it, wondering if he would need it. The aging magic was slowly draining him, making him weaker with each passing week and he still had several months to get through. It had been so long since he held on to this spell for an extended period of time, he’d forgotten how bad it could get after a while. If this weakness continued getting worse, he was going to need an intervention which he’d prefer to avoid.

The staff floated to his outstretched hand and he gently traced the carvings he had put on it. He recreated the original writing but in Old English runes rather than Old Irish as the Sidhe used.

*To hold life and death in your hands.*

Would he need it? He gripped the staff tighter. He couldn’t afford to be weak. He didn’t know what challenges awaited him, what type of monster the Chamber of Secrets contained and it would be foolish to not use all tools available to him. All of those students relied on him. He needed all the magical help he could get.

He put the staff on the floor and held out his hand over it. He struck it with a strong enchantment and felt the staff resist. It was difficult to transform an object this powerful but he needed it to be small so he could take it anywhere.

After much effort, a blinding light filled the room and Merlin covered his eyes. When the light dissipated and he blinked away the temporary blindness, there was a small item on the floor. It was a small blue crystal on a leather strap. He tied it around his neck and covered it with his scarf. No one would notice that he acquired a new pendant.

Back in his bedroom, there was another ancient keepsake - a little dragon figurine, the one his father gave him. He touched it gently, felt its familiar edges smoothed out by time. Should he bring it with him? He decided against it. It was safer here.

He went into a small library where he kept his precious volumes. Some were sacred texts he’d saved from destruction, others he wrote himself to pass on his knowledge. Every few centuries, he sat down and rewrote each book. Even with protective magic, pages tended to disintegrate over time and he wanted these words to last. He knew spells which could copy entire books within seconds but he liked to do it by hand. It was his life’s work to preserve what was left of the knowledge of Old Religion, to not let it fade into history.

He lit a small fireplace to chase away the chill and the room was illuminated with its warm glow.

Since he had transcribed each of these volumes several times by now, he had an idea where to look. He pulled out several books and sat down behind his desk.

To save time, he used his mind’s eye to scan the books faster. There were quite a lot of spells which he could try. He didn’t want to bring the heavy volumes with him so he created replicas of the pages containing the spells and stacked them all up.

The fire crackled, calling to his attention and his eyes lingered on the glowing embers. He was enjoying himself. He liked research activities like this one. It was a good refresher to page through each of these books. Some spells brought him flashbacks of past events, and some spells he had forgotten about already and was glad to be reminded of.

He looked out the window and startled, seeing that it was dark already. The large clock on the wall said that it was seven in the evening. He wasn’t devastated about being late for detention. What
bothered him more was that he was late for supper. This child’s body constantly demanded food. Thankfully, he could make a stop in Hogwarts kitchens before going back to his dorm. He wasn’t going to bed hungry.

Merlin stepped into the empty fireplace in the sitting room with the copied pages in one hand and the Floo powder in the other but hesitated. He had a moment of weakness. He wanted to stay home where it was quiet, safe and calm, to sleep in his comfortable bed, and make his own meals. Did he really belong at Hogwarts among hundreds of those who could never know who he was? His home knew. His home was his oldest friend.

Then, he remembered Colin laying stiff in the Hospital Wing and threw the Floo powder down.

He came out of Dumbledore’s fireplace, landing on all fours, spreading ashes around again.

Dumbledore was sitting in an armchair near the fireplace, reading a book and bobbing his head to the rhythm of music.

“Still listening to Mozart?”

He looked down at Merlin and smiled.

“I’m glad you’re back. For a moment, I worried if you gave me the slip.”

Merlin shook the ashes off himself and smiled weakly. “It was tempting.”

The old wizard noticed the pages he held.

“Spells,” Merlin explained. “I want to see if I can revive Colin.”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows flew up. “Mind if I watch?”

“Let’s go.”
Merlin and Dumbledore walked to the Hospital Wing at an urgent, purposeful pace as if heading to a battle. Madam Pomfrey protested when the Headmaster requested to leave them alone with the patient, but in the end, agreed to it.

Merlin walked up to his friend and smoothed the hair on his head. Colin was so young, so innocent. His face was frozen in a look of shock. What did he see?

“Was he holding something?” he asked, looking at the position the boy’s arms were frozen in.

“A camera,” Merlin shot him a look, but Dumbledore answered the question before it was asked. “The film disintegrated into ash.”

What magic could have done destroyed a film but render the boy petrified? Merlin shook those thoughts off. He was here to try his spells.

He started them one by one. They were meant for awakening, animating, restoring and powerful healing. He could feel the magic work, transfer from him into the boy and willed for Colin to wake up. He put everything he had into it. A bead of sweat formed on his forehead and he swayed on his legs. He was using a lot of energy to perform them but he had to keep going. He had to help his friend.

Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and said in a soft voice, “Maybe you’re done for today.”

“No.” Merlin shrugged him off. “I’ve got more. I’ll try them all.”

He kept going and was less careful with the pages, each one flying to the floor as he discarded it, looking for the next. The magic that petrified the boy was old, ancient, timeless, but most of all it was so dark, his spells were no match for it. But he still had hope. He could barely stand but it was only a physical weakness, and he could fight through it.

He nearly fell and caught himself on Colin’s bed which squeaked in protest. A strong hand lifted him up.

“You’re done, dear,” a female voice said.

His vision swam in front of him and he wasn’t sure who led him away from Colin and put his tired body in a nearby bed.

“No,” he protested as he felt someone taking his shoes off. “There’s more.”

“Not tonight, dear.”

He heard whispers around him but could no longer understand them as darkness pulled him in.

Merlin woke up to the smell of food and cleaning solutions. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times. His stomach grumbled, telling him to find the source of the edible aroma.

Madam Pomfrey had just put a bowl of what smelled like porridge on his nightstand.

He was in the Hospital Wing. He spent a night here?

“Just in time. Eat up while it’s still warm. You need to replenish the energy you spent yesterday.”
He sat up and took the bowl in his hand. Porridge was perfect right now.

She kept looking at him as he ate and he felt like he was being studied. The sounds of the spoon touching the bowl were the only ones disrupting the odd quiet of the reverberant room. Aside from him, there were only two silent patients there. He was on a bed next to Colin whose petrified position had not changed, making him look like a wax figure. Two beds over, Mrs. Norris lay in a permanent defensive position like an eerie stuffed animal.

“Your roommate and Head of House were already alerted that you’re here so you don’t have to worry about that. It was quite a stunt you pulled.”

“What were they told?”

“You fainted due to low blood sugar. Which is actually very close to the truth. You need to put more meat on those bones. You’re so skinny, a gust of wind could blow you away.”

Merlin couldn’t gain weight even if he wanted to. His body was frozen in the state of what he looked like at this age. The times of his childhood were hard, food was scarce. All kids were skinny like him back then.

He met her eyes for a moment and tried to judge what she knew of the previous night. He could vaguely remember a woman’s voice. Was it her?

“Yes, I saw the healing spells you were trying to perform last night. They’re quite unique.” She picked up the pages from the little table and looked them over. They were all written in ancient rune but he supposed she might have been able to read them. “Unfortunately, none of them worked.”

Colin’s petrified body was incriminating evidence of his failure.

“Don’t beat yourself up, child. It was an admirable effort.” She smiled at him kindly. “I’m happy to see someone as young as you interested in the healing arts.”

He nearly choked on his porridge but did not say anything.

“What type of spells are these?”

“Old Religion,” he answered simply.

She studied the pages more but then, put them back on the table.

“Listen, child.” She looked down at him. “Healing magic can be very draining as you may have noticed last night. No one can be expected to cast a spell after spell without consequences. I caution you against doing this again.”

“There are several more in there I’d like to try.”

She exhaled sharply. “Professor Dumbledore assured me that you knew what you were doing but you must understand that I can’t help but be skeptical to trust the expertise of a young Healer like you. A spell done wrong can be more damaging than the original ailment. You could hurt your friend if you continue.”

“I have been doing this for a long time, Madam Pomfrey,” Merlin said but knew that his word wouldn’t count for much. Just how many years could an eleven-year-old practice something? “This isn’t an experiment. I would never take a gamble with Colin’s life.”
“We will prepare Mandrake Restorative Draught and your friend will be recovered. There is no gamble in that.”

“It will be months,” Merlin said through gritted teeth. “I’ve seen the mandrakes in the greenhouse. They’re very far from ready.”

She pursed her lips thinking over how else to sway his resolve. He put down the empty bowl in his lap, resisting the urge to lick it. He was still hungry.

“Listen, Madam Pomfrey. I have to try. I can’t go on for months pretending like everything is fine if there’s even a slight chance that I can spare him this fate. Surely, you can relate to that feeling.”

She glanced at Colin and smoothed out her white apron. “Very well. However, you’re my charge too so we will do this by my rules. Come in two days if you feel that you’re back to your full strength. We’ll do only two spells at a time. And you will have to take a two-day break between each attempt.”

“That will take too long!” he protested.

“Do you think your spells are effective if you can’t even stand on your feet? You’re not casting them if you’re not fully rested.”

“I can handle more than two.”

“It is final!” she said and moved on to check his pulse.

He had to let her have the final word right now but he wanted to finish this exercise next time he tried. In fact, the more he thought about the failure of the previous night, the more he became convinced that healing spells wouldn’t work. Colin wasn’t hurt. There was nothing to repair in his body. He was kept in a petrified state due to attack by Dark Magic so a different tactic was needed.

“I’m not fully convinced that you are ready to return to classes, Mr. Ealdor.”

“I’ll be sure to take it easy today. Thank you for your care,” he got up and looked for his shoes.

He knew what she saw in his vitals and wanted to leave before she looked closer. They were all over the place as usual and fluctuated for no good reason. He was a child, but he was an adult, but he was as old as mummies on museum display. He was a medical paradox held together by magic. There was no logical explanation and the longer she looked, the more she would become convinced that he was sick, maybe even dying.

“Do remember to eat, child, and get plenty of rest.” She linked her hands in front of her and tilted her head slightly, giving her a stern and concerned look at the same time. “I wasn’t kidding about the low blood sugar.”

He found his shoes under the bed and got ready to leave. He gathered the pages of his spells and snuck a last look at Colin. He would come back and finish his work. He respectfully inclined his head to the school Healer and departed.

Merlin felt like a failure again. He should have prepared better before trying the spells but he was so eager to get started, he didn’t take precautions. It worried him how weak his body was becoming. There was something he could do about it but it would require him to visit the Crystal Cave and he’d been avoiding it for some time. Every time he visited, he was given unwelcome visions. He’d try to put it off, but if this weakness got any worse, he would have no choice.
His steps echoed in an empty stone corridor as he walked to the Gryffindor tower. Beyond the closed doors, he could hear lectures taking place. It was Monday morning and he should join his peers in Potions right now. Yeah, that was unlikely. He had a good excuse to avoid it and he was going to use it.

Whether by accident or subconsciously, his legs brought him to the most colorful corridor in the castle. Tapestries from around the world and different time periods adorned the walls along with many portraits. The carpet runner hushed his footsteps and led him to a small door he knew was Potions Master’s storeroom. He paused and speculated at what might have guided him there at this time of day.

The Greasy Git was now teaching in the dungeons, most teachers were busy and there would be no students wandering around either. It appeared that his gangly legs decided that this was a perfect time for some thieving.

He’d had enough of getting caught so some precautions were required. Glamour would work best but he still wasn’t completely recovered from last night’s healing. Only for emergencies. What he really needed was just a warning.

He sat up an invisible tripwire before both entrances of the corridor, tying the ends to two suits of armor. If anyone were to enter, the suits would fall over and make a lot of noise, which would alert him to hide or flee, whichever was safer.

Feeling somewhat secure, he easily unlocked the heavy wooden door and closed it behind him. Wizards and their little spells. They thought an Anti-Alohomora charm was enough to fully secure a locked door.

Merlin conjured a floating glowing orb to discreetly light the place. The Potion Master’s storeroom was smaller than he expected. It was a tall but cramped room with shelves reaching all the way to the ceiling, accessible by a ladder. He wanted to avoid the break-in from being discovered so he couldn’t just summon the missing ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion. He had to take only the amount he needed and attempt to make his visit undetectable.

He started from the bottom shelf and inspected each ingredient. There were quite a few rare plants and substances down there, some of them even dangerous, and he understood why they were kept locked away from students. It was a nice collection, even rivaled his own. He scanned the shelves he could reach from the floor and finally found boomslang skin. He conjured a small bag and transferred only three measures as the recipe required. He put the jar back to the same spot and continued looking.

Having explored all shelves that he could reach, he climbed the ladder and continued. The higher he searched, the more interesting objects he found. While the bottom shelves contained raw ingredients, the top ones stored potent extracts and finished potions. He was all the way to the top when his eye caught sight of a small bottle and he nearly fell off the ladder from excitement.

“Veritaserum.”

He wanted it. Too many people were holding secrets in this castle. Just three drops of the truth potion in their drink and the problem would be solved. Using a potion like this on his friends felt awful, a great breach of trust, a moral crime. If they ever found out, they would never forgive him. But solving the mystery of the Chamber of Secrets was a life-and-death situation. He needed it.

He held it in his hand and considered his options. If a potion this rare was gone, it would definitely be noticed, but if only some of it went missing, the theft might even never be discovered.
He conjured a small flask and poured half of the contents in. It was enough for at least two doses, maybe three. He placed the original bottle exactly in the same spot where he found it and corked the see-through flask. He couldn’t believe how lucky he was. The clear liquid looked so simple and non-threatening in its glass container, but when used on unsuspecting and untrained, it was extremely powerful.

Merlin had been subjected to its power in the past and let a few secrets slip before he realized what was happening. Only then, he closed his mind to its influence. But now, he would be interrogating children. They would have no idea how to recognize the symptoms. They would tell him everything.

Merlin finished searching all shelves and did not find any bicorn horn. He had to hope that Snape stored it elsewhere. Maybe his office had another storeroom. He would look there next.

He came out and locked the door behind him. Just as he finished the spell, he heard the clatter of a suit of armor.

“What is this?” Filch whined. “Nasty spoiled brats using the honorable school for jokes. If it were up to me, they’d be spending their detentions in shackles.”

Merlin didn’t want to be spotted here just in case if the theft was discovered so he ran in the opposite direction from Filch. Like the fool that he was, he forgot about the second tripwire and ran right into it. The suit of armor fell apart as he painfully sprawled on the floor with its pieces. The helmet spun around right next to his head and stopped while facing him. He could almost hear its mocking laugh echo in the iron dome.

“Who’s there?” Filch’s voice reached him and he scrambled his uncooperating limbs out of there.

Merlin ran as fast as he could and landed in the Viaduct Entrance Hall. Filch could come after him at any moment, he needed to lose him. From here the options were to run outside or downstairs. He did not look forward to spending time in the frigid weather so he took his chances with the dungeons.

Down the spiral staircase and into the gloomy underground corridor he went. He knew these passages well from the time when he attended Hogwarts originally. While many parts of the castle had changed over time, the dungeons were mostly the same. He passed by the Slytherin Dungeon entrance and was getting closer to the staircase which would take him to the ground floor where he could disappear in the safety of numbers. He could see the light of it already when he ran into a mass of black robes which had just come out of a classroom.

He didn’t know who it was but he was not going get caught again! He immediately put glamour on himself. By the time he landed on his butt, he was invisible.

Who else would he have the misfortune of running into if not Severus Snape himself? The Greasy Git looked around, bewildered but didn’t see him.

That was good thinking to use glamour. Merlin couldn’t imagine what explanation he could have come up with this time. He had a proper excuse as to why he skipped detention and didn’t show up for the morning class, but running through the dungeons while he was supposedly sick would be extremely hard to wriggle himself out of.

Snape didn’t give up looking for what had just bumped into him and outstretched his hand searching for the invisible. Merlin fought to control his ragged breathing and not give away his position on the floor. His glamour was powerful but it wasn’t infallible. In an open space like this, from such close proximity, his movement would be visible as a ripple in the air.
He needed a distraction to get away. Noise. Noise would be best.

He peered through the open door to the Potions classroom. He concentrated on a group of empty vials standing on a table and dropped one to the floor. Snape slowly turned to check what made the noise. Merlin dropped another vial. Snape looked around the corridor one last time and finally walked inside. Another vial dropped and Merlin quietly got up.

"Who’s here?" Snape asked in a growl.

The rest of the vials fell down, the door to the Potions classroom slammed shut and Merlin ran for it. He was already on top of the stairs when Snape ran out and shouted, "Peeves! I will get you for this!"

Last night, Jack barely got any sleep in. McGonagall told him that Merlin wasn’t well and was in the Hospital Wing and so for the first time in months, he slept alone. He forgot how lonely it was to not have another person gently breathing next to him, to not hear anything other than his own movements. It brought back the memories of when Mother used to punish him by separating him from Elsa. And when he fell asleep, he dreamt of darkness.

He woke up too late to visit Merlin so he planned on it right after lunch. So now as he came down to the Great Hall, he was taken by surprise when he found his friend fast asleep at the Gryffindor table with his head resting on his arms, gently snoring into his sleeve.

What got Jack really curious was that he felt different. There was a hint of different magic around him, something that reminded him of the fairy he met in the greenhouse.

He sat down next to him and gently nudged his arm. "Merlin? Are you okay?"

Merlin woke up and raised his head. His eyes were half-closed and there was a red imprint of wrinkled robes on his face. He looked around at the amused faces of other Gryffindors who were whispering and pointing at him.

Familiar click-clacking of McGonagall’s heels approached them. She looked utterly confused. Jack shrugged at her. He had no explanation for what Merlin was doing there.

"Mr. Ealdor, what is the meaning of this?"

He blinked a few times and it looked like he wasn’t awake enough to comprehend questions.

"What?"

"I was told you were in the Hospital Wing. But you’re here, sleeping?"

Merlin scratched his head and yawned widely. All the eyes were on him but he didn’t seem to mind.

"I was too tired to get up all those stairs to the Gryffindor Tower." His voice slurred a little. "And then I was hungry but too tired to make it all the way to the Kitchens. So I settled to wait for the food in here." He noticed the food in front of him and seemed to wake up a little more. "Yes!"

He immediately dug in and didn’t even look at McGonagall to see how she reacted to his explanation. She opened her mouth and closed it a couple of times, uncharacteristically speechless until she addressed Jack.

"Jack, would you kindly ensure Mr. Ealdor makes it to your dorm after lunch? If he can’t make it,
then he needs to go back to Madam Pomfrey.”

“I’m fine,” Merlin said with a full mouth, “just hungry. Fast metabolism. Need to eat more often.”

McGonagall sighed so loudly, it sounded more like a growl.

“I’ll take care of him,” Jack confirmed and she finally walked back to her seat.

Jack watched him eat and wasn’t sure what to do. McGonagall wasn’t very clear when describing what exactly Merlin’s health issue was. It felt rude to ask outright.

“So, are you really okay or you just wanted to get rid of her?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry yourself.”

The way Merlin devoured food as if he hadn’t eaten in weeks didn’t look ‘fine’ despite his assurances.

“You should take some with you in case if you get hungry before supper,” Jack offered.

“Good idea,” Merlin grinned and some food escaped his mouth and landed on his robes.

Seeing that reminded Jack of the food fight they had at this table with Colin. They were having so much fun, they accidentally attracted Peeves and he made the fight even messier. A fight like that wouldn’t have been the same without Colin. He was what made it fun.

Merlin followed his eyes to the stain on his shirt and tried to rub it off.

Jack stirred the food around in his plate, not very interested in it. They didn’t talk to each other much, and after lunch, Jack walked him to their dorm as promised.

Merlin put the spare fruit on his side table, got in his bed and pat his belly.

“I’m so stuffed.”

Jack lingered by his friend’s bed and bit his lip. He was tired of being worried about him. “Merlin?”

“Hmm?” His eyes were closed already.

“Can you just let me know next time you’re doing something past curfew? I need to know if I’m supposed to worry about your absence or not.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” he mumbled.

“Maybe I don’t have to but I still do.”

Merlin didn’t answer and Jack wasn’t sure if he was really asleep or just pretending. It was so frustrating to be stuck with the decision, do I tell on him or not. If he wouldn’t tell and something happened to Merlin, it would be his fault. But if he told and Merlin was, in fact, safe and sound, just doing something stupid with Harry Potter, then he would get his friend in trouble like a mean snitch.

“I’ll be studying with Elsa in the afternoon. I’ll see you at the evening feast. You just… just rest.”

This was actually a part-lie. He wasn’t going to study, he had an English class which he was ashamed to admit.
He still had an hour to spare so he went down to the common room. As usual, he looked for a spot to hang out away from the fireplace as it was lit every day now. He saw the Weasley twins on the other side of the room and got an idea to ask them about his new mayhem contract.

“We’ll definitely need skiving supplies.”

“That’s a given.”

“That will probably be a best-seller. What else?”

“We could have toys for little kids.”

“What kind?”

The twins were working on a piece of parchment which had a large letter ‘W’ in the upper right corner.

“Hey, our food-fighting friend,” they addressed Jack. “We could use a kid opinion. If you could go back in time and give the younger you a cool magical toy, what would it be?”

Jack wasn’t sure how he felt about being called a kid by them. They weren’t that much older than him. They looked at him expectantly and he felt obligated to give them something. What did he like when he was younger? He remembered how excited he was when he found huggers for the first time. They weren’t toys, of course, but the same principle applied.

“Maybe something that would fly?”

Fred clapped his hands. “Yes. A flying toy.”

George started writing it down and then lifted his head. “Everyone has heard of Harry and Ron’s arrival in a flying car. We could create a miniature copy of it.”

“Brilliant. I got it! Aviatomobile.”

The twins high-fived each other and Jack sat down next to them to look at their parchment. “So what are you doing?”

“We’re brainstorming for product ideas.”

“We’re going to develop our own line of products.”

“Better than Zonko’s Joke Shop.”

“I don’t know what that is.” Jack felt like an idiot again.

“It’s a store in Hogsmeade.”

“They’ll let you visit in your third year.”

“We’ll bring you something next time we go, but,” Fred pointed a finger at him, “help us come up with more product ideas.”

Jack couldn’t hide how happy this made him. It was like having his own two older brothers. Speaking of, he had a question for them.

“Thank you. By the way, you guys know Peeves, right?”
“Of course.”

“Have you ever worked with him?”

The twins exchanged a look. Fred shrugged. “He’s joined us on some of our famous pranks but we never actually purposefully worked with him. Why?”

“I… I was just wondering. Does he ever get students in trouble?”

“All the time,” George answered. “He has a habit of giving you away when you’re trying to sneak around.”

“He finds it hilarious when you start running for your life.”

Jack frowned. This didn’t sound good. “Do you have any tips on dealing with him?”

“Appeal to his mayhem love to keep him on your side.”

“Give him a fun job if you’re in the middle of doing something you’re not supposed to be doing.”

“And by fun, we mean mischief. He’s not interested in anything else.”

“So, back to business,” Fred rubbed his hands. “Ideas. Give us ideas.”

Jack scratched his head. “A product for dealing with a poltergeist.” He could use one.

George nodded and wrote it down. “Good. Good. A poltergeist distractor.”

Jack looked at his shoes and remembered how he left them in the snow and also what Elsa told him how someone hid Luna’s shoes. “Locator shoelaces for the times when you can’t find your shoes.”

He thought of how he wished some people would lighten up a little more. Laughter made everything better. “Chocolate wand with a laughing charm on it.”

“You’re on a roll. Keep it coming,” Fred encouraged.

“Jumping coins. They’d jump away as soon as you tried to pick them up.”

George continued writing and ideas kept coming.

“Magical flute that makes everyone dance. I’d like to play it for Professor Snape.”

Fred clapped him on the back. “Kid, you’re a fun inspiration. Keep feeding us these ideas and we’ll hook you up with our products.”

Jack grinned, pleased that they liked his ideas but was bothered by how they addressed him. “You know, my name is not Kid.”

George looked up from the parchment. “Maybe we will call you by your name if you can tell us apart correctly.”

Jack smirked because he knew exactly how to tell them apart. They might have looked the same but their magic felt different.

“George and Fred,” he said while pointing at each respectively.

Fred pursed his lips. “Could be luck, we’ll keep testing you on that,” he paused, “Jack.”
He spent the rest of his free time with the twins and had so much fun with them, he nearly forgot about his English class.

As he feared, it was a boring class but what was the worst, they used no magic at all! Professor Blishwick walked with a limp and was as strict as Professor McGonagall. Where McGonagall liked to dress in green and her hair was always in a tight bun, Blishwick preferred deep reds and wore a silly matching cone hat on her long loose hair. She liked to make references to famous books and authors he’d never heard of and had an annoying habit of correcting every grammar mistake. She wouldn’t even let you finish your sentence!

“You have lovely handwriting,” she complimented Elsa while walking among the students and limped away to check on the next person.

Jack judged his own notebook, slightly disappointed that he never got praise. His handwriting was similar to his sister’s, they both learned to write from the same source - by copying passages from the Elixir book, but his sister seemed to have picked a habit of making her letters even fancier and elegant as if each word was one of her art projects. Next to her, he was always going to be overlooked. He didn’t begrudge her this though. He’d rather live in her shadow than without her.

As much as he loved having an excuse to spend more time with his sister, having the class only once a week also meant that Professor Blishwick felt entitled to give them a ton of homework. This time, they had to pick a biography book, read the whole thing and write an essay about it.

After the class, they each checked out a book from the library. Jack chose one about some wizard from the middle ages, hoping that someone who had “Oddball” in the name would have an interesting story.

Out in the Great Hall, the evening feast had started already. Merlin sat with the Harry Potter Fan Club and Jack passed him trying to remain calm while fuming inside. It was as if he was competing for Merlin’s time with Hermione and the Boy Who Had a Scar. What was up with everyone’s obsession with the Potter kid? Even Colin always tried to suck up to him and get his autograph.

Speaking of Colin, would it really have been too much to sign the stupid picture? It would’ve taken Potter two seconds and it would’ve made his friend happy. But no, he was too important for that. Colin made everyone happy. He deserved those two seconds. Jack no longer felt sad about Colin. He was now angry at the injustice that was done to him.

Further along the table, Ginny Weasley sat alone so he invited himself over, hoping that she could improve his grumpy mood.

He saw her a couple of days ago as she was leaving the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey said that Ginny and he were the only people who visited Colin. Knowing that she cared about his friend made him like her a little more.

“Hi, Ginny.”

She gave him a little wave and looked back at her food.

He tried to start some small talk. “Last weekend you were wearing a Quidditch shirt. Is that your favorite team?”


“Have you seen any real games? I mean, outside of Hogwarts.”
“My whole family went last year to the World Cup game. Gwenog was unbeatable.” Her smile was becoming wider and he guessed that it was her favorite topic. “What’s your favorite team?”

“I don’t have one yet. Anyway, I’m thinking to try out next year,” he admitted.

“Yeah? Me too. What position?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never played.” He ruffled his hair in frustration. What were his chances of making the team when he’d never played the game?

“I’d like to be a Chaser,” Ginny offered and leaned forward. “I was just thinking that I could use a practice partner. Do you want to practice with me?”

Jack grinned broadly. “Yes!”

She extended her hand and he shook it. “Alright, partner. Next weekend, the game’s on!”
Naps were the nicest invention in the history of mankind. Merlin stretched like a sunbathing cat and lingered in his bed for a while. The clock said that the evening feast was about to start. He had to hurry and eat fast to make it to detention on time. He considered using the ‘I’m sick’ excuse to get out of it but knew that it wouldn’t stick for long and Snape would only get even more annoying, so he grudgingly got up.

He sat down in the Great Hall with Harry’s gang and filled them in on his thieving progress.

“Here’s the boomslang skin,” he handed it to Hermione who took it with glee. “There was no bicorn horn in the storeroom. Where else could he keep some?”

“There’s a locked room inside his classroom. I think there are ingredients in there,” she answered.

“Right. I’ll check there next.”

“So, tonight,” Hermione cleared her throat and stirred the food on her plate. “I’m available if you want some tutoring?”

“Sorry, Hermione. I’ve got another detention with Snape.”

“Oh, of course.” She dropped her fork and it sunk in her mashed potatoes. She added quickly, “Whenever you’re ready, let me know.”

Harry and Ron sniggered while Merlin wondered why it sounded like she was looking forward to it. He thought she was as tired of it as he was. He considered if maybe he could drop it now, that he was on better terms with the gang but decided to bear through it for a while longer just in case.

Later that evening, Snape seemed pleased to see Merlin show up for his detention. Merlin suspected that an extra awful job awaited him as a make-up for the missed day. Of course, Snape was informed of the “low blood sugar” incident and Merlin expected there would be taunts involved.

“You did not show up yesterday. You appear to tend to your responsibilities only when it suits you.”

“I was unconscious, sir.”

“I didn't ask for excuses.”

Snape gestured at the classroom which was filthy after a full day of messy potion making.

“I want everything spotless, all cauldrons, ladles, tables and the floor.”

Merlin looked at the classroom with foreboding. So, he was a house-elf for the night. Would he get his own pillowcase to dress in?

“And refrain from fainting here. We wouldn’t want you to hit your head and contaminate my classroom with your bodily fluids again. Where you might lack skills at everything else, you seem to excel at bleeding out.”

Merlin cleared his throat to stop himself from smiling because the taunt came as predicted. He got started and Snape worked on grading essays - while standing, of course.

The cauldrons reeked and soon Merlin recognized what mixture the last class worked on. It was a
Swelling Solution and his hands were now thrice their size. Snape should have provided him with protective gloves. Ah, but that was the punishment for missing detention. Greasy Git always wanted to one-up him.

Oh well, there was no need to suffer. Merlin whispered an incantation which eased the swelling and another one to protect his hands and forearms. He couldn't wait to see Snape's reaction later when his hands were okay.

Whenever Greasy Git wasn't looking, and he rarely was, Merlin used magic to continue his scrubbing job while he lazily looked on.

By the time Snape finished grading, Merlin was already mopping the floor with casual indifference. He would have started whistling but decided to not push his luck.

Snape’s lip twitched. "You finished all the cauldrons?"

"Yes, sir. They're sparkly clean."

Snape's gaze lingered on Merlin’s hands which were not swollen. Then, he walked up to inspect neatly stacked cauldrons and asked in a monotone voice, "What spell did you use?"

"There's a spell to clean cauldrons? I wish I had known that."

Snape swept across the floor, grabbed Merlin’s wrist, making the mop drop to the ground with noise, and pulled out his wand. Was he going to jinx him?

"Revelio. Aparecium."

Snape brought Merlin’s hand closer, trying to detect the protection charm that prevented the swelling. Thankfully, wand spells were too weak to uncover what was hidden by Old Religion, otherwise, he would have just unraveled Merlin’s aging spell and that would have been tricky to explain.

Snape's eyes bore into him and Merlin could feel the strength of the git’s legilimency press against his mind. He kept all of his doors closed and maintained a clueless expression while thinking about taking another nap.

"Is there anything else, sir?" he asked lightly while maintaining their eye contact to give the wizard an appearance of someone who wasn’t aware his mind was about to be violated.

"Who taught you occlumency?"

"What's that, sir?"

Merlin decided to play it dumb. It was completely plausible for a child his age to not know what the art of closing one's mind was called. This had to confuse the git even more.

"You expect me to believe that you can resist without training?"

"Resist what, sir?"

Snape scowled even deeper as his confidence faltered. Oh, how much Merlin would love to reverse the roles and show him what a real mind invasion was. How would Snape like to hear voices in his head?

“What are you smiling about?” Snape hissed between teeth.
Merlin cleared his throat and tried to compose his face. He was getting carried away. “I just remembered a good joke, sir.”

Snape’s eyebrow lifted and he said, barely moving his lips, “Go ahead. Share it.”


“All right. What subject is ironically missing from Hogwarts curriculum?” He paused for effect. “Spelling!”

Snape’s face did not even flinch.

“Because of spells and…” Merlin cleared his throat again. No surprise, Greasy Git had no sense of humour. “So, am I done for today, sir?”

Snape looked around the classroom as if he was disgusted at how clean it was. Seeing nothing else that needed scrubbing, he sent him away.

The next morning, Merlin was in high spirits, knowing he had tricked Snape yet again, and as much as he didn’t want to waste another evening with the git, he was looking forward to irritating him some more. Maybe this time, he’d get an opportunity to break into the closed storage room? It was also time to write that letter to explain the curse. Hmm, and the second curse was also waiting to be activated. He had so many juicy plans for the Potions Master. Things were looking up.

It was with these high spirits that Merlin got an unexpected gift in the form of truth slip-up from Jack. They were casually chatting while getting ready and Jack commented on his chosen surname.

“Why is your name pronounced Eh-ahl-dor and not “eel-dor or ehl-dor??”

Merlin chuckled. “Excuse me, we all couldn’t have an easy name like Nix.”

“That’s why we chose it.”

“Wait, what?”

Jack froze and Merlin could hardly believe his luck - he wasn’t even trying to cause the slip up this time. The boy offered it on his own.

“That’s right, kid. I caught you,’ he thought.

He did not suspect at all that the name was fake, but lies, like fake identities, were difficult to keep track of as the boy was about to find out.

“What?” Jack said while feigning confusion.

“You made up your name? What is your real name?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Is your name even Jack?”

“Yes, it is.”

“What is your last name?”

“You’re being silly. It’s Nix.”
Jack gave him a sly smile and tried to leave the room but Merlin blocked the doorway.

“What is your name?”

“Let me out.”

“What is your name?”

Merlin was enjoying this. The boy was trapped literally and figuratively. He was not going to let him get away before explaining this.

“It’s Jack Nix. There is no other name.”

Merlin was not buying it and stood his ground. Jack tried to pry his fingers off the door frame with no luck.

“Let me out, Merlin. I don’t like this.”

“Not until you tell me the truth.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

Merlin maintained eye contact. Even if he couldn’t break into the boy’s mind, he was good at judging if he was being lied to. He’d had to lie so much in his long life, he became an expert at it. Jack was not.

“I swear, Merlin. I have no other names.”

Merlin didn’t know what to think. It appeared that the boy wasn’t lying but what he said and how he reacted to being confronted pointed to someone who was trying to hide something.

“Then, why are you trying to run away?”

Jack pressed his lips tight together and stared him down. The boy was stubborn. Well, Merlin was patient. Which trait would win? They continued their silent battle of the wills and Merlin was sure of his victory. He would wait however long it took to get his answer. Time meant nothing to him. At least, that’s what he kept telling himself.

Jack threw his hands in the air. “Fine!”

Patience. Patience always won.

Jack turned around and sat on his bed.

“What did you mean that you chose your name?” Merlin asked, coming closer.

Jack stared at the floor thoughtfully and swung his leg, kicking a rug under his bare foot. Merlin settled on the bed across from him and waited for the answer. The boy raised only his eyes and there was so much pain in them, Merlin felt a sudden need to comfort him. Then, his eyes opened wide in shock, and he silently pointed at something over Merlin’s shoulder.

Merlin quickly turned, feeling a sudden desire to protect the boy from whatever danger lurked in the shadows but saw nothing threatening there. He looked back only to see the back of Jack’s robes as he ran out of the room.

Merlin sat on the bed, momentarily stunned.
Cunning. Cunning won.

“The Great Merlin fell for the oldest trick in the book,” he said to the empty room.

It was those eyes. The boy’s icy blues disarmed him and made him fall for the trick. He shook his head and gathered up his things. Jack may have gotten away this time but Merlin was not done yet. He was going to keep digging until he found out the truth.

He noticed something on the floor and laughed out loud. Jack may have given him the slip, but he forgot something in the rush.

Merlin walked out of the dorm, heading towards his morning class, feeling oddly satisfied when imagining what McGonagall was going to do when she noticed that Jack came into her classroom barefoot.

There was a clever prankster running around Hogwarts. Severus Snape was cursed with a chair-breaking jinx and Irma Pince had to deal with an animated pot of stew. Both were impressive pieces of magic that none of the staff could undo. Albus tried to hide his reaction when he learned of them, but Minerva knew him too well, he found both amusing. Still, he felt bad for Severus and attempted to remove the curse plaguing him but to no avail. The magic was too formidable even for the great Albus Dumbledore.

So it was a great mystery as to who had created both jinxes. It had been days, they should have worn off by now and yet they hadn't. Could one of the students really have done it? And so now, all teachers were on high alert, worried that they were going to fall victim to the next prank.

Minerva surveyed the first-year class in front of her. It couldn't have been any of them of course, they were too young. Besides, the worst misbehavior she’d seen from them was showing up in her class barefoot. Well, there was one student who kept committing that particular offense.

Her twins’ performance in her class improved tremendously after she had given them proper attention. From then on, she was keeping a close eye on them to not let them fall behind again. The rest of the class was making progress as well. Maybe one more lesson and she would move on to the next transfiguration.

When she thought about students who were falling behind, her eyes landed on the poor Ealdor boy. He wrote wonderful essays, Miss Granger did a splendid job tutoring him in the transfiguration theory, but he was still terrible at practical execution. Some people simply did not have the talent for it.

Remembering directions from her Headmaster, Minerva pulled young Merlin aside after the lesson.

“Mr. Ealdor, a word, please.” She felt very awkward in her request and now forgot how she wanted to phrase it. “I would like to be present during your next... gathering.”

“Gathering?”

She cleared her throat. “Gathering of the followers of the Old Religion, if that is not a problem.”

He scratched his head. “No, it’s not a problem but we didn’t schedule any gathering.”

“Oh. I was under the impression that you were a leader of sorts.”

Now, she was grasping at straws. Dumbledore told her to keep an eye on what these children were
doing. How exactly was she supposed to do that?

“I wouldn’t call myself their leader, although, I do know more about it so they’re expecting me to teach. With everything that has happened, I put those plans aside for the time being. Colin Creevey was one of the children who wanted to learn.”

Minerva felt a lump in her throat at the mention of the boy.

“Yes, I see how that would change your priorities. How many more students practice Old Religion in this school?”

He smiled weakly. “Not as many as I’d like to see… Jack and Elsa Nix for start although their mother didn’t teach them much about it. Besides them, Colin and Luna Lovegood expressed interest in learning and I will gladly have them as well. Other than that, I don’t know of any other practitioners in this school. It’s not like there’s a way to tell us apart from a distance.”

He bit his lip while Minerva tried to unpack the amount of information he threw at her. What was that detail about the twin’s mother?

“I would love to find more practitioners here, really,” he continued, “but I don’t know how to reach out to the student body without making a big spectacle of it. I’m not keeping Old Religion a secret, on the contrary, but history has taught me to be cautious. Being publicly branded as a Pagan usually has negative connotations.”

He paused to think and Minerva felt moved by his words. Did she not already form a negative opinion of his faith simply because of its association with paganism?

“You’re right, we should have a gathering,” he finally said. “I have detention for the next few days so maybe some time after that. I’ll let you know the time and place, Professor.”

“What have you done to deserve detention, Mr. Ealdor?”

“I got caught when I broke curfew,” he said with a shrug. “It won’t happen again.”

“Let me remind you that the curfew is there for your protection, Mr. Ealdor. Indeed, it better not happen again. And I mean breaking curfew, not just getting caught.”

“Of course.”

“Keep me posted. You may go.”

He left her with quite a lot to think about. It didn’t escape her notice that he didn’t act as arrogant today as she’d seen before. That observation coupled with what she knew about his poor health, and how it appeared that he had been persecuted for his beliefs in the past, it softened her attitude toward him. There were a lot of sides to everyone’s character. She may have misjudged his.
The living blackness

Chapter Notes

I've got a couple of fun little fluff chapters for you before we get to the serious stuff. I've been waiting to share this one FOREVER. You'll see why.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1990

Elsa felt her brother's excited signal and ran towards it.

They had been playing the Signal game, as they called it, for several winters already. Ever since they discovered that they could send each other a distress call over long distances, they’d been experimenting with it, trying to decipher how it worked.

So far, they figured out that they could send a feeling that could go with the signal. It could be a feeling that would mean, “Emergency! Come here now!” or a mild “Come but you don’t have to rush,” as well as, “Send me a signal so I can find you.”

They were disappointed that they couldn’t express more complex thoughts or have actual conversations that way but the mere fact that they could communicate wordlessly over long distances was an exciting miracle.

They were careful to not let anyone know of their ability, suspecting that they might need it in order to escape, and made a pact that they would never give up the dream of seeing the outside world. In the meantime, they bid their time and made plans. Even if it took many winters, they would get out.

Jack had been exploring the caves as he usually did in his spare time. As Elsa ran towards his signal she wondered if he found an exit. She didn’t dare to hope. Besides, his call would have felt more urgent if he had.

Once she found him, he walked up to her, holding a torch and gesturing a finger to his lips.

“Quietly,” he whispered and took her hand.

There was an odd type of excitement in his eyes as he led her through the tunnel and she was growing very curious.

She found herself in a large space. She’d never been in this section of the caves before and wondered what he brought her there for. It looked just like all caverns did. Dark. It sounded just like all caverns… No, she realized, it didn’t sound the same. There was the tiniest shuffling noise in the air, one she didn’t recognize. And the air smelled rather strange. She knew no other smell to compare it to.

The further they went, the larger the space was. There was a sound of running water nearby and the floor was damp, making her slip. The earth icicles hung from the ceiling and nearly touched their counterparts on the floor like two hands reaching out to each other.

Jack put his finger to his lips again and was barely holding in giggles. Was he about to play a prank.
on her? He did that from time to time and she really wasn’t in the mood for it.

“Watch where you step,” he whispered and directed the torchlight towards the ground.

The cave floor was splattered with something. It looked like slightly wet mounds of little pellets and she agreed with him. She didn’t want to step in it with her bare feet.

“I think it’s poop,” he whispered and a giggle escaped his mouth. “They poop while they sleep.”

She rolled her eyes. Her brother thought poop was the funniest thing in the world. She only hoped he would grow out of that silliness eventually.

He was still holding her hand while leading her through the splatters on the ground and after they reached what appeared to be the center of the cavern he stopped and looked at her with wide eyes, ready to reveal the big surprise.

“Wait,” she asked, remembering what he just said. “Did you say they?”

He nodded eagerly, raised the torch above his head and looked up with a big grin.

“They,” he whispered, pointing up with one finger.

The torch illuminated the cavern’s ceiling, revealing that it was covered in something black that she didn’t recognize. She’d seen black rocks in one corridor that she found out later were coal but these rocks did not look the same. As the reflection of the torch’s flames danced on the ceiling, she thought she spotted a movement. Did her eyes deceive her? Maybe it was just shadows playing tricks on her, but no, there it was again. The ceiling was moving. Her heart stopped in her chest. It was alive.

She forgot his plea to remain quiet and squealed loudly. “What is that?”

To her horror, the ceiling woke up and the massive blackness collapsed on top of her.

She screamed and tried to run away but felt Jack’s hands grabbed her wrists. He dropped the torch and held on to her tightly.

“Shhhh. It’s okay.”

How could it be okay? The blackness was all around her and it was constantly moving. She could feel it swooping down and up and around her head, touching her briefly, and it was making noises as well.

“They just got frightened. That’s all. They won’t hurt you,” he said in a calm voice.

She struggled against his hold but once she understood that he wasn’t going to let her go, she threw herself in his arms instead, clutching him close. How was he not scared? The living blackness was everywhere!

She held on to him and he comforted her by rubbing her back.

“You’re okay. They won’t hurt you.”

She whimpered, still terrified, but after a while, the noises slowly calmed down and the blackness, while still swirling around her, was reduced in intensity and was settling down.

Her heart was still wildly beating in her chest but she felt a bit more confident, encouraged by her brother’s calmness and so she took a look around. The torch’s light was dim but she could see
enough to distinguish individual shapes within the blackness. They were moving fast and she had a hard time following them to have a good look at what they were.

She started to understand that they were some kind of small creatures. They seemed to start calming down at the same pace as she was, and were flying up back to the ceiling. Only few were left moving through the air.

Jack held out his hand and kept it in the air until one of the creatures grabbed onto his hand and hung upside down from it. She covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a scream.

“They’re harmless.”

She took a step back from him and squinted in the darkness, trying to see what he was holding in his hand. Then, she remembered the torch on the ground and lifted it up, illuminating her brother.

He brought the creature into his cupped hand very gently and smiled down at it.

“Isn’t it cute?”

She tried to examine it from a distance. It was small, black, had a hairy body and tiny skinny legs. Its little hand-shaped feet grabbed Jack’s pinky finger. She walked up half a step closer.

“What’s that hanging from its arms?” she asked, wondering what the strange black leathery thing was. It looked as if this creature was wearing a cloak.

“Skin. The arms are wings,” Jack explained. “That’s how they fly!”

The little thing in his hand started licking his finger with a long pink tongue and he giggled.

“It tickles.”

Elsa marveled at it and understood why Jack wanted her to see this cavern. The creature’s tiny ears and black eyes looked absolutely adorable. It immediately became her favorite animal.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. I call them Upside Down Poopers,” he chuckled.

She scowled at him. “There has to be a better name than that.”

“Sleepy Poopers?”

Elsa groaned at her brother’s silliness and raised the torch to look at the creatures on the ceiling. She was amazed at how many of them there were. They were hanging upside down, which was funny but there was another interesting behavior she noticed among them.

“Do you see how they wrap those arm wings around themselves? It’s like they’re giving themselves a hug.”

She looked at him with a sudden idea and saw the same look reflected on his face.

“Huggers,” they said in unison and broke into giggles.

Merlin walked into the dorm and saw Jack laying belly-down on his bed, reading a book and laughing. He looked so normal, so innocent. He had never seen any malevolent behavior from the
boy but couldn’t shake the feeling that Jack and his sister were hiding something serious.

He had previously attributed their unexplainable abilities to the twins’ natural affinity for Old Religion magic, but something felt off about that assumption. Merlin couldn’t put a finger on it but he had a feeling that there was more to it. These twins were not like him or anyone else he had ever encountered.

And there were also subtle clues. There were some fundamental strange things the boy had said. He seemed to not know some basic details of life within both the wizarding and the Muggle worlds. Who was he and where did he come from?

Merlin suspected that there was a grim reason behind all this secrecy and feared that they may have been brought up by someone practicing Dark Magic. This would support the theory that they opened the Chamber of Secrets. Maybe they were innocent children who were being manipulated?

He felt guilty for having all of those thoughts. By now, he genuinely liked the boy and considered him a friend. He didn’t want to suspect him of anything dangerous. At any other time, he would easily dismiss all of those concerns and accept the boy the way he was, but these weren’t peaceful times. The Chamber of Secrets had been opened. Children were being attacked. Colin witnessed something which made him scared of Jack and tried to warn Merlin but was silenced before he could say anything.

Merlin couldn’t ignore what he knew and owed it to Colin to find out the truth. He had to put aside his friendship with Jack and treat him like a suspect.

McGonagall’s question about an Old Religion gathering gave him an idea. He hadn’t made an effort yet to teach the children like he promised because of what happened to Colin but a gathering could provide him with an opportunity to observe the twins’ reaction when exposed to Old Religion magic and beliefs. If only these bloody detentions were over with already, he would hold that meeting immediately, but it had to wait.

Jack laughed again and kicked his bare feet in the air.

“What’s so funny?”

Jack looked up from the book. “This guy wore jellyfish on his head!”

Merlin checked the title.

“Ah. Uric the Oddball. Oddball was a very generous nickname. He was completely mental, had a habit of keeping dead animals on his person.”

Jack’s lip lifted in disgust. “Eww.” He turned to look out the window. “It’s getting dark, perfect time. Let’s go so we can make it before the evening feast.”

“It’s too early for the evening feast.”

Jack ignored the protest, jumped up from the bed and pulled Merlin’s cloak out of a hanger for him. “We’re going out.”

He led him to the courtyard and jumped over the steps with excitement. It was late afternoon and the grounds began to darken. Merlin tightened the cloak around himself and wondered what they were doing there.

“What is the big surprise?”
"I promised you, didn’t I?" Jack stopped in the middle of the courtyard and stretched out his hand. "It's a long shot. I don't know if there are any huggers here but I thought I'd give it a try.”

Merlin heard him refer to this elusive animal before but still didn’t know what it was. "Huggers?"

"Yeah." He still kept his arm out. It must have been sore by now. "I don't know exactly how it works, but if I wait patiently, one will come.”

Merlin was thoroughly curious now but before he could wonder more, Jack giggled and fidgeted on the spot, seeing something in the darkness. And then, a dark shape flew right at them. Merlin stumbled back in instinctual response, tripped and landed on his butt while the creature attached itself to Jack’s hand.

Merlin blinked and got up, not believing his eyes. "It’s a bat!"

Jack cradled the animal in his hands and cooed at it with awe.

"It's the largest hugger I've ever seen!"

As if everything about this boy wasn’t strange enough, now bats. The bat seemed to be very comfortable being held as if it was a pet. Then, it climbed up Jack’s robes and licked his ear. He giggled and leaned away from the tickle. He took it back into his hands and pet the animal’s brown fur. The bat raised its head to allow him to scratch the neck and opened its mouth slightly, giving it the appearance of grinning. Merlin thought it was cute and was about to attempt the same but then noticed its sharp teeth and decided to keep his distance.

“Wow. So, you have a thing for bats, huh?"

“Well, they’re amazing, aren’t they? Unlike any other birds.”

Merlin scratched his head. “Well, they’re not birds. They’re mammals.”

“Oh, even better.”

Jack lifted his new friend up to Merlin to show it off. Merlin dared to bring his finger to it in a gesture of trust and a small pink tongue licked it. Animals were always attracted to his magic and trusted him easily, but even so, for a wild animal, it was very well behaved.

He asked softly, “Why do you call them huggers?”

Jack shrugged, not taking his eyes off his little pet. “We didn’t know what they were called so we came up with a name.” He babystalked to the little creature, “I think it fits you better, you little hugger. Who’d want to be a bat when you can be a hugger?”

“Why did it come to you?”

“I don’t know, Merlin. They always do. If it doesn’t make sense, it’s probably magic, right?”

Merlin chuckled and shook his head. Nothing was ever this easy to explain. Even if it was magic, there was always a reason behind it. There was a way to make sense of everything if you had the right knowledge.

He heard the sound of the wooden door closing and McGonagall approached them.

“What are you two doing outside?” Her eyes bulged upon seeing the animal in Jack’s hands. “Jack, what is that? Is that a bat?”
He raised it up to show her. “He’s adorable, isn’t he?”

She flinched away, not sharing the boy’s sentiment. “You really shouldn’t touch that. Let it go.”

Jack’s eyes cast down and his hands dropped and then he looked up at her pleadingly. His blue eyes sparkled with pure innocence.

“Can I keep him?”

McGonagall grimaced. “The rules are clear, Jack. The only pets allowed are owls, cats, rats, and toads. Besides, bats are really not meant to be pets.”

Jack pouted and Merlin was surprised that McGonagall didn’t melt under that puppy-eye look.

“He’s sort of like a rat, isn’t he?”

She stressed each word. “No. Bats. Allowed.”

Her lips were pressed in a thin line and a wrinkle stood prominent on her forehead. Jack was testing her patience.

He scratched the bat on the belly and it comfortably lounged in his hands.

“They’re so much nicer than owls. I’ve seen how those birds hunt. They rip their prey to shreds,” he said with disgust and shuddered. “But this little hugger,” he raised the bat up, “he just eats insects. Just gobbles them up with his little fingers.” He smiled at the animal lovingly and brought it back to his chest. “He wouldn’t bother anyone.”

McGonagall sighed and her expression softened. “I’m sorry, Jack. You can’t bring the bat to your dormitory. You’re going to have to let it go.”

Jack met her eyes and held the gaze for a moment, waiting for a break in her resolve but as there was none, he finally gave up. He stretched out his hand to let the bat go but it wrapped its wings around itself and curled up in his palm.

“He doesn’t want to go.”

The three of them stood there, watching the small creature groom itself, perfectly comfortable and happy in his hands.

“You probably have to let go of the magic you used to call it,” Merlin offered.

“How? I only stretch my hand out and they come. I don’t know how to undo it.”

He sighed and gently put the bat on a stone bench. When the creature realized that it was no longer being held, it stretched its wings and flew up to perch on his shoulder.

Jack chuckled softly and sighed again. Then, Merlin was sure of this, he deliberately put the sad puppy-look back on and slowly raised his eyes to McGonagall.

“Please?”

A range of expressions quickly passed over her hardened features as Jack blinked at her and Merlin bit his clenched fist from anticipation. It was working. McGonagall’s resolve was faltering. All that was missing was a big fat tear to slide down his cheek and no one would be able to resist.
She shook her head, snapping herself out of his influence.

“This is final, Jack. Get rid of the bat. Also, the evening feast is starting and the two of you need to come inside.” And she briskly walked away, to escape before he changed her mind.

Jack exhaled, disappointed. If he only learned how to cry on demand, he would always get his way.

Merlin snickered. “You almost had her.”

The boy grinned lopsidedly. “I had to try. Sometimes it works.”

Merlin shook his head in bewilderment. He had been on the receiving end of this look and knew just how much pull it had.

“I’m sending you if I ever want anything.”

Jack bit his lip and looked at the door McGonagall disappeared in.

“So… would you mind if I brought him to the dorm? I’ll let him out before going to sleep so he can hunt, but just for a short while?”

Merlin stared at the boy with an open mouth. He was going to do it despite McGonagall’s definite ban. Sly little kid.

“Can you keep it under control?”

Jack nodded repeatedly. His eyes were begging him, but it wasn’t the puppy look, it was an honest plea.

Merlin finally gave in. “Fine, but if you’re caught, I will deny any knowledge of this.”

“Of course!”

Jack hid the bat under his robes, where the little creature immediately made itself comfortable, and they went inside to the Great Hall. Jack kept sneaking bits of food off the table and let the bat try it. After a few tastings, it appeared that sausages were its favorite. He was so sneaky in his endeavor, no one but Merlin noticed.

On their way back to the dorm, Peeves flew up to them and Merlin was ready to hex him away when Jack stopped him, grinned at the spirit and showed him the bat. Peeves giggled quietly and floated next to them as they walked.


“I will,” Jack answered. “But today, I have my personal mischief. We’ll work on something together later.”

The spirit squealed with glee and made a flip in the air. “Wee one is feeling cheeky.”

“Peeves, I call you by your name. Why don’t you use mine?”

Peeves floated in front of them and seemed to be thinking very hard but then smiled in a much more human-way than Merlin had ever seen on any poltergeist.

“Jack-Friend,” he said in a high-pitched voice and Jack smiled in approval.
Peeves giggled and floated away.

Merlin looked after it and his bewilderment must have shown because Jack started explanations.

“Apparently, if you feel mischievous enough, Peeves can feel it and will find you. If you’re nice to him, he can be helpful.”

“Are you sure about that? He could be telling on you right now.”

“He wouldn’t do that. We’re friends.”

“Friends?”

This boy was in for a surprise if he treated the resident spirit of mayhem like a kid to play with. Poltergeists could turn vicious and make a person’s life a living hell. This particular one had been petitioned to be removed multiple times on account of the trouble he liked to cause and how he liked to torment selected people. The appeal was never approved though since it was pointless. In a place like Hogwarts, where this much magic was gathered under one roof, mischievous feelings were bound to create another poltergeist even if this one was banned from it.

Jack wasn’t done defending Peeves. “Speaking of, don’t hex him. You really need to be nicer to spirits.”

“But… he’s… he’s not a person, Jack.”

Jack grit his teeth. “He might not be human but he’s a being with emotions and feelings just like you.”

“What?” Merlin scratched his head. “Jack, do you know what a poltergeist is?”

“Yes, I do!” Jack closed his fist and his voice rose. “He’s a being born from human emotions and he’s tied to this castle. He can feel what you’re feeling and can aid you or prank you - a decision he makes based on your attitude!”

Merlin blinked, surprised at the outburst. “Well, you’re wrong on one account. He’s classified as an amortal non-being. You really shouldn’t think of him as a person. You can’t be friends with a spirit, Jack. He’s not even alive.”

“Classified… You have no idea how wrong you are,” Jack said quietly. “Of all the things you know about, you don’t know much about spirits.”

Merlin raised his hands in defeat. He didn’t want to argue with the boy anymore. “Fine, be friends with Peeves. Just don’t invite him to our dorm.”

When they got back, Merlin worked on his homework and kept sneaking glances at Jack who was playing with his bat. The boy loved animals. He showed it before when he didn’t want to transfigure them or use them in potions. His concern about harming animals would indicate someone who had an innocent mindset but it didn’t remove Merlin’s suspicions about the boy.

He reminded himself to not give in. He couldn’t afford to get emotionally attached to someone who might be guilty. Jack’s views were very black-and-white with no middle ground. It was a mindset of an extremist, and it would take an extremist to open the Chamber of Secrets.

Merlin had a feeling that the little odd details he’d noticed about Jack were only a shallow surface of the very deep well of secrets the boy hid inside of. He had to be more aggressive at getting the truth
out of him.

There was a hidden compartment in Merlin’s trunk where he hid the bottle of stolen Veritaserum. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use it on his friends but if that was the only way, then he would not hesitate. If the boy wouldn’t reveal his secrets on his own, Merlin would have no choice but to do what needed to be done in order to protect the rest of the children.

Friend or not, Jack was still a suspect.

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: the brown hugger is a noctule.
BTW, I can’t think of bats and not call them huggers. Huggers forever!
Prank time

Merlin sat in the Great Hall alone, eating and pondering on his busy plans for the next few days when a great noise echoed somewhere in the castle. Everyone looked in the direction of the large open doors, wondering if they should check it out. Few of the staff got up to investigate. Several students curiously followed and Merlin decided to join.

When everyone was climbing the Grand Staircase, Merlin saw Snape run out of his dungeon to join the noise investigation. The Potions Master shoved a student aside to get ahead of the group and Merlin got a brilliant idea. He had been waiting for an opportunity like this to present itself.

Merlin hid among the mass of students and chanted the words which activated the curse he had previously placed on the Potions Master. All the mistreatment and unfairness, the bullying, the torture and all other atrocities the Greasy Git had committed against his students, they would finally get their justice.

It worked instantly. As Snape climbed the stairs, his shoes fell off, he tripped and his knees hit the stone steps hard. Ouch. That probably hurt.

He looked at what happened to his shoes and then down at the students below who watched the scene with a mix of amusement and fear. He searched for who might have just jinxed him, but thankfully, none of the students had their wands out.

The other teachers looked around, bewildered, but then, got back to climbing the stairs, leaving the greasy-haired Potions Master to handle his predicament.

Snape put his shoes back on but couldn’t even make one step before they fell off again. He caught himself this time with his hands and shook them as he got up. That probably hurt as well.

He straightened up to his full height, towering over the students, trying to catch the one responsible. As he stood there in his black socks, which weren’t completely covered by his robes, Merlin had another idea. To complete the comical picture, he sent a tiny spell so a hole formed in one of the socks, fully exposing the git’s big toe. There you go. Now, he was shoeless and with holey socks.

“Whoever dared to send a childish jinx my way, obviously does not realize the severity of the consequences they will suffer for raising their wand against their teacher!” Snape boomed.

Whoah. Merlin had never heard the Greasy Git raise his voice before. He really got to him now. Oh, but Snape had no idea just how bad the situation was yet. He thought it was just a silly jinx.

The students lost their interest in the noise and started to slowly back up. After they fled back to the Great Hall, they went into full-on whisper war.

“Who do you think did it?”

“Did you see who had their wand out?”

“Oh, but did you see his sock?”

“It was brilliant. I wish I had thought of it.”
Merlin lingered by the entrance and used his mind’s eye to look around the corner at Snape without having to stick his head out into the hallway. And he saw that his curse was still working. Every time Snape put his shoes on and made even one step, they fell off. There was no one else left in the Grand Staircase, no one Snape could blame for his crisis.

Satisfied that everything worked as planned, Merlin was about to sit back in his earlier spot but decided to take his sandwich to go. He was thankful for that unexpected diversion. Snape was now going to be busy for a few minutes which meant that his classroom was going to be empty. It was a perfect time for more thieving.

He chewed happily while walking towards the dungeons, imagining the moment when Snape would realize the full extent of his newest curse. Any staircase, at any place, would not allow the Greasy Git to walk upon it with shoes on. From now on, if he wanted to climb any stairs, he would have to do it barefoot.

Stealing the powdered bicorn horn from Snape’s stores was easy. Merlin covered up his tracks and got out of there unnoticed.

When he arrived at Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, the trio was already there, leaning over the cauldron.

“Did you three create that noise upstairs?”

“No,” Harry replied. “Why?”

Merlin pulled out the stolen sachet and Hermione’s eyes lit up. “Because it was a wonderful diversion. All teachers headed up there, including Snape, although, I don’t know if he made it. Anyway, it was a perfect opportunity so here you go.”

Hermione took it with reverent care as usual.

“How come you’re such a good thief?” Ron asked.

“I’m an expert at sneaking around castles,” Merlin answered with a wink. “So, we’ll be done with the potion about halfway through December. Do we have a solid plan? Who’s turning into whom? We need something of theirs.”

In the end, they decided that Harry and Ron would turn into Crabbe and Goyle, the oversized goonies Malfoy hung out with, Hermione planned on a girl named Pansy and Merlin settled for a boy named Blaise whom he didn’t know. They had a few weeks left which should provide plenty of time to snatch something of the students’. What they didn’t work out yet was the how, but that wouldn’t be an issue.

Earlier that day in Herbology, Gryffindors and Ravenclaws were repotting bouncing bulbs. They were these strange purple bulbs which supposedly could grow to human size, but the ones they were working with were small, only fist-sized.

Mrs. Sprout warned them that they didn’t like being handled and should be repotted quickly before they tried to attack the person holding them. Jack found that wasn’t the case. Maybe he happened to get very happy ones, or maybe they simply liked him because they cooperated and allowed him to situate them in their new, bigger, freshly-fertilized home.

“Did you find your shoes yet?” he asked Luna who was humming happily.
“I found one,” she answered lightly. “It’s a shame that my favorite one is still missing.”

“If I catch whoever did it, they’ll be sorry for a year,” Elsa hissed and her bulb squirmed in her grasp. “If you don’t stay still, I’ll freeze you.”

The bulb might not have understood her words, but it had to have understood the threat because it stopped squirming and started trembling.

“I heard there’s a box in Mr. Filch’s office where found objects make their home,” Luna said while smiling at her bulb. “I tried asking him but he’s so upset about Mrs. Norris, he didn’t hear me.”

Luna’s bulb was the calmest of them all. It even rubbed its leaves against her skin affectionately.

“They really love you,” Jack commented and Luna startled as if he had come out of nowhere.

“Oh, wrackspurts got me again. They are very talkative today.”

Jack wondered what these mysterious creatures could be. Luna seemed to talk about them a lot.

“So where did you find that one shoe?”

“It found me. I was in the common room, trying to chase nargles out of a curtain, and my shoe fell out of it. I knew they would start coming back to me soon.”

“They’re taking a while to come back to you though. I’ll check that box in Filch’s office for you. Just give me a description in case if there’s more than just your shoes in there.”

“How are you going to ask Filch?” Elsa asked him with one brow raised.

Yes, she was right. He couldn’t ask Filch since the Squib couldn’t see him, but there was no reason why he couldn’t just walk into his office and take a look around. Maybe he could ask for Peeves’ help. It was time to start the pranking he agreed to.

“I’ll find a way,” he answered with a smirk and she dropped the issue.

Luna placed her bulb in the pot and gently covered it with dirt. “My yellow shoe is missing her sister. And the purple with the butterfly is missing a brother.”

Jack grinned broadly. “Are you saying, your shoes are twins?”

She nodded. “Of course. All shoes have twins.”

Jack turned to Elsa and waggled his eyebrows. “We’re a pair of cool shoes. Get it? Cool shoes?”

She groaned and shook her head. “Jack, you and your puns really need to take a break.”

“Who needs broken puns, Elsa?” he asked in a very serious tone.

“Jack, I’m warning you,” she narrowed her eyes to slits and pointed her trowel at him.

“Well, we are cool so I’m right about that so… I’m right and you’re left. Get it? You’re the left shoe.”

He had to duck out of the way as she threw her trowel at him so hard, it embedded itself in the wooden post behind him.
“Woah, chill out, sis.” He put his hands up as she grabbed a large pot, ready to throw it.

“What are you three up to?” Professor Sprout asked, suddenly, right next to Elsa and she reluctantly put the pot down.

“Nothing, Professor,” Jack answered and winked at his sister. “Elsa is having a tiny meltdown.”

She looked like she was going to impale him with a pair of rusty rakes. He loved making these silly puns for her. The more silly, the faster she lost her cool.

Professor Sprout inspected their bouncing bulbs and seeing that all were planted, finally left them to their quarrel. Jack was thinking what other ridiculous puns he could throw at his sister when Luna spoke up in her usual airy voice.

“If the two of you were my shoes, I would always be tripping.”

Jack exchanged a look with Elsa and they both roared with laughter. Luna was the best summarizer.

After the fun time in the greenhouse, Jack was in a good mood. He skipped to the castle with Luna, and Elsa made some grumpy comments behind him about acting his age. He split off from them when they decided to visit the lavatory together for some reason. Why did girls do that?

He wanted to help Luna find her shoes so he walked over to the Caretaker’s office. At first, he thought to pull out his wand and try the Alohomora spell, but then came up with a better idea and knocked on the door three times.

Argus Filch was a tall, hunched-over man whose overgrown wispy grey hair fell on the shoulders of his grey vest worn over a grey shirt. Jack felt depressed just looking at him and had to shake off those grey thoughts. He walked in through the open door.

Filch checked the hallway for who might have knocked, but seeing no one, went back in and locked the door after himself.

“Those good-for-nothin’ wand-wavin’ brats,” he grumbled and shuffled over to his chair.

Jack looked curiously around the office. It was exciting just to be there, knowing that he wasn’t seen and could do whatever he wanted. He didn’t want to be mean to the grey man who he mostly felt sorry for but some fun could be had.

The small office suffered from stale air and had no windows to relieve it. The only light inside was from a large oil lamp standing on the desk. Shackles hung from the wall, setting ominous shadows and Jack wondered what they could be needed for. There were shelves against the wall with various objects on them, probably things the sad man confiscated from kids who were just trying to have some fun.

Jack found a few stink pellets and three firework rockets which he stuffed in his pants pockets and covered with his robe. As he’d always observed with Muggles, Filch did not hear or see anything, even as the objects were disappearing from the shelves. Magic was so easy to dismiss for those who didn’t have any.

The shelves on the other side of the room held more mysterious objects but since he wasn’t sure what they were, he left them alone. Then, he found a dusty deck of Chocolate Frog cards tied with a shoestring. He wasn’t one of the kids who collected them but he could bet that Colin would love them so he pocketed those too.
He looked back at Filch and wondered why anyone would confiscate collectible cards. Stink pellets or fireworks, he could understand the reason behind it but why cards? The only reason that came to his mind was just to be mean.

This man liked to take away the things kids liked. It had nothing to do with keeping order in the school and all to do with what a nasty person he was.

Jack no longer felt sorry for him. Anyone who acted this way deserved a proper pranking.

He walked up behind Filch, who was reading a newspaper and blew a cold breath in his ear.

Filch looked behind him, but seeing no one there, got back to his newspaper.

Jack leaned over to his other ear and blew again.

Filch snapped his head so fast, his neck cracked.

“Who’s here?” he asked the empty room with wide eyes.

Ah, he was used to ghosts. Could he see them? Jack didn’t know but decided to play further on that idea.

He walked up to the door and traced large letters in frost, “GET OUT,” and knocked on the door three times.

Filch looked up from his newspaper again and paled, seeing the message on the door.

“Wha… wha… what? But it’s my office.”

Jack knocked on the door three times again.

“I have no quarrel with school ghosts.”

Jack knocked on the door once and paused.

Filch breathed heavily and fast.

Jack knocked again.

Filch gnawed on his lip while his chin quivered.

Jack knocked again.

Filch whimpered and was too scared to move.

Instead of knocking again, Jack put his hand on the door and let frost spread up - Filch watched it move - scale the ceiling - Filch’s eyes were bulging - down a wall - Filch held his breath - down to the floor - Filch turned and his chair squeaked in protest - and then the frost slowly crept in his direction.

Filch was just about to run out of the chair when the frost stopped. As he held his breath, waiting for what was to come, Jack approached him and after a dramatic pause, he blew his cold breath on the man’s face.

Filch screamed.
Amused by the reaction, Jack didn’t get out of the way in time, so when Filch jumped out of his chair, he ran right through him.

The sensation of someone walking through was the worst feeling in the world. It was as if his insides were being pulled out of his body and dragged along. Jack fell over and felt like retching.

Filch stumbled, also badly affected by the contact with a spirit and scrambled on all fours to the door. He fiddled with the handle and the lock until he finally opened it and ran out of there, screaming.

Jack hadn’t experienced this sensation in months and forgot how much he hated it. Being walked through was not only physically rough, but it also left him disturbed, feeling like he was less of a person than they were.

It was unfair, really, and he never fully understood how it worked. He was made of flesh and blood. Why did he turn into magic just for the Muggles? He should look this up. Maybe Hogwarts library had some information on spirits. Oh, no… He was becoming Elsa.

Jack shook off the unpleasant feeling and got up to close the door so no one would peer inside and catch him.

“HI!”

Jack jumped as Peeves appeared out of nowhere right next to him.

“Peevsie was watching,” the poltergeist giggled.

“Don’t scare me like that.” He clutched his heart which was beating wildly. Then, he smirked. “Did you like the little show I gave him?”

In response, Peeves made a few flips in the air. “Love, love, love!!!”

Jack chuckled and tried to remember what he was doing there. Ah, the shoes.

He looked around the office until he found a large wooden crate which had a sign on it: “Lost and Found.”

He started digging through strange objects like a sweater that could fit a toad, several gloves made of various materials, a small mysterious box which emitted some magic, an umbrella, and found only one shoe, a purple one. Jack grinned when he recognized that it was the same one McGonagall fished out of the snow when she summoned his shoes. He put it in his robe pocket - his robes were bulging by now - and decided that it was time to go.

He walked up to the door and froze with his hand on the handle when he heard Filch’s voice.

“New ghost! Wrote a message. Evil spirit, I tell ya!”

“Everything will be alright, Argus.”

That was the voice of McGonagall. Trouble. Major trouble was coming this way.

Jack turned to Peeves. “Peeves, what now? How do I get out?”

Peeves grinned broadly and floated over. To Jack’s surprise, he wrapped his arms around him in a hug. Instinctively, Jack hugged him back and felt a sudden pulling sensation. Before he could wonder what it was, he was in a completely different place.
Jack blinked, still holding on to Peeves and looked around him. They were out in a hallway, somewhere else in the castle, probably, one of the top floors.

He slowly let go of the poltergeist who was still grinning. “That is the best trick ever, Peeves!”

Peeves giggled in his high pitch voice and let go of him. “Peeves knows lots of tricks. I’m the best trickster.”

“Yes, you are!”

“But now, Peeves needs a Thank you.”

“Thank you! Of course, Thank you!”


“We could use one of these.” Jack pulled a firework out of his pocket.

Peeves clapped his hands and Jack started plotting. He wanted to make a nice surprise, something noisy, that would get someone’s attention.

“I need some kind of container. Metal would be best.”

Peeves disappeared and reappeared holding a large metal coffer.

“Perfect!!!”

They positioned the coffer close to the staircase so that it could be heard on lower levels. Jack loaded the firework inside it and found that there was a delayed start on it.

“After I set it off, you’re going to have to use your trick again to transport me out of here to Gryffindor Tower.”

“No,” Peeves shook his head in protest. “Pranksters must watch the prank.”

“But Peeves, I don’t want to get caught. You’ll get me in trouble.”

“Another trick. Never trouble.”

Jack considered his options. Could he really trust that Peeves would not let him get caught? He saved him before, would he do it again?

“Spirit friends,” Peeves flew over and nodded eagerly. “Spirit friends.”

Jack took a few breaths. “If you get me in trouble, we’re not friends anymore.”

Maybe it was naive to trust a mischievous spirit, but Jack did. He believed that Peeves was lonely and craved company enough to make an effort. From what everyone ever said about the poltergeist, Jack already guessed that no one saw him as an actual being, but only as a castle nuisance. That was what made him grumpy, that was what made him get students in trouble because they didn’t understand him, they didn’t give him a chance, they didn’t see him as someone who was worthy of trust and friendship. He was just a spirit to them, an amortal non-being as Merlin called him.

“What would you feel if someone called you a non-being?” Jack thought bitterly at his mortal being friend. “Would you consider me a being if you knew what I am?”
Jack looked at Peeves, who had his hands together in a pleading gesture, and felt that he had a lot in common with him. He believed that Peeves was a lot more than what they thought of him. He was a being.

“I trust you,” Jack whispered and Peeves genuinely smiled.

Jack pulled out his wand, set off the firework and closed the coffer.

“So what’s your other trick? We need it.”

Peeves floated behind him and sat on his back like for a piggy ride. And then, Jack felt some kind of magic take hold of him. He didn’t have to ask Peeves what it was because he immediately saw - he was completely invisible. He moved a few steps away from the coffer, knowing the firework was about to detonate.

It was a strange feeling to walk when he couldn’t see himself, to feel Peeves on his back but not see him. He tried to focus to use that different part of his vision and exhaled in relief when he finally saw a faint outline of his body’s white glow and Peeves’ reddish one. He was still learning how to use this new ability but noticed that the more he used it, the easier it became.

A bang sounded in the coffer as the first firework exploded. It banged around noisily and had to be heard several floors down. Another bang sounded even louder than the first and echoed through the corridor. Then, it was quiet.

Jack knitted his brows in worry. Was that it? He was expecting more. He heard some commotion from lower levels - someone heard the noise and was climbing the stairs. Peeves also looked unhappy. They were hoping for more noise.

He could already hear footsteps approaching and lamented what a failed prank it was when a faint wheezing sound met his ears. Something was happening in the coffer. His hope flared up again.

The wheezing started getting louder just as the teachers arrived. Jack tried to breathe as quietly as he could as he watched McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Filch emerge and approach the coffer. Peeves tightened his legs around him, also anticipating what would happen.

“What do you think is inside?” Sprout asked.

“Let’s find out,” Flitwick said and pulled out his wand.

He waved it and the lid flew open, releasing a hissing firework which flew over their heads and out into the corridor, came back and exploded with a big bang just a few feet away from them, showering them with magnificent sparks.

When the smoke cleared, four stupefied soot-covered adults stood in front of the coffer. McGonagall waved her hand in front of her face to chase away the smoke. The top of Filch’s head was smoking and Sprout put it out by conjuring water and throwing it at his face. Flitwick tried to shake the soot off his robes and looked up at the other adults apologetically. Whatever he expected to find inside, it wasn’t that.

Jack stifled a snort while on his back Peeves was shaking from suppressed giggles. McGonagall’s eagle-like stare scanned the hallway, looking for traces of evidence as to who might have done it. Jack stood as still as he could and wished that Peeves would calm down.

“More. More!” Peeves whispered in his ear and jumped on his back.
So the hunger for mischief wasn’t satisfied yet. Whether affected by the spirit or from his own volition, Jack was inspired with another idea. He quietly pulled out another firework from his pocket and walked up to the closest suit of armor. He lifted up the helmet visor and threw the rocket inside.

McGonagall heard the clanging inside the iron suit as the rocket fell in and looked in its direction. Jack activated the firework with his wand and quietly walked backwards.

Seconds ticked by and McGonagall made a few steps forward. Just when she was a foot away, the firework exploded, making the suit jump. Startled, she shrieked and reflexively threw a stun at the suit, which fell apart, releasing the firework. She stumbled and fell on her behind to avoid getting hit by it and it zoomed at the other teachers. This time, Flitwick reacted in time and shot some spell at it which made it explode in a flash of colorful sparks.

Jack covered his mouth to stifle his giggles but some must have escaped because McGonagall’s head snapped to look right at where he was standing.

Jack pat Peeves’ leg to signal that they had to go and the spirit understood.

Within a blink of an eye, they were in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady and she screeched upon seeing them.

“You scared me,” she exclaimed while holding a hand to her bosom.

“Sorry.” Jack tried to look innocent but then exploded with laughter. “She fell on her butt!!! The look on her face!”

Peeves guffawed while floating upside down next to him.

Jack started to calm down and was semi-composed but then Peeves did a reenactment of the suit of armor versus McGonagall, complete with firework sound effects and Jack lost it again.

The Fat Lady looked on with an obvious distaste but waited until he got over his fit. He took a long breath and decided that he couldn’t bear to laugh anymore. “Wattlebird.”

Fat Lady pointed a finger at Peeves. “You are not allowed in. You know the rules.”

Peeves stuck his tongue out and blew a raspberry at her.

Jack waved at him. “I’ll see you later, Peeves. It was fun, friend.”

Peeves made a flip in the air, lowered his jingly hat with a theatrical bow and disappeared.

Fat Lady opened the portrait hole to let Jack in and he ran to his dorm to hide his new contraband in his trunk. He had a small supply of pranking goods to get him started. Once he runs out, he could always check the other items in Filch’s office. Maybe Peeves would know what they were and how to use them.

He couldn’t wait to have more fun with his spirit friend.

Chapter End Notes

How did you like the prank day?
Three days had passed since Merlin tried to heal Colin. He wanted to try again the day before but couldn’t find the time between a full day of classes, detention and an early curfew. He barely found the time for a quick trip to the Forbidden Forest to gather up some herbs he needed.

So he trudged on now, holding a copy of his strongest spell in his hand, freshly enchanted poultice in his pocket and hope in his heart. Maybe he didn’t try hard enough before. He could do better this time. After all, wasn’t he THE Merlin, the Greatest Sorcerer to Ever Live?

Madam Pomfrey eyed his poultice skeptically and demanded to know everything that was in it. He knew that attitude well. Modern Healers considered the use of such methods outdated, thinking that their potions were the only “real” medicine. They were fools. Just because a method was old, it didn’t mean that it worked any less.

They stood on opposite sides of Colin’s bed and looked down at him. She did a splendid job taking care of the boy and keeping his body nourished, but he needed more than just care. He needed magic. That was something Merlin could offer.

“This one is designed to cleanse the body and soul of Dark Magic,” Merlin explained as he got ready and placed the poultice on the boy’s chest. “I should have started with this. I just didn’t realize the severity of the magic that petrified him.”

He put one hand over the boy’s forehead and the other over the poultice.

”Where’s your wand?” She finally noticed.

He smirked at her. ”In my pocket, where it belongs.”

She was going to protest but closed her mouth and shook her head. As much as she didn’t like the idea of unknown spells, she was curious. She wanted to see what this different branch of healing magic could do. For Colin’s sake, he hoped he could impress her.

He took a last glance at the page and tried to memorize the long incantation. He lowered his head so she wouldn’t become startled at the flash of magic in his eyes and started chanting. He could feel as well as see it as magic was released from the poultice and encased the boy’s body in swirling white vapour.

Madam Pomfrey gasped and Merlin hoped she wouldn’t dare interfere when he was in the middle of an incantation. He repeated it several times and could feel the magic swell within him and pour into the boy. It was the strongest cleansing spell he knew. It had to work.

After all the vapour was released, Merlin finally stopped and checked on the boy. Colin looked strong and healthy but he was still very much petrified. The spell worked, he was sure of it. He could feel its power. He did not hold anything back so why was the boy still frozen?

What was the point of all his magic if he couldn’t help this little boy? Anger at his helplessness awoke the power he always tried to hold back and the glass panes of the windows rattled in warning.

He reminded himself to get a grip. He took a step back to calm down before he caused any damage. He walked up to a large window and braced his hands on the ledge. He couldn’t remember the last time when he struggled at healing someone.
There was only one explanation for why the spell didn’t work. Colin was petrified by a creature of Dark Magic and only special Dark Magic could undo its work.

“We need those mandrakes,” he admitted, hanging his head.

There was no use in his spells. He couldn’t do anything on his own. There were no magical shortcuts to take.

Madam Pomfrey approached him and put a hand on his arm.

‘You said there were more spells you wanted to try.’

“No, Madam Pomfrey. If a spell this strong didn’t do anything, nothing else I have will. I tried healing spells already - he’s not injured so they won’t work. A dark, ancient creature did this.”

Maybe even more ancient than him. He shuddered at the thought of going up against something as mighty as the Great Dragons. If only those mandrakes grew a little faster.

He left the Hospital Wing with broken spirits, trying hard to not let hopelessness grab ahold of him. The only way to not fall into despair was action. He had to keep himself busy. Right now, he needed a clue as to what type of creature it was.

He noticed Harry in the hallway and remembered what he saw in the puddle with hydromancy. Harry and his friends were the first at the scene where Mrs. Norris was petrified. They ran. How did they know that something had happened there? He needed his answers. He’d waited long enough.

“Hi Harry,” he walked up to the boy. “I was just visiting Colin. Poor kid, it’s so sad to see him frozen like that.”

“Yeah, it’s awful,” Harry sympathized.

Merlin fiddled with the ends of his scarf and reminded himself that he had to put morality aside. He put this off for too long.

“Harry, I was wondering…”

He came to a stop and Harry faced him. He tried to look as innocent as he could.

“About?”

“Well, you, Ron and Hermione arrived first when Mrs. Norris was petrified. How did you know that something had happened there?”

He put a mask of worry on his face when looking Harry in the eye.

“I…” Harry dropped his gaze and shuffled his feet. “It was a coincidence that we got there first.”

He was lying. Merlin was sure of it. He felt awful for doing it but the boy gave him no choice. Merlin put a hand on his shoulder to keep him in place.

“I believe you,” he lied as well and entered Harry’s mind.

As suspected, Harry was recalling the day of the attack. He was remembering a voice which only he heard and his friends didn’t.

“... kill... time to kill...”
The voice seemed to be moving upwards so he ran after it. He followed it until he reached the corridor where the horrible scene took place.

“Merlin, are you okay?”

Merlin snapped out of the boy’s mind and hoped his breach wasn’t felt. Usually, when he didn’t probe but simply watched what the person was thinking of, the invasion went unnoticed, but one could never be sure.

If he really wanted, he could probe deep into Harry’s mind and extract his deepest secrets but the boy would’ve felt it. Looking at Harry now, it seemed that the intrusion went undetected. He wanted to keep it that way.

“Yeah, I’m just worried. We need to find who’s doing it.”

“We will.” Harry’s eyes were intense. “And we’re starting with Malfoy.”

After Harry went on his way, Merlin sat down at the bottom of the stairs and tried to understand what he saw in Harry’s memories. He heard a voice. Did someone send him that voice or did he hear it by accident? Did he hear voices all the time?

He had many more questions now but couldn’t ask them without revealing how he knew about the voice at all.

He hated himself for invading the boy’s mind. If Harry found out, he would never forgive him. He needed his trust if he was to stand by him for years to come. He spent so much time and effort to gain it and was almost there, just had to break through that last barrier. Then, maybe Harry would volunteer to tell him.

Someone sat next to him and he was surprised to find that it was Luna Lovegood.

“Think happy thoughts,” she said with a vacant stare.

“What?” Honestly, this girl sometimes spoke nonsense.

“To chase the wrackspurts away. They’ve been awfully active recently.”

Merlin sighed. As he thought, nonsense.

“I think about flowers,” she continued. “Flowers always make me happy. What makes you happy?”

Merlin dropped his gaze, feeling a mixture of frustration and shame at his inability to solve the puzzle of what was happening around him. If only happiness was as easy as thinking about flowers.

“People,” he admitted. “People make me happy.”

“Friends!” she said dreamily and stared off into the distance.

“Yes, friends. But how do we make friends, Luna?”

Such a simple task. He’d had countless friends over the centuries. What was he missing this time?

“By letting them get to know us.” She smiled at his bewildered expression and got up. “I hope there’s pudding tonight.”

Merlin watched her happily skip away and wondered at the unexpected wisdom of the girl’s words.
He was never himself with Harry. He was always pretending and the boy instinctively sensed it.

How did he expect of someone to reveal his secrets if he didn’t reveal any of his own? So maybe that was the solution. The remaining question was which one of Merlin’s many secrets the boy could handle.

Another weekend came and Jack woke up feeling good. He normally woke up feeling clammy from bad dreams but something about today was different. The mystery of it baffled him until he noticed the window. He ran up to it and threw it open. It was snowing.

It wasn’t officially winter yet and he hoped the centaurs wouldn’t blame him for this since he had nothing to do with this snow.

He held out his hand to allow a few snowflakes to fall on it. It didn’t melt on contact with his skin and he looked at it with glee. The fresh crisp air felt invigorating in his lungs. He wanted more. Acting on impulse, he pulled the snow into the room and it came in swirling with a gust of wind.

“Why’d you open the window?” Merlin complained from his bed and waved his hand which closed it.

It was annoying sometimes how he could do that so easily.

“Sorry,” Jack said quickly but didn’t really mean it. It was too warm in the room and he’d love to keep the window open the whole day and night to remedy that.

At least, it was snowing today so he already knew what his weekend plans were going to be.

Down in the common room, a group of students was gathered in front of the notice board and so they made their way there to check it out.

“Dueling Club tomorrow,” Jack read with confusion. “Dueling as in… fighting?”


“Oh,” this actually sounded interesting. “Are you going?”

Merlin looked around at the excited students and shrugged.

“I think I’ll check it out,” Jack answered while wondering why his friend didn’t seem enthusiastic about a potentially fun activity.

The day was looking up. He dragged Merlin outside to play, though his friend didn’t last very long in the cold. He caught up with all of his homework and knew that he had the rest of the weekend free for fun.

Come Sunday, he practiced with Ginny at the Quidditch pitch. He played the role of the Keeper while Ginny was a Chaser. He would have loved the game without it, but the snow just made it so much more fun. Ginny shot a few goals past him whenever he’d get distracted by the flurries but he suspected that if he really focused, he wouldn’t have let any Quaffles in.

They had fun but this playtime also had to be cut short when Ginny got too cold. It was a shame. He loved flying in the snow.

Sunday evening finally came and the students filed into the Great Hall, excited about the Dueling Club.
Instead of the usual House tables, the hall was empty, creating one very large space and a golden stage was set up in the middle.

“Who do you think will lead it?” Jack asked as they made their way to it.

“My guess is on Flitwick,” Merlin answered. “He’s the best duelist among the staff.”

Jack looked up at the ceiling which reflected the weather outside and wished that the snowflakes would reach them instead of being simply an illusion. They would’ve made this activity more fun as well, just as everything else.

Probably half of the school came to check out the Dueling Club. He noticed Elsa on the other side of the hall and waved to her. She smiled but looked a little nervous. He was sure she would do well.

“Gather round. Gather round,” a familiar voice said and several students nearby groaned while a few girls squealed in delight.

“Professor Lockhart?” Jack asked Merlin who was one of those who complained.

“The worst possible teacher for this club,” Merlin grumbled.

The blonde wizard who just climbed the golden stage basked in the attention from everyone and announced how Professor Snape would be his assistant. There was something comical in calling the grave Potions Master his helper and the latter did not look happy at the title.

Snape approached the stage, sat on it and lifted himself up in an awkward fashion.

“Why didn’t he use the stairs?” Jack asked and Merlin snorted out a chuckle next to him.

The two teachers demonstrated how to get in dueling position, bowed to each other and the hall went quiet as everyone waited to see who would throw the first spell.

“I wouldn’t want to be Lockhart now,” Jack whispered. “Snape is in a really bad mood.”

“Expelliarmus,” Snape said loud and clear and a jet of scarlet energy shot out of his wand and into Lockhart who was blasted off his feet.

That looked fun, maybe a little painful, but definitely fun. Lockhart looked disheveled when he got up but tried to dazzle everyone with a smile anyway. Jack couldn’t wait to duel like that.

“What was that spell?”

“Disarming spell,” Merlin answered.

“It seemed to do more than just disarm.”

“He might have overpowered it a bit. My guess is that it wasn’t by accident.”

The two professors started to pair up kids to start their own duels and Jack wanted to partner up with Merlin, but when Snape got to them, he paired them with two first-year Slytherin boys.

Merlin was up against a small-eyed skinny kid and smiled mischievously as if he was glad that that was who he got instead. Jack’s opponent was a dark-haired boy with a square jaw and a flat nose.

“You got the freak, Harper,” Merlin’s partner said.
“Don’t worry, Graham, there won’t be much left of him when I’m done.”

Jack wasn't scared of the threat but suddenly recognized that he had a problem.

”Merlin, I don't know any spells like that.”

"Use Protego,” Merlin demonstrated a simple wand movement. ”Imagine a shield in front of you.”

Jack tried to visualize the spell and convince himself that he could do it even though he’d never even practiced it.

The skinny kid, Graham, looked pretty confident but judging from the smirk on Merlin’s face, it wasn't wise to underestimate him.

Jack measured the boy he was up against, Harper, who cracked his knuckles menacingly. He was larger than him and looked like a typical bully. Maybe he was used to getting his way with his size and wasn't very good at magic. One could hope. Jack wet his lips and adjusted the grip on his wand. It was time to see if he could do it.

The teachers gave the signal and the duels started.

Harper attacked immediately and Jack didn't even hear the spell over the noise of the crowd. He yelled ”Protego” too late and got hit by a jinx which turned his legs to jelly. He fell to the floor while his opponent laughed. After a few seconds, the jelly feeling wore off and he got to his feet. He had to be faster.

Merlin’s opponent was sprawled on the floor while he looked at Harry Potter’s duel with Draco Malfoy.

Jack felt heat rise to his face. He couldn't believe that Merlin was still obsessed with Potter even at a time like this. He should be focusing on his own fight, or at least help his friends if possible.

Jack looked back at his opponent just as he yelled another jinx. Fueled by the sudden anger at Merlin, Jack reacted instinctively and waved his wand without thinking of any spell. A white wave of energy shot out of it, collided with the green jet of light generated by the jinx and slammed into Harper, knocking him on his back.

Jack gasped in horror. He didn't mean to hurt the boy. Harper shakily got to his feet and Jack thanked the Moon he was okay.

”Sorry, I didn't mean…”

He didn't finish as the boy yelled, “Expelliarmus.”

Jack's hand reacted on its own, sending another white wave out before he even had time to think. Now, both of them got hit at the same time. Harper fell on his back again while Jack felt his hand tingle as the disarming spell reached him. The feeling of the wand leaving his grip prompted him to hold on tighter and he was glad to find that he didn't drop it.

Harper groaned and shivered on the ground and Jack felt a smile form on his face as the realization hit him that he won the duel.

The teachers broke up remaining fights, some were physical, and helped counteract jinxes and curses which were still in effect.
"You okay, Jack?" Merlin asked.

His opponent was on the ground, laughing uncontrollably. Professor Snape stopped by and counteracted the laughing jinx and moved on to Harper who needed a warming spell.

Both Slytherins got up and Jack couldn't stop the outburst of laughter when he noticed that Graham had a wet patch on his pants. Apparently, Merlin’s jinx made him laugh until he peed himself.

The boy looked bewildered at the reaction and finally noticed why people were looking at him and pointing. His face became red as a tomato and he ran out of the hall.

Snape scowled at Merlin and Jack remembered how his friend had just finished his detentions. It wasn’t his fault that the boy didn’t go to the bathroom before coming here.

Merlin explained with an innocent shrug, “It was just a tickling charm.”

After a small stare war, Snape finally moved on and Jack turned to his friend.

“You might have overpowered it a bit.”

“By accident.”

“Of course.”

Jack focused back on his opponent who startled and ran after his friend.

“What spell did you use on him that he’s scared of you?” Merlin asked.

“I have no idea.”

“What do you mean?”

Their conversation was stopped short as a commotion started on the golden stage. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy’s duel had apparently been turned into a spectacle for everyone.

Jack rolled his eyes as Merlin predictably came up closer to observe. Of course, the fight between the legendary Boy Who Had a Scar and the resident Snobby Bully was going to get the most attention. He grudgingly followed his friend to see what the fuss was about.

Professor Lockhart pat Potter’s shoulder and counted out, “Three - two - one - GO!”

Malfoy yelled, “Serpensortia!” and a large snake shot out of his wand.

The students gasped, some screamed and everyone took a step back from the stage. Was that what the Slytherins were learning in their House - how to conjure snakes? This didn’t seem like a duel anymore but rather an occasion to show off.

Potter stood still, not prepared for that move so Lockhart stepped in and tried to destroy the snake, but only succeeded at making it angry.

In retaliation, the angry serpent got ready to attack one Hufflepuff boy and Potter approached it like a fool. Then, he started hissing and sputtering at it, and strangely, the snake listened.

“What’s he doing?” Jack asked Merlin who looked at the scene with a look of shock.

Snape vanished the snake and everyone stared at the Scarred Wonder Boy with open mouths.
“What do you think you’re playing at?” the Hufflepuff boy yelled at Potter and ran away.

The hall started to murmur with whispers.

“He’s a Parselmouth.”

“I knew it! He’s the Heir.”

“Is Justin next?”

“He just marked him.”

Potter was pulled from the stage by his friends who dragged him out of the hall. Merlin struggled through the crowd to get to them and Jack tried to follow.

“What’s going on, Merlin?” He had no idea why the mood in the Hall suddenly changed and why everyone appeared to be scared of Potter.

“Stay here,” Merlin ordered and ran up to his other friends.

Jack stayed behind in the crowd and swallowed a lump in his throat. It was so easy for Merlin to just dismiss him. Harry Potter was always more important.

When Potter and Friends left, the whispers turned into loud conversations. Everyone was now talking about it and it drove him mad. He would love it if everyone would just stop saying his name.

“Did you know?” Elsa snapped him out of his frustrated thoughts.

“What?”

“That Harry Potter is a Parselmouth?”

“I still don’t really know what that means.”

“He can speak the language of snakes and order them around.”

Jack ruffled his hair, marveling at what a useless ability that was. “Why snakes? That’s so weird. Anyway, why is everyone making such a huge deal out of it?”

“Because Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth,” she answered in a serious tone. “It’s a hereditary ability which suggests that Potter might be his descendant.”

Jack groaned. Like the boy wasn’t famous already, now he was related to one of the school’s Founders? This was getting worse and worse.

“You know what that means, right?” Elsa asked him.

“That he’s got another reason to be famous for?”

“That he could be the Heir of Slytherin - the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets.”

Jack’s breath caught and he hissed. “He’s the one who petrified Colin?”

“It’s possible, but of course, it’s also possible that it’s a coincidence.”

It felt as if an icy blast spread from his abdomen and through his whole body. He was beyond furious. Not only was the Boy Who Had a Scar now taking his only friend away from him, but he
also possibly hurt Colin.

This couldn’t be happening. How was he allowed to walk among everyone like everything was alright while Colin was laying stiff in the Hospital Wing! Why didn’t the teachers run after him?

“Calm down,” Elsa put a hand on his shoulder. “Or you’ll start losing control of your magic.”

Jack’s hands tingled with frost which begged to be released and he knew that she was right. She knew him so well. Her eyes, so much like his own, were full of concern and care. He took a few long breaths to steady his nerves and focused all his thoughts on her instead. She was his family, his blood, his twin. In the end, only family mattered. It was time he put family first.

“Elsa, I’m in the mood to look for that mirror of yours.”

She instantly lit up. “Yes, we have to go back. Hopefully, Peeves won’t get in the way this time.”

“Peeves will leave us alone. It’s a perfect time because everyone is going to be excited about this Potter thing now, so they won’t pay attention to anything or anyone else. Let’s do it tonight.”

She nodded fervently. “Yes. Tonight.”

“I’ll let you know when Merlin is asleep and we’ll meet up on the third floor. We’re doing this together, sis.”

She took both of his hands in hers. “Together.”
Tom, you’ll never believe how much fun I had today.

Really? What did you do?

I practiced in the Quidditch pitch with my classmate, Jack.

Oh.

It was awesome! I got to play Chaser like I always wanted to. My brothers never wanted to practice with me, said I was too young, but now I played with Jack and it was the best feeling in the world.

Ok.

He’s a pretty good Keeper, he’s fast, but I was able to get a few goals in anyway. And the weather was awful, it was snowing the whole time, but I didn’t mind because I finally got to play. Isn’t it great?

I guess.

Tom? Why aren’t you excited for me?

Ginny, you shouldn’t hang out with this boy.

But Tom, I had fun and made a friend. I thought you would be happy for me.

Friends are nice but have you forgotten about Harry already?

Of course not. Why is that a problem?

If Harry sees you with another boy, he will not look at you at all. You’re not being faithful to him.

Tom, that’s not… I don’t think…

I’m a boy, remember? I know how boys think.

I guess you’re right.

Of course, I’m right. Now, I’m bored. Tell me what else has been happening. How is Harry?

I heard that things took an unexpected turn at the Dueling Club.

Oh, really? What happened?

I wasn’t there so I don’t know the details but for some reason, people are whispering that Harry is the Heir of Slytherin and that he opened the Chamber of Secrets.

Why would they say that?

I know, right? He’s innocent but then they were saying that this boy, Justin, is his next target and all Muggle-borns are now scared of him. I should talk to someone to find out what exactly happened.
You do that Ginny, but first, spend some time with me.

Oh, of course, Tom. I’m all yours.

Let’s play a game.

Two small figures in hooded dark robes walked down empty Hogwarts corridors. Their bare feet made no noise, their linked hands dispelled the darkness of the sleeping castle, and their hearts beat as one. No patrolling teachers caught them, no students out of bed saw them, no lurking monsters smelled them, only a being like them sensed their presence.

“Jack-Friend, where are you going?” Peeves whispered, appearing in front of them.

“It’s our business, Peeves. This isn’t the time for mischief.”

“There’s always time for mischief.”

“Then, do something fun for me. I think Professor Flitwick is on the second floor. Go spook him or something but don’t lead him to us. This is important.”

Peeves grinned broadly. “The wee Professor could use spooking.”

“That’s right. Have fun, Peeves.”

Peeves giggled and floated to the staircase, leaving the twins to their adventure.

They arrived on the third floor and made it to the door which promised to lead them to what they desired. They unlocked it and opened the trap door in the center of the floor.

“Lumos.”

They peered over the opening but couldn’t see how far the hole went.

“I’ll go first,” Jack offered, and before his sister could protest, jumped inside.

“Jack?” Elsa called when she didn’t hear from him. “What’s down there?”

“It’s some sort of plant,” he answered and the echo of his voice bounced off the walls.

She decided to take the chance and jumped in as well.

“Ow,” he complained when her foot hit his face.

“Sorry.”

“So, what is this? It’s moving.”

The plant broke their fall which made them thankful but the way its tendrils moved around and crept up their arms and legs, made it seem sinister.

“We need to find a way out of it before it strangles us.”

“That’s the idea.” He struggled but it just tightened around him. “Ideas would be welcome about now.”
She tried to free her hands out of it but for each tendril she removed, two more wrapped around her.

“Jack, it’s got me.”

“Let’s freeze it.”

They both used their powers on the plant, which finally made it stop moving but it was still holding them hostage.

“Give it all you’ve got, Elsa,” he encouraged. “Make it colder.”

She grit her teeth, and with a small scream, released a wave of frigidness which would have killed anything alive in the vicinity. They struggled again and this time, the frozen plant shattered, releasing them from its prison.

“Nice,” he complimented, shaking broken bits of the plant off his robes. “You’re one cool sister to have.”

She groaned at his joke and pushed him through a stone passageway which was now coated in a thick layer of ice. They lit their wands and proceeded into a chamber with a high ceiling where a heavy wooden door was slightly ajar.

“Hermione said that there were a bunch of traps and challenges down here. I’m guessing that plant was the first.”

“I wonder how they got through it.”

“I don’t know. She said that they solved the challenges so they wouldn’t be a problem anymore but since the plant was still here, do you think the others will be too?”

They walked into a large chamber which contained tall statues. As they walked among them, they realized that the statues were chess pieces and the floor was a giant chessboard.

“Strange challenge,” Elsa mused while Jack kicked a jagged piece of rock and cried out in pain. “You forgot you don’t have shoes on, huh?”

He tried to cover up his embarrassment by jumping from square to square.

“Did it on purpose.”

They went through more chambers, one which smelled so bad, they ran through it, and one which had sinister scorch marks left behind on the floor, and they jumped over them. The last chamber had steps leading down and when they ascended, they saw what they were looking for, waiting for them so enticingly available, it seemed too easy.

“Is this really it?” Elsa asked.

“Let’s check it out.”

In the center of the chamber, standing on two clawed feet was a beautiful large mirror. Elsa slowly approached it to fully appreciate the masterful ornate gold frame and noticed an inscription carved on top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

“What language is that?” Jack asked and then suddenly stopped. His eyes went wide as he stared at the mirror.
Elsa took a look at it and at first, saw only the two of them, but then something started to come into shape in the air.

From a distance, it looked like large insects. She came closer and pulled Jack along with her.

The more she approached, the clearer the image was. She tried to discern what the flying things were. They looked somewhat humanoid. Fairies?

She looked around and above her - there were no fairies in the room but yet there were maybe ten of them zooming around in the mirror. She remembered that the mirror showed your deepest desires. She desired a way to find her father and the mirror showed her a group of fairies. This made no sense. She walked right up to it to have a better look at them.

She’d seen a drawing of a fairy in a book called *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, but those didn’t look like the ones in the mirror. These had a blue-tinged skin and white hair tied in ponytails and braids. Their clothes were made of soft sheer material which swished about them like curtains blown by the wind.

“Why am I seeing you?” she asked the strange fairies but they just hovered in the air silently. “Jack, are you seeing this? What could this mean?”

Her brother was still staring at the mirror with wide eyes. He raised his hand and touched his hair, watching the movement of his reflection. Their eyes met in the mirror and she noticed moisture in his. She turned around to look at him directly. She couldn’t remember the last time she saw him cry and it hit her that it was possible that he saw something else in the reflection.

“What do you see?”

He didn’t answer but just stood there, silently, looking longingly at the reflection.

Elsa was getting impatient. “I see something that looks like blue fairies. Do you see them too?”

He blinked a few times. “No. It’s just us.”

“Just us? There has to be more. What do you see?”

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and looked away. “This mirror is evil. I don’t like it. Let’s go.”

Elsa wasn’t ready to leave. She needed to know more.

“Tell me how to find him,” she pleaded with the fairies but they remained silent and hovered around her.

Jack pulled on her arm. “We should leave.”

“I’m not done!” she said desperately. She needed answers, guidance, some clue. This wasn’t enough.

“We are done here. There’s nothing this mirror can do for us.”

“No! Tell me.” She grabbed the mirror’s frame and pleaded with the fairies inside. “There must be something you can tell me or show me at least.”

One of the fairies waved at her and she nearly sobbed because his lips were moving and yet no sound came out. His almond-shaped eyes were the color of the bluest sky and smiled at her in
greeting. He had the answers to the questions she sought. If only he could speak, she would learn it all. The answers were just beyond the glass.

He touched the glass with his tiny blue hand and Elsa brought her hand to it. She hoped that when their hands met, maybe she would hear the fairy speak, or it would come out of the mirror or some kind of special magic would dazzle her and answer all her questions, but all she felt was the cool smooth surface of the glass.

Jack tried to pull her away but she held on tight to the frame. He squeezed himself under her arm and blocked her view. She craned her neck to look around him.

“You said it yourself,” he said in a grim tone, “this mirror is dangerous. It killed someone. You’re falling for its spell, Elsa. Listen to me! Let’s go.”

Maybe deep in the dark alleys of her mind, she knew that he was right, but right now her questions were burning a hole in her and were much more important than his words. She needed to know. She had searched so many books, she had asked each teacher at this school, and it was all for nothing, she had no clues, no hints or tips to aid her. This mirror was the closest to an answer she had gotten. She couldn’t leave yet. These fairies were a sign of something and she had to stay to figure out what it was.

Jack was in her way so she let go of the mirror to shove him aside. He used that moment to grab her by the shoulders and wrench her away. She realized that he was about to succeed so she used all her strength to hold her ground. The fairies in the mirror watched with detached interest and waited for her to come back. The same one she saw earlier motioned with his hand to come closer like he had a message for her, and she had to hear it!

Out of nowhere, her legs bent beneath her, she lost her balance and fell hard on the ground. Jack collapsed on top of her and held her down.

“Stop looking at it!”

She couldn’t see the mirror from this position and struggled under his hold. He tripped her! How could he? She lashed out at him and tried to push him away.

“Think, Elsa!” he said while struggling to keep her prisoner. “You love thinking. Think!”

She instinctively thrashed harder, feeling like a trapped animal fighting to get away from its captor, and used the only weapon she had, her nails. They wrestled on the ground and he still held her down, unfazed by her attack.

“Let me go!”

She was getting tired of the struggle and could feel the will to fight leave her. A streak of red caught her eye, distracting her from the scuffle. She blinked, trying to understand where the color came from.

“Are you finally thinking?” he asked, breathing heavily but still holding her down. “Do you understand now?”

Elsa winced. He was holding her really hard and it hurt her arms. He must have noticed because he loosened his grip.

“I’ll let you go but do not look at the mirror again, promise?”
The streak of red caught her eye again. There was blood smudged on his cheek and neck and stuck under her nails. She realized that she scratched him hard enough to hurt him. She couldn’t understand why they were fighting. They had never brawled like this before. What had just happened?

Jack finally released her arms and she put her hand on his neck and released some ice on the scratched skin. It healed quickly. She wondered if she should say that she was sorry for hurting him. Was she sorry? She was just fighting back because he held her down, because he attacked her.

Then, she remembered the mirror and turned her head to look at it. Jack moved to cover the view again.

“Nuh-uh. You’re not looking at that. It has a very bad effect on you.”

Her mind was muddled. “Why did you do that?”

She just couldn’t understand his behavior. He had never been aggressive, especially not to her.

“I’m sorry. I hope you’re not hurt. I had to. Just… Don’t look at the mirror anymore,” he said softly.

The mirror. The mirror which gave her a very frustratingly unhelpful answer.

Jack got up and held out a hand to her. She took it grudgingly. She still wasn’t happy with how roughly he handled her. Now, he pulled her away from the mirror so she couldn’t see it.

“I’m not stupid,” she protested. “I get it. You don’t want me to look. Really, I think you overreacted. Nothing bad was happening. I was just looking.”

“Just looking?” he said in a skeptical tone. “Elsa, does this look like just looking?”

He showed her his forearms which were riddled with bloody scratches. She paled. She didn’t realize that she scratched him everywhere. She quickly healed it for him and inspected him further only to find more wounds. She hung her head in shame but still couldn’t get the “I’m sorry” out though. It was self-defense after all.

“Why didn’t you want me to look?”

“We’ve been here for hours, Elsa. You were glued to that mirror. You wouldn’t listen to me and I was scared. I didn’t know what else to do. I had to get you away from this evil thing.”

She stared at him in stunned silence. That couldn’t be right. It had to have been only a few minutes. As if to prove her wrong, a bell rang nearby, announcing that it was time for morning classes.

“We’ve been here all night?”

Jack nodded and sighed. “I should’ve done this earlier. I just… I didn’t want to hurt you. So, was it worth it? Did you get your answer?”

“It was just us and these strange blue fairies flying around. What could it mean?”

Jack shrugged. “Harry Potter saw his dead parents in the mirror. You didn’t see anyone that looked like he could be our father?”

“No. I don’t understand. It’s supposed to show us our deepest desires. I don’t desire fairies!”

“Well, maybe fairies are a clue. I know where we can find some. We should ask them what they
“Yes. Take us there later.”

Elsa’s mind switched into overdrive. This little trip to the mirror had taken them a lot longer than expected. They were supposed to come back to their beds before their roommates woke up so no one would find out that they were sneaking around the school past curfew but now that plan had to change.

“We’re late for classes. We have to go to our towers to get our stuff and then back down. We’re going to be so late. I have Potions, Jack. I can’t arrive late to Potions! Snape will kill me!”

Jack scratched his head. “I guess, we could skip the morning classes but we need a good explanation. What would be a good excuse for both of us to be out?”

“We got lost?”

“We’ve been here too long already. I don’t think this will fly.”

“We’re sick?”

“Do you know of any jinxes or something that could make us sick?”

“Not really.”

“Me neither.”

They stood by the door, waiting to open it. She was running out of ideas.

“Fine,” Jack said in a resigned voice. “I’ll do it.”

“Do what?”

“The only thing better than sick.” He walked to the end of the dark chamber where some old damaged furniture laid. “Does this count as partial repayment of the favor I owe you?”

He picked up a broken piece of wood and inspected it. Then, he hefted his leg on top of a chair and lifted the leg of his trousers.

“What are you doing?” Elsa had a sneaking suspicion but was hoping that she was wrong.

“Unless you have a better idea?”

She had no more ideas at the moment. Maybe if he gave her more time, she could come up with some kind of a plan, but they didn’t have time. The classes had already started. Soon, the teachers would start looking for them. They had to have a reasonable excuse for their absence.

Jack hesitated. “Madam Pomfrey can heal it, right?”

He looked to her, hoping she had come up with a better plan but since she didn’t, he braced himself. He was really going to do it.

And then, he sucked in his breath and struck his leg with the jagged piece of wood.
Hmmm. Tom is up to something again and what do you think those blue fairies mean?
“Get a move on, Fawkes,” Albus complained to his Phoenix and gently pet him, only to cause another feather to fall off. “You look like a half-plucked vulture.”

The bird squawked in challenge and repositioned himself on his golden perch. It was time for him to burn but he kept delaying it for some reason as if waiting for something. Fawkes gagged and coughed and Albus brought him his water dish to help soothe the dry throat. Why the bird refused to allow himself to be reborn and suffered in his old body was a mystery. Albus would’ve loved to shed his old self and start over again as a youngster. It would’ve been so fun.

He turned around, hearing a knock on the door, and invited his visitor.

Severus Snape came in, carrying shoes in his hands which he put on once inside. Albus thought that maybe he was here to discuss earlier events at the Dueling Club. Harry Potter turned out to be Parselmouth! What a delicious little secret the boy had been keeping from everyone!

“Headmaster,” he said in a shaky voice. “I must use your pensieve.”

Albus smoothed out his beard and wondered what was the matter. Severus had been acting very odd in the last few days. He stopped showing up for meals a while ago ever since he started having problems with chairs, but the last few days, he supposedly never left the dungeons anymore. And now, he showed up here in Albus’ office looking uncharacteristically distraught. Severus was never distraught. He never showed emotions that would make him appear weak. Something very serious had to have happened.

“Certainly, Severus. What is the matter? Talk to me.”

“Someone cursed me again!” His voice was higher pitch than normal and there was a glint of madness in his eye. “I can’t climb any stairs without losing my shoes. I’ve tried everything I can think of to rid myself of this curse but it’s just as strong as the one that keeps breaking my chairs.”

He walked over to the pensieve in the corner and brought his wand to his temple. “I must find out who it was.” His right eye twitched uncontrollably.

Albus approached him cautiously. Severus in this unstable state was outright dangerous. “May I join you? I might be able to help.”

He didn’t answer but pulled the memory from his temple and transferred its wispy white form to the pensieve.

They both gripped the edges of the pensieve and fell into the memory.

They landed in a Hogwarts hallway and watched the memory—Severus briskly walk from the dungeons and climb the Grand Staircase. A group of students came out of the Great Hall, going in the same direction.

“Watch now. One of them did it. They cursed me in the back!” Severus ran up to the group and started looking at each of the children in detail. “Look which one has a wand out.”

Albus watched the group and saw no wands. He did, however, notice that Merlin was among them and felt his stomach drop. Not again.
Carefully, to not let Severus know, Albus watched as Merlin smiled mischievously as if he just got a good idea.

‘No,’ Albus thought. ‘What idea did you get now? ’

Merlin slowed down to become absorbed by the group and cast his eyes down. Albus guessed that his eyes flashed amber at this moment.

Then, memory-Severus tripped and everyone stopped. Albus maintained his eye on Merlin who shyly looked at Severus and bit his lip, trying to hide a smile.

Over on the staircase, memory-Severus put his shoes back on but they would not stay on. He stood tall and yelled at the students. Albus’ eyes widened when he noticed that a hole had appeared in his sock.

Merlin backed away with the other students while stifling laughter. Why did he always pick on the Potions Master?

Memory-Severus stayed on the staircase and struggled with his shoes while the real Severus pulled on his long hair.

“I saw no wands. Who did this, Headmaster? Which one of them?”

“I saw no wands either,” Albus answered truthfully.

He had to have a serious talk with Merlin. This foolishness had to stop.

As the memory ended, they were both pulled back to Albus’ office but Severus immediately dived back in. He would keep repeating this memory until he inspected each of the students that were present there.

Albus was sure that Merlin was the one responsible but the sly sorcerer was very sneaky and did not give himself away. He was safe from the Potions Master.

But he wasn’t safe from Albus who couldn’t wait to get his hands on him.

Another busy weekend passed by quickly. Merlin tried to follow Dobby again, only to find him in Diagon Alley, waiting in a long line of house elves who were grocery shopping. He was not in the mood to wait for hours again, so he apparated back, and was so tired after the effort of breaking through the school wards, he had to take a nap.

It was over too soon regretfully, and he had to report for detention with the greasy-haired Potions Master for the last time. Hopefully, he could keep himself away from getting more detentions. He could do without the constant cleaning and handling dangerous substances for a while.

Then, there was the Dueling Club. He was rather happy that his dueling partner happened to be one of the Slytherin kids who bullied Colin before. Merlin used only mild and harmless jinxes on his opponent but to such an extent that the boy lost bladder control. Nope, Merlin wasn’t sorry for his behavior at all. Some people fully deserved public humiliation.

Because he was observing Harry’s duel with Malfoy, which was not mild at all, he didn’t see how his roommate did. Jack seemed to have won his duel by using some unknown spell and Merlin was most curious to find out which but when he got back to the dorm, the boy was already asleep so he didn’t get to ask.
And then, there was Harry taking everyone by surprise by speaking Parseltongue. People now were even more convinced that Harry was the Heir of Slytherin - especially that Hufflepuff boy, Justin, who was nearly attacked by the snake.

The three of them finally calmed Harry down by convincing him that if he spoke with that Hufflepuff boy, he could explain that he wasn’t egging the snake on but ordered it to stand down. Merlin hoped this was enough to calm down Justin and his friends.

He still couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that Harry was a Snakelord. This was crazy. He didn’t know there were any of them still around.

Just like Dragonlords could command dragons, Snakelords could command snakes. The Great Snakes were nearly as powerful as the ancient Great Dragons but with the added danger of having very sinister nature. While dragons were proud, noble creatures, snakes were deceitful and preferred to aid only those who had malicious intents. That was the reason why they were always associated with Dark Magic and evil sorcerers. Even Morgana, Merlin’s greatest nemesis, had a preference for them, and while she wasn’t a Snakelord, they obeyed her simply because they appreciated her vindictive nature.

It was a relief that all of those evil creatures were long extinct and the only snakes left for Harry to command were non-magical.

And here was another Monday and it already started stressfully. Jack was missing. The boy had to have got up before Merlin and then didn’t show up for breakfast or Charms in the morning.

His absence was very suspicious. He had been sneaking out a lot lately, usually, under the pretense of studying. Seriously, he could lie better - of all excuses the boy could come up with, studying was the least believable. Merlin was tired of this endless game of guessing and suspecting. He just wanted to know the truth already.

He kept tapping his finger on the desk and eyed the door again as Flitwick was going over the theory behind the Repairing Charm. He wanted to search for the boy. He knew a useful spell which he could release through the castle to scan all of its hallways at the same time. Maybe he could excuse himself for a bathroom break, Flitwick would probably let him go.

“ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK!” a panicked voice sounded in the hallway.

Flitwick stopped talking and everyone went quiet, listening.

“NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATAAAACK!”

Flitwick jumped off his desk and hurried to the door. Merlin was the first student to run after him. The others followed.

Everyone spilled out into the hallway and gasped in shock at the scene.

The screaming was produced by Peeves who was flying in circles through the hall spooked by seeing the ghost of Nearly Headless Nick, who instead of being his normal translucent white, was now black, smokey, and frozen in the air with his head dangling from his neck.

More concerning was that there was a petrified Hufflepuff boy laying stiff on the floor, staring at the ceiling with a look of shock, and right next to him was Harry Potter, very much alive but scared.

Students started murmuring among themselves about how they knew Potter was the Heir of Slytherin and how the petrified boy was Justin Finch-Fletchley - the same boy that was nearly attacked by the
snake last night, which only proved Harry’s guilt.

Merlin had enough of the rumors so he immediately dived into Harry’s mind.

Harry was in a state of panic and his thoughts were jumping all over the place. He wanted to run but was so scared of what was happening, he felt frozen in place.

“Caught in the act!” another Hufflepuff boy screamed at Harry.

Harry’s thoughts became even harder to keep track of but then Merlin saw what he needed to see: Harry just remembered how he was walking down the hallway and tripped over the body of the petrified boy. He was innocent.

McGonagall led Harry away while the victims were taken to the Hospital Wing and the students were ordered to go back to their classrooms. Merlin watched a boy waft the ghost away with a fan and his eyes fell on the poltergeist who was flying around frantically.

“Peeves!” He walked up to the spirit.

“I’m scared but there’s chaos. Need to stay for chaos,” the poltergeist spoke to himself while unable to hover in place.

“Peeves, focus. Do you know where Jack is?”

The spirit’s black eyes widened. “I just saw him.”

“Tell me where you saw him.”

“Jack-Friend was limping to his dorm. Peeves helped.”

Merlin used the havoc of the moment to slip away from the crowd unnoticed and run to the Gryffindor Tower.

Another child was attacked right under his nose! His investigation was taking too long, and this time, even the ghost of Sir Nick was affected and he couldn’t wrap his mind around what powerful Dark Magic he was dealing with that even the spirits of the dead were not safe from it. There was no more time left for tiptoeing around. He had to know the truth immediately.

Merlin ran up to his dorm and found Jack on the bed, reading a book. The boy looked up at the clock on the wall.

“Are the classes over this early?”

Merlin tried to calm himself down so the boy wouldn’t notice how he was fuming inside.

“Where were you?”

Jack pointed to one leg which was wrapped in a bandage. “I hurt myself and had to go to Madam Pomfrey.”

Merlin scrutinized the boy and reminded himself to sound nonthreatening.

“What happened?”

“I was clumsy. I was running, and just playing with Elsa. It was stupid. I tripped and fell into a chair.”
Such a ridiculous lie but one which Merlin could unravel, even if he couldn’t invade the boy’s mind.

“If she healed you, why didn’t you come to class?”

“She tried to heal it but for some reason, her spells wouldn’t work all the way. So, it’s difficult to walk and she told me to stay in bed for a couple of days. Thankfully, unlike McGonagall, she falls for my tricks so I convinced her to let me spend that time in the dorm.”

The boy smirked, proud of himself and Merlin took a long breath to steady himself. The whole tale sounded ridiculous but he had to pretend to fall for it.

“Her spells didn’t work?”

“I guess a little bit. I felt something, it felt hot when she tried them. I think it hurts a little less. Anyway, so she just cleaned it and wrapped it up. It will have to heal on its own.”

None of that made any sense. Jack was not good at making up stories. First of all, his sister was a healer. If she was there, why didn’t she heal him? So he had to be faking. The story of getting hurt and spending hours with Madam Pomfrey sounded too much like a cover-up. There was no way that so many coincidences could follow the boy.

First, on Halloween, Jack and his sister arrived at the feast late and Mrs. Norris was petrified during the same time. Then, Colin found out something about him and was attacked the same night. Then, Justin was petrified just at the same time when Jack and his sister were off playing somewhere in the early hours of the morning.

Merlin’s eyes lingered on Colin’s bed. The lack of the boy’s cheerful voice stung his ears. And now, another boy joined him in the Hospital Wing. He couldn’t let any more children get hurt. He had to take action. It was time to pull out Veritaserum and find out the truth.
Truth is a slippery thing

Merlin looked at the white-haired boy, who laid on his bed, reading a book happily and a decision cemented in his mind. No matter how wrong it felt, he had to do what was necessary to protect the school, even if it meant violating whatever sense of decency he had left. It was time to be the bad guy again.

He whispered, “Swefn,” and Jack’s head immediately plopped down as he fell into a deep slumber.

First, Merlin wanted to uncover the most recent lie. The boy went to the trouble to bandage the fake wound. Clever trick but it was easy to disprove. Merlin proceeded to unwrap it and blanched when he uncovered a real wound under it, which, having been handled by him in such a careless way, started bleeding.

Merlin reacted instantly and said a quick spell to stop the bleeding. He swallowed hard, seeing an uneven laceration as large as his hand which would support the claim that Jack hurt himself on a broken piece of wood. He looked back at the unconscious boy and a sick feeling filled his stomach as guilt seeped in. He did not lie about getting hurt.

Merlin gently covered the jagged wound and bandaged it anew. So, it wasn’t a lie, but this didn’t explain why Elsa didn’t heal it for him or why Madam Pomfrey’s healing spells didn’t work. He had a good opinion on the Healer’s competence and was sure she could handle much worse injuries than this one.

One possible explanation was that Jack’s laceration wasn’t caused by a broken chair, as he claimed, but by magic. Magical injuries were much more difficult to heal. And the suspicions were back in Merlin’s head. If the boy was innocent, why did he keep lying about everything?

Satisfied that the wound was covered, Merlin retrieved the bottle of Veritaserum from the hidden compartment in his trunk. He hesitated for a couple of breaths, feeling awful for planning something as despicable as drugging an eleven-year-old child but then he remembered the reasons behind this act. It had to be done to protect everyone else. It was a life and death situation.

He tilted the boy’s head, dropped three drops in his mouth and waited a minute for the serum to start working.

He put the bottle away and went to stand in his earlier spot. He woke the boy with another spell and observed his reaction to the truth serum.

Jack lifted his head and smacked his lips. “What just happened?”

Merlin made an effort to look down at his scarf and feigned that he didn’t notice anything strange.

Jack looked around the room and blinked a lot. “I feel a little… funny.”

Merlin was glad that the serum was working this quickly. It was time to test it so he sat down on his bed, facing him. Jack sat up too, winced and cradled his leg.

Merlin still felt guilty for messing up the wound. He probably made it worse. “Do you want me to try a healing spell?”

Jack tilted his head and looked a little confused, his reasoning muddled by the serum. “Yeah. It couldn’t hurt, right?” Then, he giggled. “Couldn’t hurt, get it?”
Merlin ignored the joke and hovered his hands over the wound and used a weak healing spell aimed to ease the boy’s pain without revealing just how much magic he could do.

Jack smiled and touched the wound gently to test it. “It doesn’t hurt. Thanks.”

Now, that the guilt trip was over, Merlin felt he could get to his test, starting with some simple questions to gauge whether the serum was working as intended.

“Where were you this morning?”

“Elsa took me to Madam Pomfrey after I hurt myself.” He knitted his brows in confusion. “I thought I already told you that. Didn’t I?”

“How did you hurt yourself?”

“With a broken chair.”

Merlin was frustrated because if this was the truth, then it didn’t explain any of the concerns he had before. Was the serum even working?

“What were you doing before you hurt yourself?”

“We found the Mirror of Erised and…” Jack stopped and his eyes bulged. “I’m not sure why I told you that.”

Merlin’s interest peaked at the name of an enchanted mirror he’d heard tales of before but hadn’t seen himself. “Mirror of Erised? What were you doing with it?”

Jack groaned. “I hate my stupid loose tongue.”

He thought that he gave up the truth by accident and did not recognize the symptoms of being drugged. Good.

Jack ran a hand through his white hair and messed it up. “Elsa was convinced that the mirror would have answers for her.”

“Answers for what?”

“We’re looking for our father. But that thing is evil. I barely got her out of there.”

Merlin completely forgot about what he witnessed many weeks ago when the twins had tried an unorthodox elemental spell. So after all this time, they were still working on that project. This would explain why the boy “studied” so often with his sister.

Two mysteries were solved but more needed answers. How about that lie Jack slipped up few days ago?

“What’s your last name?”

“I don’t have one,” Jack said and put a hand over his mouth, a look of horror in his eyes.

Merlin snapped to attention, hearing another truth he did not expect. The serum was most definitely working. So the boy did not lie when he said that he didn’t have any other names. Sly kid, it was a lie of omission.

“It’s okay,” Merlin assured him. “It’s surprising, but it’s okay. Don’t panic.”
Jack stared at him with fear. “You don’t think it’s weird? Everyone has a last name.”

Merlin wished he could admit that he didn’t have one either. He was born a peasant after all. What a strange thing to have in common with the boy.

“It’s uncommon in current age but I’m okay with it. More important question is, Jack, are you the Heir of Slytherin?”

The boy exploded with laughter and clapped his knees.

“Good one, Merlin.” Then, he noticed that Merlin was still waiting for an answer. “You’re more likely the Heir of Slytherin than I am,” and he laughed some more.

Actually, he couldn’t be more wrong since Merlin was older than Slytherin but he couldn’t admit that either.

“Please answer my question.”

“No,” Jack answered and tried to compose himself. “Don’t be ridiculous. Why do you keep asking me so many questions?”

It sounded like the truth. One more important question and it would be over with.

“Did you open the Chamber of Secrets?”

Humor drained from the boy’s face. “Why would you ask me something like that?”

“Answer me.”

“You think that I would…” The boy’s chest heaved. “Colin is my friend! Why would you think that I did it?”

“Answer, Jack, please,” Merlin said steadily. “It’s important that you answer yes or no.”

“NO!”

Merlin heaved a sigh of relief because he believed it and being sure of the boy’s innocence felt like releasing his heart from a cell he kept it in. He hated himself for suspecting him all this time and was glad to be rid of that burden.

Why was he so mistrustful of the boy anyway? Jack had never done anything to suggest evil intentions. So maybe he was hiding behind a blanket of secrets and lies. It was no reason to accuse him of the worst. It wasn’t like Merlin was a stranger to deceit. He was the biggest liar of them all.

Jack got up, swayed on his feet and pointed a finger at Merlin.

“But you don’t suspect Potter when he’s… this… snake thing. No, not the Golden Boy.”

He closed his eyes and held on to the bed frame for balance. Frost started building under his touch but he didn’t even notice that he was creating it.

“I feel really… strange.”

Jack slid down to the floor to sit on his haunches and leaned back to stare out the window with his mouth slightly opened. Judging from the strength of the reaction to the serum, the dose was probably too large.
The guilt came back in a painful wave. He did this to a child.

Merlin sat on the floor to stay on the same level. Knowing that he was the reason for the boy’s distress, he wanted to make him feel better.

Jack closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to shake off the serum’s influence.

“I feel so… foggy. Can’t even think.”

Merlin watched the effects of the serum and hoped the boy never found out that he did this to him.

It occurred to him that Jack could spill out all his secrets accidentally in this state if only prompted in that direction, but he no longer felt the need to know. He wanted Jack to tell him because he trusted him, not because he was drugged. He kicked himself mentally, realizing that he spent weeks trying to gain the trust of Harry Potter but did the absolute opposite with the innocent boy in front of him.


“It’s all those secrets. Secrets breed suspicion.”

“What about yours!” Jack accused. Tears brimmed in his blue unfocused eyes. “You think I don’t know just how much you’re hiding?”

Merlin startled and tried to look innocent.

“What do you think I’m hiding?”

“I can feel magic,” Jack whispered and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “You’re so different but we all have secrets for a reason so I didn’t ask.” Tears fell down his cheeks and his voice broke. “Why couldn’t you just accept what I am like I accepted you?”

Merlin felt a lump in his throat, knowing well the boy was right. He was a hypocrite and an idiot. All of his suspicions and assumptions were wrong and hurtful. He had no excuse.

“I’m sorry.” He hung his head in shame. “I wish I could make it up to you.”

The clock ticked away the seconds as they sat there and the silence hung between them like a heavy curtain. Jack was hurt by the accusation. Would he ever forgive him?

Jack sniffed and wiped his eyes again. His gaze lingered on Merlin’s scarf.

“Can I touch it?”

Merlin touched his scarf protectively.

“What do you want with it?”

Jack leaned in and stretched out his hand in the direction of Merlin’s neck.

“I’ve wanted to touch it since you put it on.”

Merlin leaned as far back as the bed allowed him, feeling that his personal space was invaded.

“It’s just a plain scarf, the same one you have.”

Jack’s hand hovered in the air and he sniggered.
“Scarf? The crystal. Can I please touch it? I’ll give it back, I swear.”

Merlin let out a chuckle. He was so convinced no one noticed what he wore around his neck, but of course, his roommate did. He hesitated but seeing the boy’s pleading eyes, decided to give in. He felt guilty for making him cry again and would do anything right now to see that lopsided grin again. He untied the leather string and slowly stretched out the crystal towards Jack whose eyes lit up.

“Be very careful. It’s extremely valuable but it can also be dangerous.”

Jack took the blue crystal with care.

“It feels like a thousand fairies.” He clutched it to his chest and closed his eyes.

Merlin watched him curiously and wondered what was happening.

“It’s actually Sidhe magic, not fairy magic. They’re much more powerful.”

“It feels so good,” Jack whispered, his eyes still closed. “I’m so jealous. I wish I had something like this on me so I could always feel fairy magic.”

Merlin could feel the powerful magic within the crystal but never felt affected by it in the way the boy described.

“So, you knew I had it on me all this time?”

Jack nodded. He looked so peaceful now, the crystal was calming down the despair he felt earlier.

“I’m sorry I upset you.” Merlin put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll try to be a better friend from now on.”

Jack immediately hugged him and Merlin felt moved to tears. He couldn’t believe he put this boy through so much distress. Why did he grow so distrustful that he would suspect an evil crime of the most kind-hearted person he’d met in a long time? And the worst part of it was that Jack suspected Merlin of holding back the truth as well but never held it against him. He was a much better person than he was.

“You can keep your secrets, Jack,” he whispered. “I won’t ask you again. My curiosity will have to wait until you’re ready to tell me.”

“Same,” Jack answered and squeezed him tighter. “I’d rather have a friend than know.”

Did this boy realize just how incredibly rare he was? Merlin didn’t deserve his trust. He was despicable.

A sob escaped his throat as the weight of what he had done fully hit him. Sure, he released his heart from the prison of doubt, he could finally allow himself to like the boy, but at what cost did he secure its release? What would it take to cleanse the stain he put on it?

Merlin tried to release the hug only to be held back by Jack who wasn’t ready to let go.

“I like hugs,” the boy slurred.

Merlin gently clapped him on the back. “Yeah, hugs are nice.”

“Peeves gives good hugs too.”
“Really?” Merlin had a hard time imagining the poltergeist in an embrace. Jack had the strangest relationship with that spirit.

“Can you imagine, in all of his winters in this castle, no one has ever hugged him,” Jack said seriously. “That’s like a billion days without a hug.”

Merlin never would have thought of it like that but he also found it interesting that Jack referred to years as winters.

“He’s my spirit friend,” Jack slurred again, still refusing to release Merlin from his hug obligation. “I never had a spirit friend before. It’s nice. And now I have wizard friends and that’s nice too.”

He was rambling now, reminding Merlin that he was under the influence of a strong serum. He needed to do something about it.

“I never had friends before,” Jack continued. “I only had Elsa. And huggers.” He giggled. “We’re huggers now too. Get it? Because we’re hugging.”

Merlin couldn’t help but snigger at the silly pun. At least, the boy’s improved mood allowed him to disentangle himself.

“Jack,” he looked at the boy’s goofy smile, “I think you should take a nap.”

“I’m not tired,” Jack jumped up and swayed on his feet. He steadied himself and a corner of his mouth lifted. “It’s too warm in here. Wanna see something cool?”

He walked up to the fireplace, limping a little, put a hand on the stone and frost started spreading, going inside the fireplace, climbing the inner walls and approaching the burning logs. Magically powered, it didn’t melt under heat but proceeded to cover all logs until the fire was extinguished with a hiss.

Seeing the smoke convinced Merlin that they reached a point when he needed to stop this. The serum was doing a real number on the boy and who knew what he would do in his affected state.

“Alright, I think that’s enough for you.”

He pushed him to his bed, put him to sleep with a spell and tucked him in so he could sleep off the rest of the serum comfortably.

Jack was still holding the Sidhe crystal. Merlin tried to gently pry it away but the boy’s grip on it was tight. He supposed, he could let him keep it for a while longer. If not for this crystal, he would still be crying.

“I’m really sorry, Jack,” he whispered to the boy who slept soundly with a smile on his face. “I will make this up to you.”

Lisa’s excited voice awoke Ginny and she wanted to go back to sleep. The Chatties were, well… chatting, and as usual, she ignored them, but then Lisa said “Harry Potter” and Ginny’s eyes flew open. She looked in their direction, wondering why they were talking about Harry.

“Look who’s awake,” Lisa said. “Wait, did you even go to classes today?”

Ginny wondered what she could have meant and looked at the wall clock.

It was three o’clock. Three in the afternoon???
Ginny closed her eyes and wished that she imagined it, but when she opened them, the clock still showed the same time.

“I wasn’t feeling well,” she mumbled in response and the girls ignored her again.

The last she remembered, it was Sunday evening, when she was in her dorm, writing to Tom. How could she have slept through the whole night and day? She got up and noticed that she was wearing her robes. She sat back down as if a great boulder was tied to her waist and was pulling her down to murky waters. There was one possible explanation. She was sleepwalking again, and this time, she lost a huge chunk of her day.

“So,” Lisa continued gossiping, “Ernie, who’s Justin’s friend, told me that they warned him to stay away from Potter and just hide. He marked that poor Muggleborn yesterday after all. And now, Potter was caught red-handed, having attacked Justin as predicted, and Ernie is furious that he hasn’t been arrested yet or at least expelled.”

Ginny’s hands trembled and she balled them into fists. Someone else was attacked while she was asleep!

“Do you think I have anything to worry about?” Tracie worried. “I’m in Gryffindor.”

“He went after Creevey first. House loyalty doesn’t matter to him.”

“I forgot Creevey was in our House.”

“Exactly. No one is safe. Even I could be in danger just because you’re my friend.”

“There was always something shifty about him. You saw how he talked to that snake. It was just wrong.”

Ginny had to leave the room. She couldn’t stand how they were talking about Harry.

Unfortunately, down in the common room, all conversations sounded the same. It was all everyone was talking about. Harry was being blamed for this attack even more than for the earlier ones.

Conversations turned into whispers when Harry Potter walked through the portrait hole. Few people packed up their things and ran to their dorms, everyone else stared.

Her twin brothers took this as yet another opportunity to make a joke.

"Make way. Evil wizard coming through,” Fred said while George spread his arms wide as if he was parting a crowd when, in fact, it was only two people in front of Harry who scurried out of the way anyway.

"It isn't a laughing matter,” Percy huffed at them. ”You two need to start acting your age.”

Fred nudged Harry with his elbow and asked loudly, “So Harry, who do you plan to attack next?”

“Oh, don’t,” Ginny begged them to stop, worried that those who didn’t know Harry well enough would take this seriously, but they just laughed it off.

Harry smiled awkwardly and moved on to sit with his friends.

Ginny felt that it was so unfair how everyone besides his closest friends treated him. He never liked how much attention people paid to him because of his history with You Know Who, but now, it was even worse. He was a victim here.
She wished she could reassure him that it was going to be okay but she wasn’t sure of that herself. She was sure of his innocence but not of her own. She was starting to doubt her own memories and worried that she was responsible for the awful things that had happened.

She could no longer ignore her observations. The saying went that if something happens twice, it’s a coincidence, but thrice is a pattern. This was the third time that someone was petrified and she could not recall where she was at the time.

Ginny’s hands were shaking as she reached into the pocket of her robes and pulled out her diary. She sat down at a nearby table, picked up a quill someone left there and started writing. She felt like she was at crossroads with no signs to guide her which path to choose. She needed advice, but when she wrote to Tom about it, he dismissed her concerns.

*Does someone become petrified every single time you sleepwalk?*

*No.*

*Then, that’s your answer. It’s a coincidence.*

*But it’s the third time, Tom.*

*You’re a good person, Ginny. You wouldn’t be capable of something this awful.*

Of course, she would never attack anyone but could she really control her actions while she was asleep? She wondered if maybe she could ask one of her roommates to watch her to see what she normally did when sleepwalking, or to maybe stop her if she tried to leave the tower but Tom reminded her of the story of his friend who had the same problem and how badly he was treated when he admitted to it.

She was torn and wasn’t sure if Tom’s advice was good anymore. If there was even a chance that she was responsible for these kids getting hurt, she should turn herself in.

*They’ll take you away and I’ll be left all alone again, Ginny. I need you.*

Ginny read those words and a sob escaped her throat. No one had ever needed her the way Tom did.

*I could give your diary to someone else to keep you company.*

*I’ve never connected with anyone the way I connect with you, Ginny. Please, don’t abandon me the way everyone else had. I beg you. Don’t do this to me.*

Ginny clutched the diary to her chest and realized that she couldn’t be that heartless. After everything Tom gave her, she couldn’t take away the only thing he ever asked for - her company.

She opened the diary again and put the quill down but wasn’t sure what to write. He was waiting for her to promise him that she wouldn’t tell anyone, but if anyone else got hurt, it would be all her fault. She didn’t know what to do.

The ink from her quill pooled on the page, making one large blotch which got absorbed by the paper.

*You’re my best friend,* Tom wrote in a very small print and Ginny broke down, making her tears mix with the new blotch of ink.

As she watched the diary drink the salty ink, her heart knew that she couldn’t hurt Tom. She needed him as much as he needed her. They were one.
And you’re mine. I won’t abandon you, Tom. I won’t tell anyone.
“Merlin, yes, sit,” Dumbledore invited him curtly and continued scribbling on parchment.

Merlin sat across from him and watched the Headmaster as he worked on some paperwork, his face drawn in worry lines.

His host remained quiet so Merlin looked around the office and noticed that Fawkes was now a baby bird - reborn after having burned of old age. Maybe when he was this young, Merlin could get on his good side? It bothered him that the Phoenix resisted him so far and was determined to befriend him. He had to look up what these birds ate. Food usually worked best with all animals.

Dumbledore was now observing him from under his spectacles so Merlin decided to fill him on what he knew regarding the latest attack.

“I believe Harry completely. You don’t suspect him, I hope?”

“I don’t.”

“Good. He’s getting ready for a little stunt as part of his own investigation. Don’t worry, I’m keeping an eye on the trio to ensure they stay safe during their escapades. I’ve been unable to remove the curse from Colin. The Dark Magic will not waver and it worries me what type of ancient creature we might be dealing with. What else… I’ve been trying to follow Dobby but so far no luck. Every time I find him, he’s out running errands. I think I’m going to have to do it at night.”

“Any clues as to who opened the Chamber?”

Merlin shook his head. “None. I’ve already started breaching kids’ minds hoping to find clues and I’m not proud of it.” He fiddled with his scarf absentmindedly, remembering just how much he crossed the moral line. “I don’t know, Albus. Should I resort to checking every single person in this castle? It feels awful to even consider that but I’m running low on options.”

“If you can do it without anyone sensing it, I’ll say, do it. Is your legilimency subtle enough to avoid detection?”

Merlin decided that the best answer would be to demonstrate. “You’re thinking of strangling me with your circular crochet hooks. Are you angry at me, Albus?”

In response, Dumbledore threw his glasses on the table and Merlin felt the walls in his mind close down.

“Don’t worry, I’m out.” Merlin raised his hands. “I have no interest in poking in your or anybody’s head.”

Dumbledore stared him down and Merlin wasn’t sure if he should laugh or be serious. What did he do to anger the calmest Headmaster this school has ever had? Was his thieving detected? He did it for Harry and thought it was a valid excuse.

The old wizard exhaled a puff of air. “You need to stop acting so childish, Merlin.”
“You wanted to know if people can sense my legilimency so I tried to let you answer that for yourself. Did you feel it?”

“No, I did not, but that’s not what I’m trying to say. Stop picking on Severus Snape!”

“Oh, that.” Merlin leaned back in his chair. “Greasy Git deserved it.”

“Especially at a time like this, I need my teachers to be able to do their jobs. How is Severus supposed to do his if he can never sit down and if he can’t even climb stairs? Do you realize how many staircases this castle has? One hundred and forty-two!”

“He can sit down,” Merlin corrected, “just not on chairs. And he can climb stairs, just not with shoes on.”

“Reverse both curses,” Dumbledore said quietly but with a clear threat behind it.

Merlin fiddled with his scarf. “I will deliver a note to him, instructing him what he needs to do to lift the curses.”

Dumbledore looked like he really wanted to pull out his crochet hooks out of the drawer so Merlin continued, “He needs to be taught a lesson, Albus. Do you know how he treats his students? That monster should never be allowed near children. They rely on adults to stop abuse when it happens but he bullies them and turns a blind eye for his precious Slytherins no matter what they say or do. Why in the world did you hire him? Next to him, Lockhart looks like the teacher of the year!”

“I have my reasons for keeping Severus close.”

“Please, do enlighten me on your reasons. Maybe you’ll change my mind about him.”

Albus stroked his beard, trying to calm himself. “He will protect Harry Potter. He has a personal reason to.”

“He hates Harry and Harry hates him. I think your plan has a lot of holes in it.”

“You do not get to preach to me like I’m one of your pupils, Merlin.”

“You couldn’t be my pupil even if you wanted to be.”

Albus picked up his spectacles and pointed a finger at him. “You’re making me regret inviting you here. You cause more trouble than you solve.”

The words cut Merlin deep into his core. True, he hadn’t been much help so far, but he was doing all he could. He was stretching himself thin and wide and fighting the odds in his attempt to solve this riddle. He didn’t want to leave. He couldn’t just walk away now when he was already personally invested in helping Harry and protecting the children.

“I’m trying to help, Albus. I…”

Dumbledore put his hands on his desk and leaned toward him. “You are a guest here, you keep forgetting that. Hogwarts is not your little project. I gave you a lot of freedom. You wanted to start your religious club here, I won’t stop you as long as it doesn’t keep students from their regular education. But the teachers are off-limits. Reverse the curses.”

“You have to bring my beliefs into this? It really bothers you, huh?”

“You could believe in three-headed Moon Frogs for all I care. Your personal vendetta against
Severus severely impacts his ability to teach and protect the students. I can’t believe I have to tell this
to someone as old as you, but Merlin, you need to grow up.”

“You really don’t care, do you? All that matters to you is that you’ve got a Death Eater as a pet and
it’s of no consequence what he does within these walls. For the greater good again, Albus?”

Dumbledore inhaled sharply and his eyes widened in shock. “Don’t you dare!”

“You never changed for all those years… Well, neither have I. I will always protect the innocent.
You stick to your plan, I will stick to mine.” He got up and walked away. “I’ll see you later, Albus.”

Merlin walked down the hall with his head hung. He wasn’t proud of what he said. It was a low
blow.

For the greater good was the slogan Albus developed with Gellert Grindelwald at the beginning of
the twentieth century during their campaign to overthrow the Statue of Secrecy and rule over
Muggles.

Merlin met him while they were still together. They were obsessed with their convoluted ideals,
flaunted their power, wanted to make themselves royalty. Later, Albus came to his senses while
Gellert continued their vision on his own. Albus redeemed himself in the end by defeating him and
Merlin developed a friendship with him over time, but he never forgot the first impression Albus
made on him in his youth - he had no problem sacrificing others for the cause he believed in.

Did Merlin’s words have any impact on the old wizard beside the obvious pain of dragging the
mistakes of his youth out in the open? Probably not. If he hadn’t changed in a hundred years, there
was little hope for it now.

And so, they were back to square one. Snape was given free rein to abuse his station and more
children would suffer. Then, Merlin’s stance on the issue did not change either. He would not
remove the curses. He would not rest until Greasy Git learned his lesson. These children were under
his protection.

Merlin got back to the dorm where Jack still slept soundly and sat down to write his letter. He rolled
up the parchment, and with a quick spell, delivered it to Snape’s desk. He hoped that Potions Master
was there right now and saw it appear out of nowhere.

He did not expect for his instructions to be followed, on the contrary, he was sure that Snape would
give him a reason for a new curse within days and already had an idea for what it would be.

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The school was abuzz with the newest excitement - another attack on a Muggleborn student. The
news affected Elsa as much as the “weather” of the Great Hall. It would be scary to be caught in the
unforgiving storm the ceiling reflected, but as it was an illusion, she could ignore the flash of
lightning and carry on as usual.

After taking Jack to the Hospital Wing, Elsa was ordered to attend her remaining classes. She barely
paid any attention in them and doodled swirly patterns in her notebook instead of taking notes. She
couldn’t make herself care.

When evening came, she followed Luna to the evening feast automatically but wasn’t even hungry.
At least Luna had the decency to respect her wish for silence, unlike some others who thought she
should be talking, or smiling, and most definitely should be her usual focused and strong-willed self.
Wasn’t she allowed to feel whatever she was feeling?
Her brother was unfortunately in the latter group. He found her in the Great Hall, limped over and attempted at pleasantries which she ignored.

“Are you okay?” When she didn’t answer, he continued, “You didn’t even do your hair.”

Her hair was not only unbraided, it was tied lazily at the nape of her neck. She didn’t feel like bothering with a braid and was not in the mood for a ponytail. She honestly only bothered to tie it because it was uncombed.

Jack put his hand on hers but she shrugged him off and pretended to eat in order to claim the use of her hands.

“We can still find him,” Jack kept talking, not recognizing that she was in no mood for a conversation. “We have a clue, Elsa. It’s not the end yet.”

“I know that,” she said through gritted teeth.

Just because she was in a bad mood, it didn’t mean that she was stupid. Instead, she was just mentally exhausted.

“So, you probably heard - another boy was petrified this morning. Can you imagine, Merlin thought that I was the Heir of Slytherin, that I was doing that!”

This finally got her attention. She stared at him and couldn’t think of a proper response.

“Exactly.” Jack threw his hands up in exasperation and leaned in to whisper. “He said that it’s because I’m keeping secrets. Well, so does he. I know that he’s hiding something.”

Elsa swallowed, starting to fully understand just how bad the situation was. Did anyone else suspect her brother of these attacks? Did anyone suspect her? This wasn’t good.

“How’s your leg?” she asked, remembering that he limped over to her. “Do you want me to heal it for you?”

“It’s not that bad now. It will be suspicious if I’m healed too quickly.” He huffed. “Yeah, like I need more suspicion.”

Jack’s plan for a reasonable excuse for their absence assumed that Madam Pomfrey could heal his self-inflicted wound but for some reason, her spells did not work on him. Any other time, Elsa’s mind would’ve gone into overdrive to start analyzing why, but today, she couldn’t find the energy to.

“So, the fairies,” Jack started babbling again. “Do you want to visit them after classes one day or should we wait until the weekend? There’s a game though so I’m not sure if it’s the best timing.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. His priorities were really contorted to put the game before everything else, but maybe it was better to wait. She didn’t want to visit the fairies in this mood.

“We’ll go when we both have the time,” she answered to dismiss him.

Peeves the poltergeist floated over to them. Instead of his mischievous self, he looked… was it worried? It was hard to tell. His facial features weren’t meant for expressing such human emotions.

“Hi, Peeves,” Jack said.

“Jack-Friend, be careful. Even spirits aren’t safe! The monster can get us.”
“I know.” Jack ruffled his hair. “But what can we do? Just don’t float through empty corridors, Peeves. These attacks always seem to happen without witnesses. Stay close to people.”

Peeves nodded repeatedly and floated above them. His mask of worry dropped though when his eyes fell on the Gryffindor table.

“Weasley twins are up to something. Must assist.”

“Bye, Peeves,” Jack said and got back to eating.

Elsa looked between the two of them. She did not expect that her brother would form a friendship with a poltergeist or that it was even possible, but here they were, acting like buddies who were just catching up.

“Look at the Albino freaks.”

She looked up to see Draco Malfoy loom over her.

“Albino?” Jack asked her.

Elsa shook her head. “He can’t even insult us properly. He’s more likely Albino than we are.”

Jack tilted his head and she got the feeling that he didn’t know what it meant. She would explain it later.

“They’ve got old people hair,” one of Malfoy’s large friends commented and touched Elsa’s hair.

A shiver ran down her spine and it felt like all the blood rushed to her temples.

“Don’t touch her!” Jack shot up to face the Slytherins but swayed on his bad leg and had to catch his balance on the table.

“Need a cane to go with that hair?” Malfoy jeered.

Elsa’s vision became muddy and her grip on her fork tightened. She felt something build inside her and tried to keep it in. To occupy herself, she slowly lifted her mug to drink her juice, trying to ignore what was happening right next to her.

“Oooh,” Malfoy continued taunting, “Look at him. We hurt his feelings.”

The juice in Elsa’s mug froze and she blanched. She did not do that on purpose.

“Go away, Malfoy,” Jack warned in a growl.

Elsa’s mug was now fully coated in ice and she gently put it down, hoping no one noticed.

Malfoy laughed with his goonies. “Sit back down, freak, before you break a hip.”

Her fork was also now covered in ice and she tried to hide it behind her plate.

Jack’s hand dived into his pocket and he slowly pulled out his wand.

“What will you do with that, Nix?” Malfoy taunted.

Ice built on the table under Elsa’s hand and she quickly put both of them in her lap.

‘Control it. Control it,’ she chanted to herself.
She saw a patch of ice on the table spread even though her hand was no longer touching it. Everyone was going to see that she created it!

She got up and ran out of there, ignoring her brother’s call and the laughs of the Slytherins.

She ran through the doors to the grounds where a thunderstorm raged on. A streak of ice started forming behind her and she tried to outrun it but it got thicker and stronger.

“Stop it! Stop it!” she yelled at the ice and herself.

She finally ran behind a wall and crouched on the ground as more ice spread around her. She was powerless against it. What was happening?

Now, reacting to her magic, the air temperature dropped, the rain changed into sleet and the thunder roared loudly overhead.

Jack ran up to her and embraced her.

“No one saw, Elsa. It’s okay,” he said while rubbing her back.

She hugged him back and could see that she was unwillingly covering him with ice too. At least, he could handle it, she didn’t have to worry about hurting him.

The ice under her was still spreading no matter how much she willed it to stop. Why was this happening?

“Close your eyes,” Jack said in a calm voice. “Don’t even look at it, just listen to my voice.”

She obeyed and held on tight to him but could feel the ice magic continue spreading. If it didn’t stop, it would reach the castle!

“Remember that hag Leta?” Jack said out of nowhere. “She had that mean goat that tried to bite me every time she saw me. As revenge, I would pull on her tail whenever I could. She hated it!”

Elsa had no idea why he was talking about that.

“And then Leta caught me. She chased me through the tunnels, yelling, Leave my beloved goat alone! And I always wondered why she called that goat beloved. Was she in love with her goat? Ah, what a picture - a hag in love.”

Elsa snorted. He was ridiculous.

“And so later, whenever I saw Leta, I teased her about her bearded girlfriend. And of course, she was mad about that, but then one day she yelled back at me, My girlfriend has a mustache, not a beard!”

Jack chuckled at his joke and Elsa shook her head.

“Is that story even real?”

“Totally.”

There was a spark of mischief in his eye and she suspected that he made up the whole thing, but she finally laughed. When she finished, she noticed that her ice was no longer spreading. Whatever was happening to her before, stopped.
She threw her arms around him again.

“Thank you, Jack. You always know just what I need.”

“What are twins for?”

She finally let go of him and looked back at the castle. Next time, if she lost control like this, she could hurt somebody. How could she ensure that she didn’t?

She stared at her hands and wished she could cover them with something. Maybe if her skin didn’t touch objects directly, then the ice would stay controlled.

Jack tried to move aside a wet lock of hair which plastered itself across her face.

“It happens to me too.” He smiled up at her. “I was starting to think I’m too much of a mess, but look, you’re just like me.”

He nudged her shoulder playfully but she didn’t find it funny. It wasn’t the same. First of all, while he was prone to creating frost by accident, he could always stop it at will. But most of all, his magic wasn’t as deadly as hers. She was downright dangerous.

“I think you accidentally healed my leg,” he said, touching it. “Oh, well. Thanks for that.”

He tried to move his wet hair out of his eyes and stared up at the sleeting rain.

“Do you want to stay here longer? I’m not a big fan of being wet but I suppose it’s already done. We’re soaked through.”

At least the ice she created was getting washed away so there would be no evidence of her outburst.

She sat there, not ready to go back, scared that as soon as she entered, she’d lose control again. If only she knew what triggered it, maybe she could avoid it.

Malfoy was making fun of them. His insults were pathetic though, not at all clever, so she didn’t think that was what set it off.

Jack was upset with Malfoy. Did his mood rub off on her? She didn’t think so. Honestly, it didn’t seem like she felt anything while all of that was happening. She was numb, unfeeling.

She looked at her brother who was clearly bored and uncomfortably wet but patiently waited for her and occupied himself by dropping rocks into a puddle. His biggest concern always was that they would turn into monsters like Mother if they stayed with her. What defined a monster?

She stared at her hands again. She was capable of so much destruction. What if it wasn’t Jack that ran after her into the rain? What if it was Luna? She would have frozen her, killed her best friend.

If she couldn’t learn how to control her power then she was a monster already.

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The journey to find the truth had consequences as Merlin found out.

Jack slept off the serum until the evening. When he awoke, he remembered their conversation, and now with a clear head, and no longer influenced by the Sidhe crystal’s magic, he was far from a hugging mood. He remained silent, avoided eye contact, and like that wasn’t enough to indicate his feelings toward Merlin, he ditched him as soon as they got to the Great Hall to sit with his sister at
Merlin felt that he deserved that cold shoulder. While Veritaserum gave very drug-like effects, loosening tongues and inhibitions, it did not erase the memory of what was said while under its influence. It was obvious that Jack held a grudge at Merlin’s accusation.

Merlin shook off the guilt and hoped he would get a chance to repair their friendship. For now, he had to focus on what he could control.

He approached Harry’s trio and Hermione made space for him.

Merlin took a look around at the children in the Great Hall. A good number of them were Muggleborns who were now being persecuted for their heritage.

The wizarding community had separated itself from the Muggles few centuries ago in order to stop persecutions like the witch hunts but now the same was happening within their community.

They were all children of magic. This madness had to stop. What if the next victim died? Merlin couldn't live with himself if he let that happen under his watch. He was magic. They were all his children.

His eyes landed on each face surrounding him. Here were his Gryffindors, the loud and proud, and this generation was full of red-headed Weasleys as if they defined the House. Could he suspect any of these children?

What about children from the other Houses? They all looked so innocent. The school had hundreds of innocent children but it took only one to put them all in danger. He wasted all this time suspecting the wrong person while the real Heir of Slytherin hid in plain sight.

'Who could it be?' he thought.

Merlin’s contemplations were interrupted as one of the Weasley twins ran up to the red-headed girl who was scribbling in a notebook.

"Ginny!"

One of them tried to snag it away but she got it out of the way in time.

"We could use your input on our joke idea."

"Go away!" she hissed.

"Come on, you look so sad. Let's do something fun."

Ginny’s response was turning her back on her brothers and leaving the Hall.

"Ginny!" they called her in unison and exchanged a worried look.

They sat back down in their seats, looking defeated.

"She’s been pretty depressed," Ron said while chewing. "All those attacks are getting to her."

"They're getting to everyone," Harry added. "Her response is actually more rational than others."

Merlin supposed Harry meant everyone who accused him of the attacks. Poor kid was trying to stay positive and even went along with the Weasley twins’ “evil wizard” jokes but underneath that, he
was under a lot of stress.

“Why Justin?” Merlin asked. “I get it that he’s Muggleborn but don’t you think it’s suspicious that he was the target after what happened during the Dueling Club? It’s like whoever is doing it wanted you to be blamed for it.”

Harry crossed his arms. “Maybe they were there and watched the whole thing.”

“Like Malfoy,” Ron suggested.

“We can’t accuse him without proof,” Merlin reminded them.

He still wasn’t convinced that it was the pale-haired snob and thought that the trio picked the boy only because of their prejudice towards him. Being a spoiled prat was not a crime.

“Did you notice how sour Malfoy looked during Potions? I think his lips got stuck in a permanent sneer.” Ron chuckled to himself. “He can’t stand it that you’re getting the credit for the attacks when he’s doing all the hard work.”

Merlin resisted an urge to roll his eyes. He wouldn’t be able to convince them to drop their accusation when they despised the boy so much.

“We’ll know the truth soon enough,” Hermione said.

“Can we speed up the potion?” Harry asked.

“There will be a full moon in the second week of December so we won’t be able to even start until then,” Merlin pointed out. “Don’t forget, we still have to procure a part of the person we turn into.”

Hermione cleared her throat and stirred the food on her plate. “I already have my Slytherin ingredient.”

The boys looked at her, surprised and Ron asked, “How did you manage it?”

“There was a reason why I engaged Millicent Bulstrode in a physical fight during the Dueling Club. I picked some hair off her robes.”

“Smart thinking,” Merlin praised and she blushed.

“Thanks, Merlin,” she said in a tiny voice. “Also, I’m available for tutoring tomorrow afternoon. Your schedule is clear on Tuesdays if I remember correctly.”

“Did you memorize his class schedule?” Ron asked.

She blushed further. “I have a good memory.”

“Sounds great,” Merlin said.

Harry and Ron whispered something to each other and he had one of those irrational feelings that they were talking about him but shook it off and got back to casual mealtime chatter with Hermione.

Next day during the tutoring session, he was exhausted of having to mess up spells so he asked Hermione to explain the theory behind switching spells which she was very happy to do. While she recited the textbook nearly verbatim - her memory was truly remarkable - he thought over his plans for this evening.
Since he cleared Jack of his suspicions, he had to focus on the next clue he had - the house-elf. It had been eluding him so far but he guessed that if he tracked it at night, it should lead him to its master.

Hermione snapped her fingers in front of his face and he startled.

“Merlin, are you paying attention?”

“Yes, sorry.” He smiled apologetically. “I’m just hungry. Is it time for the evening feast yet?”

She grunted. “You’re just like Ron - always thinking about food.

That evening, Merlin went to bed early to catch a little nap before sneaking out for the night. He needed his strength. Later that night, he snuck out to the bathrooms, to not wake his roommate, and focused on Dobby’s mark.

The elf was stationary, maybe even sleeping, but rather far away. Still, it was within the range Merlin could transport himself to. He disapparated, fought through some ancient wards at the destination and appeared in a hallway.

Merlin took in his surroundings. He was alone, thankfully, in a well-lit corridor. He walked slowly and appreciated the intricately carved details of the wooden wall panels. He guessed that he was at the residence of a wealthy family and sighed with relief. This had to be the family Dobby served. He didn’t know where The elf was in this house but no longer had a use for him. All he needed right now was a name.

He passed by a portrait of an elegantly-dressed wizard whose eyes followed him. He bowed respectfully and moved on before the painting got any ideas to raise an alert.

He tiptoed through the silent hallway, hoping that the residents were asleep already and no one would notice an uninvited guest in their home while he took a look around. When he quietly opened a double door, he found himself in a large room. He confirmed that he was alone and willed for all candles and lanterns to light up so he could look for clues as to where he was.

He took a moment to take in and fully appreciate the majesty of the drawing room he was in. A long ornate table stood in the middle which could seat twenty people, the ceiling had to be at least 30-feet-high, heavy curtains embroidered with golden thread framed enormous floor-to-ceiling windows, there was not one but two crystal chandeliers and even a pipe organ. A grand marble fireplace stood like a crown jewel in the center of the wall and many portraits hung on the walls. Everything in there was lavishly decorated, from embossed purple wallpaper to the finest rugs, even the ceiling was extravagant.

“Are they royal or something?” Merlin mused to himself, feeling like a lowly servant caught in the king’s chambers.

He remembered what he was doing there and started to check each painting. He hoped that he would recognize someone and put a name to this sumptuous residence.

“What is your business here?” a tall man with long blond hair, holding a decorative cane asked from his frame and Merlin silenced him with a spell.

He gasped at the portrait because he recognized not the man but who he posed with. The man and his wife had their hands on the shoulders of a young pale-blond boy. He was younger in this painting but the resemblance was unmistakable - it was Draco Malfoy. Harry was right after all.
Chapter End Notes

Malfoy!!!

Also, don’t worry, you will get to read Merlin’s letter to Snape. It’s precious.
Albus watched the students eat their breakfast and worried about them. If these attacks continued, he might have to close the school. In fact, he was in quite a conundrum because he had not notified the parents of those two petrified boys of what had happened to them. Soon, they would wonder why their sons had not written to them and what then?

They could obviously not take them home, as the boys needed magical means to be tended to while awaiting the mandrakes. Muggles were normally not permitted inside the school but the parents would surely want to visit their children.

“It will be months before they wake up,” Minerva said when he discussed this with her over breakfast. “We can’t possibly keep this secret for that long. We have to notify them.”

He supposed she was right but couldn’t bear the idea of having to explain something this delicate to Muggles.

“I’ll visit each family this weekend and will take care of it,” she offered and he tried to not show how relieved he was that she was taking the burden off of him.

“Thank you, Minerva. What do you plan to tell them?”

“Something close to the truth.” She straightened up her gown and looked uncomfortable with the idea of lying. “I’ll try to reassure their fears and hopefully can convince them that Hogwarts is a safe school.”

It was personally insulting to him that this year the school was not safe, not to Muggleborns. The fear was clearly seen on each young face in the Great Hall. He wondered if there would be any students who would not come back from their winter break this time.

His eyes landed on Merlin who was yawning widely while walking, tripped over his own feet and landed on his friend. So far, Merlin had been committed to helping resolve the crisis. When Albus invited him, he thought that the powerful sorcerer could come in handy in case of a confrontation with Voldemort, he did not expect more, but Merlin proved that he could be useful in more ways.

Sure, he was causing trouble with Severus, but was it really that surprising? Albus was not a fool. He expected some level of complications as a result of the sorcerer’s presence in the school. One does not become the most famous sorcerer in the world for being quiet and sitting in the sidelines. Merlin liked to get involved and was not afraid to challenge authority. In that case, was Albus too hard on him? Should he let Merlin deal with Severus on his own?

Once back in his office, Fawkes greeted him with a high-pitched squawk. Albus walked up to his nest and brought him his meal. The bird was always very demanding when he was this young. He had just burned a couple of days ago and Albus finally learned why he delayed it - he wanted witnesses. Harry Potter got to witness the phoenix burst into flames and be reborn from the ashes.

“You’re such a show-off, Fawkes,” Albus said and scratched the small bird on its fuzzy head.

Speaking of show-offs reminded Albus of Merlin again.
He walked up to the portrait of Salazar Slytherin, hung high above the Hogwarts Headmasters. The old wizard was dozing off while standing up, his bald head gleamed, the only spark of light in an otherwise gloomy painting. He, unfortunately, was painted without a chair, a fact he often complained about.

“Dear Salazar,” Dumbledore said, “would you care to impart some of your wisdom to me?”

The portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw laughed openly. “Salazar - wisdom? You joke, Dumbledore.”

Salazar opened his eyes and sneered in her direction. “No one asked you, woman.”

“Thank you for waking up for me. I need to ask you about your student, Merlin.”

“Ah, Merlin. He was brilliant, my best student, but a troublesome charlatan he turned out to be.”

“Could you elaborate? What trouble did you have with him?”

“A blood traitor, he was. Associating with Muggles. No respect for authority. MY authority. The biggest mistake, taking him in, it was, for from the traits I valued in my students most, cunning is his strongest one. Had I known he was not a child, I would have banished him, but he deceived us all just like he’s deceiving you. You are a fool, Dumbledore. You let him use you, infiltrate this school for his own agenda.”

Albus sat down as his old legs screamed in protest, demanding rest. Did Merlin really have an agenda in the school? He was gathering pupils but that didn’t bother Albus too much.

“You should consider who’s saying this,” Rowena rebutted. “All of us got to teach Merlin. I only agree with the brilliant part of Salazar’s account.”

“I would have gladly given him over to your House but that would’ve broken our own rules,” Salazar grumbled. “We were so idealistic.”

“Dear Founders, can any of you offer me advice as to how I can rein him in?”

“Appeal to his intelligence,” Rowena said. “Make a sound argument which he cannot rebuke.”

“Get rid of him. Send him away,” Salazar spat. “Before he causes more trouble.”

“I say, embrace it,” Godric Gryffindor interrupted Salazar. “It sounds like the lad is doing the right thing and is only trying to protect others. Why fight him on that?”

“He’s trying to reinvent the school we created,” Salazar argued with Godric. “He had a millennium to start his own school if he thought that what we built was so wrong.”

“If I may,” Helga Hufflepuff chimed in and the others quieted down. “Underneath all that confidence, he is humble. Appeal to that. Remind him that he’s getting a big head and that better results will be yielded if you all work together.”

Albus considered her words. Merlin was hellbent on punishing Severus. How could he join him in that?

Before he had time to elaborate on the Founders’ advice, and as if sensing that Albus was thinking about him, Severus knocked and came in.

“Headmaster, the punk who cursed me now issued threats against me.”
His eye was twitching again when he handed him a rolled up piece of parchment.

Albus unrolled it and read.

*Dear Professor Snape.*

*You may have noticed how you have been exceptionally unlucky in recent weeks. Rest assured, your misfortune was not a silly prank.*

*Your mistreatment of students has come to my attention, and I could no longer remain a silent spectator. You have been given a glimpse into how capable I am of inconveniencing you, and I will not stop there if you force my hand.*

*I like to believe that people can change and so I will give you a chance to correct your behaviour.*

*You may earn yourself a release from each curse if you follow these easy instructions:*  

- You will not let any student come to harm in your presence.
- You will not emotionally torment a student.
- You will not allow the use of vulgar slurs in this school, especially those aimed at Muggleborns.
- You will not tolerate bullying and will punish the perpetrators - even if they are Slytherins.
- You will act like a decent human being as defined by my standards.

*Failure to comply with these instructions will result in more curses placed upon your person. Fret not, there are a lot more inventive ways in which one’s life can be encumbered and my imagination is very vivid.*

*Sincerely,*

*Three-Headed Moon Frog.*

Albus took off his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He would have laughed at the *Three-Headed Moon Frog* joke if he wasn’t in such somber mood.

What was he going to do with the young sorcerer? The letter made it sound like he was planning to curse Severus some more. Albus wasn’t sure if the wizard could take any more curses before losing it and that could become ugly.

‘Oh, Merlin,’ he thought, ‘why must you make everything so complicated?’

“Headmaster,” Severus snapped him out of his reflections. “I realize that there are other issues the school is facing but we shouldn’t take this lightly. This letter is clearly a threat.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. No matter how light-heartedly it was written, it was a direct threat against Severus.

“Do you think it’s possible that the Heir of Slytherin wrote it?”

The last thing they needed was for Merlin’s games to get mixed up with the school’s threat.

“I don’t think so.” He had to convince Severus to stop this line of thinking. “I think the motivation
“But what magic is this prankster using that we cannot undo his curses? This is too similar to the magic that was able to petrify these students. Surely, Headmaster, there must be a connection. It can’t be a coincidence.”

While he was wrong and it was a coincidence, he was right to draw the conclusion that there was a similarity in the type of magic used. It was ancient, unknown magic. Even Merlin couldn’t heal the victims of their state. Oh, what were they facing that even this immortal sorcerer was stumped by this magic?

His eyes found the portrait of Salazar Slytherin again, who was sneering down at him as if saying “I told you so.” He had questioned the Founder about the monster and the location of the Chamber previously, but unfortunately, the portrait knew nothing, having been painted years before Salazar came up with his plan.

“Severus, I realize that this is insulting, but I beg you to heed the warning. So far, he has only inconvenienced you, but I fear he might resort to more damaging curses if you provoke him.”

“Do you take me for a coward?” he said through tightly clenched lips.

Oh, how many times have people said those words before going off to do something foolish?

“Besides,” Severus continued while drawing himself to his full height, “I have not committed any crimes to be given punishments by a brat who thinks he can be my judge.”

Albus stroked his beard and pondered on how blinding pride could be. In this battle of the wills though, Severus would not come out on top.

What could he do to calm down the situation? Merlin wouldn’t listen to him, convinced that he had the right to be the judge, and Severus would not give in to a threat of a student. If only he could reveal Merlin’s identity, Severus would know who he was dealing with, or at least, Albus could call in a meeting to mediate between these two stubborn parties.

“We must find who wrote this, Headmaster.”

“What means do you propose?”

Corner of his lip lifted. “I have an idea.”

The next morning started with a snag. A large loop of a red thread hung from Merlin’s scarf, and he paused his morning preparations to repair it. He hovered his hand over it and watched the thread weave itself back into place when out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Jack froze while putting a foot in his shoe.

“What?” Merlin asked, wrapping the repaired scarf around his neck.

The boy flinched, startled from his thoughts.

“He was wearing mismatched socks,” he answered quietly.

“You’re going to have to make more sense than that.”

Jack looked in the direction of Colin’s bed. “Colin was trying to convince me to wear socks. His were mismatched.” He smiled a little but it quickly fell. “Was there a reason? Did he just feel silly
that day or does he always wear them like that? I didn’t ask.”

“You’re talking about him like he’s dead. He’ll be back.”

“That’s what everyone says.” He was still looking at the empty bed. “But it doesn’t feel like it. It feels like he’s just… gone.”

He looked up to the ceiling and blinked a lot. Then, his mood completely changed like someone flipped a switch in his mind and he stared at Merlin with a sneer.

“I don’t get it why you continue hanging out with Potter when he’s most likely the one that did it.”

“Jack, he didn’t do it.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t suspect your *real* friends. So, did you find a new suspect to interrogate? Is my sister next?”

Merlin closed his eyes. He deserved this.

“Of course not,” he whispered.

“Whatever.”

Jack gathered his things and stormed out of the room.

Merlin sat down, slumped his shoulders and fiddled with his scarf. All actions had consequences. He was losing a friend for his mistaken suspicions and it felt awful.

But in truth, he did have another suspect.

Now that he was sure that the Malfoy kid had something to do with the Chamber of Secrets being opened, he looked for an opportunity to find out more. He couldn’t wait for the Polyjuice Potion to be finished and had to use whatever skills he had to find out what the boy knew. Was he the Heir of Slytherin? If not, what was his family’s involvement?

He took to following the boy and attempted to listen in on his conversations and thoughts. He was very much unimpressed by what he heard so far. This boy, who so undeservingly was named Draco, meaning dragon, was arrogant, mean and thought himself to be superior to everyone around him.

It was truly a disgusting experience to be inside his mind which was always swirling with insults. If people thought the boy’s words were mean, their toes would curl if they heard what he was thinking. Merlin liked to see good in everyone but so far, he did not find any redeeming qualities in this boy.

But, as unlikable as he was, so far he did not reveal himself to be the one responsible for the attacks on Muggleborns and so Merlin had to keep at it.

This time, he was following him as Malfoy walked down the middle of the hallway, forcing everyone else to get out of the way. His bodyguards framed him, making him look awfully small next to their bulk. Merlin followed close behind and used his skills to listen in.

”Do you think Potter is the Heir?” one of his goonies asked.

Malfoy laughed loudly. ”Good one, Goyle. Don’t tell me you really buy that rubbish. Like there’s any chance Saint Potter could be a Slytherin descendant?”

”He speaks parcitongue,” the other goonie offered.
"It's Parseltongue, you idiot." He exhaled loudly. "Just rotten luck. I already sent an owl to my father. We’ll see what he says about that.”

Not getting anything out of their conversation, Merlin dived into the boy’s mind. Malfoy was at first thinking how annoyed he was with his friends and calling them all sorts of names. Then, he recalled a scene with his father who looked nearly identical to how he was depicted in the portrait, complete with the long suit jacket and an ornamental cane.

*Keep your head down, Draco.*

*But I'm Malfoy. We keep our heads up.*

*Father hit him on the head with his cane and Draco winced.*

*Be smart. This year you're keeping your head down. You don't want to draw suspicion to yourself.*

*Draco pouted but knew better than to challenge his father.*

Merlin was thrown out of the boy’s thoughts as he walked into a physical obstacle - such was the hazard of digging in someone’s head while walking.

He rubbed his aching forehead while the Slytherins turned around.

"Did this moron just walk into a wall?" Malfoy asked incredulously and his goonies cackled. "He gives a whole new definition to the term Gryffinloser."

Merlin checked, and sure, the wall was what he bumped into. He plastered a smile on his face.

“Oh, no, I didn’t. I was just admiring this painting,” he pointed at a frame which contained a disturbing image of two lovers in a graveyard. The woman was giggling away on her swing (what was a swing doing in a graveyard?) while the man pushed her, and gravestones ominously contrasted with their amorous fun.

Malfoy pulled back his lips in disgust.

“ ‘That’s even worse.’ He made a step towards Merlin. ‘Are you a filthy Mudblood too? You should be the next to go. It would be a service to the school.’”

“ ‘Watch your tongue, Malfoy.’”

“ ‘Or you’ll do what?’”

Malfoy made another step forward and his goonies followed, ready to back him up, effectively cornering Merlin.

“ ‘They’re lowering the bar, letting all sorts of pathetic rubbish in this school,’ Malfoy said, trying to look down at Merlin although they were similar height.

“ ‘They had to lower the bar to make space for you,’ Merlin retorted, standing his ground. ‘Or did you just buy your way in?’”

Malfoy ran a hand through his slicked-backed hair and chuckled. “You have no idea who you’re messing with.”

As if that didn’t sound like a threat enough, he pulled out his wand and kept it ready at his thigh.
“Never heard of an Ealdor family. You must be a Mudblood. Even if not, what wizard would want to admit to having such an embarrassment in his family tree? You’ll be safer among the Mudbloods in the Hospital Wing.”

That was it. Merlin had enough of hearing this term within these walls. As an idea of a perfect solution came to mind, a smile crept onto his face.

“Keep saying that word, Malfoy,” he whispered in warning.

“What is going on here, boys?” McGonagall’s voice sounded behind them but Merlin did not drop his glare from Malfoy.

The Slytherin smiled. “We’re just discussing artwork, Professor.”

And he pulled on both ends of Merlin’s scarf as if straightening it out but, in fact, tightening it around his neck and Merlin made an effort to not flinch as he was being choked.

Malfoy clapped him on the shoulder as if they were buddies and walked away.

Merlin loosened his scarf while McGonagall walked up to him.

“Are they bothering you?”

“I’m fine, Professor,” he answered and gave her a reassuring grin.

She made a “tsk” sound, looked after the three Slytherin boys who just disappeared around the corner and sighed.

“Don’t linger in the hallways by yourself, Mr. Ealdor,” she instructed. “It isn’t safe.”

“Yes, Professor.”

Once he was out of her sight, he walked inside an empty classroom.

If he was capable of putting a stop to this, then it was his responsibility to do so. He gathered his thoughts and planned how he wanted to phrase his newest curse. He felt responsible for all of these children. He could teach Malfoy a lesson but that wouldn’t solve the big-picture problem. Everyone had to learn this lesson, not just Malfoy.

While what he intended was a drastic measure, it was necessary. Using the term “Mudblood” was hurting the entire wizarding community. Prejudice started at a young age and had long-term effects on everyone. It started innocently with a few mean words and hurtful jokes, but then it expanded into discrimination and persecution. He’d been around long enough to see this pattern repeat throughout history.

Sure, they would come up with a new derogatory term eventually, but then, he could just repeat this exercise. In fact, he had done this curse in the past on entire towns and with great success. It was time Hogwarts received the same blessing.

Merlin said the long incantation and slammed his fist to the floor. At the impact, an invisible wave of magic spread outward through the whole castle and its surrounding grounds, binding itself to the place as strongly as the wards which protected the school.

From now on, anyone that tried to say or write the word “Mudblood,” would immediately bite their tongue.
The last weekend of November brought a promise of Quidditch fun which would be a welcome distraction from all the drama.

Jack got up early before Merlin woke up. He has been avoiding him for the past few days.

He couldn’t get over the feeling of betrayal and all the questions it raised. Just how long did his friend suspect him of attacking Colin? Why would anyone suspect him at all?

He stood in the bathroom, gripping the sink and glared at his reflection. His hair was whiter than the cold wall tile that surrounded him. He would never blend in, wizards would always look at him and see something different from what they were. And who should be the first person to suspect when something awful happens - the outsider. Because the Chamber of Secrets couldn’t have been possibly opened by someone ordinary. It would have to be the anomaly, the resident freak.

Frost started building under his fingers, coating the white porcelain and it reminded him that Merlin had seen this part of him. Jack deluded himself into thinking that letting his friend see a glimpse of his magic was an equivalent of bonding. How stupid he was. Merlin was only human. Showing him an inhuman ability only made him scared. If he knew the truth… Jack didn’t even want to imagine how bad that could turn. No one could ever learn the truth.

When Jack came back, Merlin stirred in his bed.

“G’morning,” he mumbled.

Jack startled, surprised that he was awake and looked at his friend, trying to decide what to say or do. Merlin assured him that he didn’t suspect him anymore but that didn’t take back what he said before. What kind of friends accused each other of such terrible things?

Merlin rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and smiled.

“Good Morning,” he said, clearer this time and Jack realized that he stared for too long. He was being weird again.

He didn’t know how to talk to him anymore, so instead, he got busy with getting ready. What if every single thing he had said to Merlin since they met each other was wrong? What if his words were what created this mistrust? Merlin had pointed out more than once how he was surprised that Jack didn’t know something that he should’ve known. It was safer to not speak, so he limited himself to short replies only when necessary.

Still, he wasn’t blind to the fact that Merlin was trying to get back to good terms. Jack wanted it too but didn’t know how to get over everything that happened. He would love to forget it and put it behind him but that wouldn’t be smart. He had to learn from this experience but had not figured out yet what the moral of the story was.

Later, he was getting ready for the game and Merlin reached out to him again.

“Where are you off to?”

“Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff today.”

He left the room but stopped in his tracks. Should he try to repair their friendship? He didn’t know what to say but maybe words weren’t what was needed.

He poked his head back in and saw Merlin sit alone on his bed. It felt wrong to just leave him there.

“Do you want to come?”
Merlin lifted his head, opened his mouth and closed it like he was thinking about it. Jack tapped his finger on the doorframe. The longer he waited, the more frustrated he was becoming.

“If you decide to come, we’ll be somewhere there with the Ravenclaws. Find us.”

It was probably the longest sentence he’d said to him all day. He thought it was a good idea initially but maybe he shouldn’t have even tried. Maybe watching Quidditch together wasn’t the solution they needed.

He met up with Luna downstairs, and she equipped him with a large, handmade blue hat with a bronze eagle on the front, the same one she was wearing.

“Elsa didn’t want to come,” she said while positioning the hat on his head.

“What is she doing?”

“I lent her my drawing supplies since she said she wasn’t in the mood for the library. What happened?”

Jack supposed that Luna noticed the resigned mood his sister was in. First, Elsa was really disappointed with what happened with the Mirror of Erised. The vision it showed her was not what she expected. He imagined that she felt burned out by the nonstop research she occupied herself with. And then, she lost control of her magic. Jack had not seen her like this in a long time. She always had better control than him. Not being able to stop the ice scared her. He worried about her.

“She’s taking a break, that’s all.”

As they made their way to the game, Jack noticed Ginny Weasley walk alone in the same direction. He remembered the fun he had with her when they practiced Quidditch so he called her over.

“Hey, Ginny. Do you want to sit with us?”

Ginny grinned and opened her mouth like she was about to say, “Sure,” but then her smile fell.

“Thanks. I’m… I’m meeting someone there.”

Jack frowned and worried why no one seemed to accept his invitations today. Did he do anything wrong with Ginny that she no longer liked him? Was Luna the only friend he had left? What could he do to ensure he didn’t mess up and lose her too?

As they walked near Ginny, he snuck glances at her. She didn’t look like someone who was about to meet up with her friends to watch a fun game. She looked… just sad and lonely. He hoped the game would cheer her up.

So it was just the two of them. Jack cheered the Ravenclaw team with Luna who knew a surprising amount of details about each member of the team and kept a running commentary during the game.

“Look at Becky go,” she observed. “She’s as tiny as the Snitch, which I suppose is the point. She’s also very talented at Levitating Charm. She’s been levitating my Quill every day while I work on my essays.”

“While you’re using it? That’s mean.”

“It’s all in good fun. She gives it back eventually.”

He looked at her with surprise. If someone tried to mess with him that way, he’d retaliate
immediately. Luna had such a positive view of everyone around her. He wondered what it would be like to be in her head.

“Look at that,” she pointed at the sky, “that eagle is overseeing the match. I bet it’s a good omen.”

The eagle circled above the players and Jack wished he could be up there with it. That would be a prime seat to watch the game from.

She continued and he gladly listened to her voice. “Did you know that Ravenclaw’s emblem is an eagle because the eagle represents the element of Air? The Founders were very much into the symbolism of elements.”

“Really? What are the other House elements?”

“Gryffindor is Fire, Hufflepuff is Earth, Slytherin is Water.”

Jack laughed openly at the irony of being sorted into the very opposite of his element.

“Seriously? I’m fire?”

Maybe he should’ve been in Slytherin, his affinity was closest to water, but then, he’d be stuck underground since that was where they lived and he didn’t want that.

She tilted her head while still looking up at the bird. “You’re not a Heliopath - a spirit of fire.”

His head snapped immediately to her. “What do you know of elemental spirits?”

“I know that they’re real. I haven’t seen one yet, although one time, I was swimming in a pond and could swear a water spirit splashed me.”

He laughed at that but was intrigued by how freely she spoke of this. “What would you do if you met an elemental spirit?”

She smiled and looked at him this time. “Maybe I’d give him a hug.”

He couldn’t help but grin back. He wondered if Luna’s accepting nature would mean that she would be able to handle a secret like his. Maybe one day. Besides, Elsa was best friends with her, she would probably tell Luna first.

He didn’t have cool friends like that.

Ravenclaws won the match when Becky caught the Snitch and Luna fully attributed the win to the eagle.

After the game, they were slowly walking back, Jack put his hands in his pockets and Luna surprised him by putting her hand under his elbow so their arms were linked. He was used to Elsa taking his hand whenever they walked together, and for some reason, having arms linked this way instead made him feel more grown-up. He liked the feeling of leading Luna and wondered if Elsa would be willing to start doing the same.

They were passed by Ginny Weasley who quickly made her way through the grounds alone. Just like he feared, she didn’t meet anyone at the game. She went there alone, sat there alone and now was coming back alone.

“I’m worried about Ginny,” he thought out loud.
“Oh, really?”

“I think she’s sad, maybe she’s dealing with some issues but I don’t know how to get her to talk about it.”

Luna looked after Ginny with a gentle smile. “You’re a good friend, Jack.”

If he really was Ginny’s good friend, he would’ve known how to reach her. Unfortunately, they weren’t close.

“I’ll talk to her,” Luna said. “What does she like?”

“I know that she likes Quidditch.” He tried to remember what else he knew about her. “I think she also likes cats. And writing. I always see her writing stuff.”

“I’ll think of something.”

Luna took her funny hat back from him and ran after Ginny. He hoped she would find a way to get through to her.

When he nearly reached the door, he saw four people who had just come back from the game - Harry Potter Fun Club, which this time included Merlin.

So Merlin didn’t want to go with him because he already had plans! Just when he thought that maybe his friend was worth the effort of getting back, he showed his true colors again.

The four of them were talking about the game, and didn’t even notice him. Jack walked close enough to bump Potter’s shoulder when passing by and kept on walking as if nothing happened.

Potter yelled after him, “You got a problem with me?”

Jack turned around and kept his hands in his cloak’s pockets, trying to look innocent.

“Didn’t see you,” he said with a shrug.

“If you’ve got something to say, why won’t you just say it to my face?”

Potter’s breath came out in visible huffs in the chilly air. He took two steps forward, and his hand dived inside his pocket where undoubtedly, his wand was.

There were so many things that Jack wanted to say to the Scarred Wonder but somehow none of it sounded right in his head. All he could think of right now was how easy it was to take down that Slytherin boy at the Dueling Club. His hand tingled with magic which was itching to be released but he kept them both in his pockets.

“What are you smiling about?” Potter asked while shifting from leg to leg. He looked worried. Even better.

Jack’s fingers wrapped around his wand. It would be so easy to do this again. Potter wouldn’t know what hit him, but he didn’t want to be the first to start a fight. He had to be smart.

“The truth will come out, Potter,” Jack finally said, “and I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I am not the Heir of Slytherin!” Potter’s voice rose.
Merlin walked up and positioned himself between them.

“Jack, calm down.”

“I’m calm,” Jack answered, irritated at the command.

Was he doing anything that would suggest not being calm? He was standing calmly, speaking calmly. There was nothing uncalm about him. It was Potter that was starting to lose his cool and Jack was just waiting for the right opportunity to show just how calm he could be when flattening that Wonder Boy to the ground.

Merlin took a step closer. “Jack, it’s not Harry. I swear to you.”

Jack huffed. Like that mattered.

Merlin put a hand on his shoulder and Jack shrugged him off.

“Don’t touch me.”

He turned around and left the scene. Only then, he noticed that quite a crowd gathered to watch and everyone looked disappointed that there was no fight. He was the most disappointed of them all.

Chapter End Notes

Lots happened in this chapter. Snape is planning something. Did you like Three-Headed Moon Frog's letter? Merlin is on a cursing spree. Are you disappointed that there was no fight? Jack is wondering if Luna could handle his secret. What do you think her reaction would be?

I will tell you this teaser - 7 chapters later, someone will learn someone's secret. Who will it be?

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MILESTONE! We've passed the 1,000 hits mark.

Now, if you've made it all the way to chapter 39, I assume you're enjoying this. If yes, leave a Kudos if you haven't already.

If you're not enjoying the story - let me know why. Let it all out. I can take it.
Ginny did her homework automatically. She found learning new spells easy but no longer felt excited about them. Tom encouraged her to keep studying so she did.

Ginny watched the game, and in the back of her mind, she remembered loving it, but this time, it just wasn't the same. Maybe these players weren't skilled enough to make the game exciting.

She sat down in the Great Hall, waiting for lunch and pulled out her diary. She wrote to Tom about her disappointment with the game.

*It's only Quidditch, Ginny. There are more important things in life.*

*But it's my only source of fun.*

*It's obviously a poor source of fun.*

*Then what else do you propose?*

*I'll find you something to do after lunch.*

*I think I'll skip lunch today.*

*You need your strength. Eat up, Ginny.*

*It's too early. Food isn't here yet.*

*Then do your homework.*

*I don't feel like doing homework today.*

*You must or you'll fall behind. Don't neglect your duties.*

And so she pulled out her textbook and got ready to read it. It was easier to just follow his directions instead of having to make decisions on her own.

She barely opened the book when she noticed that someone was coming in her direction.

*Luna's coming my way. What now?*

*Chit-chat until she goes away.*

*About?*

*Weather. Something boring.*

She turned to Luna who was stopped by and gave her a jerk of a wave.

"Dreadful weather we're having."

Luna looked up at the enchanted ceiling and then back at Ginny and her gray gaze was unnerving.
“Did you enjoy the game, Ginny?”

”Your team won. Congratulations.”

Ginny looked over at the Housepoint hourglasses and saw Ravenclaw’s sapphires piled up higher than all other jewels.

”You're leading for the House Cup.”

”It was the eagle,” Luna said with a tilted head.

Ginny noticed a bronze eagle on the girl’s hat. Did she think her weird hat brought her team good luck?

“When something weighs me down, I distance myself from it,” Luna said.

“What?”

“And trust your intuition. It’s usually right.”

Ginny felt that saying another ‘what’ would be useless at this point.

“Allow yourself some fun, Ginny. Don’t let anyone hold you back.”

Ginny blinked at this strange girl who smiled at her. Luna was always friendly and nice but it was impossible to hold a conversation with her.

Apparently, she now said what she wanted to say and walked away, skipping to the Ravenclaw table.

Ginny pulled out Tom’s diary again.

She left.

What did she want?

I have no idea.

Forget her then. Get back to homework.

It’s Saturday. I’d rather do something fun.

Do homework with me. That will be fun. Ask me questions. I’ll help.

Ginny sighed. It wasn’t the type of fun she had in mind but since she only had Tom for a friend, she had to do what he wanted to do. That was what friends did, wasn’t it?

Cars passed by, sputtering noise and spewing their smelly smoke. Minerva waved her hand in front of her face to push the foul air away. How did Muggles put up with this?

She finally found the address she looked for. Creevey’s residence was a small house, looking nearly identical to its neighbors. Muggles could be so boring.

She knocked and was greeted by a young mousy-haired woman who had a yellow flowery apron on. Her eyes widened upon seeing the witch. Minerva did not change into Muggle clothes, deciding that since she was on school business, she should wear her normal attire - her favorite dark green
gown and a warm cloak but she had to leave her pointy hat behind.

“Good Morning,” she tried to ignore the woman’s stare. “I’m Minerva McGonagall. I trust you received my owl?”

The woman laughed in a nervous way.

“Owl? Oh, the letter from Colin’s school? Yes, we did. Please come in.”

The woman and her husband received Minerva in their quaint sitting room, served tea and biscuits - they were quite tasty - while their dog came over and started wagging her tail so hard, she knocked over a few things off a side table.

“Down, Cleo!” the man ordered and the dog obeyed.

Minerva scrutinized the creature and kept her eye on it. She never fully trusted canines. They were so unpredictable but at least this one was calico-colored so it wasn’t as ugly as some others.

“Is Colin having problems at school?” the man asked, getting impatient.

“He’s such a good boy,” his wife added. “If he caused any trouble, I’m sure we can resolve this.”

The parents looked at her full of nervous apprehension and Minerva braced herself for the lie.

“Colin is not in trouble. I’m afraid that he has fallen ill.”

The woman gasped and covered her mouth while the man set his jaw.

“I’m here to tell you this personally because it is not a normal malady but a magical illness. Our Healers are taking great care of your son and are confident that he will get better but it might take some time. He has to stay in the school’s Hospital Wing during this time.”

The boy’s parents exchanged a worried look. Their dog whined on the floor and a little boy who looked like a miniature Colin pulled on Minerva’s gown.

“Will my brother come home for Christmas? I have the best gift for him.”

His big chocolate-brown eyes made her heart feel heavier as she knew she had to lie to him just like she did to his parents.

“We’ll see how he feels but he might have to stay at Hogwarts over the holidays.”

The boy’s mother let out a sob.

“I assure you, Mrs. Creevey, that he is in the most capable Healer’s hands. He will be alright.”

She nodded and found a box of tissues to blow her nose. Her husband comforted her.

“Can we visit him?” he asked.

“I’m afraid it’s not possible. The school is hidden from the Muggles, you see.”

She reassured that she would keep them informed on his condition and left with an ache in her heart. These were good people who loved their son and she imagined how horrible it must have felt to hear that he was sick, be unable to do anything about it and not even be allowed to see him.
But it wasn’t over. She had one more family to inform.

Mrs. Finch-Fletchley was not as easy to assure.

“We’ll move him to the best hospital immediately. I will request a helicopter to not risk worsening his condition in an ambulance.”

“Mrs. Finch-Fletchley, there is nothing that Muggle doctors can do for your son. His illness is magical and only trained Healers are capable of caring for him. He must stay at Hogwarts.”

“In that case, we’ll send over Doctor Haves to check on him. He’s a close family friend and a world-renowned specialist. He’s the one all doctors go to when they have a medical mystery.”

She reached for the telephone on her desk and Minerva had to stop her.

“If this doctor is a Muggle, I’m afraid he cannot enter the school. The school is hidden from all Muggles.”

“I’m sure you can make an exception and lift your… magic,” she waved her hand in a dismissive way. “This is my son you’re speaking of.”

“These are permanent wards, Mrs. Finch-Fletchley. There is no way for us to lift them just to let one Muggle in.”

“Then, what do you suppose we do?” the woman asked with one hand on her hip.

“You must leave it in our hands, Mrs. Finch-Fletchley. We are taking care of him and will not let any harm come to him during his stay there. I assure you…”

“I’m not interested in your assurances, Mrs. McGonagall,” she took a step closer and Minerva was glad that she was taller. She’d hate to have this woman look down on her. “You’re supposed to be the best school of magic around and then you let my son fall sick.”

“He would have fallen sick even if he never went to Hogwarts,” Minerva lied, now growing desperate, “with the difference that you would have taken him to Muggle doctors and they wouldn’t be able to help him. We can. Only WE can. You must trust the expertise of our Healers.”

It took quite a lot of convincing before the woman finally accepted that she had to trust wizards. Minerva left as quickly as she could, feeling drained.

She took one last look at the large residence and hoped that she would not have to make any more trips like this one but was it in vain? Slytherin’s monster was still on the loose. They still didn’t know who was responsible or how many more students would be attacked. While she exuded total confidence, telling these parents that everything was alright, deep down her heart clenched tighter every day, dreading the news of who was next.

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The common room was empty when Jack sat down to get started on his blasted Potions essay. He had gathered notes for it but put off writing it because the topic disgusted him. And now he no longer had time to procrastinate, it had to be done.

Soon, people started coming down to the common room in groups of two or three and he tried hard to not let it all distract him. They were gossiping by the fire, playing wizard chess, cards or exploding snap, a couple of teenagers snuggled on the couch, another couple was pointing at them.
But there was a dreaded essay to write so Jack continued, checking his notes and trying to do a good job despite choking on his own words. Brains. Why did it have to be brains? He really did not want to know in how many ways a frog’s brain could be used but here he was practically an expert on the topic.

What would it feel like to be in a frog’s brain? Did their thoughts revolve only around eating flies or did they have any higher thoughts? They probably thought about their young - where to lay eggs, how to feed them and protect them. He glanced at the couple on the couch. Frogs must also be thinking about mating. Did they have mating rituals like some animals? Once, he observed birds dance, trying to impress a potential mate. He imagined a frog dance and chuckled. Or maybe they sang to each other. This school had a choir which used giant toads and he couldn’t wait to hear their performance.

He looked down at his essay again. He wasn’t writing about frogs who danced or sang. He wasn’t even writing about frogs which were dead. He was writing about their brains as if they were objects, as if they didn’t belong to animals which wanted to live and enjoy their lives just as much as all of these wizards did.

Laughter filled the room while he continued writing about different ways a brain can be diced, marinated or cooked.

Someone sat opposite of him and he didn’t look up. His jaw felt tight from how hard he was grinding his teeth but he continued writing. This topic reminded him of hags. They loved animal organs. In potions or as snacks - raw snacks.

*When you sun-dry a handful of frog brains, they can be later ground and used as a potent powder, useful in potions aimed to give the drinker a clear mind.*

“Hi.”

Merlin’s voice broke through the noise of the common room laughter and Jack barely registered it. However, one must be careful to dry them thoroughly. *If the brains spoil before drying out, the resulting powder will give the opposite property to the potion.*

“Will you finally talk to me?”

Jack thought that silence was the best answer in this case so he continued writing, ignoring present company. Why should he talk to him anyway? He’d rather write about frog brains than expose himself to more rejection. He was never going to be able to compete with Harry Potter. He was too perfect. He was good at Quidditch, he was famous, and most of all, he was a normal kid, something Jack could never be. He was never going to be good enough.

Merlin moved his scarf aside, took off the crystal pendant and dropped it on Jack’s parchment. Jack paused mid-word and stared at the blue crystal. It was calling to him, promising an escape from the frigid feeling in his chest. He yearned to stretch out his hand and touch it. He finally looked at Merlin, wondering what he was doing.

“Peace offering.” He smiled weakly. “I know that you like holding it.”

Jack stared at the crystal some more. This was truly a slick ploy on Merlin’s part. He wanted it so badly. Brains. He was supposed to write about brains. He put his quill to the parchment but couldn’t remember what he was planning to write. Who was he kidding? Would he really prefer to write about sun-drying frog brains to holding the power of the Sidhe? Finally, he couldn’t resist, dropped
his quill and clasped the crystal in both hands.

Warmth spread through his whole body as the Sidhe magic touched his skin. He felt light like a feather and bright like a sunrise. It was a wonder he wasn’t floating. He imagined that this was what humans felt when approaching a fireplace on a cold day.

He opened his eyes slowly and looked at Merlin who leaned forward.

“Will you forgive me? I want to get back to being friends again.”

Jack shook his head. This was so unfair. An unacceptable bribe. But honestly, he was tired of being angry and wanted his friend back. Also, it was sort of cool that Merlin was trying to win him over and he felt flattered.

“I can’t stay mad at you when I feel so good,” he finally whispered.

“I was hoping for that.”

Merlin was grinning at him and Jack couldn’t help but be infected by it. Suddenly, the sound of laughter in the room sounded right, didn’t contrast with his mood as much, and he wanted to join in on the fun.

They didn’t even get a chance to exchange a sentence though before the Quidditch team came back from practice, which included Potter, and Merlin’s attention was back on the Wonder Boy.

Jack groaned. Oh, how little it took to lose him again.

“Why do you hate Harry so much?” Merlin asked him with a frown.

“I don’t hate him.”

Jack got back to his essay, holding his quill in one hand and the Sidhe crystal in the other. He wondered how long Merlin would let him keep it. If he was expected to behave while in Scarred Wonder’s presence, he really needed it.

Merlin continued defending his other friend.

“I know that everything points at him, but he didn’t open the Chamber of Secrets. He’s not the Heir.”

Jack tried to ignore this and reread his last sentence, trying to remember what it was about but Merlin had no respect for his studying.

“We think it’s Malfoy, we’re just looking for proof.”

“Malfoy?” Jack shook his head at that laughable theory. He would faster believe in tap-dancing frog rituals. “You’re not a good judge of character, Merlin.”

Merlin frowned. “That’s not true.”

Jack pointed his quill at him. “May I remind you, I was your first choice.”

Merlin flinched. That’s right. They might be speaking again but Jack was not going to let him forget that so easily. Besides, he enjoyed the bribe and hoped for more.

“So forgive me for not trusting your hunches.”
“It’s more than a hunch, Jack. So, why do you rule him out?”

“If he was the Heir, he wouldn’t feel the need to keep pointing out how important his father is because he’d be more proud of Slytherin. He’d be quiet about his known family - sort of like Potter.”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “You’re quiet about your family as well.”

Jack tightened his grip on the crystal, willing for its magic to calm him. Could he continue to go on as he had in the past? Keeping quiet was the reason why Merlin suspected him in the first place. Should he reveal something? But then, what if he said something that sounded wrong again? He decided to stick to the simplest words.

“My mother is dead. I’m not quiet about it, I simply have no family to talk about.”

Merlin was looking at him intently and Jack made an effort to not react. Thinking about his mother threatened to unleash memories he was trying hard to repress. He was not going to fall apart in front of his friend again. Crystal. Focus on the crystal.

“If it helps resolve your doubts about Harry, I’ll tell you about his family. Both of his parents are dead by You Know Who’s hands as you probably know already. His only other family is his aunt, uncle and their bully son - very unpleasant Muggles who treat him like rubbish.”

“So far you’re only proving to me how much he dislikes Muggles. More motivation to open the Chamber.”

Merlin groaned and pulled on the ends of his scarf.

“That’s not what I’m saying. Hogwarts is his escape from the horrible life he’s led so far, but immediately after he arrived here, he was given this ‘famous’ label which he doesn’t want. He just wants to be a normal kid but things out of his control keep interfering with that.”

“I get it. He’s got a lot to be angry about.”

“And you’re making it worse, Jack. Stop trying to pick a fight with him.”

“Is it my fault that he’s got a temper and no self-control?”

“You know exactly what you’re doing.” Merlin gritted his teeth. “He’s under a lot of stress and you’re exploiting that.”

“So he’s the only one that is allowed to be stressed? I should get myself a scar, maybe I’ll be given some slack.”

Merlin shook his head.

“You keep flipping this in the wrong direction, Jack.”

“Am I?” Jack took a long breath and squeezed the crystal. He’d had enough of this topic and did not want to argue anymore. “Just don’t talk to me about Potter.”

Merlin leaned back in his chair. “No problem. Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

Jack scratched his head and stared at his unfinished essay.

“Is there a way to substitute frog brains in potions?”
Merlin smiled. “Nice topic change. I’m going to have to think about that but maybe. Do we have a potion coming up that calls for it?”

“It’s for the essay Snape gave us.”

Merlin pursed his lips.

Jack exhaled loudly. “I knew it. You weren’t paying attention in class. We have an essay due Monday on possible uses of moonstone and frog brains.”

“Oh.” Merlin spun his scarf like a little helicopter. “I suppose I should get started on that.”

“You should. I found several recipes that call for frog brains and worry that Snape might have us make one of them soon. I don’t want to use a brain in a potion, even if it’s just a frog. It’s still an innocent creature which had to die just for this stupid potion that will be flushed down the drain.”

Jack felt anger build inside him at the thought of how many students would be preparing that potion - each would be taking multiple lives and for what? Just for the sake of learning? This wasn’t right.

“There has to be a way to use something else.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Merlin said, leaning toward him again. “Let me help.”

Jack got back to rereading his last sentence, but Merlin wasn’t done distracting him.

“But also, I think it’s time we had our official Old Religion meeting. That is if you’re interested.”

Jack grinned at this unexpected news. Finally, Merlin was talking like a friend.

Chapter End Notes

Yay. Are you excited? I am. Let’s talk magic!
Merlin’s heart pounded as he waited in the Transfiguration classroom. Oh, he should’ve done this earlier. It had been so long since he’d been able to teach Old Religion to someone, he forgot the rush it came with.

But this time it was so much more because of multiple emotions clashing in his heart. There was hope, frustration, fear, excitement and it all blended into one massive nervous blob which seemed to have situated itself somewhere in his throat.

The reason for his frustration sat in the corner of the classroom. He was very irritated at the idea of McGonagall - frustration number one - supervising this meeting. She was one of those witches who were set in her ways and he expected that she viewed his methods and views as outdated. Moreover, he would have to watch what he said so she wouldn’t catch on that his understanding of magic was too advanced for a child. He was tired of pretending.

But as one frustration wasn’t enough, Dumbledore came with her.

“T hope you don’t mind I've invited myself in.”

Merlin gently inclined his head. “No problem.”

What was he doing there? Was this because of the whole Snape thing? Was Dumbledore going to check that he wasn’t teaching these children how to curse their Potion Master on Merlin’s behalf?

He decided to ignore the white beard for now. This was too important to waste his focus.

Elsa, Jack and Luna walked in, excited to learn from him but they had no idea how much it meant to him, how much he wanted them to be able to learn. It had been decades since he had taken on a pupil and centuries since he had multiple students. He was beyond excited about the prospect of all three of them succeeding.

He wanted this meeting to feel more like a gathering of friends and not a lesson so he did some rearranging. He moved tables to the side, exposing the center of the room, and arranged seven chairs in a circle.

Elsa and Luna sat on Jack’s sides while Merlin remained standing.

The trio sat down and ended up in an arrangement that Merlin’s back was to the blackboard, the first-years were on his right and the second-years on his left. They all studied each other with varying levels of curiosity.
Merlin fiddled with the ends of his scarf and broke the silence.

“I’m glad you’re all here. I invited Hermione, Harry and Ron because they’re my friends too, and as Luna pointed out to me, one shouldn’t keep something this important from his friends.” He cleared his throat and pointed at the first-years. “Just so we all know each other, these are Luna, Jack and Elsa. We’re joined by Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore who will... uh... monitor that we’re not doing anything inappropriate here.”

Merlin shot Dumbledore a scrutinizing look and the old wizard gently smiled. No. He wasn’t supposed to think about his chaperones.

While the first-years knew the purpose of the meeting, Harry’s trio didn’t. He figured that letting them in on this part of his life was a big step, a step he needed to make if he ever expected Harry to trust him.

“I was pretty cryptic before so let me say it straight out now. I practice Old Religion and we’re here to talk about it.”

Harry’s trio exchanged looks and whispers, and he started the quick explanation.

“Ever since I found out that Jack and Elsa share my beliefs, we’ve decided to do this together. We’ve requested for the school to take our faith into account and excuse us from practices which go against our values. This is our first official meeting and I thought it would be a good opportunity to get any questions out of the way. So, now that you’re all caught up, let’s talk.” He sat at the edge of his chair and wished that they would start asking questions.

Hermione raised her hand and Merlin chuckled. “I’m not a Professor, Hermione. You can just speak up.”

She got flustered. “Sorry, habit. We’re in a classroom and all. What is this Old Religion? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Old Religion is a belief system, a set of customs and practices, but most of all, it is the original magic practiced in these lands.”

“How is it different from the magic practiced now?”

Merlin sighed and saddened. “Wizards and witches no longer take the time to understand magic, or to respect it. There is a delicate balance between people, magical creatures and the elements, between life and death, good and evil. Ignorance of this sacred balance prevents many from truly mastering the raw magic that’s around them.”

The trio exchanged excited glances.

“You’re going to teach us different magic?”

Merlin realized that he was setting himself up for a lot of disappointment.

“I should probably make this clear. Not every witch and wizard can wield this magic. It is something you are born with.”

“What if none of us can wield it?” Elsa asked with doubt in her voice. “You’re so convinced that we can but we haven’t tried yet.”

“We’ll find this out today,” Merlin tried to assure her. “Before we start though, I want to make sure
that all questions are out of the way.”

Elsa continued, “Yes, I do have a question. You said before that all magic practiced in these lands used to be Old Religion. What happened? Why is it rare now?”

Merlin smiled at her sadly. “Fear. People were scared of what sorcerers were capable of.”

“Muggles?”

“Yes. Muggles. Magic used to be an important part of society here. Druids were religious leaders, political and legal advisors. Physicians openly practiced healing magic. Seers were revered for their connection to the Goddess. But then fear sunk in because in the wrong hands, magic can be used as a weapon. One prejudiced king banned all magic and ordered all known and suspected practitioners to be hunted down and executed. But the worst part of it was that the Great Purge started from those who were in the spotlight and those also happened to be most knowledgeable. And so the survivors had no more High Priests and Priestesses to guide them, to continue the values previously taught openly. New generations of children with magic were born with no elders to teach them. Whoever still practiced, did so in secret.”

“Like your family.”

“Yes.”

Luna spoke up, “Did the original Merlin you’re named after practice Old Religion?”

Merlin smiled broadly. He always found it amusing to talk of himself in the third person. “He did.”

“Are you his descendant?”

A gasp went through the group. Ah, the dreaded descendant question, the curse of his immortal existence.

His smile fell. “No. As far as I know, Merlin never had children. There are no descendants of Merlin.”

The kids looked rather disappointed at that.

Luna was observing him with a tilted head. “Do you celebrate holidays?”

“Yes. Samhain has just passed. You know it as Halloween. It marks the start of the dark part of the year. From sunset to sunset magic is at its strongest and the veil between the worlds is the thinnest. It’s a time to remember your dead but also it’s possible to communicate with them.”

“Have you done that or seen it done?”

She asked like someone who wanted to dive right into it.

“Yes. I would be very cautious though. More potent magic means more potent consequences of upsetting the balance. So promise me you will not attempt to do anything like that on your own.”

“You think I could talk to my mom?” She asked with wide eyes.

“If you’d like, we can try on Beltane. That’s the Spring equivalent of Samhain, the beginning of the lighter part of the year.”

He felt sympathetic to the girl. Had he not dived into his memories countless times just to see his
mother one more time?

“Beltane, Samhain, aren’t those pagan terms?” Hermione asked.

Ron snickered. “I’ve heard of those pagan rituals. They involve human sacrifice. Virgins, right? Or did you evolve to roosters now?”

Merlin’s mood instantly switched. He was not going to put up with jokes like that.

“Evolve?”

It took all his restraint to not crush this ignorant boy in front of him. He put his hands on his knees in a very controlled manner to prevent them from shaking. He had heard accusations like this one many times. These modern wizards thought they were better than him when in fact they were feeble shadows of sorcerers of the past.

“Yes. I am Pagan. Yes. I believe in the Triple Goddess and in maintaining the balance of magic. But no,” his voice was rising. “I do not dance naked in the moonlight. And no, I do not sacrifice virgins at the altar!”

Merlin continued staring the ginger boy down while Ron leaned as far back as his chair allowed.

“Relax, mate,” Harry said with a nervous chuckle.

Merlin finally released his deadly stare and blinked at Harry.

“Sorry. I lost it for a moment.” He took a long breath. “You might want to learn some tact, Ron. It will serve you well in life.”

He closed his eyes and tried to get a grip. He was going to scare them away if he didn’t tone it down. Ron was just a rude kid. Merlin had to be more tolerant.

When he opened his eyes, he caught Hermione making wild gestures at Ron.

“What did I say?” the boy whispered with a shrug.

“You offended him,” Hermione answered and mouthed, “Apologize.”

Merlin smiled at them, previous quarrel forgotten.

“I’m sorry, it got tense here. Let’s forget that and move on to something fun.”

Elsa started tapping her foot. “Will you teach us any magic today?”

“Actually, I was thinking to do a little exercise.”

He said nothing but thought at them, If you can hear this, raise your hand.

Over in the classroom, the twins, Luna and Harry lifted their hands.

“What are you doing, mate?” Ron asked while Hermione looked between them bewildered.

“You didn’t hear it?” Harry asked his friends and they looked at him as if he was mental.

“Hear what?”

“You have no idea how happy it makes me to see so many of you with your hands up. Now, to
explain. I’ve asked whoever could hear me to raise their hand. If you did, it means you were born with the ability to hear someone’s nonverbal broadcast and you can learn how to do it as well.”

“Telepathy?” Elsa jumped up from her seat.

“Yes.”

She ran out of her chair and grabbed his shoulders. “You must teach us! We’ve always wanted to be able to do that!”

Merlin was slightly taken aback by the intensity of her excitement. There was a glint of madness in her eye as she stared him down and he shrank down in his chair. How did this girl have such intimidating effect on him?

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but it isn’t something that can be taught quickly. I’ll start by getting you used to the feeling by broadcasting to you from time to time.”

Elsa finally realized that she was making him uncomfortable and backed away. “Of course.”

Luna raised her hand. “Is there a way to not hear the voice?”

“Yes,” Merlin focused on her, but glanced sideways at Elsa, not completely over the bewilderment of the effect she had on him. “Good question. You can choose to not receive the broadcast in a similar manner to occlumency, but this is another difficult ability which would take time to master.”

“Occlumency.” Hermione spoke up. “That’s the art of closing your mind to legilimency. Is your telepathy similar to legilimency?”

“Another good question. Yes, it is similar in the meaning that it is a mental ability. No, because it isn’t an invasion of the mind. I like to use the word broadcast because it describes it best. I broadcast my message and whoever has the internal radio can hear it. Unlike with legilimency, I don’t invade anyone’s mind to do it. I can’t hear your thoughts when I do this and you can’t hear mine. It is a communication method, not a violation of your privacy.”

Hermione nodded, opened her mouth and then closed it. Merlin guessed what she wanted to say.

“I know what you’ll ask me next. Can I teach you? I don’t know but we can try. It doesn’t hurt to try, right?”

Hermione smiled and looked at the floor shyly.

“Is there a way to make it private?” Elsa asked.

“Yes. It requires more focus to send a private broadcast to a selected person so that lesson would come after you learn how to send a general broadcast.”

Elsa exchanged a look with her brother and they smiled at each other. He got their interest.

Merlin clapped his hands together. “Now, on to the test part of our lesson.” He giggled and looked around the gathered kids. “It’s such a rush. I feel like a professor.”

He walked up to the blackboard and wrote in runes. He clapped the chalk out of his hands and turned back to the children.

“Can any of you read runes?”
Luna raised her hand, surprising everyone. The girl was a Ravenclaw but she better fit the eccentric stereotype of that House, not the brainy one.

“Fleoge,” she read.

Merlin pointed a finger at her. “Yes! Good job, Luna.”

“Fly,” Elsa translated and Merlin beamed at her.

“You kids are awesome.”

“Is that what it means?” Luna asked. “I can read them but I don’t really know this language.”

“Well, this is my homework for you, kids,” Merlin said, grinning broadly. “Whenever you find the time, look up ancient runes in the library. Look for Old English, there are others and you don’t want to confuse yourself. So, Fleoge is an easy spell and it has a similar result to one charm you already know. As the name suggests, you use it to make an object fly.”

And he demonstrated it by saying the word and making his chair float up and move around the classroom. He watched the kids observe it, brought the chair back and sat down but had a hard time sitting still.

“I want each one of you to try it. Pick an object - start with something small - imagine it flying and say the word.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione pulled out their wands and Merlin immediately put his hands up. “No wands. Did you see me draw a wand?”

The trio exchanged bewildered looks and put their wands away.

McGonagall spoke up from the back of the class. “No wands? You’re talking about wild magic, Mr. Ealdor. This is unstable, dangerous magic you’re teaching them.”

He turned to her and decided to use her objection to his advantage.

“Yes, Professor. That’s exactly my point! Untrained magic is difficult to control, which is why we practice and learn Old Religion, so we understand what we’re doing and don’t upset the balance.”

She scoffed at him and exchanged whispers with Dumbledore and Merlin reminded himself that he wasn’t supposed to worry about them.

The children picked a few items from nearby shelves, things like books and objects McGonagall used in her transfiguration demonstrations, and all tried to use the spell but didn’t get it on their first try.

“Come on,” Merlin encouraged while walking around them, “this isn’t your first time performing magic. It takes more than just saying Fleoge. Do it with feeling. Will your object to fly.”

Then the first object flew up which was a colorfully decorated wooden box.

“That’s brilliant, Luna,” Merlin said, looking at the girl. “I’m liking you more with every second.”

She smiled in her usual detached way while on the other side of the circle Hermione Granger growled. The girl was used to being the best in class so she probably felt competitive at the moment.

He observed the twins now, hoping his suspicions about them were correct. They whispered to each
other, maybe exchanging tips, and then, two small books floated up in front of them.

“I knew you two could do it,” Merlin praised and moved on to the remaining three children.

“What just happened to your eyes?” Elsa asked her brother in a worried tone.

Merlin interrupted, “Sorry, I forgot to mention. When you use Old Religion magic, your eyes will flash amber.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, not having seen what Elsa referred to.

Merlin walked up to her, bent down, said, “Watch mine,” and said the spell again, making her book float.

The girl gasped while staring up at him and brought her hand up, stopping just before touching his face.

“Why?”

“Well, haven’t you noticed that when you use a wand, the wand tip often lights up or that different charms emit different colored energy?” He shrugged. “Magic creates light.”

She locked her brown eyes with his and he felt uneasy at the prolonged gaze. He looked away at Harry just in time to see the boy’s green eyes flash amber and his water goblet float up.

“Yes!” he exclaimed.

This was a very unexpected but welcome surprise.

“Blimey, Harry,” Ron said. “How are you doing that?”

“I don’t know, I just am.”

Harry grinned and lost concentration, resulting in his goblet flying out, heading for the window. Merlin stopped it just in time before it broke the stained glass and guided it back to him.

“Marvelous job, Harry. Just keep your focus until your object is back in your hand.”

Harry took his goblet back with a “Thanks” and got back to practicing.

Merlin looked around at the kids, feeling encouraged by the positive results.

“Keep trying. I want you to practice this spell until you have complete control of it. There are others similar to it which will be easy to use once you master this.”

His heart swelled with pride as he looked at various objects flying past him. This far exceeded his expectations. He only hoped that the twins would be able to do this but now he found two more children he could teach. Most of all, one of them was Harry and this could mean a monumental change in their friendship. They had something else in common now.

He sat back down and looked at each child. Luna was making her box dance in front of her. Elsa was experimenting with control, trying out different speeds and heights and whispered to herself like a mad scientist. Jack got bored with his earlier object, this time picked up a cauldron and flew it around the classroom with ease. Merlin kept an eye on him to ensure the boy didn’t lose control and throw the heavy object at one of the other students, especially at Harry who he was staring daggers at.
Over on the other side of the room, Harry was having fun with his water goblet, making it fly in circles. Ron did not succeed at making his own goblet fly and looked rather defeated. Hermione also wasn’t able to perform the spell and looked on the verge of tears.

Merlin got up and crouched in front of her.

“It’s okay if you can’t do it. It’s actually a pretty rare ability. Not being able to do this does not make you less of a witch.”

She blinked a lot and wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Hey, maybe this will cheer you up. Professor McGonagall is trying to make her hat fly behind you and she can’t do it either. I know for a fact that Professor Dumbledore also can’t do it. Despite that, they’re both pretty skilled and powerful, wouldn’t you say?”

The girl quickly glanced at McGonagall who kept repeating *Fleoge* but her hat would not budge from her lap.

“How do you know this about Professor Dumbledore?”

“He’s friends with my uncle.”

Hermione nodded and tried to smile although she still looked disappointed.

He was not disappointed at all. To have four out of six children perform the spell was outstanding. This meeting was a huge success.

Ron stopped trying the spell and stared at Merlin now.

“You were keeping a pretty big secret from us.”

If only the boy knew just how deep his secrets went.

“It’s not really a secret but I don’t blabber about it. Not everyone is accepting of my beliefs, you see.”

Ron crossed his arms.

“What exactly do you believe in? You weren’t very specific earlier.”

Merlin reminded himself to be patient although this boy had quite a talent for raising his blood pressure.

“Do you expect me to explain it all in one sentence? Ask me a specific question.”

He was aware that everyone was quiet now and was listening to their conversation. Ron shifted in his seat and pursed his lips while thinking. Merlin got back to his seat and continued staring at the redhead, waiting for questions.

"How much wandless magic can you do?"

Merlin looked at the floor and swallowed. This question would be easier to answer without McGonagall there.

"A lot."
“Then why bother coming to Hogwarts at all?”

“There is still value in learning wand magic and everything else they teach here.”

“How come there are no Old Religion schools?”

“It’s difficult to find people who are born with this ability. Unless Hogwarts students were tested upon entrance...”

This idea had occurred to him in the past and he came close to realizing it more than once but in the end, the school’s Headmaster always backed away before allowing him to screen the children. He hadn’t tried to raise this question with Dumbledore yet. Maybe if what he started here went well, the old wizard would give him a chance?

“Why aren’t they?”

Merlin sighed. “It’s... political, I suppose. It’s not a branch of magic, Ron. It couldn’t possibly be a Hogwarts subject because it goes against a lot of the teachings here. Hogwarts Headmasters always worried that students would drop out to pursue Old Religion instead. So, all we can do is find individuals and teach them.”

Merlin dropped his eyes to the floor. Was this really all he could do? Was there anything he was missing? Hogwarts founders found a way to discover children to teach. Could he design something similar?

No matter how he designed it though, it would always be seen as stealing students from Hogwarts - the school very tightly bound to the Ministry of Magic. They would see his school as a threat and his students as targets. There would be a civil war and he didn’t want it to come to that.

“What exactly is this meeting about? You made it sound like these two,” Ron pointed at the twins, “practice with you but it looks like they’re clueless about everything you talked about.”

Merlin played with his scarf. The boy was very close to unraveling the neat little story Merlin spun up with Jack for the school. It wouldn’t be a problem if only McGonagall wasn’t hanging on to every word they said.

“This meeting is a gathering of friends who have the same interests,” Merlin tried to answer calmly. “The twins were not brought up with the full teachings of Old Religion and wanted to learn what I knew about it.”

Ron scrunched his brows like he was ready to go into a full-on interrogation.

*Can you help me out here, Harry? Merlin reached out and Harry jumped in his seat from surprise. There are things I can’t say with the teachers present.*

Harry’s eyes met Merlin’s and he hoped the boy saw only sincerity.

Ron was about to ask something else when Harry leaned in and whispered to him. They exchanged a silent shrug conversation but then the redhead leaned back in his chair, apparently satisfied, but with a look in his eye that he had a lot more questions.

What worried Merlin though was that he looked more hostile than he had ever seen on him.
The aftermath

Jack climbed the stairs with Merlin as they made their way back to the Gryffindor Tower and couldn’t help but sneak glances at him. He saw him in a completely different light today.

There was a magical charge in the air when Merlin got angry at Ron and it gave Jack a tiny glimpse into how powerful his friend was. He started to understand how much Merlin was holding back. He could always sense that Merlin was different from ordinary wizards, but now, he knew that it was a lot more than that. He wasn’t just different. He was special, but at the same time, he didn’t brag about it or abuse it and that modesty just made his uniqueness stand out even more.

Merlin noticed. “Jack, will you please tell me why you’ve been staring at me? I’m feeling pretty self-conscious right now so I’d really love it if you just voiced your thoughts for once.”

Jack bit his lip and wasn’t sure how to say this. If Merlin was hiding this much magic, he had to have a reason for it. That day, after the Mirror of Erised, when Merlin interrogated him and Jack spilled a bunch of secrets accidentally, they made a small pact with each other. They were not going to ask questions but wait until the other was ready to reveal his secret and he suspected that Merlin wasn’t ready yet.

“I just got a glimpse of the real Merlin today, that’s all,” Jack said quickly.

His friend worried his brow. “Oh, really? You were probably the most informed of my tricks in that meeting.”

Jack was also the most skilled at sensing magic at that meeting and in that short span of time his friend was a blazing ball of power.

Merlin didn’t let go yet. “Was it the telepathy? Elsa seems excited about that.”

“We both are. Expect lots of questions from her.”

Merlin grinned. “I’m actually looking forward to teaching you. It’s been a while since I knew anyone I could talk to in that way. We could have all sorts of fun once you learn it.”

They were a few steps behind Potter and his friends. Jack wondered if they realized how lucky they were that Merlin was willing to share their knowledge with them. Jack did and he felt honored.

“It’s something specific, isn’t it?” Merlin asked, still worried about Jack’s new interest in him.

“As you said, it wasn’t anything new. I guess, I just saw the same trick from a different perspective.”

If by trick he meant being more impressive than any of the teachers in this school. He couldn’t wait to see what he could learn from him. Merlin didn’t push further and Jack tried to not stare at him anymore.

Hermione turned and climbed the stairs sideways so she could talk to Merlin.

“You know runes. Are you fluent in Old English?”

Merlin smirked at her. “Yes.”

At least she looked properly impressed.
“Next year, they’re letting us take more classes and I’m definitely taking Ancient Runes. Will you help me learn? I’d love to get a head start.”

Merlin chuckled. “Of course. I’ll gladly repay the favor.”

Jack looked between the beaming Hermione and his friend and wondered if their relationship was getting any further along. They looked cute together.

As soon as they climbed through the portrait hole, Potter pulled Merlin by his arm and they went into the corner of the common room. Even though Jack didn’t feel invited to this conversation, he felt protective of his friend so he tagged along.

“So, what was it that you didn’t want to say in there?” Potter asked.

Merlin heaved a sigh. “Well, Ron was onto something and was going to stir up trouble if he continued in that direction.”

The redhead crossed his arms. “I knew it. Spill it, Ealdor.”

Merlin shot Jack a look but then explained. “I didn’t want you to poke deeper into why Jack and Elsa don’t appear to know Old Religion.”

Jack swallowed, seeing three pairs of eyes shift from looking at Merlin to now looking at him. Why was this suddenly about him?

Merlin continued. “It was true what I said before. Jack didn’t want to perform certain spells because they’re immoral in his eyes. Old Religion gives him a way to avoid them. It’s not a total lie. We’re just stretching the truth so it fits our circumstances.”

Weasley was still frowning but Potter smirked at Merlin.

“You’re using your religion to get him out of exams? Can I get on that plan?”

Jack was scowling now. That was not what they were doing. “I’m not getting out of exams. I don’t want to use my magic on animals like a cruel monster.”

“McGonagall is not here now so you can drop the act,” Weasley said and turned to Potter. “Harry, this is a brilliant idea. So, all we have to do is say we believe in all that pagan stuff and McGonagall will be off our backs.”

“Ron,” Hermione hit his arm. “Think about what you’re saying.”

“Hermione, it’s perfect. We’ll only use it for the really hard stuff. We’ll do all of the others.”

“This is such a relief!” Harry grinned. “Some of those spells are so difficult.”

“Hold on. You misunderstood,” Merlin put his hands up. “We’re not doing the animal transfiguration spells but McGonagall will give us equally-challenging spells to perform instead. We’re not doing less work - just different work.”

Potter’s and Weasley’s grins faded and Jack’s opinion of them dropped even lower than what it was before. They weren’t actually interested in what Merlin could teach them. They just wanted to slack off. They were given this wonderful opportunity to learn magic not only in this school but now also from Merlin and all they could think of was how they could learn less. They were so entitled, just waited for it all to be handed to them when Jack had to constantly fight to keep this opportunity from
“Jack, calm down. Why are you angry?”

Merlin was suddenly in front of him with his hands on Jack’s shoulders. Angry? Who was angry?

“I’m calm,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Downright serene. Listen, why won’t you wait for me in the dorm?”

“Why?”

Jack did not want to get shooed away like a fly. If Potter was staying, he was staying. At the moment, Scarred Wonder looked maybe not scared, but at least weary of him and that just suited him fine.

“Because you’re holding that wand like you want to attack someone.”

Jack glanced down at his hand and, look at that, he was holding a wand. When did he pull it out? He wasn’t sure but he felt ready to use it.

Merlin whispered, “Are you angry at me for inviting them? I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. It was a last-minute decision.”

“Not at you.” Jack looked into his friend’s eyes which were like pools of water illuminated by sunshine like straight out of a postcard from some tropical beach. They were as unique as him.

These two did not deserve him. Was it selfish of him to want his special friend just for himself? Was it arrogant to think that he deserved him more? Maybe, but that was what he really felt right now. They just wanted to use Merlin, they weren’t his real friends. Why couldn’t he see that?

Merlin’s expression lightened up. “We’ll just talk here for awhile. You go to the dorm.”

Jack stood there and couldn’t believe it. Merlin chose them over him again. Why was he surprised? It would always happen. Harry Potter would always win.

He ran out the portrait hole and heard Merlin’s voice behind him, “Come back before curfew.”

Curfew? Who cared about curfew. He just wanted to get away.

He ran down the stairs and got annoyed at how many there were. He jumped over them and found it easy. Just a leap and a soft landing. Repeat it a few times and done - a much more efficient way of getting down.

He stomped down a corridor and couldn’t stand the sound of his own footsteps. He hated his shoes. He stuffed them in his pockets and basked in the silence. He heard voices and didn’t want to deal with people looking at him so he made a sudden turn.

He wanted to do something. His hands were tingling, magic was building under his fingertips and if he didn’t let it out, he would explode. He could go outside and bring down winter upon the whole bloody castle but thought it would’ve been unfair to the creatures of the Forbidden Forest who weren’t ready for winter.

He went up the main stairs, enjoying the feeling of climbing and sped up, going higher and higher, putting more distance from everyone. The staircase finally ended and he turned, stomping without a direction. What was he doing here anyway? Ugh. Where else could he go?
The corridor ended and Jack turned around. He just wanted a place of his own for once. Back in the caves, it was easy to find solitude when he wanted it, when he didn’t want to be found. But this castle was full of so many people, he couldn't stand just how many of them there were. He liked company but there were limits.

He reached the staircase again and looked to the floors below. If he went down, people would find him. They were crawling through the corridors like bugs, bunching in groups, always whispering while looking at him, staring at the freak.

He didn’t want to go back down there so he turned back and walked down the corridor again. Frost started building under his feet and he considered just releasing his magic right here in this corridor when he noticed a large double door which hadn’t been there before.

Jack stopped by it and felt compelled to open it, feeling that it was there for him. This castle had a lot of strange magic. Sometimes, it liked to play tricks on the unsuspecting by showing doors which were really walls, just pretending. Once, one of them laughed at him as he pulled the handle just to see it turn into flat stone. But this door opened and when he entered, wall torches started lighting up to reveal a very large space.

Jack walked inside and marvelled at it. It was a large room with very tall ceiling, full of decorated arches but the decorations, and the colors, they all resembled a cavern, complete with earth icicles, the musty smell and the sound of dripping water. He giggled.

“It is a room just for me.”

This castle was awesome. It produced a room he was just thinking about! He ran around the large space to explore it and checked the ceiling, hoping to see huggers but there were none.

He frowned. A perfect cavern room would have had huggers.

For now, he had to entertain himself with some magic instead.

To start, he frosted the whole place and watched with satisfaction as it changed colors from shades of brown to white. White was so much cleaner and, ironically, warmer, less depressing. Then, he looked up at the ceiling and made frostflakes fall down in a steady stream. This was more difficult and took some concentration to maintain, but he wanted to push himself.

He laid down on the cool floor and stared at his frostflakes. When he first escaped with Elsa, he was watching clouds pass by and somehow figured out how to turn them into snow clouds. He wished he could really make it snow in here, but there were no clouds for him to convert. Mother used to be able to conjure snow clouds in any space that had a tall enough ceiling but he hadn’t figured out how to do that yet.

He stopped his frostflakes and concentrated on the ceiling, thinking hard about clouds and snow, and willed it to create there but nothing happened.

He took his wand out of his pocket and wondered if it could help him. He pointed it at the ceiling and tried it again, this time focusing on the castle’s magic, channeling it.

“Snow clouds,” he said and waved the wand, hoping that maybe he could invent his own spell.

A few white sparks came out the end and he groaned. He supposed, he would have to look up what the real spell for it was.

Magic was so unpredictable. Sometimes, it came easy to him and did exactly what he wanted, other
times, it was just beyond his skill. He yearned for the day when it would all become easy. How many winters would he have to learn to get to that point?

He got up as another idea came to him. He braced his feet on the frosted floor and channelled the castle’s magic again.

“Avis,” he said confidently.

Immediately, several small huggers sprouted out of the tip of his wand and he laughed out loud. When he first tried this spell weeks ago, it didn’t work because he didn’t know how to channel the castle’s magic yet.

He watched the huggers as they flew around, waiting for a command from him. He waved his wand and they responded by flying to the same rhythm. He experimented with a few movements until he got the hang of it and could order them in any direction he wanted. For now, he sent them to the ceiling to rest.

He observed them as they hung upside down and remembered what Merlin said when he taught him this spell.

*It’s an advanced spell.*

“How about this, Potter?” Jack said and his voice echoed in the cavern room. “I bet you can’t do that. No scar will help you here.”

He would show them all. He’d show Potter that he was better at magic and he would show Merlin who was worthy to be his friend.

Merlin looked after Jack who ran down the stairs. Why did the boy keep running away from him? He seemed to have a better attitude towards Merlin today, the crystal bribe worked, so what set him off again?

He went back in and found the trio in front of the fireplace. He sat down in the empty seat next to Hermione with the boys opposite of him.

“Sorry, I don’t know why Jack has been acting so tense lately.”

He hoped that Jack’s behavior wouldn’t mess up the little progress he made with Harry.

“So, will you show us some cool tricks?” Ron asked.

“Tricks?”

Was this what he was now reduced to - a pet or a circus animal? He couldn’t help but feel offended at this but he supposed they were children. Magic was all about tricks for them. He had to bite down his pride and be a good little pet.

“*Gewyrc an lif,*” he said and a blue butterfly flew out of his cupped hand.

Hermione gasped at it. “It’s beautiful.”

Harry looked after the butterfly. “You conjured it, just like that, like it’s easy.”

Merlin shrugged. Spells like that were always easy for him but he supposed he wasn’t a normal case.
Ron scowled like he was permanently dissatisfied and crossed his arms.

“Why were you hiding all of this?”

“Not really hiding. I just wasn’t ready to share it before.”

Ron wasn’t done. “And the whole thing with the pagan stuff. I get it why you’re using this magic, it is sort of cool, but why bother with the religion thing?”

Merlin closed his eyes and tried to calm himself.

“You might not realize this but you’re insulting me, Ron.”

“Will you stop being so sensitive?”

Weren’t these just the perfect words to raise his blood pressure again.

“If you knew what I know and experienced what I have, you would believe too.”

Ron scoffed. “You’re like a religious fanatic or something.”

“Ron!” Hermione scolded.

“Why do you have such a problem with me?” Merlin asked. This kid had it in for him since the beginning.

“Because I can see what you’re doing.” Ginger’s voice rose as he pointed his finger at Merlin in accusation. “You’ve been trying to worm your way into our group and I want to know why!”

Harry looked down at his feet and Merlin wondered if he felt the same way.

“Is it so hard to believe that I want to be friends with you three?”

“I get it. You’re an outsider with your weird magic and,” he shook his head, “beliefs, so you want to latch on to the famous Harry Potter so people would think you’re cool.”

“Ron, stop it!” Hermione shouted and put her hand on Merlin’s. “Why are you so mean?”

Harry was staring at his shoes, not confirming or denying Ron’s opinion. Merlin started to understand why Ron was so hostile - he was protective over Harry, wanted to ensure that people didn’t use him or exploit him. Even though his words hurt, Merlin gave him some respect for that.

He wasn’t finished. “You’re so weird, maybe you’re the Heir of Slytherin.”

Merlin dropped his head. Maybe he deserved this for what he put Jack through. It was only fitting that tables would turn against him.

“That’s enough!” Hermione shouted and pulled Merlin by his hand.

She led him a few steps away from the couches and wrapped her arms around him. He felt so numb at the moment, her friendly gesture warmed his heart.

“Do all of you feel the same way?” he asked softly.

She released her embrace and took his hand in hers.

“I’ll talk some sense into Ron. I’m sorry he’s being so mean to you. You’re not mad?”
She raised her eyes to him and he shook his head. He wasn’t angry. He was disappointed because his plan had the opposite effect from what he intended. He thought showing them who he was would help break through that last barrier of mistrust but it increased their suspicions, at least, Ron’s suspicions and Ron’s opinion mattered to Harry.

She lingered there, rocking on her feet, still holding his hand, and he realized that she might be his last hope for not losing everything he worked for.

“Thank you for taking my side, Hermione.”

She glanced down but then back up to his eyes again.

“I will always take your side.” She gave him another hug and whispered in his ear. “I’m glad you told us. Even if I can’t do this magic, I hope you’ll invite me again.”

He disengaged himself from her and felt a little awkward. She surely was a hugger.

“You’re invited.”

She beamed at him and went back to the couches where she sat down with a bounce.

“Oh, shut up, Ron,” she scolded him even though he didn’t say anything.

Harry chuckled and shot Merlin an amused look.

Merlin wished them a good night and left for his dorm, hoping that Hermione could turn the tides in his favor.

The next morning, Minerva sat down next to Albus in the Great Hall. They exchanged greetings but in her usual fashion, she wasn’t interested in chitchat about the weather, which was dreadful at the moment, and dived right into the topic she wanted to discuss.

“What are your thoughts about the Old Religion meeting yesterday?”

Albus spent a lot of time the night before thinking about that meeting. It felt like he learned more about Merlin during it than during the decades he had known him.

“It was very enlightening.”

He had never seen the immortal sorcerer so nervous. But the most intriguing part of the meeting came at the very end when the question was posed as to why there were no Old Religion schools. Merlin mentioned the need to screen children entering Hogwarts and also about political issues which would arise if such school existed.

And the truth started to unravel. Had there been political issues in the past? Had Merlin tried screening Hogwarts students before? These were all questions which Albus was now anxious to ask of him.

“I’m still worried,” Minerva said while looking at the Gryffindor table. “I’m trying to be accepting of this ancient belief but that wandless magic troubles me. I think a staff member should always be present during these meetings to ensure no one gets hurt. You’re familiar with Ealdor family. Do all of them practice this magic? How well can they control it?”

Ealdor family. It was really sad to hear a reminder that Merlin had absolutely no family or descendants. Albus supposed, he wouldn’t have any either. It was too late for him now. The thought
of not having children never bothered him before but there was something sad about the realization that he wasn’t leaving any of himself behind.

“They have exceptional control over their wandless magic, Minerva.”

“I have a theory that he performs so poorly in my class because of his aversion to wand magic. He also appears to be a Legimimens,” she continued. “I get the feeling that anyone who can do that broadcasting can invade a mind if he wants to. That is a very young age to possess such advanced skills, Headmaster. Were you aware of it?”

He decided to tell her the truth. “Yes, he’s a Legimimens. I was not aware of this broadcasting skill but I’m not very surprised.”

“He gets very defensive when people question his faith. For a moment, I was worried for young Weasley,” she joked.

“Indeed. He’s quite proud of his ancient beliefs. It would be unwise to challenge him on that.”

“And he knows runes already.”

It appeared that Minerva was checking off a list of everything odd about Merlin. If she continued at this, she would have to come to the conclusion that he couldn’t possibly be a child. Oh, Merlin, you slipped in your act.

“Is there anything else I should know about him?”

Her question was innocent but he knew what was behind it. She was starting to understand that there was something strange about Merlin and that Albus knew what it was. He supposed he would have to fill her in eventually but decided to wait.

Instead, he had to remind the young sorcerer to try harder to appear childish. If he continued exposing himself like this, soon, more people would start noticing. There was little chance of people guessing who he really was, even when he so boldly used his real name, but they could come to even more worrisome conclusions.

“He means well,” he finally said. As troublesome as Merlin was, it was a good thing that he was on their side.

Minerva finally dropped the topic and Albus was left alone to his thoughts.

He spent the rest of the breakfast observing the young sorcerer among his friends and wondering if they also started making their own lists of Merlin’s oddities.

Later that day, Severus visited him in the office and asked to use the pensive again.

“Be my guest. Your memory is still in there.”

“Thank you, Headmaster.”

He proceeded to dive into the memory, come out of it, write on a piece of parchment, and then, continue going back in to repeat the process. Once he appeared to be done, he finally explained.

“I’m making a list of everyone that was there that day.”

“Oh, really?”
Albus should’ve known that he wouldn’t drop the issue this easily. He supposed he would be just as
desperate to find the culprit if he was the one that was cursed.

“I will start from these,” Severus held up the parchment with his list of names.

Albus hoped he wasn’t going to harass these children. “What do you intend to do?”

“I’ve assigned all classes an essay. Now, I just have to compare their handwriting to the letter. Soon,
I’ll be able to unmask who this Three-Headed Moon Frog is.”

Severus left with his list and Albus hoped that Merlin had taken precautions against being discovered
in this way. Should he warn the young sorcerer or let him be caught?
Merlin watched the sun rise over the mountain peaks and marveled at its serene beauty. Maybe it would be a nice day. No sooner he thought those words when clouds moved in, covered up the glowing orb and turned the world into a murky grey again, undoing all its work. He could relate to it.

He ate his breakfast silently while next to him Jack was trying out Fleoge to call various foods to his plate. It actually wasn’t the best spell for a delicate action like that but that didn’t stop the boy from trying. He was determined to master it and Merlin observed it with pleasure. If everything else failed, at least he found new pupils to pass his knowledge to.

He got another surprise that morning as Harry’s trio came over. The boys sat across from him, Hermione sat next to him. This was the first time that they joined him for a meal, he was usually the one who sought them out, so they had his full attention.

Hermione stared at Ron until he rolled his eyes and recited in a monotone voice, “I’m sorry that I made fun of your beliefs. I’m a rude and inconsiderate troll.”

That was the most insincere apology Merlin had ever heard and he couldn’t help but smile at it. It had Hermione written all over it. She was an excellent mediator.

“It was a pleasure meeting you,” he answered and Ron sighed in relief.

The tension at the table deflated and everyone got busy with food.

Jack resumed playing with the Fleoge spell and Merlin had a feeling that he was showing off. Harry was in a good mood and tried the spell as well, but the sandwich he tried to make fly fell apart and spread all over the table.

Merlin chuckled, pulling ham out of his mug, and encouraged the boy anyway. It was going to take them a lot of practice before they both mastered it.

A small group of Hufflepuffs passed by, they gasped and started whispering loud enough for them to hear.

“Look at Saint Potter surrounded by his gang of idiots, Mudbloods, freaks, and losers. This year at least no one talks about his Quidditch since they all hate him. Serves him right. And Flint still points out how I didn’t catch the Snitch first. He could take a bloody break. It wasn’t my fault. Ah, look at that Mudblood Granger with her rabbit teeth...”

Merlin got out of his head, so disgusted from listening to him, he could actually taste it on his tongue,
and found everyone at the table staring at him. He looked around, bewildered. Did something happen while he was busy mind-diving?

Harry and Ron exploded in snorts and giggles. Even Hermione covered her mouth to chuckle.

“What?”

Jack pulled his mouth back in disgust. “Stop dipping your cinnamon bun in mustard sauce. Just watching it makes me gag.”

Merlin looked at the half-eaten bun in his hand and a yellow sauce it was covered in. That would explain the foul taste in his mouth.

He drank his entire mug of water to wash out the flavor while the four kids had their laugh at his expense. What could he do? To not appear like a zombie while listening to someone’s thoughts, he had to do something with his hands, and mishaps like this one were bound to happen. He was glad he didn’t finish this unfortunate flavor bomb.

“When you dipped it, I watched if you would really eat it and you made this face,” Harry demonstrated by squishing his features, “If it was that nasty, why did you keep dipping it?”

“You’re bonkers, Ealdor,” Ron said while trying to pick his next sausage.

Merlin tried to save whatever sense of dignity he had left.

“I was thinking.”

Harry was still chuckling. “Your thinking is hazardous to your health.”

“How are we doing with the potion?” Ron asked Hermione in a whisper.

She shot a worried look at Jack who was ignoring their presence at the moment.

“Lacewings are nearly done. Then, we just need the full moon and we can finish it. We’re nearly there.”

“So what’s our plan for getting the… personal ingredients?” Harry asked.

“We could make a Sleeping Draught,” Hermione volunteered.

“Is that difficult?”

“I can do it.”

Merlin decided that it would be best if he monitored how she made it before she poisoned someone. “I’ll help you.”

Hermione grinned while Ron and Harry sniggered and whispered to each other while looking at him. What was with those two?

The Weasley twins walked by and Merlin overheard part of their conversation.

“I just finished it. My hand aches from all the writing. I hope I never have to write about moonstone and frog brains again.”

The twins said a quick greeting to Harry and the gang while Merlin experienced a sinking sensation
as he realized that he had forgotten to be a student.

“Uh-oh. I forgot about that frog brains essay.”

“Merlin!” Jack exclaimed at him. “I reminded you yesterday! Do you want to have detentions again?”

He shrugged. With all the excitement of the previous day, it flew out of his head.

“We also had a moonstone and frog brains essay,” Hermione said. “I wish you had told me. We could’ve written it together.”

Merlin didn’t care about his grade. He was now more focused on the peculiarity that the first-years, second-years, and fourth-years were all given the same essay assignment. Was Snape getting lazy? He was starting to resemble Lockhart now. So much for redeeming himself.

When they got to their Potions classroom, all students dropped off their essays and Merlin approached the grumpy Professor.

“Professor, can I be given an extension? I’ll have the essay ready later today and will deliver it...”

“No. Five points from Gryffindor, Ealdor,” Snape said all too eagerly. “And detention tonight. Come to my office at seven.”

Merlin walked back to his table and tried to avoid the “I told you so” glare from Jack. He didn’t care anyway.

When he showed up for detention later that day, Snape pointed to a desk for Merlin to stand by where several pieces of parchment, ink and a quill were waiting for him. There was no chair. It seemed that Greasy Git thought that if he wasn’t allowed to sit then no one should be.

“You requested an extension, you get it. Write your essay now.”

Merlin resisted an urge to roll his eyes. Any other student would probably be mortified at the idea of writing an essay like this without having any reference materials on hand but he didn’t have to worry about that.

“Thank you, Professor.”

He knew that he wouldn’t get a good grade anyway, so, to spite the Potions Master some more, he wrote an incredibly detailed and rich paper, worthy of professional publication. He handed it in just half an hour after starting and Snape narrowed his eyes into slits.

“You can’t possibly be finished already.”

Merlin tried to look innocent.

“I’m a fast writer.”

Snape paused, making Merlin hold his parchment in the air for a while but finally took it and unrolled it. While he inspected it, Merlin glanced at the essay Snape was in the middle of grading. It appeared that some words were vanished. Why was he doing that? He hoped that Greasy Git wasn’t planning on changing that student’s essay to fit the grade he wanted to give it.

After seeing that the essay satisfied his length requirements, Snape stared deep into Merlin’s eyes.
Merlin was ready with barriers in his mind and pictured eating a mustard-covered cinnamon bun to discourage further legilimency attempts. He was tempted to retaliate and invade the Potions Master’s mind to find out why he was vanishing words but didn’t want to risk getting caught.

Snape grimaced and it took all of Merlin’s restraint to not burst out laughing. It tasted even worse than it looked.

“In that case, you have time for another. I want two feet of parchment describing the twelve uses of dragon blood.”

Humor drained out of Merlin. He was a Dragonlord, their protector. In his eyes, using the blood of these noble creatures was equivalent to cannibalism.

Snape mistook his mood change for fear. “Problem, Ealdor?”

“No problem, Professor.”

Merlin went back to the table and got started. Oh, he would write him an essay but not about the discoveries made by Dumbledore. There was only one use for dragon’s blood.

The mountain peaks in the distance were white-coated already, symbolizing that the Queen of Winter began her reign. Mother had her magic back and was now surely using it to search for them. Would she charge the school in a full-on offense or would she come peacefully to demand that her children be returned?

Elsa liked it here. She wasn’t ready to let go of it all. She wanted to have an escape plan and their father was it.

Elsa caught up with her brother on the way to class.

"We should go soon.”

"You're saying this like there's an option. McGonagall will be furious if we're late.”

"I don't mean class.”

He stopped in his tracks and smirked.

"You wanna skip class? Elsa,” he waggled his eyebrows, ”have you got the naughty bug?”

Oh, how quickly his mind jumped to mischievous thoughts.

As if on cue, Peeves materialized and giggled.

"Jack-Friend, are you ready for fun?”

She clarified, "I don’t mean skipping either.”

“False alarm, Peeves,” Jack shrugged at his poltergeist friend. “Got my hopes up for nothing.”

“The fairies, Jack. This weekend, we’re going.”

“Can I come?” Peeves asked, bouncing up and down, his hat jingling.

“Can you leave the castle?” Jack asked.
Peeves pouted and blew a raspberry at them.

She was glad the spirit couldn’t follow them. She didn’t think fairies would appreciate a guest like that.

The rest of the week went by quickly and Saturday morning Jack found her at breakfast so they could leave while everyone else was still eating. The grounds were quiet, crisp air greeted them, satisfyingly refreshing and energizing.

“I wore shoes this time,” Jack joked while leading her to the forest. “Watch out for those thorny brambles.”

Elsa looked at the long line of trees awaiting them.

“So how will we know where to go?”

“Reed, the fairy I met, said that we’ll be able to feel their magic and can just follow it.”

Elsa heaved a long sigh. She put all her hopes on his ability to find the fairies and assumed that he knew where they were, but in fact, he had no idea. Why couldn’t he ever plan anything properly?

She pulled out a piece of parchment from her pocket and gave it to him.

“I tried to draw the blue fairy I saw in the mirror. Maybe they will be able to recognize it. What do you think?”

He looked at her drawing while walking. The longer he was silent, the more she was becoming convinced that he was judging her. She tried to do a good job but Luna probably would’ve drawn it better.

“It looks nothing like Reed,” he finally spoke up. “Nice drawing.”

He gave it back to her and she rolled it up quickly. She hoped that fairies wouldn’t feel offended at her drawing skills.

“That’s what they looked like in the mirror.”

They reached the edge of the forest and he looked in both directions while scratching his head.

“Well, how about I go right and you go left? It will be faster.”

“How will I recognize the trail?”

“You can’t miss it. Fairy magic feels awesome.”

She grumbled under her breath but turned left and walked slowly by the tree line, peering curiously inside. The tall trees were obscuring a lot of light, making the forest floor seem menacing but if delicate beings like fairies lived there, it couldn’t be all bad.

She passed by the Gamekeeper’s hut and hoped he was still in the castle, eating breakfast. The forest was forbidden to the students. She would likely get detention if she was caught lurking about it.

She was growing impatient and wondered if there would even be a trail to follow. Fairies were flying creatures. What if their magic trail got swept away by the wind?

And then she felt it. It was like a smell that she could feel within her whole body instead of her nose.
It made her feel warm inside, it compelled her to follow. She sent Jack a signal to call him over and stepped inside the dark forest.

Fallen leaves crunched under her feet as her legs moved on their own accord, guided by the invisible hand of magic.

Someone took her hand and she startled. She sighed in relief, seeing her brother’s smiling face.

“I told you we’ll find the trail.”

There was no more breeze, the air was still and earthy. They walked in silence, appreciating the beauty of the nature magic around them. It was in each creaky tree, rotting log, the soft ground under their feet, even the air felt magical.

There was also some presence nearby. She looked around her but could only see trees.

“The centaurs are watching us again,” Jack said quietly.

“Should we be worried?”

“We’re new here. They don’t know what to expect of us so let’s not give them a reason to think we’re a threat. That time I hurt my foot, a centaur actually helped me find my way back, so they can be nice, but also, he complained that we caused that winter day before. Remember when we played in the Courtyard? It’s not your season,” he mimicked a deep voice and giggled at his poor impersonation.

Elsa huffed. “We’re Winter Spirits. They can’t blame us for sticking to our nature.”

He chuckled at her. “Don’t say it like that if you’re facing one of them.”

A loud sputtering noise interrupted them and they both looked in the direction of where it came from.

“Is that… a car?” Elsa asked incredulously.

She couldn’t think of what else it could have been. It was a blue car with the headlights on, slowly making its way through the trees. It was scratched up, dented and partially covered by green moss. The front windshield was broken and it looked as if vines were growing out of it.

“No driver,” she mused as it passed by.

“That is one magical creature I did not expect to find here.”

They watched it disappear behind the trees and were rooted to the spot even when it was quiet again. A sound of a crow overhead woke them from their stupor and they resumed their trek.

The deeper into the forest they went, the thicker the undergrowth became. Mist hung low over the ground, and even less light penetrated down to the ground. Massive exposed roots were splayed out like fingers, supporting trees so tall, she couldn’t see their tops. They walked under them and Elsa felt tiny as if each step she took shrunk her a little more. She squeezed Jack’s hand who held on to her firmly and smiled at her with reassurance.

“You didn’t want to search for our father before,” she remembered how unenthusiastically he helped her research. “What changed your mind?”

“You did.”
A herd of deer stopped running not far from them, turned their heads and stared at them while turning their ears in different directions. Jack waved at them and they scattered.

He continued, “You reminded me that family is most important. He’s our family too, right?”

They stopped when they met with a wall of thick growth, which was taller than a few men and too thick to even peer through. They found that it was too large to go around and yet the trail definitely led them there. They had to find a way through this ominous thorny bush.

“They probably just fly over it,” Jack said and pulled out his wand. “We could just blast it.”

She grabbed his wrist to stop him.

“It could be a defense, Jack.”

“Oh, you think it will attack us if we try to destroy it?”

“They built a wall so forest creatures wouldn’t wander into their colony. I think they will not appreciate it if we make their home vulnerable.”

Jack smiled at her and put his wand away. “It’s nice to have a smart sister. So, what do you propose?”

She took a few steady breaths. She knew what she wanted to do but was scared that she would fail. Could she control it well enough to not get them hurt? She had been practicing this spell all week and had great success with it. She couldn’t think of any other solution at the moment.

“Tell me what you see when you’re up there.”

He blinked in confusion. “Up where?”

“Fleoge,” she said and made him fly up in the air.

“Whoa,” Jack cried out but then laughed.

Her hand shook as she pointed it at where she wanted him to fly to.

He hovered in place and pointed at the ground. “You were right, it’s a wall. Just set me down there.”

She directed him above the wall and slowly lowered him down. It became difficult once she couldn’t see him.

“Are you far from the ground?”

“Just a little more.”

She strained to keep control of him and felt it slip. He yelped and she heard a thud as he hit the ground.

“I’m okay,” he confirmed and she sighed in relief. “How will you get over?”

“Fleoge,” she directed the spell at herself.

An involuntary little squeak escaped her throat as she felt the magic take hold of her body. The higher she flew up, the tighter the knot in her stomach became. She made an effort to not look down but kept her eyes on the wall of thorns. Her body was rigid with fear and she wanted to get this over
with quickly before she lost control of the spell. She whimpered as she floated above the brambles, worried how painful it would be if she fell down into them. On the other side, she saw Jack on the ground.

“You’re almost there,” he encouraged.

She sped up her flight, impatient to get down, but then didn’t know how to slow it down. His eyes were wide as he saw her fly right at him but did not move out of the way. Instead, he caught her and they both tumbled to the ground.

She held on to him tightly and panted.

“You did it! You were amazing, Elsa!”

Her fingers were frozen stiff as she clutched his robes and her eyes were still closed. At the moment, she just wanted to stay like that. She did not like using that spell on herself, that was certain. She wanted to promise herself ‘Never again,’ but then remembered that they would probably need the same means to get back.

“Elsa?” he whispered. “You should open your eyes.”

She took one long breath and released him, ready to resume their search for the colony.

She got up but didn’t even get a chance to shake the leaves off her robes as a hundred tiny glowing spears surrounded them.

Chapter End Notes

The fairies! Finally.
Also, yes, you will get to read Merlin’s essay on 12 uses of dragon blood later.
Elsa was aware of the danger they were in, but she was in too much awe to think. All she could do is feel and all of her senses feasted. It was as if they stepped into a different dimension. While the forest they went through was dark and ominous, mostly empty and quiet, the fairy colony was teeming with life.

It was significantly warmer here. The trees shimmered with golden and red leaves, sunshine broke through the canopy and streamed through to the ground. But most of all, the place was teeming with seducing magic which brought an involuntary smile to her face.

“How did they get through our wards?” a female voice said and she looked for the source.

Elsa finally paid attention to the little glowing spears held by fairies dressed in shiny green armor. Their wings glimmered in the sunshine as they bat them so quickly, they blurred.

“You mean the wall of thorns?” Jack responded. “We flew.”

“Our wards should have kept them out,” another fairy said.

“What wards?”

“They understand us,” another fairy guard said.

The twins exchanged a look.

“Reed insisted that I’m a fairy,” Jack whispered to her.

The fairies looked confused, probably never having dealt with a situation like this.

“We would like to speak with your queen,” Jack said to them with his hands raised, eyeing the spears.

“What business do you have with The Queen?” This fairy had a slightly more fancy armor on and a little green helmet through which little pointy ears poked out. As the others looked to her for instructions, Elsa guessed she was a leader.

“We… We were invited.”

Another guard spat at them. “Humans are not allowed here.”

“We’re not human. We’re nature spirits,” Jack said quickly. “We only want to talk.”

While the guards deliberated, Elsa wondered what type of damage their weapons were capable of.

“We’ll ask the queen if she wishes to see you,” the leader decided.

The fairies parted, making a pathway for them.

Jack took her hand and led her forward. They walked slowly through the soft grass, curious about the colony while the guards formed a half-circle around them.
They passed by a tree which was overgrown with large mushroom and fairies hovered around it, pruning the fungus. Were they farming?

They passed by what looked like workshops where fairies were busy carving wood and painting leaves with sparkly powder which seemed to transform the leaf into a leather-like material. She was curious about what they were doing but knew that it wasn’t the right time for questions.

They passed by trees which were full of tiny houses made of sticks and bark and decorated with painted pinecones. The residents poked their heads out the window openings, checking out the newcomers but hesitant to come out.

Above them, birds sang and she wondered why songbirds were still here when all others flew south for the winter. Was this place shielded from cold weather?

She knew they approached the queen’s tree because it was magnificent and radiated magic. It was decorated in tiny glowing orbs and the leaves on it were still green. The guard told them to stop while the leader disappeared inside the tree.

“This place is amazing,” Jack whispered while looking around.

One of the trees was full of swings made of green vines and little fairies played on them, giggling. They paused upon seeing them. Jack grinned to them broadly and waved. They squealed and hid behind leaves but poked their heads out curiously.

The leader guard flew up in front of them and announced, “Queen Pitsa will see you now.”

Jack’s eyes widened and he asked in a restrained voice, “Did you just say her name is Pizza?”

“Queen Pitsa. You will address her with respect.”

Elsa shot him a warning glare, praying that for once he could be serious. They were going to be attacked if he laughed at the queen’s name.

He chewed on his bottom lip in a clear attempt to control himself. “Just wanted to make sure I got the name right.”

The queen floated out of the tree and their attention snapped right to her.

She was by far the largest of the fairies in the colony, and it wasn’t by height. Her wings were twice as large as everyone else’s and Elsa wondered if it was because she was a queen or if their length adjusted depending on the fairy’s weight.

“Bow,” the leader guard hissed at them.

The twins quickly lowered their heads respectfully and waited to be addressed. Elsa wasn’t sure what the proper etiquette was but she decided to treat this fairy the way she would have treated Mother. Don’t speak up until you’re spoken to. Don’t ask questions. Phrase each sentence with care. She wished she could remind him of another rule - don’t crack jokes. Merlin better teach them that telepathy soon.

The queen stopped a few feet before them. She had a kind, round face and smiling bright eyes, yellow-green like a cat’s. Her rusty-brown hair curled under her crown which was carved out of an acorn.

“Who might you be?” the queen asked in a chiming voice, hovering slightly above their bent heads.
Elsa took the cue. “This is my brother Jack and I’m Elsa. We’re Winter Spirits.”

“Lies! You wear Hogwarts robes. Why?”

“We’re students there. We want to learn wizard magic.”

“What magic did you use to break our wards?”

Elsa glanced at her brother. This didn’t sound very welcoming.

“I used a flying spell to send us over the thorny wall. Nothing else. If there are wards there, we did not break them.”

“Do you have a habit of invading fairy colonies?” The queen’s voice was steady but it sounded hostile.

All around them the fairy guards were watching the scene in focus, waiting for the queen’s orders.

Jack swallowed and spoke up. “I was invited. I met one of your fairies in the greenhouse and he said that you would like to meet us.”

The queen’s eyes narrowed. “Saying that I wanted to meet the newcomers and saying that said newcomers are welcome to barge in are two different sayings.”

Jack dropped his eyes and Elsa grit her teeth. Were they in trouble over a misunderstanding?

“We mean no harm,” Jack said with a bow of his head. “We just want to talk.”

“Why would you assume I have an interest in talking to nature sprites who associate with wizards? Why are you really here?”

The guard took a cue from her words and pointed the glowing spears at them. Elsa stood her ground and got ready. She could freeze them all before they attacked.

Jack must have sensed her thoughts because he shook his head at her. So he wanted to continue diplomacy? She wasn’t sure if there was a point anymore. These fairies did not want to help them. It was a mistake to seek their help.

“I’m on your side,” Jack said. “I oppose all cruel practices wizards are so used to. I will never use fairy wings in potions, and I will always point out to them how wrong they are.”

“That will achieve nothing!” The queen turned away from him and the leader of the guards flew up to her, ready to take orders.

“Yes, it will.” Jack didn’t give up yet. “I’ve already had them change their curriculum for me. They’re open to seeing magic practices which don’t harm other creatures. With time, I can achieve more.”

Elsa was surprised to hear this. She did not know that he planned to help the fairies. She thought he only had a general aversion to certain ingredients. Or was he making this up just to appease the queen?

The queen cast a fleeting glance in his direction but then looked away to the trees where dozens of tiny heads were peeking out from behind leaves. She whispered some instructions to the leader guard and Elsa overheard, “Which method would work best?”
They were getting ready to attack! Elsa shot a worried glance at Jack who watched the queen with furrowed brows, still hoping that she believed his good intentions. They were fools. The fairies had no reason to help them. As far as the queen was concerned, her colony was under attack.

Elsa let her ice magic tingle in her fingertips. Of the two of them, she was stronger. It was her responsibility to protect her brother.

She snuck a quick glance at where the fairy guards were, preparing herself for the worst. They looked so delicate with their shimmering wings and tiny hands and feet but she was sure that all of these glowing spears combined could deliver a stun they would feel. It pained her to think that she might have to use her magic on them. Would they survive? She wanted to protect her brother but she didn’t want to kill them.

But ice was ice. There was no way to control it once she let it all out, and she knew that if they attacked, she would have to give them her worst.

‘Don’t attack,’ she prayed. ‘Don’t make me do this.’

A guard flew up to the queen and whispered something in her ear. She crossed her little arms and turned her head to them but didn’t say anything.

A male fairy flew down, stopped in front of her and bowed.

“Kind Queen Pitsa, I know this spirit. He saved me from being captured by a witch.”

“That’s Reed,” Jack whispered to Elsa.

The queen flew up to Reed and put a hand on his bent head.

“You vouch for them?”

Reed was silent for an extended time, keeping them in suspense.

“I only know the boy,” he finally said and Elsa was ready to growl.

“I vouch for my sister,” Jack spoke up and the queen shot him a scornful look for speaking out of turn. That shut him up and he stared at the ground again.

The queen heaved a long sigh and deliberated. Finally, she turned to them.

“I’ve never seen nature sprites among Hogwarts students.”

“They don’t know what we are,” Jack said quietly.

The queen’s eyes widened and she flew closer to them. Her guard followed to stay by her side.

“You’ve fooled them.” She looked between the two of them. “How committed are you to changing their ways?”

“Completely,” Jack said immediately. “I’ll talk to whoever listens.”

“They think you’re one of them?” Jack nodded and the queen’s mouth slightly lifted. “You’re placed in a uniquely advantageous position. You can affect change from the inside.”

Her smile finally reached her eyes, turning her features warm.
“Why are you here?”

A tiny spark of hope swelled within Elsa. Maybe the situation wasn’t lost.

“We’d like to ask you if you recognize this being.” Jack held out a hand to Elsa. “The drawing.”

Elsa pulled out her blue fairy sketch and they showed it to the queen.

“We want to find out who our father is. When searching for answers, Elsa saw these beings in an enchanted mirror. We think it’s a clue to finding him. Do you know what they are or where we can find them?”

The queen looked at the drawing and pursed her lips. Elsa hoped her rendition of the blue fairy was accurate enough for the queen to recognize what it was.

“It is not a fairy,” the queen said, still looking at the drawing and glancing at them. “I wonder…”

It sounded like she had an idea. The spark of hope made Elsa’s heart skip a beat and she wished the queen would share her theory already.

The queen stared at them and narrowed her eyes. “I’m intrigued at what you might be. You can break through our wards and can speak with us as if you were a fairy.”

Jack giggled. “Our mother is the furthest thing from a fairy. She’s a Winter Spirit and so are we.”

“Are you sure about that? A Winter Sprite would cease to exist upon entering this sacred place.” She gestured with her hand at the beautiful autumn scenery the colony was bathed in. “If you haven’t noticed, we are shielded from Winter.”

Elsa didn’t like being referred to as a sprite. Something felt demeaning about that title.

“What?” Jack scratched his head. “Cease to exist?”

“You might be some rare Elemental Fae but I am certain that you are not Winter Sprites at all.”

“Well, we’re only half-Winter-Spirits.”

“Not at all,” the queen repeated and chuckled. “Oh, dear younglings, whoever told you that little lie was truly wicked. Winter Sprites are not beings made of flesh and bone. They aren’t born - they’re created by the power of the Winter Element. Neither you nor your mother could have been a Winter Sprite.”

Jack gasped. “She lied? Our mother lied about what she is? Why hold something like that from us?”

“I cannot answer this question.”

Jack seemed to have a problem with breathing and held on to Elsa for support. She tried to clear her mind. She was shocked but further stipulations about their mother’s alleged lie were pointless. She could plot theories about this later. It was time to move on and get as much information as she could from these fairies while they were still speaking.

“Dear Queen, can you help us find our father? Is there anything you can do, magic or otherwise?”

Queen Pizza hovered side to side in front of them as if she was slowly pacing. Her tiny hands were folded on her abdomen and her eyes were looking up at the trees.
“What powers do you possess?”

“Aside from what we’re learning from the wizards, we never exhibited anything other than winter magic. I can create ice and lower air temperature. Jack creates frost and can call in snow clouds.”

The queen fluttered between them. “Your Fae magic might be untrained but I’m certain you have exhibited more. Think, younglings, think.”

Elsa bit her lip and asked her brother. “What can you do that isn’t winter-related?”

“I can call huggers,” Jack said and stretched out his hand. Within a minute a large brown hugger flew around him and then suspended from his hand.

Elsa chuckled as her brother brought the creature close to him. The fairies moved a little away. They were too large to be a bat’s prey but they still appeared very cautious.

“Do control that beast and take it with your when you leave,” the queen warned. “Or we will deal with it.”

“Of course,” Jack assured her. “He means no harm.”

The queen moved a little further away and her guards flew to her side protectively.

Jack stroked the bat’s furry chin. “It’s the same one! I should give you a name already. How about… Bo.”

“So you can call huggers to you. I don’t really know what that means yet. What else?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have any hidden talents.”

“Hey, what about that charming thing you do - the puppy eyes. Everyone falls for it!”

Jack smirked at her. “Almost. It didn’t work when I tried to convince McGonagall to let me keep Bo in my dorm.”

Elsa let out a chuckle, imagining bats hanging from Jack’s four-poster bed. That did not sound far fetched for her brother at all.

Jack perked up as he got an idea.

“Oh, what about flying? When I was on a broom, it felt like it wasn’t the broom that was carrying me. It felt like the wind was propelling me forward. Does that make any sense?”

“Maybe.”

“What about you, Elsa?”

Elsa tried to think of any special abilities she had and frowned, not being able to name even one. Could it be that all special Fae powers were only given to Jack? That wasn’t fair. The winter powers that they inherited from mother were split between them, but when it came to other abilities, Elsa felt left out.

“I can’t think of any.”

“You’re smart and you’re an amazing artist.”
Elsa appreciated his attempt at cheering her up but it really wasn’t the same as his gifts.

“That’s not really all that special. Even humans can claim to be smart or artistic.”

“You had flying lessons too, didn’t you? You didn’t feel anything strange with the wind?”

Elsa thought back to the few times she sat on a broom.

“I could fly, it was easy, but I didn’t really go far. Professor Hooch told us to stay close to the ground.”

Jack looked at her with an obvious disappointment and she knew what he was thinking. She played it safe like she always did. Who knew, maybe if she took a chance and didn’t listen to directions like her brother, then she would have experienced that elusive wind power Jack described.

“I’ve been told I’m intense and intimidating. That’s my equivalent of your charm.”

“They only say that because they don’t know you’re a softie on the inside,” he playfully nudged her with his elbow and she huffed.

“Poke me again and you’ll see why they’re scared of me.”

He laughed and she couldn’t help but smile along. It was impossible to not become infected with his mood.

Elsa wanted to try something. She held out her hand the way Jack always did when he called huggers and waited.

“Do you do anything special when you call them?” she asked, getting impatient.

“It’s like, in my mind, I invite them and they just show up. Wait a moment longer.”

Elsa imagined herself inviting huggers in. After a while, she started to feel silly for standing there with her hand out.

The fairies observed her curiously and looked around for any other bats. She had never tried this before. Jack was always the one who was fascinated with huggers but maybe he wasn’t the only one that could call them. She really wanted to have some Fae powers as well so she waited some more.

She considered if she should put her hand down already when something a lot larger than a hugger settled on her arm. Huge wings created a gust of wind which swept Elsa’s hair and her heart nearly leaped out of her chest. Few fairies screamed and hid in the leaves. The hugger in Jack’s hands squeaked and hid in his neck while Jack gaped open-mouthed at the bird on Elsa’s arm.

It was an owl. A large brown owl.

Elsa was speechless as she stared at the majestic bird who dug its talons into her robe.

“Wow,” Jack said quietly while cupping his hands around Bo protectively. “You can call owls. These birds are scary. Maybe after all, you are scary, Elsa. But in a good way… in a powerful way.”

Elsa’s heart started beating faster. She wasn’t left out of this strange Fae ability!

“What does this mean?”

She dared to pet the owl on the head. The bird closed its eyes, enjoying her touch and she
immediately loved it. So, owls were her animals. She was oddly satisfied with that. They were so much more impressive than huggers, not that she was comparing. Maybe she was. Just a little bit.

“Flying animals! We can call flying animals.” Wheels in her head started turning. “I’m sensing a pattern here. You felt the wind while you were flying. Flying animals like us. Jack, this could be the key.”

The queen fluttered closer. Her guard flanked her nervously, casting worried glances at the bird. The owl passed them a bored look and leaned to Elsa, asking for more pets.

“AIR!” the queen shouted in an incredulous voice. “You’re the Lords of Air!”

A murmur went around at the queen’s exclamation and more fairies came out of the trees. These were the ones that previously were too apprehensive to show themselves. Now that they were all out, it looked like there were thousands of them. This was a very large colony.

The queen flew close enough to touch him. In fact, it looked like she wanted to but restrained herself.

“Air,” she repeated in a soft voice, “we, fairies, worship Air. It is the most sacred ancient power, powerful, hidden magic. Air Lords, the Sylph, are the highest of the Fae - the protectors, the guardians, the messengers of the gods. They can control not only the Air element but all beings which occupy the Air domain.”

The queen then flew just as close to Elsa. Her eyes were brimming with tears. “It is an honor.”

She flew back to her guard and curtsied to the two of them deeply, casting her eyes down. All fairies around followed her, curtsying or bowing.

Jack smiled lopsidedly and pet his hugger. “It’s like we’re Fae royalty.”

The queen straightened up and smiled graciously. “I did not recognize the drawing because the Sylph are only visible to other Sylph. Not even we can see them even when we’re their most devoted servants.”

Elsa exchanged a look with her brother, still trying to process the possibility that they were half-Sylph.

“You think our father is a Sylph?”

“An Air Elemental,” the queen offered. “We, fairies, are distantly related to them although our magic does not begin to compare to their divine powers.”

Elsa looked back at her drawing. “But they’re… small.” Not to mention, they had blue skin.

The queen smiled kindly. “The Sylph are also shapeshifters who can assume a visible form at will - a human-sized form. Please forgive my hostility earlier,” she bowed to them again. “I did not know.”

Elsa exchanged a look with her brother and allowed her hope to fully ignite. It finally made sense why she saw the blue fairies in the mirror, no, the Sylph. She could have even seen her father among them.

They were so close to finding him, she could already imagine how drastically their lives were going to change. But how would they find an invisible Air Elemental?

The queen had a plan for them. “We will pray to our Air Lords in hopes of getting you an audience
with them. Is there any message we can pass on to help them locate your father?”

Elsa heaved a long breath.

“Tell them that…” Was she really going to say this? Yes. She had to. It was time to learn the truth. “Tell them that our mother is Dark Beira, Queen of Winter.”

Chapter End Notes

Reaction time! Did you know that the Sylph are usually described having white hair? I didn’t even know that when I chose their father to be one. I was researching mythology and liked the idea of an Air Elemental, and then much later I searched drawings and my jaw dropped. I couldn’t have chosen a better Elemental. How do you like the fairies and Queen Pizza? To clarify - the twins don’t know that it’s spelled Pitsa and really think her name is Pizza.
Minerva was in her office when she heard a knock, followed by Severus Snape entering the room. She couldn’t remember the last time when he visited her.

“Minerva,” he said in his usual monotone voice, “if you’ve got the time, I’d like to discuss one of your students.”

She invited him in but he refused to sit down and instead, loomed in the doorway.

“What can you tell me about Merlin Ealdor?”

She linked her hands on her lap. Dumbledore would’ve been a better person to answer questions about the young wizard but Severus might not know that.

“He’s mostly quiet in class, doesn’t cause trouble although he can be mildly arrogant at times.”

Severus’ eyelid twitched. “I assure you, he’s capable of causing trouble. What is your opinion on his magical skill?”

“Rather mixed. He performs very poorly in my class, needs tutoring to get through each spell. But as I learned, he’s skilled at other magic disciplines.”

His eyelid twitched again. “Such as?”

“He performs acceptably in other classes, but also, he practices unorthodox methods of magic. You’re probably aware that he’s a practitioner of Old Religion.”

“Same as the Nix twins.”

“Yes, but actually more. There is a magic aspect to it which he seems to be skilled at. I’ve attended their meeting and was both impressed and concerned about it.”

Severus gazed at her intently and she couldn’t take the suspense anymore.

“Will you tell me where this sudden interest comes from?”

“I can’t make heads or tails of him.” The way his eyelid kept twitching was distracting. “As detention punishment, I asked him to write me two essays on the fly and he produced the best-written paper I have ever seen. And just when I started thinking that maybe he’s a lot smarter than he lets on, he delivers me this joke.”

He pulled out a rolled-up parchment from his robes and threw it on her desk. As she reached for it, he continued, “So, brilliant on some topics, a moron in others which seems to match what you’re
Minerva unrolled the parchment and started reading.

*Blood is a specialized bodily fluid which is crucial to the survival of the creature it belongs to. Dragons, like many other creatures, rely on it in the following twelve ways.*

“What is this?” she asked, not following why Severus would assign this type of essay.

“It’s supposed to be an essay on twelve uses of dragon blood.”

Minerva dived back in.

*The first and most important use of dragon blood is to keep the dragon alive. Losing this precious combination of plasma and cells would be detrimental to the owner’s health and must be avoided at all costs.*

*The second such use is keeping said dragon happy. There is no nicer feeling than the feel of healthy blood running through the dragon’s veins. Any dragon questioned about this, would confirm this observation.*

Minerva wasn’t sure what to think about this. This essay seemed to be a parody of Dumbledore’s book on the uses of dragon blood. But she was compelled to keep reading.

*The third such use is to circulate essential substances throughout the dragon’s body. While blood carries oxygen and nutrients, it also carries the dragon’s magic. Proper distribution of magical plasma ensures the dragon stays powerful and mighty enough to defeat any wizard or Muggle who tries to harm her.*

Minerva couldn’t hide the smile forming on her lips. There was the boy’s arrogance again. Who else would dare write about dragon’s romantic pursuits in their school paper?

*The fifth use of dragon blood is to allow the dragon to refer to it in metaphors. Like any noble intelligent being, dragons often find themselves in need to describe their emotions by the way blood runs through their veins. Blood that runs quick, sluggish, is hot or cold may all refer to physical manifestations of dragon’s feelings.*

Minerva chuckled at this but continued reading, curious what else he could have come up with.

*The sixth use of dragon blood is to keep the dragon’s perky visage. A dragon that is low on blood might have a pasty color to her scales which greatly diminishes her beauty. A dragon with nice blood flow will have a handsome complexion and striking features.*

*The seventh use of dragon blood is to carry her genes to the next generation. Each dragon wants her bloodline to be strong and successful. It’s important to maintain a strong lineage to ensure the future of this magnificent creature.*

*The eighth use of dragon blood is to distinguish dragons from other creatures. Dragon’s unique magical properties are unmistakable but if different blood ran through her veins, it would change what type of being she was. No dragon would like to end up being mistaken for an overgrown lizard.*
The ninth use of dragon blood is to distract the gullible. It is well known that lower-intelligence beings get mesmerized by seeing dragon blood. She may use this to her advantage during a battle to lay waste to her attackers. While they stand there, wondering what they might want to use her spilled blood for, she may burn them to ashes.

The tenth use of dragon blood is to enable the dragon to be a full-blooded creature worthy of being feared. Being a dragon is hard. There’s livestock to eat, treasure to guard, humans to burn. Dragons don’t have time for indecisiveness. Their words need to be as full-blooded as their veins.

The eleventh use of dragon blood is to allow connection to Dragonlords. While humans are puny compared to those noble creatures, select few get the privilege to share a blood-bond with them which wouldn’t be possible without the precious liquid.

The twelfth and final use of dragon blood is to be a constant subject of research for curious humans. While we may only guess at its potency, only dragons hold the secrets to its true power.

Overall, the magical blood of dragons has many wondrous properties and plenty of uses for their owners. We are lucky to share this world with such noble creatures so that we may learn from them. If we take proper care of them, the Great Dragon’s bloodline will survive for millennia more and will continue to amaze the human race.

Minerva rolled the parchment back while quietly chuckling. Severus was scowling at her as she handed him the essay.

“Oh, lighten up, Severus. He didn’t know what the twelve uses of dragon blood were so he made this up.”

He scoffed. “If he can write about moonstone better than a NEWT student, I think he would know the basics of dragon blood usage.”

Minerva worried if there was anything Severus ever found funny.

“Point taken. It’s also possible that this topic sat badly with him because of his religious beliefs. The essay’s point seems to be that dragon blood should not be used by wizards. This sounds a lot like the argument Jack Nix made against the use of animals in transfigurations which he said were against the values of his faith.”

Severus pursed his lips while taking in her words. “This faith, you said you attended one of their meetings?”

“Yes, I’ve requested to be notified when they meet again. I plan to monitor what magic they practice there.”

“Do they practice curses?”

“I haven’t seen any,” she was surprised at that question. “Will you please explain where you’re going with this?”

“I have a suspicion but it seems very unbelievable considering how young Ealdor is. I would like to attend as well so that I may witness this Old Religion for myself.”

He raised his eyebrows, indicating that he would not ask nicely but simply expected to be invited. This irritated Minerva. She was tired of men and their egos but she was not in the mood to school a fellow staff member at the moment so she assured him that she would notify him of the date and time.
His interest in young Merlin was very curious. She wondered what he suspected him of. Oh, well. Maybe she would finally find this out during the next meeting.

During the following weeks, Merlin observed how many kids mumbled due to a swollen tongue. Unsurprisingly, many of them were Slytherin but students from other Houses fell for that infliction as well. He wondered how long it would take before they figured out the cause of their sudden desire to chew on their own tongue. At least he heard less foul language in the corridors. His blessing was working.

Things were starting to go back to normal. He was back on good terms with the trio. He brew the Sleeping Draught with Hermione and picked fluxweed with her on a full-moon night which was the last ingredient needed to finish the Polyjuice Potion. Just a few more days and they could get on with their plan to pretend to be Slytherins and interrogate Malfoy.

His relationship with Jack was starting to recover although the boy now spent even more time with his sister. There was still tension when it came to Jack and Harry. Whenever Harry’s trio came over to Merlin, Jack left. This continued until one day Merlin couldn’t take it anymore and pulled him back to his seat.

”You are not going to Ravenclaw. You're a Gryffindor, you sit here.”

Jack grumbled but finally obeyed. Still, he showed off his stubborn side by refusing to talk to anyone other than Hermione.

Harry chose to ignore the silent hostility while Ron always kept an eye on Jack who was not afraid to return the death stare. Merlin supposed it was better than fighting but couldn’t help but worry that a clash was imminent. He couldn’t force a friendship between these boys but could they at least tolerate each other?

One day, Dumbledore caught up with him in the hallway.

“Merlin, a word.”

He followed him behind a corner where they could talk freely.

“I should warn you, you’ve attracted Minerva’s attention. She’s already making a list of strange things about you and who knows what conclusion she arrives at. I bet she isn’t the only one.”

Merlin leaned against the wall. Had he been careless? He was so tired of pretending, he let his act slip.

“If you are to pass for a student for seven years, it isn’t a good start if you’re discovered just three months in.”

He was right, of course. It was easy to lie, but to keep up a pretense for such a long time was an entirely different skill. It required coming up with a brand new persona. He’d done it before so it wouldn’t be as much of an issue if only he didn't have to be real with his friends so they would trust him. Ideally, he had to be two different people but what if his friends and teachers were in the same room together? Which persona should he assume then?

“What do you suppose I do?”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “Do something to remind everyone that you’re a child. Just look around you - you have hundreds of children you could imitate. And don’t show any more advanced
magic. I think you did too much during that meeting.”

“That was too much?” Merlin threw his hands up in exasperation. “I might as well pretend to be a Muggle.”

“Just look… nonthreatening. You’re pretty good at acting clumsy.”

Merlin snorted at that. His clumsiness was not an act but he didn’t mind if Dumbledore thought so.

"I can do that but I think she'll require more than that to stop suspecting me.” A smirk formed on his face. ”Just a short while ago you told me to stop acting so childish. I believe your words were, Merlin, grow up."

He sighed internally. It was the one thing he couldn't do, being frozen in time, forever unaging.

Dumbledore linked his hands in front of him. "That's because you're abusing your abilities in childish ways.”

"Ah, so you want me to be a Muggle child.”

"Merlin,” Dumbledore warned.

"I know how to pretend to not have magic but it's frustrating to have to do this among my own kind.”

Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and spoke gently, "Unfortunately, you're very different from your own kind. Try to blend in.”

The old hand felt heavy on Merlin’s slender shoulder. Even in the times of his youth, he was different from other sorcerers. He always loved his magic, feared that he would be no one without it, but it came with a hefty price. He was always an outcast.

"I'll try harder.”

He didn't know how to be less magical so a Muggle it would have to be.

Dumbledore released his shoulder and left him there. As he watched the old wizard walk away, a pale-blond head passed by at the end of the corridor and Merlin followed again.

He got close enough to listen in to Malfoy’s thoughts.

*Potter this, Potter that. Even my father talks about him. What can I do? I tried to be friendly in the beginning but Weasley got to him first. Besides, how would that have worked out when he was sorted into Gryffindor?*

So Malfoy’s father was disappointed that his son didn't befriend Harry. This was interesting.

*I'm better off without him. He's boring anyway and keeps loving on those Mudbloods. At least my friends appreciate the value of pure blood. Even if they're morons.*

Said friends caught up with him and ran over while cackling like hyenas.

"We did it. We dropped a dungbomb in Weasley’s pocket.”

Malfoy pinched his nose. "Then why do you smell like dung?”
The large boy blinked at him with a vacant expression.

"Come to think of it, you do smell more than normal, Crabbe."

Crabbe reached inside his pocket and pulled out a crushed dungbomb, the smell of which reached Merlin. It stunk like a barn on a warm day mixed with a skunk and rotten food.

"You put it in my pocket?"

“Oh,” Goyle said intelligently.

Malfoy made a gagging sound and ran away from the smell.

Crabbe looked confused as if he didn't understand why his ring leader left, then he turned and his eyes found Merlin.

Merlin immediately spun around and tried to leave the scene but felt a body-binding curse hit him and fell to the floor, stiff like a statue.

The two Slytherins walked up, the smell of dung even stronger now from proximity. Merlin could free himself but remembered Dumbledore’s warning. He was supposed to be non-threatening, as helpless as a Muggle. He would have to put up with whatever these two bullies planned for him.

"I didn't get Weasley but I can get this Gryffinloser."

Goyle guffawed while Crabbe proceeded to lift Merlin up and propped him up against the wall like a doll.

"Now, you will smell like dung."

And he rubbed the contents of his hand on Merlin’s robes and face. Merlin’s eyes watered, he wanted to crawl out of his skin to shed it, but all he could do was attempt to hold his breath.

The two goonies cackled at Merlin some more and finally left.

Merlin was close to passing out and had to take a breath. The smell hit him again and he felt like throwing up but couldn't even do that while bound with the curse and had to wait for them to walk away. Each second was an agony. He held his breath again.

They disappeared and Merlin freed himself. Unfortunately, no amount of magic could eliminate the smell. He resisted his gag reflex and ran to the nearest lavatory and splashed his face with water until he got most of the stink off. He pulled off his robe and burned it right on the spot. He didn't think that smell would wash off anyway. His only consolation was that Crabbe smelled the same at the moment.

He still stunk. There was no other way. He had to walk through the whole school, the common room and the dorm before he could reach the showers and suffer the humiliation of smelling like a barn.

He gritted his teeth while he trudged on, ignoring the stares and finger pointing. He did not like this helpless Muggle act at all if it turned him into an easy target for abuse. Was this really the only way?

By the next day, it seemed that the whole school had heard of the incident. Unsurprisingly, Malfoy was the first to come up with a new nickname for him which he spewed as he was leaving Potions.

“Keep your distance - Smelldor coming through.”
Merlin was so focused on trying to ignore the taunt and planning his special retaliation on the two bullies - a curse that would make them cluck like chickens sounded pretty good - he forgot to control his legs and tripped. He fell into Ginny Weasley whose bookbag flew open and her stuff spilled out.

“I’m so sorry, Ginny.”

He dropped to the floor and started picking up her things and scolding himself for being so clumsy. He handed her pieces of parchment, a thankfully-unbroken ink bottle and textbooks. He felt a sting of magical charge as his hand touched a leather-bound notebook and he dropped it from surprise.

Ginny quickly picked it up, stuffed it in her backpack and tried to get away but he grabbed her hand.

“Ginny, there’s powerful magic in that book.”

Books shouldn’t possess magic like that. While he felt it for only a moment, it was enough to give him an impression of pure evil.

“There’s a charm on it, that’s all.”

“What type of charm?”

“I don’t… I don’t really know,” she said quickly and tried to leave but he still held her wrist.

“Ginny, this book feels like a being, not an enchanted object. I’ve seen books imbued with Dark Magic which were capable of great evil when put in the hands of an unsuspecting person. Ginny, you need to have someone look at that book. It could be dangerous.”

“It’s just a book, Merlin! Leave me alone!”

He wanted to convince her to bring the book to Dumbledore but before he could say anything more, long pale fingers prised away his grip on the girl’s wrist.

“What do you think you’re doing, Ealdor?” Snape’s voice dripped with venom.

Ginny used this moment to run away while Merlin felt helpless.

“Ten points from Gryffindor and detention tonight for this behavior.”

Greasy Git looked too pleased to have a reason to punish him again.

Merlin remembered Dumbledore’s warning that his actions were attracting the attention of possibly more than just McGonagall. He had to act like a good little student. Well, a student didn’t have to be obedient.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” Merlin said while staring Snape in those soulless black peepers.

“Then, I suppose you will have to be punished until you learn what you did wrong. You can start now. Inside!”

Snape went inside the classroom while Merlin looked down the hallway where Ginny disappeared to. He had to catch up with her later, but for now, he had to deal with Snape.

Ginny ran until she reached Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. She hid in the stall next to Myrtle and tried to catch her breath. How could she have been so careless? Merlin nearly took Tom’s diary away!
Myrtle gurgled water in her toilet while Ginny slowly pulled out the diary and a quill. She wanted to write to him but wasn’t sure what to say.

Was Merlin right? Did Tom use Dark Magic to enchant this diary? So many questions swirled in her head. What if Tom’s magic had an unexpected side effect and was the reason for Ginny’s sleepwalking problems? He would tell her, he was her friend after all.

Hi, Tom.

Hi, Ginny. What’s up?

I just wanted to chit-chat. Holidays are coming. My parents are going to Egypt to visit my brother, Bill, but I thought I would stay at Hogwarts. Harry usually stays. What do you think?

That is an excellent idea, Ginny. I'll help you come up with a good plan so you can approach him.

Thanks, Tom.

It’s my pleasure.

I was wondering…

About?

Tom, how did you create this diary?

I enchanted it.

But what spell did you use?

Why this sudden interest?

Just curious.

Tom did not answer. Suddenly, Ginny felt lightheaded and images flashed through her mind - her memories. They sped through and she couldn't stop them as if someone else was controlling her thoughts. A memory of the conversation with Merlin passed by in great focus. Merlin’s face zoomed in and his words repeated.

Ginny, you need to have someone look at that book. It could be dangerous.

She did not remember what happened next.

Severus tried again and was met again with a brick wall. He had been attempting to break into Ealdor’s mind for hours, tried to pick moments when the kid was most distracted but he never dropped his defense. He tried it when the boy was scrubbing the cauldrons, mopping the floors and sorting ingredients in the storage room, but none of those activities weakened his armor.

Severus gripped the edge of his desk and took a long breath to steady himself. There was no use in letting frustration get to him. It was only going to make his eye twitch again.

Still, he had never met an Occlumens that was this young. How could an eleven-year-old thwart him - one of the most skilled living Legilimens?

He looked down at the parchment in front of him. He had transferred selected words from Ealdor’s
essays and words from the letter of the Three-Headed Moon Frog to compare them. He expected sloppy handwriting from this boy but instead found an elegant script hinting at calligraphy training. It did not fit with his opinion of Ealdor, but most of all, the handwriting was so distinct, it was a definite match. He had done the same exercise with countless essays of other students and this was the only match.

He stared at the kid again. How could this be possible? Someone this young being able to enact curses this powerful? Maybe he had an older accomplice.

Minerva mentioned something about the kid practicing some shady magic. Maybe the answer was in the type of magic used, not its power. If he didn’t find out what type of magic it was, he might never rid himself of this embarrassment.

It was a miracle that no one noticed his newest curse. He had even tried to permanently enchant his shoes to his feet but the curse broke that enchantment on the first step. He could not climb stairs at all.

He’d had enough. He had written evidence, and as ridiculous it was to present this boy as the suspect, it was his only lead. He would bring this ingrate to Dumbledore where they could properly interrogate him.

The boy looked at him with an insolent bored expression. “I’m done, Professor.”

Severus didn’t care to check his work.

“Splendid,” he hissed. He was going to uncover this fool. “There is one more task for you to do. I need you to go to the Headmaster’s office and wait for me there.”

The kid dared to roll his eyes on him!

“Yes, Professor.”

The boy slammed the door behind him and a little gust of wind put out the light of the nearest torch.

Severus waited for a beat, then grabbed the evidence - the boy’s essays, the letter, and the parchment to which he copied selected words of both to prove that the same person wrote them. He put his shoes in his pockets and left the classroom.

As he closed the door, he heard glass breaking. He looked back inside and saw a jar of pickled puffer-fish eyes on the floor, the eyes were rolling around among the glass. It was strange but he didn’t think much of it. He vanished the mess and went on.

It was already past the evening feast so thankfully, the students were in their dorms and no one would notice him climb the stairs barefoot. With some luck, he would get this and the chair curse lifted off him soon.

He couldn’t wait to show the proof to the Headmaster. What punishment would they give Ealdor? He hoped Dumbledore wouldn’t go soft on the boy. Surely, cursing a Hogwarts Professor would warrant at least expulsion.

He turned the corner and saw something large on the floor. It looked like a figure of a person lying down, unmoving. He approached and was so shocked that he didn’t even notice that his socks got soaked through on the wet floor.

He stared at the face which had defiantly slammed the door of his classroom just a minute ago.
This was his fault. He told this boy to walk alone through the dark school corridors, knowing well that it wasn’t safe to do so. He sent him to his death.

The Chamber monster claimed its first fatal victim. Merlin Ealdor was dead.

Chapter End Notes

I love cliffhangers and I cannot lie…
What’s your reaction? Do you hate me right now?
When Merlin was on his way to Dumbledore’s office, he heard a shuffling behind him and ran behind a corner. It could be the monster. Why did it target him? He was Half-Blood, not Muggleborn but how exactly could the monster tell?

He started building an energy ball inside his palm and poured deadly magic into it. He only needed a split of a second to deliver the blow.

The hallway grew heavily quiet and he suspected that the source of the sound was close by already. But he didn’t know if it was the monster. What if he was mistaken and it was just a student? He had to look first to ensure he didn’t accidentally kill an innocent child.

With his energy ball pulsing between his fingers, Merlin swiftly turned the corner and his eyes locked with yellow eyes of a giant serpent. He released his magic but never found out if it made it to the target. Excruciating pain started at his eyes, burrowing into his mind, and after an agonizing second, it took his life.

Merlin opened his eyes to a white world made of fog. Still remembering the agony of dying, he didn’t immediately catch on to where he was. He tried to walk, only to find that he was kneeling. That was when the realization of where he was hit him.

“Oh, shit.”

Normally, when he died, the Goddess simply brought him back, nearly immediately, but from time to time, she wanted a word. The reason was usually not good.

“I don’t appreciate that language, my Emrys,” an ethereal voice sounded behind him.

He immediately bowed his head, hoping he didn’t offend her. “My apologies.”

Triple Goddess walked around him and was now facing him but he didn’t dare to lift his head.

She sighed and the fog swirled around her bare feet. Her white gown moved as if it was underwater.

“How many times must I bring you back from the Otherworld, Emrys?”

He didn’t know what to answer to that so he stayed quiet.

“Your spirit is weighed down by time. I had hopes that you would last longer but you’re looking forward to death, aren’t you?”

He felt that it was a rhetorical question so he stayed quiet. Of course, he was looking forward to death, and she knew that. She could hear his every thought after all.

“Then, maybe this was your last life. Maybe I shall grant your wish now.”

He raised his head, unable to stay quiet anymore. “But Goddess, what about Arthur? I thought that I was waiting for him.”

“If you visited the Crystal Cave lately, maybe you would have glanced my plans for you and wouldn’t have to ask me insignificant questions.”

Her voice was steady and mostly pleasant but he could hear the threat behind it. He stepped over the
line. He had no right to question her design.

She walked around him and the fog followed her.

“Why are you afraid to look?”

She knew exactly why he didn’t want to visit the cave.

“I prefer to not know the future.”

“The crystals can show you more than just the future. You know this, Emrys.”

“Goddess, if I may ask, do you mean that Arthur will come soon?” Her angelic face showed no reaction to his words. Could that mean… He inhaled through his teeth. “Is he here?”

“The future we both desire is taking shape but there is more to be done before it comes to pass.”

He wanted to know more but knew better than to ask. If she wanted to be clearer, she would have been.

“Don’t disappoint me again, Emrys,” her voice lost the pleasant edge and he swallowed down everything he knew he had done wrong recently. He was a failure in so many ways. It was a wonder she still wanted him to be her Chosen One.

She sighed and walked around him again. “It’s too late for a new Emrys. You had a long time to accumulate knowledge and skills you will need. Where else will I find someone like you now?”

While it was assuring that he didn’t fail her so badly to be relieved of the destiny she chose for him, it still stung when she referred to him in this way - like he was replaceable, disposable - after a millennium and a half that he devoted to her.

She stopped in front of him and he tried to control his resentful thoughts before they provoked her into punishing him.

“You nearly unravelled everything I built but I see that there is a way to salvage the timeline. Leave the twins to follow their path.”

“I… I didn’t know,” he stammered while his head felt heavy with the weight of her words.

He had no idea that the twins were important to the Goddess. Maybe if he had not avoided the Crystal Cave, he would have had a warning of their involvement.

“I’d like to meet them.”

“The twins?”

She smiled gently and he understood what he needed to do.

“Get this little issue over with, Emrys. You’re wasting your time.”

Could she have meant Salazar’s monster? He was working on it and now, he finally had a useful clue.

She approached him and placed her hands on his shoulders. He stopped breathing as the magic of her divine touch seeped inside him. His heart felt a little lighter.
There was hope. He didn’t fail completely yet. He could still fix it all and get back to the path he was on - to help Arthur return. There was a point to this unnaturally long life he led. He would get his happy ending one day. Hopefully, he wouldn’t have to wait another millennium to see it.

“I like seeing you as a child,” she said softly and placed a kiss upon his forehead.

He closed his eyes, unable to believe what was happening. She gave him her blessing!

And then, he felt himself be ripped from under her hands and rushed through the realm In-Between.

His audience was over. It was time for the agony of waking up in a dead body.

Albus rushed to the Hospital Wing. He received an urgent Patronus from Poppy Pomfrey. Another student was attacked.

Severus Snape stood at the foot of a bed, he forgot to put his shoes back on. Poppy sat with the patient and wept. Albus blanched when he recognized the student. It was Merlin.

“I’m afraid it’s bad news, Headmaster,” Severus whispered. “He’s not petrified.”

Poppy sobbed pitifully and Albus felt momentarily stunned. He had seen Merlin dead before so he thought it shouldn’t be such a shock to see him like this but still, it was. The young sorcerer’s eyes were burned as if someone put a torch to them. His body wasn’t rigid as the victims of petrification were. It was limp and his skin was ashen pale. He was truly dead.

“He’ll be back,’ Albus reminded himself, feeling a tear form in his eye. ‘Don’t forget, he’ll be back.’

He blinked the tear away and remembered that he had to act quickly.

“Poppy, Severus, help me move him to my office.”

Poppy got up and cried. “But Headmaster, he’s gone, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Trust me, Poppy. This is urgent. We cannot let anyone see him this way.”

“As you wish.”

Severus levitated Merlin’s body. Poppy sobbed but followed them out. Thankfully, they did not encounter anyone on their short walk and brought the young sorcerer’s body to Albus’ office with no incidents. Severus gently laid him on a comfy sofa Albus pointed to and they gathered around him.

“He wanted to be a Healer,” Poppy cried while smoothing the boy’s dark hair. “He tried so hard to heal his friend. I’ve never seen such determination in someone this young. He would have made a great Healer if only…”

She couldn’t finish among her sobs. Severus shifted on his feet uneasily. Albus knew that he never got along with Merlin but he too was affected by his death. He noticed that Severus carried his shoes with him when they climbed the stairs. So the curses had not lost their effect when their caster died. Only someone as powerful as Merlin could create curses which lasted past his death.

Albus smoothed his beard and wondered how long the process would take. He had seen Merlin come back to life before but it was in the heat of a battle and he didn’t know how much time had passed. There were witnesses this time. He could attempt to modify Poppy’s memory so she wouldn’t remember the incident at all but one could never be sure of side effects of memory charms. He didn’t want to risk her sanity. Severus had a very strong mind, so memory charm wouldn’t even...
work on him. They were going to know everything.

“I’m afraid, I am to blame,” Severus said quietly. “I sent him to your office alone, you see. I suspected him of the curses placed on me and… He wouldn’t have been in that corridor otherwise.”

Albus didn’t care. He just wanted the young sorcerer to wake up already.

They waited there long enough for Poppy to finally calm down. She got up and smoothed out the wrinkles in her apron.

“Shall we notify his family?”

“He doesn’t have any, Poppy,” Albus answered quietly.

It was taking a long time and he was beginning to worry. Could this really be the end of the great Merlin - taken down by the monster left behind by Salazar Slytherin? The Founder’s portrait looked down at the scene below with a hint of a smile on his face. The other Founders and past Headmasters quietly whispered to each other. Heliotrope wept in her frame.

“We should cover him,” Poppy murmured and conjured a white sheet.

Albus ripped the sheet away from her hands. He wasn’t ready to give up hope. He kneeled next to him and took his small, cold, limp hand in his old wrinkly one.

“Come on, Merlin,” he whispered urgently. “You’ve kept me waiting long enough. It’s time to show off again, pull another trick from under your scarf.”

Poppy sobbed again.

A couple of hours must have passed by now and he was losing hope to see life in those burned eyes anymore, but Merlin always spoke of the big prophecy which included him. He couldn’t die permanently before that time came, could he? If he did, it was all Albus’ fault. He convinced him to come here.

Poppy’s weeping infected him and he couldn’t stop a tear which rolled down his cheek.

“We must trust, Poppy,” Albus said while nervously caressing the boy’s cold hand, “that his legacy isn’t meant to end this way.”

Severus sounded confused.

“Ealdor’s legacy?”

“His name is Merlin, Severus.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

Severus put a hand on his shoulder. “Headmaster…”

And then Merlin inhaled in a loud gasp and Poppy screamed.

Albus held the still clammy hand of the young sorcerer and felt a strong grip on it. Merlin took a few laboured breaths. It sounded like he was in pain.
“Welcome back. Took you long enough.” Albus’ voice cracked.

Poppy dropped to the floor with shrieks.

“I don’t understand. I was sure… Couldn’t be…”

Severus watched the scene in quiet focus.

Merlin let go of Albus’ hand and brought it to his face.

“My eyes…” he said in a croaky voice.

While he was back alive in his body, he had a quite an undead look to him. His skin had an ashen shade to it, making him look like he was a zombie, but the worst was that his eyes were still burned beyond repair.

“Poppy,” Albus turned to her and tried to calm her down, “can you heal his eyes?”

She was still hysterical.

“But he was dead! How is this possible?”

“It was only temporary. Poppy, I need you to calm down.”

Snape hissed. “It was obviously some clever death illusion. It was very convincing.”

Merlin sighed in resignation. “Snape. Who else is here, Albus?”

“Just Poppy, Severus, and I. No one else saw you.”

“Mind your manners, Ealdor,” Severus drawled. “Like you haven’t caused enough trouble with your little stunt.”

Merlin barked out a laugh but then grimaced in pain.

“Madam Pomfrey, I could really use your help if you know any spells that can heal my eyes so I could properly roll them at the Potions Master.”

Poppy sobbed but finally spoke up. “I can heal the burns, but with this damage… I’m afraid you will be blind. No one can cure that.”

Merlin frowned.

“Oh, Goddess. That would be most inconvenient. I suppose I could call Aithusa.”

“Who’s that?” Albus asked.

Merlin smirked but before he could answer, young Fawkes flew over and perched on the arm of the sofa above his head. It was his first flight since he was reborn and Albus thought he looked spectacular.

Merlin must have heard it because he whispered, “Hi, Fawkes.”

Everyone waited with anticipation as the bird tilted its head and cried. Each drop that fell onto Merlin’s face sizzled as it landed and the boy flinched in pain but stayed put. They waited patiently as his burned eyes slowly healed until they were healthy cerulean-blue again. Merlin blinked several
times and then sat up with a broad smile.

“I can see!”

Poppy released a loud sigh of relief which turned into a sob.

“Fawkes, I could hug you right now,” Merlin addressed the bird who squawked and flew back to his perch. The boy put his hand on his chest and bowed to the young Phoenix. “Thank you, I am in your debt.”

He looked so much better. There was color in his cheeks and a healthy sheen to his complexion. He no longer looked like the undead.

Poppy walked up to him and checked him over.

“You really scared me, child. I truly thought you were dead.”

“Oh, I was,” Merlin answered, his grin still on. “Your diagnosis was correct.”

Poppy was flabbergasted but continued examining him.

“It took you a long time. It was hours,” Albus said accusingly.

“Was it? Goddess wanted me for a chat. In any case, I saw it, Albus.”

“Saw what?”

“I saw the Chamber monster before it killed me. I know what it is.”
It’s a Basilisk!

Merlin jumped up from Dumbledore’s couch and immediately went to the door, expecting to be followed. Dumbledore, Snape, and Madam Pomfrey walked behind him (Snape had to make a quick break to take off his shoes), and Merlin started explaining.

“Keep your eyes down. The creature will kill you if you look at it.”

“Where are you leading us?” Dumbledore asked, surprisingly springy for his old age.

“The library. I want to see whatever you have on this creature. We need a way to kill it. As I found, a plain, old confrontation does not work.”

They quickly passed the dark corridors, keeping their eyes down, and Merlin opened the large double door of the library.

It was empty at this hour so it would make the task easier. He approached the closest table, said his long incantation and waited.

“What was that?” Snape asked, his eyes narrow as slits.

“I called all books containing a mention of Basilisk. It’s a giant serpent, a creature of Old Magic. I thought they were all extinct already but it appears that Salazar saved one for his special mission. Oh, Salazar,” he sighed, “what a deadly pet you had.”

Would he have done differently? Didn’t his Dragonlord heritage urge him to do everything in his power to save dragons from extinction? Could he blame a Snakelord for feeling the same? If only Salazar’s snakes were not so… evil, it would be very relatable.

Books started floating over to the table, stacking themselves neatly and Merlin used his mind’s eye to scan each one for mentions of Basilisk.

“Can we help?” Dumbledore asked.

“You’ll be too slow.”

He was aware that Snape and Madam Pomfrey were staring at him while he was using magic they had never seen, but he didn’t care. They saw him rise from the dead. There was no need to hide anything else from them.

He stopped on a book called Most Macabre Monstrosities.

“Crow of a rooster is fatal to it? This sounds like a silly Muggle superstition. I suppose we could try it out, but that’s a big chance. I’d like to have a backup plan in case if this is false.”

He continued looking through other books and only found a mention of smell of a weasel which sounded even more unlikely to be true.

Merlin ran out of books to search and scratched his head.

“I might have something about the Great Serpents in my collection. I’ll look there next.”

He sent the books flying back to their spots and leaned on the table, thinking. He touched the Sidhe crystal on his neck. Would the staff work? Maybe, but in any case, he would have to leave the
school. Several issues needed his attention and he couldn’t put them off anymore.

Snape was glaring at him and Merlin realized that the Greasy Git still had not figured out who he was.

“You might as well tell them, Albus,” he said with a shrug. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with this drama.

Snape’s lip twitched. “I know who you are.”

Merlin waited for the onslaught of questions. People had various reactions to learning his identity - some would be in awe, some were scared, yet some were disappointed, expecting the Great Merlin to be more impressive than him.

Instead, Greasy Git pointed a finger at him and spat, “I was right. You’re the Three-Headed Moon Frog!”

Merlin barked out a laugh, a welcome change of mood from the somber seriousness. He loved it that he chose that name as his pseudonym.

Snape grabbed him by his robes and lifted him so that Merlin had to stand on his tippy-toes.

“Reverse the curses!”

Merlin made a show of thinking about it. “Yeah, about that… no.”

Snape’s grip tightened as he grew frustrated with being unable to intimidate a student. He stared deep into Merlin’s eyes but he was ready for the attempt to break in. This time he pictured Snape kneeling on the ground, begging him for mercy and enjoyed the reaction it got.

Snape snarled in anger, and Merlin smirked. He was trying to keep calm, but on the inside, he was itching for a fight. Being brought back to life always had such an energizing effect on him.

“Severus, if you let me handle this,” Dumbledore cut in and the hold on Merlin’s robes loosened.

“Placing a curse like that on a Professor should be punishable by expulsion!”

“Severus…” Dumbledore said in his level tone, “you should understand who you’re dealing with. This is Merlin. The same Merlin that the Order of Merlin was named after.”

“Don’t get me started on that nonsense,” Merlin said darkly.

He hated the whole thing with the Order of Merlin. He created that organization for an entirely different purpose than what it was being used for now. He wanted to make a change and protect the rights of Muggles, opposed to how the wizarding community abused their magic against them. But now, wizards used the organization to give themselves awards, the original purpose forgotten. Even that fool Lockhart had one! It was a disgrace to his name.

Madam Pomfrey raised her eyebrows halfway up her forehead but said nothing. Snape’s face became paler than usual and he looked from Dumbledore to Merlin.

“But… that would mean… that he’s a thousand years old? You believe this, Headmaster? He’s obviously fed you lies.”

“Over fifteen hundred. I’ve been around since the sixth century.”
Snape huffed and did not let go of him yet. “Who are you?”

“My name is Merlin. Always has been. Ealdor is the name of the village I grew up in.”

Snape scowled and Merlin guessed he did not believe him yet. He honestly did not care.

Snape glanced at Dumbledore. “He’s not a child, that’s clear. Polyjuice Potion?”

“No, I assure you, this is my face and my good looks. It’s an aging spell.”

“But… no one could hold an aging spell this long!”

Merlin was glad he thought so. No ordinary witch or wizard could but Merlin was not ordinary. It was time Greasy Git acknowledged it. He was getting tired of being held by his robes and tried to pry the pale hand away but the git refused to let him go.

“What are you doing here?”

Dumbledore made a step forward and spoke in a gentle tone. “Severus, he’s here on my request. Release him.”

Snape hissed to Merlin, “What game are you playing? Pretending to be The Merlin, cursing Hogwarts staff, fooling the Headmaster, then faking your death - all for what? What’s your goal?”

Merlin’s patience was wearing thin. “I didn’t fake my death - I’m immortal. I don’t care if you believe who I am. We have more important issues than this.”

“How could you die if you’re immortal?”

Merlin did not like educating people, especially those he didn’t trust, on his biggest weakness - he was still human and could be injured and killed just like any human. Only gods were truly immortal. So, he settled to not say that explicitly.

“Triple Goddess doesn’t want me to die yet so she brings me back.”

No amount of magic could cheat death. That was the mistake everyone seeking immortality made, and why they always failed in the end, yet it never stopped them from trying. This included that pesky Voldemort who was trying to bend the rules. Death would catch up with him too, Merlin was sure of that.

Snape’s nostrils flared as he processed the information, and he finally let go, but then, his features set into the usual mask of disdain.

“Release my curses… Merlin.”

Since he addressed him this way, he finally must have accepted the truth. Good.

“Once I see improvement in your behavior, I’ll take back the curses.”

Snape spoke so fiercely, some spit reached Merlin’s face. “I will not stand for this. You dare lecture me?”

“I will protect these children from all threats. Right now, those threats include you.”

“Merlin.” Dumbledore tried to calm down the situation. “Perhaps it’s time…”
“We’re going in circles here, Albus,” Merlin complained, feeling tired of this conversation. “You’re not listening to me and I’m not interested in repeating myself. The curses will stand until,” he pointed a finger at Snape, “you prove to me that you deserve to be an educator.”

Snape pulled out his wand and took two steps back.

Albus tried to placate him, “No, Severus, this isn’t wise. Both of you, calm down this instance.”

“He’s entitled to a little tantrum,” Merlin joked and Snape looked positively murderous.

Madam Pomfrey screamed when the Potions Master threw a nonverbal curse at Merlin who waved his hand to shield himself from it. In response, he lifted the wizard off the ground with his magic and backed him into the wall where he held him captive by invisible binds. The wand clattered to the floor while the air vibrated with magic.

Merlin knew at which moment Snape finally understood Merlin’s ability to end him right there because that was when the expression on his face changed to someone who was about to shit their pants. One of the columns stretched and twisted around Snape’s neck like a vine, not to strangle him but to simply point out that he could. It worked. The usual mask of indifference and contempt was now pure fear.

Madam Pomfrey cried out, “Merlin, don’t!”

“Merlin, my friend, stop this,” Albus begged.

“I figured a proper introduction was in order since my name didn’t do the trick,” he took a long breath and reminded himself that the greasy-haired wizard was not his enemy. “Dear Professor,” he said the title with sarcasm. “This is my final warning. Do not - pick a fight - with me.”

He released him and straightened up his scarf.

“If you’re done with your tantrum, I have actual matters of importance to attend to. Albus, I must leave the school. You’re going to have to watch Harry on your own in the meantime. I’ll be back in a couple of days.”

Albus nodded in agreement but then looked at him pleadingly.

“Severus is an asset to this school. If you leave the curses, you incapacitate one of the most capable protectors of Harry.”

Merlin rolled his eyes and groaned. He liked Snape’s curses the way they were but maybe Dumbledore had a point. Snape was a competent wizard.

“Fine. Consider this your lucky day.”

He said an incantation to release the shoe-dropping curse and felt it lift itself off of the Greasy Git.

“That’s it?” Snape looked around himself, probably expecting some big show of magic when in fact he didn’t even feel anything happen. “I expected more…”

“Please, do continue to pretend that the magic you’re used to is not diluted,” Merlin couldn’t help himself. He needed to rub it in how infantile their magic was. Wizards and their wands… “Inform Jack and Harry that I’m sick and my uncle picked me up to care for me himself, will you?”

Merlin winked at Snape and wanted to stump him again, so he disapparated right there in a cloud of
dark smoke and a whirl of wind.

Ginny woke up in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, and like several times before, had to rest for a few minutes before she could get up. Myrtle sobbed in her stall, her wails were echoing off the cold tile.

Ginny reached into her pocket where her diary was. No, Tom’s diary. Not hers.

Whenever she held it, she felt an inexplicable urge to open it but this time she put it down on the wet floor and took a step away.

She started pacing in the small space and glancing looks at it. It looked so innocent, so small and ordinary but she always knew that it was imbued with strong magic. What book could respond to the person writing in it?

The last thing she remembered before she lost track of time was asking Tom what kind of magic he used. He never answered but then something happened, she didn’t understand what it was, but it felt like someone broke into her mind. Were books capable of this? The memory it focused on was Merlin warning her.

Was Merlin right? Was this book dangerous? She wanted to ask Tom but had a feeling that he would dismiss her concerns just like he always did. He kept telling her that everything was alright but it never was. Her life had become a living hell.

She glared at the book on the floor. What if this innocent-looking item was responsible for it all?

She picked it up and immediately felt the familiar pull like a voice telling her that everything would be easier, would make sense if she just opened it and wrote to Tom some more.

It had to be magic. The diary’s magic was speaking to her right now. It was trying to influence her, override her free will. This sounded just like what Dark Magic would do.

She screamed, threw it into a toilet and left the lavatory, not even looking back.

This was the year of Ginny, not the year of Tom.

The rain gently tip-tapped on the glass of a window, the only sound in an otherwise empty and cold room. Jack opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He did not want to get up. There was no reason to.

His whole life was a lie. It shouldn’t surprise him. He always knew that Mother was a monster but this monstrosity was difficult to imagine. Who would lie to their children about what they were? Why did she do it? What was she if not a Winter Spirit? Even the hags referred to her like that, did she lie to them too?

He looked at his hands. He could always create frost. Once Mother accepted that he couldn’t create ice like Elsa, she never expected anything else of him. If she encouraged him to practice non-winter magic, would he have skill in it? What else was he capable of?

He turned to his side to look at the empty room while the rapping on the window continued.

He was completely alone for several days now. Colin was still in the Hospital Wing, Merlin was sick and left for Christmas break early without even saying goodbye. Jack supposed he wasn’t important enough to warrant himself a visit.
He groaned while the rapping at his window got louder, making it difficult to think. That was selfish. Merlin was sick and here he was thinking about himself.

He got up and decided to write a letter to his friend to wish him well.

“Will you shut up?” he yelled at the rain and glared at the window accusingly.

To his surprise, the glass was dry, the sky was overcast, not rainy and there was some movement outside.

He got up to investigate and found a tiny creature hover in the air. He threw the window open and a shivering fairy flew in.

“What took you so long???” Reed complained and hid under Jack`s blanket.

Jack stared, too shocked at the surprise to react.

“Can you close the window? It’s freezing enough as it is.”

He numbly closed the window while still staring at the fairy.

“I’m sorry, Reed, I thought it was rain.”

Reed shivered and hid completely in the blanket.

Jack shook off the surprise and tried to be a good host.

“Incendio,” he said while pointing his wand at the fireplace.

Nothing happened. He walked up closer and tried to channel the castle’s magic properly.

“Incendio.”

A spark appeared but did not ignite the wood. Was it wet? He used frost earlier to put out the fire the house-elves started since he preferred his room cold and might have wet the wood too much.

It took him several more tries but the fire finally crackled. He walked up to the bed, bundled up his blanket carefully and brought the whole thing together with Reed closer to the fire while he took a step back from it.

“Sorry, it took me a while. I think my natural magic interferes with fire spells.”

Reed poked his head out and tentatively stretched his tiny hands to the fire.

“So what are you doing here?”

“Since I vouched for you, I was volunteered to deliver the message. No one would dare venture outside the colony in the winter, you know.”

“Thank you.”

Jack sat down cross-legged and waited for the fairy to warm up. He didn’t mind the silence. It was nice to share his room with someone, even if he was a tiny fairy.

“I apologize,” Reed said, his head bent in a tiny bow. “That was no tone to address an Air Lord. Forgive me.”
Jack was taken aback. “I’m not offended. You don’t have to tip-toe around me. I still don’t even know what being an Air Lord means.”

“It’s a great honor and it’s my honor to be your servant.”

“I’d rather have a friend than a servant.”

Reed covered his face with his tiny hands and sobbed. “So noble. Just what I would expect from an Air Lord.”

Jack felt awkward at all the adoration. He didn’t do anything to deserve all this respect.

“I bear a message, my Air Lord.” Reed calmed down and wiped his eyes on the blanket. “Queen Pitsa would like you and your sister to know that we have a confirmation that the Air Lords received our message. She suspects that they will check among their kind if anyone had heard of your mother’s name and claims you. You will likely hear from them directly but if they send us a message, we will pass it along.”

Jack smiled at the hopeful news. “Thank you, Reed, and give our thanks to the Queen. We will always remember the favor.”

Reed started to relax, the fire finally warmed him up.

“Stay here for awhile,” Jack offered. “I’ll bring you to the forest later to reduce your exposure to the winter.”

“Thank you, my Air Lord. You’re most gracious.”

“Please, address me Jack.”

After Reed warmed up, Jack hid him in his robes and went down for breakfast. He walked right past Harry Potter’s gang. Now that Merlin wasn’t here, at least he wasn’t forced to sit with the Wonder Boy again. His sister wasn’t there yet so he sat alone and ate quickly before anyone noticed the scared fairy he was hiding.

“I can’t believe I’m surrounded by hundreds of wizards,” Reed said, daring to peek out from under his robes.

“You’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to you.” He pointed at the food on the table. “Does anything here look appetizing to you? What do fairies eat?”

Reed smacked his lips and eyed the table. He pointed at the fruit bowl and Jack brought it closer to let the fairy take his pick.

“Those blueberries look delicious.”

“You’re right, Reed.”

Jack stealthily gave one to his hidden friend while he snacked on a handful himself. Reed surprisingly ate five of them in all - where he fit it was a mystery.

Elsa finally entered the Hall with Luna and Jack took it as his cue.

He walked up to her and whispered in her ear, “Reed brought us a message.”

“Hi.” The fairy peered from under his robes but was too scared to come out.
Elsa beamed, thinking it was the news she awaited.

“No news of our father yet,” Jack deflated her hope and her smile fell. “I’ll bring him to the forest and we’ll talk after you eat. Meet you outside.”

“Is that a fairy?” Luna asked.

Reed hid back in Jack’s robes and trembled there.

“He’s a little scared so I should take him to safety.”

“Please,” Reed said from under the heavy fabric.

Jack dropped off Reed in the forest, said his farewells and walked in the direction of the Great Lake to wait for his sister.

There was a little bit of snow on the ground, not enough in his opinion. It made his shoes muddy and he tried to walk on the patches of white but they were too small. Snow was so much cleaner.

“This is a disgrace,” Jack said to himself.

He decided to give Reed a head start to get safely to the colony and then he could remedy the muddy situation.

He was glad when the wet ground turned into a wet beach. The sand was brown and riddled with pebbles which crunched under his feet and no longer felt muddy. He found a group of large stones which sat right at the edge of the water, climbed them and sat down.

The snow looked thicker on the upper part of the mountains. Soon he would make it all look the same color until everything was evenly white.

He wondered why he felt such a strong desire to create winter if he wasn’t a Winter Spirit. An Air Spirit wouldn’t have this internal need so it had to be a trait inherited from Mother. What could she be?

The longer he thought of it, the more confused he was. What if what they always assumed were winter powers were actually air powers? Elsa could lower the air temperature. He could manipulate clouds. These were all Air Spirit abilities, weren’t they? But then what of their frost and ice abilities? Was it just a water affinity?

He peered down at the water touching the boulder he sat on. The surface was completely still and reflective like a sheet of mirror.

He wondered what this water would feel like if he stepped into it but something held him back. It bothered him because he didn’t understand this feeling. He couldn’t swim but it was shallow here.

This strange innate fear rendered him paralyzed, unable to touch the water and satisfy his curiosity. Merlin insisted that water was his affinity so why was he scared of this lake?

He saw the dark shape of his sister making her way down the hill and waited for her.

Sun’s light was reflected in the lake in a beam as if its glow came from underneath the depths. Clouds lazily shifted and teased him like they were about to release the sun but kept changing their mind.

A crunch of feet behind him announced the arrival of his sister.
“Why are you so far from the castle?”

“It’s a nice spot, isn’t it?”

She sat down next to him.

“What did Reed say?”

He relayed the message from the fairies and stared into the distance. It was easier to think here where it was quiet, empty and simply beautiful.

The castle rose out of the boulders it stood on and reflected in the lake. Its spiky turrets removed any doubt that it was a man-made structure but somehow it looked like it belonged there, like it was part of the mountains. He wondered how it was built. He couldn’t imagine wizards laying down each brick individually, which would suggest that magic was used.

Something tickled the edge of his mind and he couldn’t place the uneasy feeling that he was missing something glaring right at him. This castle had always felt so familiar. Did it remind him of Mother? He bet that her magic hammer could force the rocks to take the shape of a castle. Her magic wasn’t limited to winter abilities, was it?

“What are you thinking about?”

“Mother,” he said simply.

Elsa understood. “What she is? Yeah, I’ve been racking my brain about it.”

Jack closed his eyes and focused on the clouds above him. It was time to do his thing. Soon, they became darker and blocked the sun completely. The lake looked a little sad without its glow but once snowflakes started reaching them, it was beautiful in a different way.

“Why do we have these abilities?” he asked her the question that was bothering him.

“Because Mother does,” Elsa answered, watching the view with him.

As each snowflake hit the surface of the water, it disturbed its smoothness and became one with it. The clouds were now not only reflected in the lake, they became a part of it one snowflake at a time.

“You know what this means,” Elsa said. “Only Mother can tell us what we are.”

“I’m not going back just to ask.”

Elsa sighed and watched the lake in sad contemplation.

“What if the fairies are wrong?” She got his attention. “Queen Pizza is convinced that we’re not Winter Spirits because we entered their colony but what if we entered the colony because we’re half-Sylph and it doesn’t matter what our other half is?”

Jack chuckled at the mention of the Queen’s name and shook his head at Elsa’s new theory. Like he wasn’t confused enough, she gave him more to think about.

“Maybe.”

“It’s easier to explain than the alternative.”

“That our mother is a monster?”
“Don’t say it like that,” she whispered.

“That makes us half-monsters,” he said, staring at the mountain which had not smoothed out in color yet.

He wondered how long the snow would have to fall before they became completely white. Right now, the snowflakes were small and gentle so probably a long time. He didn’t want to increase their intensity though. He liked them this way.

He closed his eyes and cleared his mind. It was so peaceful here. Unlike rain, snow was muted, unobtrusive, it allowed even the stormiest thoughts to lay down and calm themselves. He felt flakes fall on his eyelids and wanted to feel more.

The quiet of the moment was broken by Elsa’s sniff. He immediately turned to her. Silent tears were streaming down her cheeks while she stared at the water. Why was she crying?

“Elsa?”

She sniffed again and took a long breath which broke.

“We should get back.”

She got off her boulder and started walking away, not even waiting for him.

He scrambled to follow her but slipped on a mossy stone and fell into the water with a splash.

Elsa turned around and stared. He felt really embarrassed as he got up and walked out of the ankle-deep water. His robes were dripping and his shoes made a squishy sound while his feet uncomfortably slid inside.

He walked over to her, feeling pathetic, and each step created a different SLURP - HISS - PLOP sound combination. Elsa roared with laughter and pointed at his shoes, too hysterical to even say anything.

His cheeks burned but he didn’t mind as much now, that he made her forget whatever made her sad before. He made a few steps in place to play with the slurpy sounds and she bent over, unable to stop her fit.

He looked down and finally understood why she kept pointing. Every time he made a step, a stream of water shot out, making his shoes look like little fountains.

“It’s like a wet sneeze,” she finally managed to say.

He rocked on his feet to make more squishy sounds. Water finally stopped coming out although it felt just as wet and uncomfortable inside.

He lifted his arm to offer her his elbow. She accepted the invitation, and they walked together through the snowy grounds, their arms linked, their smiles on, while his shoes played slurpy music which livened up their half-monster hearts.
Merlin arrived home and breathed in the familiar scent. The lamps turned on, sensing his arrival.

First, he stood against a door frame and marked his current height in the wood for later reference. Then, he finally did what he was dying to do - he let go of the aging spell and his clothes ripped as he regained his full size.

“Oops.”

He took them off with much effort and went into the bedroom to change. It felt divine, not only to be back in his adult body but also to not feel his magic encumbered. It felt as if he took off a mask and could breathe fresh air for the first time in months.

He rolled his shoulders and sat on his bed. There was no time to waste. They were lucky that he was the one that the monster attacked. If it had been someone less durable, he couldn’t stand the idea of a child dying under his watch.

It was interesting that he was the one chosen by the monster. If the Heir of Slytherin wanted to go further than Salazar’s intentions and attack all half-bloods as well as Muggleborns, more than half of the school would be in danger.

There was also the possibility that he was getting close to the truth and the Heir saw him as a threat. In that case, it was good news.

So, was it Malfoy? Did the kid notice that Merlin had been watching him? He had to increase his efforts. He still had a few drops of Veritaserum left which he could use on the boy and get this question out of the way.

First things first, he needed to address a few issues. Triple Goddess gave him a clear instruction - he had to visit the Crystal Cave and watch whatever visions she prepared for him. He wasn’t looking forward to it but it was foolish to not heed her direct words.

Once there, he could also take care of the pesky problem of his magic being limited while he held the aging spell.

Finally, he needed to find out more about the Basilisk. He saw it, it was a Great Snake, at least twenty feet long. He didn’t know they even got this large but he supposed this one was now ancient, at least a thousand years old.

He walked over to his library and pulled out a bestiary. He found that the Great Snakes normally did not live that long but their lifespan could be prolonged if the Snakelord put the beast into a deep sleep. This made sense. Then, every time a Slytherin’s Heir wanted to use it, they would wake it up, make it do their bidding and let it slumber again. The beast could survive thousands of years this way.

He read further. They had skin as durable as the Great Dragons, easily deflecting weapons and spells. That would prove it difficult to kill. Some, as the Basilisk he encountered, had the power to instantly kill with their glare. All it took was a second of looking it in the eyes. Their bite was lethally venomous - good to know. The book mentioned that some victims had been found petrified but did not explain how.

Finally, the bit of information he needed - any part of their body not covered by their skin was
vulnerable to attack. That didn’t leave much. Eyes? Nostrils? If he could get it to open its mouth maybe?

He supposed, he could let it swallow him and kill it from within. That would be very unpleasant but he was willing to make that sacrifice. He only had to ensure it didn’t kill him before he got the chance to lay the fatal blow. Being brought back to life while inside a snake’s stomach would be extremely ill-advised.

He imagined it would feel nearly as bad as that time when he angered the Goddess and as punishment, she brought him back few days after his death when his body was buried and already decaying. He shuddered, remembering the agony of that experience. It had been a long time since then but his memory refused to let him forget it.

Merlin transported himself to the Valley of the Fallen Kings which welcomed him with its deep forest. He was hit by the contrast of the damp foliage under his feet compared to the snow he’d already gotten used to in the highlands. Winter was very different in Camelot.

He was so close to where the castle used to stand, it was difficult to avoid memories. He descended through the narrow passage which split the rock like a fissure in the earth and had a flashback of following Arthur as he led him down these now worn-out stone steps.

“They’ll never follow us in here. They won’t dare. Trust me,” his prince said with a confident smirk.

Of course, the bandits followed them, undeterred by the Valley’s reputation for being cursed, and Arthur had to be yet again saved from death by magic, though he never learned of it.

There was hope that his prat would return soon. The Goddess didn’t confirm when but it sounded like it was close. Did she feel the passage of time at all? Merlin wished he didn’t. If not for magical means of entering memories, he would’ve forgotten what Arthur looked like by now. Sometimes, he could hardly believe that it all really happened, he didn’t imagine it.

The two statues of forgotten kings which framed the entrance were already ancient back when Merlin was young, and now, you couldn’t even tell what they once were. They were claimed back by nature, reduced to looking like tall rocks protruding from the earth, overgrown by vines, tree roots, and moss - the evidence of time passing him by. He never would have imagined back then that he would still be here fifteen hundred years later - his prophecy still unfulfilled, still without Arthur.

When he first came here with Arthur, he sensed strong magic repelling him from the place and thought that it was indeed cursed. Only much later he figured out that the feeling came from ancient wards which were meant to keep out intruders. Whether poorly cast or worn out with time, they were faulty and so he set up his own.

It was easy to repel Muggles from exploring this area. Wizards had forgotten about this place but he set up wards against them as well just in case and only brought here whoever he deemed worthy of knowing this secret.

Although it felt wrong to guard the Cave, after all, it belonged to mankind, not him personally, he felt it was his duty to protect it. Several times, he witnessed people try to plunder the crystals for their own purposes. If he allowed that to continue, they would all be gone by now. At least any time he used the crystals, he always brought them back and tried to reuse them instead of harvesting new ones. Others did not have his ideals.

The unused pathway to the Cave was overgrown by dormant grass and ferns, further hiding its location. He could feel the pull of its power call to him the closer he got. It excited his senses but he
couldn’t help but feel reluctant. The Cave gave him a lot but it always asked for something in return. The narrow entrance was hidden behind a wall of vine. Now, during winter, it was bare of leaves but still provided enough protection from curious eyes of whoever might overcome the wards and venture all the way here. He inspected the plant to ensure it looked healthy and said a quick spell to strengthen its roots just in case.

He moved the vines aside but lingered before entering the dark depths. The Crystal Cave had a tendency to always hog his time. He wanted to get this over with quickly so he could get back to the castle.

“Just in and out,” he promised himself.

The light of day did not penetrate deep into the Cave but there was no need to cast any spells. The white crystals sticking out of the rock floor, walls and ceiling emitted an everlasting warm glow which illuminated the space enough. The sounds of outside muted as soon as he walked in, replaced by a gentle hum - the sound of pure magic.

More memories flashed before his eyes. He had once seen the spirit of his father right here and always longed to see him again but the Cave did not grant his wish. All he had was a feeble memory of what he said.

You are more than a son of your father. You are magic itself. Believe what your heart knows to be true. That you have always been, and always will be.

That day, Merlin accepted his destiny and was given everlasting youth and immortality which seemed neat at the time but he never would have dreamt that “always will be” meant living for thousands of years.

He felt tricked. The cave used his father’s image to convince him to agree to a bargain he wasn’t fully informed on.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. There was no use in wondering whether he would have accepted this destiny if he understood what it meant. It was done and he was a man of his word. He would not back down. He was Emrys and always would be for as long as destiny demanded it.

He always dreaded looking into the crystals and right now, he stepped around them, taking care to not accidentally let his eyes fall onto any individual one. It was distracting to see flashes while trying to walk or think. No, he would allow the visions to come only right before leaving - on his terms.

“In and out,” he reminded himself.

On the other side of the cave, he stored previously used crystals. There was one which contained a few drops of his blood and which he enchanted to work as a battery. He could use it to recharge if he ever found himself weakened by the aging spell. It’s spent a couple of centuries down here and should be fully charged.

He kept his eyes on the rock behind which enchanted crystals laid and did not dare to look where he was stepping, afraid to accidentally catch a glimpse of a vision in one of the crystals.

And so he didn’t notice a wet stone, slipped and fell hard on the jagged rocks where he hit his head and knocked himself out.

Fawkes swooped down from the top of the tall ceiling down to the floor and right back up, his bright
red feathers reflecting the lights of the many lanterns in the Headmaster’s office. Albus glanced at his Phoenix and chuckled at his antics. He was always very playful when young.

That thought reminded him of the ancient sorcerer who never seemed to act his age. Albus wondered if Merlin realized how much being a child affected him.

The more he thought about it, the more he was amazed at Merlin’s playfulness. Would anyone else be able to maintain youthful innocence through this long passage of time? He doubted it. He imagined that if he had lived as long as Merlin has and experienced everything he had, he would have become bitter and resentful. Merlin was special in that regard and probably that was the reason why he was given the gift of immortality. Anyone else would have abused this power by now.

A knock snapped him out of his reflections. Severus came in. He didn’t have to hold his shoes anymore. Albus expected him, guessing that he was just looking for the right time to launch into questions.

“Headmaster. Finally, we can talk, I hope?”

“Come in, Severus.”

Albus sat down in his high-backed chair and smoothed out his beard, waiting for Severus to start. The Potions Master looked apprehensively at the chair awaiting him.

“He only released the shoe curse.”

Albus understood and got up.

“I apologize, I wasn’t aware. You can sit on the sofa, correct?”

Severus nodded more with his eyes than his head and they walked over to the couch on the other side of the room. Albus sat down on it and remembered how Merlin’s dead body laid in this same spot for hours.

It disturbed him to witness that Merlin was not instantly healed when he awoke. His body was just as damaged and still looked dead with the addition of a working heart and a soul back in it. He wondered how he could ask him about the experience… tactfully.

Severus settled himself in and thankfully did not break this furniture.

“Do you truly believe him to be THE Merlin?”

“Yes, Severus. That’s who he is. I’ve witnessed enough to no longer doubt that.”

“Is he as powerful as the legends say?”

“I’ve seen glimpses of his power. Sometimes, it seems like it doesn’t have limits but I’ve also seen evidence that it does.”

Black eyes narrowed while the Potions Master thought over Albus’ words.

“I don’t believe the Dark Lord knows of his existence,” he finally said. “If he’s this powerful, why hasn’t he defeated him yet?”

“He tried during the war but Voldemort has made himself immortal as well. Alas how, that’s what we’re going to have to find out.”
Severus pursed his lips, a flick of emotion ran through his features but disappeared as quickly as it came.

“Headmaster, I understand why you brought him here, but you must admit that he is not under your control. He’s unpredictable. Who knows what he’ll do on a whim the next time he feels like someone deserves his judgment.”

“I worry about that too, Severus, but I would rather have him on our side.”

Severus shuddered. “Just the thought of the Dark Lord recruiting him…”

“That would be catastrophic but I doubt it would happen.”

Severus licked his lips and it looked like he had a hard time saying what he wanted to express. Albus waited patiently and leaned back in the sofa, getting comfortable. Above him, Fawkes started singing.

“Headmaster,” Severus said slowly, carefully, his eyes glancing at Fawkes with impatience. “Do you think I should be worried or that I should be on alert?”

Was this fear? Sure, Merlin created a scene in the library but Severus wasn’t easily intimidated.

“Worried about what?”

“I was the reason why he died. It appeared to be a painful experience, so I imagine he will hold a grudge. He seems to take grudges very seriously.”

Ah, he didn’t want to get cursed again.

“Indeed, it appears so.”

Albus remembered how Merlin threw For the greater good line at him. Everyone made mistakes in their youth. Must he always be judged for his?

“Just in case, you might want to be careful around him. I think it goes without saying - don’t torment him or his friends.”

“What if he starts acting like an insolent brat just to test my patience? How can I ignore that behavior in front of other students?”

It was a good point but Albus thought it wouldn’t be as much of an issue as Severus feared.

“I think it won’t come to that. He might give you a snarky remark, I don’t think he can help himself, but otherwise he should keep his head down. Just recently I reminded him to try harder in his attempt to blend in as he was drawing attention to himself.”

“More than just mine?”

“Minerva has been asking all sorts of questions. I don’t think she suspects who he is but she’s starting to notice that he’s more than a child.”

Fawkes settled on his perch and continued his song from there. Albus listened with pleasure. Though he heard it many times before, each song filled him with such warmth as if he was hearing it for the first time.

Severus shifted in his seat. ”Why does he hide from the world and pretends to be a myth? This part I
don't understand."

"He's laying low while waiting for his prophecy to come true."

"What is his prophecy?"

"The legendary King Arthur is supposed to return. Severus," Albus linked his hands and looked
down his spectacles, trying to get the message across, "we need him. I want him to stay by Harry’s
side. You need to let him be."

"Potter has no idea?"

"He doesn't."

Severus sighed quietly. "I don't envy him the babysitting job. What do you think he's doing now?"

"Working on a plan to help us with the Chamber of Secrets, I hope."

"I wonder if you placed too much hope in him."

Fawkes finished his song on a high note and occupied himself with grooming. His brilliant red and
gold feathers gleamed in the light streaming from a nearby window. The glow which bounced off of
him looked as if it was laced with magical energy. It probably was.

“What have we left if we lose hope?"

Snowflakes as large as Galleons floated down to join millions of them already piled up on the
ground. The world was white as it should be and it would continue to be as long as Jack had a say
about it. Elsa scolded him for bringing too much snow but he didn’t care. He was in the mood for it
and so it would go on. He had nothing better to do anyway.

In the early morning, the common room was his. He leaned against the windowsill of the only
window in there. He’d much rather sit on it but it was slanted so every time he tried, he just slid
down.

Winter Solstice arrived which meant several awesome things. Classes were over, the majority of the
students were going home - Jack hoped Potter was among them - and it meant empty hallways
available for fun.

He ran to the entrance courtyard, waved to everyone who was leaving and then ran to the balustrade
to watch the carriages make their way to the station. The train puffed away and left him grinning. He
raced to the castle and itched for some fun.

He found Elsa and gave her a big hug.

“Happy Birthday!”

“To you too,” she giggled and tried to get away.

“What are your plans?"

“I’m meeting Padma at the library. Luna left us some dirigible plums so I’m going to sneak them past
Madam Pince. It will be fun! Do you want to come?”

“The library?”
He stared at his sister with his mouth open. What part of ‘fun’ did she not understand?

“Thanks, I’ll pass.”

“See you later then.”

Elsa walked away and Jack prayed to the Moon that he could find something to do and not resort to celebrating Elsa-style.

“Peeves!” he yelled and waited.

Right on command, Peeves popped into existence right next to him.

“Jack-Friend!”

“It’s my birthday. Let’s do something fun!”

Peeves squealed in delight and gave him a hug. Jack returned it and Peeves chose this moment to tickle him.

It started as an innocent funny feeling, a jolt of electricity which hit him from many sides at once, made him drop to the floor and giggle, but Peeves didn’t stop there. Jack lost control of his body as an abandoned, delirious, belly laugh took over and left him feeling helpless. He couldn’t catch enough breath to tell him to stop. He tried to wriggle away but Peeves’ fingers quickly found newly exposed parts of his belly or armpits and resumed the torture.

“Stop! Peeves, stop!” Jack begged, only to have the tickler increase the pressure.

Jack struggled and writhed on the floor until he managed to grab the spirit’s wrists and could finally take a breath.

“Peeves, no!”

Peeves pouted but finally stopped. “But it’s fun.”

“Not for me,” Jack said and dropped his head to the floor, breathing heavily.

His eyes found the bespectacled face of Harry Potter whose feet were right by his head and who was looking down at him with a grin on his face.

Jack suddenly realized what a weird position he was caught in. He still held Peeves’ wrists while the spirit sat atop of him. This had to look quite weird.

He let go and got up swiftly. Peeves floated next to him and giggled in his high pitch.

“Potter,” Jack tried to act like Potter had not just found him straddled by a poltergeist, “you didn’t leave for the holiday.”

The Scarface chuckled at him. “If I had, I would have missed this.”

Jack ground his teeth but tried to look cool. “You’ve never been tickled by a poltergeist? That problem could be solved very easily.”

Potter’s eyes widened, he looked between Jack and Peeves and swallowed. Peeves rubbed his hands and grinned so widely, his mouth nearly stretched from ear to ear.
“Get him!” Jack said, feeling like a general giving out orders.

Potter started running but Peeves floated and easily caught up. Jack heard the echo of Wonder Boy’s uncontrollable laughter and felt that his work was done. If he had to share the empty castle with him, he might as well have fun with it.

Now that Peeves left, Jack didn’t know what to do. He saw Ginny Weasley stare out the window with a sad look on her face and weighed his options. Last time he tried to invite her for fun, she made up a story that she had plans with someone else. Luna said she would talk some sense into her. Maybe she succeeded? He decided to give the girl one more try.

“Hey, Ginny,” he ran up to her. “Fancy a game?”

“Quidditch?” He nodded and she shook her head with a laugh. “Jack, look at the weather!”

It was snowing. He knew because he caused it. What was her point?

“We can’t practice in this!” she pointed out the window.

He frowned but then an idea came to his mind.

“What if there was a place where we could practice indoors? Would you want to?”

Her eyebrows flew up and she chuckled like she didn’t quite believe him. “Sure.”

“Give me an hour.”

Jack ran upstairs to the seventh floor. He never tried to do this before and wasn’t sure how it worked but he hoped that his special room could take on other forms, not just a cavern look. So he repeated the same steps he did before. He walked down the corridor, back to the staircase and then down the corridor again while imagining a perfect room to practice Quidditch in. The door appeared and he threw it open.

The room was larger and taller than before. There were still columns obstructing the way but they could be used as an obstacle course of sorts. There were three hoops just like the ones at the pitch and the floor was made of some soft squishy material which he imagined would soften a fall from a great height.

It was perfect and he shouted out a hoot in victory. This room was awesome! The only thing missing was the equipment. He needed brooms, balls, and gloves for them. He ran out, procured the items from the shed outside and snuck them inside the castle where he stuffed them inside a broom closet.

He felt more than heard something behind him.

He swiftly turned around and found himself face to face with a ghost.

“AAAAH!” he startled and slipped on the snow he tracked in, landing painfully on his butt.

“Sorry,” the ghost said and floated over to him.

It was a teenage girl with pigtails and glasses who eyed him with fascination. He’d seen her before, although she was one of those ghosts who weren’t as social as others and did not mingle with the living.

“You must be the one I heard other ghosts talk about,” she said and floated so close, her face was nearly touching his.
He scrambled away from her. Her dead aura sent shivers down his spine. Ghosts just felt wrong. He got up and tried to back away from her.

“Don’t go,” she said and batted her eyelashes at him. “There are no other spirit boys my age at this school.”

Did she mean… Was she flirting with him?

“I am nothing like you. I’m alive.”

She tilted her head and pouted.

“I don’t mind.”

He ran out of there and she floated in front of him, landing in a flirty pose - her hands linked behind her, her head tilted. She rocked herself side to side to make her ghostly skirt twirl.

“I’m Myrtle,” she said in a shy, high-pitched voice.

He backed up against a wall and wondered what he could do. He couldn’t hide anywhere - she could walk through walls! He couldn’t outrun her. How could he get rid of her?

“What’s your name?”

Would he have to resort to actually talking to her? She floated up and he could feel her dead aura again. It made it difficult to think.

“I’m Jack.”

He hoped that maybe if he engaged in a conversation, she would eventually leave him alone.

“Hi, Jack.” She giggled and got even closer. “Want a kiss?”

He inched sideways against the wall, trying to get away from her.

“I don’t even know you, Myrtle.”

“What do you want to know?”

She floated over to his new location and he felt trapped.

“I haunt that bathroom,” she offered, pointing at the lavatory at the end of the corridor. “I died there.”

This would explain why it was deemed out of order.

“I’ve always wanted a boyfriend but I died before…”

She started sobbing pitifully, hung her head and looked up at him with her big ghastly eyes. Did she think this was alluring? It just disturbed him more.

“Yeah, that’s sad. I feel sorry for you. Uh…” she blinked at him and he tried to inch away again. “Rest in peace?”

“I wish I could!”

She flung herself at him and his whole body froze because she touched him. She sobbed for a moment before she noticed it too. While she was a translucent wispy ghost who could go through
walls and he was made of flesh and bone, she was able to touch him as if she was solid.

He gulped while she slowly moved away just an inch, her eyes going wide as she started to realize what this meant.

“You really are a spirit,” she said quietly. “It doesn’t matter that you’re not dead.”

She grinned and reached out to touch his face. Her touch felt cold, and not a good-cold like Elsa’s icy touch, it was a sickening cold that made his insides twist.

“Don’t touch me,” he growled and tried to walk away backwards.

She grabbed his shirt with both hands.

“Oh, but you can’t get away.” She squealed in delight. “You’re mine.”

She leaned in as if she was going to kiss him and he had a hard time breathing. He needed to stop her. If she could touch him, then he could touch her!

He put his hands on her wrists and released a strong wave of magic on her. Frost started covering her hands, going up her arms and her grey lips were near his before she noticed what he was doing.

She grimaced. “What is this?”

He held her wrists and kept forcing more magic into her. Frost took over not only outside but also the inside of her ghostly body. Her face contorted into fear.

“What are you doing to me?”

He did not stop but kept going until her entire form was now completely white.

He finally released her and she tried to get the frost off her unsuccessfully. She wailed and lamented and with a shriek that hurt his ears, she flew through a wall. As she ran into it, the frost was left behind - left flat on the wall in the shape of a running figure.

Jack shivered, and while he succeeded in getting rid of her, he couldn’t get over the cold feeling of being touched by the dead. He stumbled out of there, heading for the Gryffindor Tower, eager to put her out of his mind. Quidditch. Quidditch would make him forget.

He realized that he did not tell Ginny where they would meet. He was a poor planner. Thankfully, she was in the common room, sitting in front of the fireplace. He shook off the last of the shaky feeling Myrtle left him in and tried to forget her. Today was supposed to be a fun day. He was going to make it fun! Whatever it took!

“It’s done,” he shouted to her and she jumped from surprise. “Let’s go!”

“What’s done?”

Jack whirled around and found Potter eyeing him.

“Not your business, Potter.”

“Are you going to set Peeves on Ginny now?”

Jack smirked, imagining how badly his spirit friend tormented the Scarred Wonder. He should have followed to watch.
Potter growled and his hand dived into his pocket. Jack shook his head. And Merlin said that he was trying to pick a fight when clearly, Potter was wand-happy. He turned around and addressed Ginny, trying to ignore Scarhead.

“I have a perfect place and the equipment ready to go. Let’s go, Ginny.”

“You’re not taking Ginny anywhere.”

This time it was Potter’s red-headed sidekick that spoke up. Jack ground his teeth while Ginny hunched her shoulders.

“Don’t go anywhere with him, Ginny,” Weasley said. “Don’t trust him.”

She looked up at Jack and seemed undecided. This was getting ridiculous.

Jack turned around and stared at the two second-years who already had their wands out. No, it didn’t matter that they were second-years. He was now twelve just like they were.

“You’re not taking my sister anywhere.”

“Oh, now you’ve decided to be a good brother?” Ginger eyebrows knit together but Jack didn’t stop. “Where were you when she was sitting alone, waiting for someone to come over and talk to her?”

Weasley pointed his wand at him. It looked weird like something was wrapped around the middle of it. Tape?

“Shut your mouth, Nix.”

“Or what?”

Jack leaned against a couch, crossed his legs casually and decided to not take his wand out, even though his hand was itching for him to. He tried to satisfy the need by running a hand through his hair. He wanted them to throw a jinx at him first. If they attacked him when he was unarmed, he could do whatever he wanted to them without repercussions.

“You remind me of Malfoy,” Potter said.

“Do I?” Jack couldn’t help but grin wider. “He wishes he was this cool.”

“All of you need to calm down,” Ginny said.

She got up from the couch and with an apologetic glance at Jack, ran up to her dorm.

Now, this wasn’t fair. He didn’t do anything wrong. They were supposed to play together. How was he supposed to celebrate his birthday now?

“Leave her alone,” Potter spat, still holding his wand.

Well, if he wasn’t going to play with Ginny, he had to entertain himself in other ways.

“Make me,” he challenged.

Potter shifted on his feet. His voice was steady.

“Take your wand out and let’s duel.”
Before Jack could respond, Percy Weasley shouted at them, sticking out his chest to show off his Prefect badge.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He ran down the stairs and stood in front of them. “You’re ganging up on a first-year? Ron, put that wand away before you jinx yourself again.”

The younger Weasley grimaced and Jack remembered a story he overheard of how his jinx backfired, making him cough up giant slugs for hours.

“Awww, I’d like to see that,” Jack said and made a show of pouting. “Do the slug jinx again.”

“Shut up, Nix!” Weasley shouted. “Just shut up!”

Jack made a show of slowly reaching into his pocket, pretending to pull his wand out.

“Flipendo!” Weasley shouted.

A jet of light headed his way and Jack jumped away just in time. Instead, the spell hit the couch and Jack was glad Ginny was no longer there because it flipped into the air and crashed against the wall.

Percy yelled at them, “Five points from Gryffindor, Ron!”

“What? But he started it.”

“No, I didn’t,” Jack said, looking innocent. “I only wanted to play with Ginny and I don’t know why they just attacked me.”

“Mum will hear of this, Ron,” Percy said grimly. “To your dorms NOW!”

Potter shot Jack a death stare while the younger Weasley looked rather scared and they both grudgingly went up to their dorm.

Percy turned to Jack.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. The couch isn’t.”

“Reparo,” Percy said while pointing his wand at the broken bits of the couch.

The pieces lifted into the air and arranged themselves like a puzzle until the couch was in one piece.

“Stay out of trouble.”

He clapped him on the shoulder and left.

This was all fine and dandy but Jack was left alone with no one to play with again.

He left the common room and walked to the Hospital Wing, watching carefully for any more ghosts.

The petrified victims were on their own. Jack didn’t know where the Healer on duty was but it was even better this way.

He sat down next to Colin whose position was the same as always.

“Hi, Colin. It’s just me again.”
He looked at his friend’s frozen face and wished he could see that enthusiastic smile again.

“It’s my first birthday outside, it’s special, you know, but I haven’t been able to find anything fun to do yet. How am I supposed to celebrate if I’ve got no one to play with? Merlin left for the holidays, Elsa is doing something boring in the library, Ginny was going to play but then got spooked by Potter. He’s taking all my friends. It’s not fair. It’s just us, Colin. I know you’d love to do something fun if you could. I can’t even imagine how bored you must be. We’ll make up for it when you wake up.”

Colin couldn’t speak up for himself but had that permanently shocked look on his face. Jack imagined his friend would jump up on the bed excitedly in his mismatched socks, take a picture of the two of them together and would be excited for whatever type of fun Jack could come up with. Colin knew how to have fun.

Jack sat down on the floor cross-legged and started drawing small shapes with his frost. He made them rise and watched the frost fairies zoom around the room. He kept drawing and making them come alive until the room was so full of them, he couldn’t see any furniture. This was his party and they were his guests.

He imagined them socialize, laugh and play. They started a frostball fight and then ganged up and attacked him all at once with tiny balls which landed on him gently like snowflakes. They danced in sync to music in his head and arranged in a line, following each other, tripping over each other’s wings.

Then, they gathered around him and showered him with hugs, gifts, and kisses. Then, they built a giant - for them - cake just for him, gathered around him, holding hands and sang a birthday song together.

He could almost hear it when the fairies collided with each other and fell apart. One after the other like dominos, they started to disintegrate until the last one was gone and fell to the floor with a snowy poof.

There was no cake, singing or dancing. There was only frost laying flat on the grey-tiled floor.
The gentle snowstorm had turned into a vicious blizzard which had not eased up in two days. The highlands were famous for their quickly-changing weather but this was ridiculous, bordering on magical.

Since the weather outside made it impossible to enjoy a stroll in the fresh air, Ginny went for a walk through the castle halls. Yes, it was stupid. There was a Chamber monster lurking about but as she was a pureblood witch, she thought the risk was minimal and she had to get out.

Her roommates all left for the holidays which left her completely alone and she was so visibly spooked by her empty room, Hermione invited her to sleep in her dorm. Ginny took her up on the offer and slept better than she had in months.

Was it the prospect of no classes, or something else, but she woke up refreshed, energized and ready for the day. She felt disappointed that Jack’s idea of indoor Quidditch didn’t work out, spoiled by Ron’s irrational need to protect her from all boys. Seriously. Brothers could be so annoying sometimes.

Her legs took her to the dungeons and her steps echoed through the gloomy hallway. She shivered and wrapped her sweater tighter around herself. She sped up, thinking to get out of the underground and find a warmer place for a stroll.

She heard a squeal and stopped in her tracks. It came from behind a closed door. She’d never been in this part of the dungeons before but she assumed that this was a classroom which should have been empty right now.

The sound repeated. It was a high pitched yelp. Was it a yelp for help or a happy one? Just to be sure, she decided to check it out.

She quietly opened the door and peeked inside. As she guessed, it was a classroom and two teenagers were at the front of it. The girl sat on the teacher’s desk with her back to Ginny, her long hair draped behind her like a veil while the boy was pressed up very close to her and his hands were on her hips.

Oh, boy, were they snogging? This was a funny thing to walk in on and she stifled a snort when the girl squealed and giggled. What could the boy be doing to cause that?

Then, the boy lifted his head and Ginny’s eyes bulged. It was her brother Percy!

She quickly got out of there. Walking wasn’t quick enough so she started running. She raced out of the dungeons, listening closely if she was followed, wondering if Percy saw her.

She ran into the library and hid behind a bookcase. She was short of breath and could feel how hot her face was. Images flashed before her eyes as she remembered what she just witnessed. She shouldn’t have looked.

Then she burst out in a laugh too loud for a library and tried to stifle it with her hand. She caught her brother snogging. Oh, Percy. This was the secret he had been guarding. The twins kept mentioning that he’d been acting odd. They had no idea. He even gave a half-baked excuse as to why he stayed for the holiday “To help the teachers.” Yeah, right.

Of all the secrets her pompous brother could be hiding, she never would have imagined that he was
hiding a girlfriend.

Should she tell him that she knew? Nah. It was funnier that he thought it was still a secret.

Once back in the common room, she saw Fred and George plot something by the fire, their heads close by, whispering.

She sat by them and tried to restrain her smile. She knew something they didn't.

"What are you two up to?"

They looked around the room to confirm no one else was there. Then, Fred pulled something out of his pocket to show her.

“I stole Percy’s Prefect badge,” he whispered.

“We need to rename it,” George offered.

Ginny stared at them in disbelief. If Percy found out they messed with his most precious possession, he’d flip out.

“What word do you think would properly describe our dear brother?"

They looked at her expectantly and she blurted the first word that came to her mind, “Pinhead.”

“Pinhead it is,” George said and the twins grinned devilishly.

Harry Potter walked down from the dorms and sat with Ron at the chess table. When looking at him, she couldn’t help but remember Percy with his girlfriend and her cheeks burned. She wasn’t ready for things like that but she wondered what Harry’s lips would feel like.

She had never kissed a boy before. She’d love it if Harry was her first kiss but he always felt so out of reach. How could she get him to notice her?

The sounds of laughter woke Elsa and she came down from her dorm to investigate. Her fellow Ravenclaws were gathered in the common room around a large decorated pine tree, showing things to each other.

“There’s one here for you, Elsa,” Padma called out.

Today was the day of surprises. She didn’t know that she was going to get a gift from McGonagall - pretty art supplies and a variety of wizarding sweets. She didn’t know that today everyone was exchanging gifts and her hands felt very empty when she later thanked the witch. Padma assured her that it was alright but it didn’t feel like it. Only now she realized that she didn’t know much about the witch. What gift would someone like McGonagall wish for?

The Great Hall was beautifully decorated in a winter theme. There were wreaths and garlands already hanging from doorways. She watched Hagrid haul a giant pine tree and set it down among others. She counted twelve which were stacked on two sides of the Hall.

“Wait until they’re done decorating,” Padma said and nudged her. “It will be magnificent.”

The staff tables were split up to make space for a huge tree at the center.

“Last year, there were a lot more students here for Christmas so this year it’s very cozy.”
Cozy was a good word to describe the atmosphere. They sat down at the end of the Ravenclaw table with the few other students who Elsa was only getting to know now. It was much easier to make friends when there were less than a dozen people there and by now, she remembered everyone’s names. They all greeted her and Padma as they sat down. She only wished that Luna was there but she went on holiday with her dad to track some elusive creature all the way in Sweden.

The enchanted ceiling reflected gentle snow and Elsa was glad that her brother finally released the heavy blizzard he had been obsessing over the last few days. She wondered what gift he got from McGonagall but couldn’t ask as he didn’t show up for breakfast. Maybe he slept in.

While these were all pleasant surprises, she preferred being prepared so after breakfast, she went to the library and read up everything she could find about Christmas within the few hours until her stomach growled. She now felt properly informed but worried about other human traditions she might be clueless about. Was there an easier way to find out besides waiting until the holiday came? Humans made everything so complicated.

By lunchtime, progress was made with decorations. The trees were now adorned with many shiny objects. She was shocked to find that the largest tree at the center had live fairies.

She walked up to them and whispered, “Why are you on this tree?”

The fairies startled and looked at her in question. “You better keep your promise!”

“What promise?”

They exchanged bewildered looks.

“You understand us?”

“Of course I do. Don’t waste time - answer before someone notices that I’m talking to a tree.”

She touched a shiny golden ball to make it look like she was admiring decorations.

The fairies murmured to each other and she guessed that they didn’t come from the colony in the forest since they didn’t know who she was.

One of them jumped up and offered an explanation, “The short wizard promised us lots of honey if we sat on this tree and looked pretty.”

Elsa sighed in relief. For a moment there, she was afraid that they were kept there against their will. Jack would flip out if he saw that they were treated as a decoration. She turned her head and glanced at the Gryffindor table. He still had not arrived.

“If you need help, let me know,” Elsa told them and went back.

She left the fairies buzzing with excitement while she ate uneasily. She waited and watched the entrance but her brother still did not show up. She was now officially worried.

She sent him a signal asking where he was but he did not answer. He couldn’t still be sleeping, could he?

She finally walked up to the Gryffindor table which was full of red-headed Weasleys and a few people she did not know. She recognized that Hermione girl. She only remembered her name because it was so weird.
“Hi. Have you seen my brother?”

The girl furrowed her brows and shook her bushy head.

“No. I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Good,” the youngest Weasely boy said.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“His absence is a surprise Christmas gift. He’s always getting us in trouble.”

Hermione cut in, “From what you’ve told me, you attacked first. He didn’t even pull his wand out.”

“You weren’t there. He clearly provoked me.”

“What do you mean?” Elsa made a step towards the ginger boy. “You attacked my brother? What did you do to him?”

“Nothing!” Harry Potter defended.

Elsa’s rage at the thought that someone tried to hurt her twin must have shown because Potter started stuttering.

“I think he did it on p-purpose. He kept s-s-saying things to make us attack him. He’s always like that! Always trying to start a fight with me.”

“I can see why,” Elsa said through gritted teeth.

She felt an unexplainable urge to strangle both of these boys. Gryffindors had a reputation for being aggressive but these fools were exceeding her expectations.

“It was a few days ago anyway,” Potter said quickly. “That’s not why he’s missing now.”

All of the Gryffindors were listening to their exchange by now and she looked at them with an accusation.

“He’s one of you and yet none of you are worried that he’s been missing all day?”

An older Weasely spoke up, “This is rather normal.” His badge read Pinhead instead of Prefect and Elsa wondered when he would notice that his Christmas gift was getting pranked. “He’s been keeping to himself during this holiday. I rarely see him.”

Jack was avoiding company? That wasn’t like him. He was always very social. Elsa felt heat in her eyes which she knew would turn into tears.

“What do you expect after you attacked him?”

These were his House-mates. They should be treating him like family. She hated Gryffindors and she was beginning to hate all wizards.

She felt a tingle of ice in her fingertips and was afraid that if she kept talking to these idiots, she would lose control of her magic again. She couldn’t let that happen.

She turned around and sat at the Ravenclaw table where people at least had heads on their shoulders.
“I heard the whole thing,” Padma said in a gentle tone. “I’m sorry. Those Gryffindors are such hot-heads.”

“They can’t handle him, that’s the problem. He talks in a playful banter but these idiots wouldn’t know a verbal spar if it hit them over the head.”

She worried about him and sent him a signal again - which he didn’t respond to again. She decided to force him to accompany her if it came to that so he wouldn’t spend so much time alone. Their whole childhood Jack always took care of her. It was time she took care of him.

Two cold hands covered her eyes.

“Guess who.”

She turned around to her grinning brother and smacked him in the shoulder.

“What’s that for?”

He rubbed it but sat down, still grinning.

“You didn’t answer.”

He shrugged. “I was already on my way. Just had to change.”

“Why?” This sounded suspicious.

“Snow.” He winked at her.

“You don’t mean you were outside in this weather!” Padma shouted.

“What's the use of a blizzard if you don’t get to play in it? It's up to my waist. You have got to check it out, Elsa!”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Padma ran a hand through her long black hair and commented on the blue hoodie he was wearing, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear anything other than the uniform.”

He grinned again while looking down at it.

“Christmas gift. McGonagall must have remembered how bummed I was when she threw my old one out.”

“You look good in blue,” Padma commented and Elsa rolled her eyes so hard she might have strained a muscle.

“Since I’m Ravenclaw-colored anyway, I’ll just hang out with you two if you don’t mind.”

“You’re always welcome here.”

Elsa was getting a headache from being in the middle of Padma’s flirting attempt. She wasn’t sure if she approved of it. Padma was her friend but she felt a need to sit between the two of them like a chaperone. Thankfully, Jack wasn’t showing a lot of interest and was mostly just polite to her. She didn’t know if she could take it if he participated in this game.

She tried to change the subject. “So what is this I hear about a fight with Potter and Weasley?”
He waved his hand dismissively. “Don’t worry, sis. It would take more than a Weasley to take me down. It wasn’t even a fight.” He snickered. “He destroyed a couch and got caught.”

She glared at him and he put his hands up.

“I’m not stupid. If I attack them, I’d get in trouble but if I don’t even pull my wand out…”

He shrugged.

Padma giggled. “Then they get in trouble.”

“And I don’t even have to do a thing. They’re so easy. They fall for it every time.”

“That’s genius,” Padma praised and he crossed his arms, feeling proud of himself. Oh, but he didn’t know that Padma hid a motive behind her compliments.

“It’s not winning you any points with them though,” Elsa pointed out.

Jack’s features became serious. “I don’t care if Potter likes me.” He was staring at the tree she approached before. “Are those fairies?”

“They’re there from their own free will. Someone promised them a treat if they just look pretty.”

“I hope they’ve been praised for being pretty, then. They’ll be crushed if they’re posing there and no one notices.”

Padma giggled. “You do it, then.”

Jack raised an eyebrow and got up.

She gasped. She did not expect that he was serious.

He walked up to the tree and said loud enough that they heard it.

“You are the loveliest fairies I have ever seen. All other decorations pale in comparison to your wings’ glow.”

Elsa imagined that the fairies were now swooning from the compliment. And they didn’t even know yet that an Air Lord gave it.

He ran over to the staff table to thank McGonagall who was happy that he wore his present.

Staying true to the promise she made herself, Elsa made an effort to spend more time with him. She let him drag her outside to show off his snow and they played by launching themselves at it from heights. It cushioned the fall in the most liberating way.

When they tired themselves, they laid in the cool puff until the day came to an end. Elsa watched the snowflakes gently fall and remembered a question he never answered.

“Jack, what did you see in the Mirror of Erised?”

He played with the snow, making it swirl in a circle.

“It’s stupid and not real. I don’t know why I saw it.”

“Tell me.”
The snow was under his complete control and he intensified it.

She worried that he wouldn’t tell her and wondered if she did something to cause this chasm to grow larger between them.

“She were human,” he said quietly.

She was so shocked, she sat up.

“What?”

He played with his little snow tornado.

“I had brown hair and a tan,” the corner of his mouth lifted, “you were blond. You look good as a blonde.”

“The mirror shows your desires. You want to be human?”

“No.” He spread both arms out, which suspended all snowflakes and they hovered, waiting for his instruction. “I like my magic. I wouldn’t want to be a stupid powerless human.”

She laid down on her side and watched him. “Then why did you see that in the mirror?”

“I suppose,” he resumed swirling the snow, “I wouldn’t mind if I wasn’t such a freak among them.”

She reached his white hair and gently combed it. She never felt this way. In fact, the unique way she looked, her long white tresses, startling blue eyes, and porcelain skin, she thought it made her look pretty. She’d seen how boys gaped at her. They never dared to say anything or approach her - too intimidated - but it pleased her when she caught them looking. Girls looked at her brother in the same way. Only someone jealous of them would refer to their look as “freaky.”

“You’re not a freak,” she whispered. “They’re not worth your time if they think that.”

He let go of his snowy tornado and it fell around them.

“I can see myself living among them,” he said, still not looking at her.

She continued combing his hair since he didn’t stop her. Maybe he enjoyed it as much as she enjoyed when he combed hers.

He continued, “We could build some kind of lives in their world if only we learned how to blend in with them better.”

She did not like that idea. “I don’t want to hide who I am.” He finally looked at her and she continued, “We have to while in this school, but once I’m older, I’m not going to hide my magic anymore.”

“You shouldn’t. Your magic is beautiful.” He created a frostball, tossed it in the air and caught it. “I definitely wouldn’t want to live the way Mother does. I’d rather pretend among wizards.”

Elsa wondered why their mother liked spending so much time underground. It was such a gloomy world when life in the open air was so much richer.

“What do you think the Sylph live like?”

Jack smiled. “I imagine houses with no walls so you could always feel the breeze.”
“I tried to look in the library but didn’t find much about them. Wizards think of them as myths.”

“Of course you did,” he chuckled and she hit his arm.

In retaliation, he made his frostball fall on her face and she got up, blinking pieces of it out of her eyes.

“You asked for it,” she growled, grabbed a chunk of snow and threw it at him.

And hence started the best snow fight in the history of winter fun, which they kept up until their facial muscles felt sore from all the laughing.

When they came back in with their hands clasped together, their hearts felt light and were beating as one.

Merlin came to and rubbed his throbbing head. He had a faint impression that he just woke up from a strange dream but couldn’t remember what it was about. Wherever he was now, it was not a bed, he was too uncomfortable.

As his eyes adjusted, he recognized the glowing white crystals and remembered how he fell within the Crystal Cave. He was glad no one had seen the Almighty Emrys show off his greatest weakness and a source of constant humiliation - poor coordination. No amount of time or magic could cure him of it.

His forearm felt strange and he inspected it. There were trails of dried up blood all over his skin. He couldn’t find the wound - the cave’s magic already healed it.

“Oh, no,” he breathed as his eyes fell on one small crystal which lay loose on the cave’s floor.

It emitted a deep red glow which could mean only one thing - the crystal had sucked up his blood. It was officially his now and he couldn’t leave it here. While he thought he was the only one who knew of the Crystal Cave, he couldn’t risk this crystal falling into anyone’s hands. With it containing this much of his blood, it could be used against him in many ways.

And so it seemed that the Cave had plans for him. It took only a few drops of blood to create a battery. This crystal sucked in so much of his blood, it permanently changed color, and it being brand new, it would hold a power charge for a very long time. It was a doubly potent gift.

He put it in his pocket and decided to get this trip over with. He got comfortable on the rough floor and stared into the nearest white crystal. He cleared his mind to allow the vision to form clearly so he could understand it. They usually came immediately, locking him in an inescapable trance, but this time nothing happened.

He adjusted his position and looked into another crystal and all he saw was its glow.

He scratched his head and wondered if he was doing something wrong. He went up to other crystals and checked each - none of them gave him anything.

He stared at the silent cave, unable to understand. He always saw visions when he came here. Even the Goddess urged him to come, saying that visions were waiting for him, but there were none. What was he supposed to do now? What if he was supposed to learn something important which he would need soon?

He tried again one more time just in case, with no success.
“Fine!” he shouted and the cave’s echo responded with the same.

He didn’t want the blasted visions anyway.
Ravens flew away with shrill caws as Merlin transported himself to Hogwarts grounds. He figured he’d make it appear like he was coming from Hogsmeade but soon found a problem with his plan.

“What happened here?”

He was trapped in four feet of snow. He could barely move and the castle was still far away. It would take hours if he didn’t use magic so he pulled out his wand and started melting the snow in front of him. He hoped no one would ask him how he managed to get here all the way from the village.

He thought he was gone only a day, but seeing this snow, he dreaded that it was longer than that. How much of his time did the cave take? What happened while he was gone?

He entered and immediately wished to go back outside to the fresh crisp air.

It stunk! Few students ran past him with their scarfs wrapped around their noses. He promptly did the same.

“When I find out which one of you did it, you’ll be scrubbing toilets while wearing shackles!”

Merlin followed Filch’s voice even though his nose pleaded to turn around and go in the other direction. It led him to the entrance of the Great Hall which the Caretaker was guarding, covering his nose with a grey handkerchief.

Merlin peeked inside, where the most peculiar scene was taking place.

About thirty students were lined up, keeping distance between each other, covering their noses and farting every twenty seconds or so. Each gas pass made them jump up startled because they were passing fire as if their backsides had turned into small roaring dragons. They didn’t seem to be hurt, and some were even laughing. The fire did not burn their clothes, thankfully, it was obviously magical, but how they all came to suffer from the same fate was a mystery.

They were waiting in line to a table in the front where Madam Pomfrey, dressed in a medical mask, was giving them each something to drink. He guessed it was an antidote.

He’d seen many strange things in his unnaturally long life and this made the top ten most bizarre magical maladies. Even though the scene was fun to watch, he couldn’t take the stink anymore.

On his way to Dumbledore’s office, he noticed Jack sneak out of Filch’s office.

Merlin quietly walked up behind him just as the boy was gently locking the door.

“Boo.”

Jack screeched in freight and covered his mouth. He whirled around and immediately hugged Merlin.

“You’re back early! This is awesome!”

Merlin disengaged himself from the excited boy.

“Yes. I’m here. What were you doing in Filch’s office?”
“Nothing,” he quickly replied and put his hands in his pockets.

Not suspicious at all.

“So, do you know what’s going on with the fire farts?”

Jack snorted and looked at the floor.

“I don’t know anything.”

“So why do you look so guilty?”

Jack was gnawing on his lip and looked like he was bursting to say it, confirming what Merlin suspected - he had something to do with it.

“I won’t tell anyone. What did you do?”

Jack looked around them to check if they were alone and then pulled Merlin away from Filch’s office.

Once in a dark corner, he exploded in hushed explanations, “I brew a farting potion and added a few stink pellets for some extra oomph, then Peeves snuck to the Kitchens, poured it in the pumpkin juice and nearly everyone drank it.” He tried to stifle a giggle. “Even McGonagall! It was only supposed to be stinky but it backfired with the fire thing.” He laughed loudly now. “Get it? Backfired!”

Merlin could imagine how funny this must have been to witness but then wondered if he would’ve fallen for the prank if he was here for the meal.

“They’re all getting the antidote now so it should pass soon. Pass! Ha!” He waved a hand in front of his nose while giggling. “I can smell it all the way here. Let’s go to our dorm and we can talk. Everyone affected was told to stay in the Great Hall because of the fire hazard so we’ll be safe there.”

Jack pulled him along and Merlin had to stop him.

“I’ll meet you there. I have to speak to Professor Dumbledore first.”

Jack’s gaze fell on the ground.

“You won’t tell on me, will you?”

“Of course not.” He waved a finger at him. “But later, we have to talk about responsible pranking, Jack. You’re lucky your experiment didn’t hurt anyone.”

The boy pouted and looked up with those pretty blue eyes.

“I was bored.”

He sighed so pitifully, Merlin felt an urge to give him a toy. How could anyone ever reproach someone who looked this innocent?

Merlin left the scene while he still had his free will about him.

At Dumbledore’s office, Snape was there and visibly blanched when Merlin walked in. Was it fear? That suited him fine.
Dumbledore was happy to see him.

“Merlin, finally! You said a couple of days.”

“Sorry, Albus, it took longer than expected.”

He still didn’t know what day it was, but judging from the castle decorations, Christmas had already passed. In that case, he was gone for more than a week.

“So, what did you find out?”

“The skin is impenetrable and resistant to spells but we can kill it if we strike inside the mouth. Did anything happen while I was gone?”

“Thankfully, no attacks.” Dumbledore pointed at the window. “Massive blizzard, just stopped. And this newest prank. I’m glad I skipped the juice today.”

Snape’s upper lip lifted. “Was it your doing?”

“The fire farts?” Merlin couldn’t help but chuckle when saying the words. “I wasn’t even here.”

“It’s right on par with your maturity level.”

Merlin chose to ignore that comment and walked up to Fawkes who looked a little older now but not quite like an adult Phoenix yet. He owed a lot to this bird. He was suffering before Fawkes healed him. He pulled out a piece of steak from his pocket he brought just for this occasion and Fawkes snatched it from his hand immediately.

“I knew you’d like it.”

Fawkes swallowed the piece whole and made a throaty sound which Merlin guessed was equivalent to licking one’s lips. He tried to pet him but Fawkes only checked his hand for more meat, and seeing none, made a slow step sideways in a very “No, thank you” gesture.

“How did you gain immortality?” Snape asked.

Merlin turned around. He expected questions like that and decided to get straight to the point. It didn’t matter that Greasy Git wouldn’t understand.

“Triple Goddess chose me.”

“Chose you? And what have you done with this gift?”

“Excuse me?”

Snape looked down at him.

“What have you achieved? You’re hiding from the world instead of doing something useful.”

Merlin was speechless. Was the Greasy Git insinuating that he knew how to be a better Emrys than him?

“Severus, don’t!” Dumbledore warned but Snape wasn’t done.

“You wield powerful magic and you waste it. With this talent, you should be making history.”
“If you haven’t noticed, I use my real name - I’m not hiding. I don’t care if people don’t accept that I’m the same Merlin they’ve heard tales of. And I’m here, aren’t I?”

“And yet the monster still prowls this castle, the Heir is doing who knows what. And what did you do? You got a chance to fight it and you got yourself killed.”

“You think you would’ve done better when stuck in a prepubescent body and having to deal with the likes of you?”

Snape waved his hand dismissively and turned up his nose on him. The nerve.

“If I had the amount of time a child has…”

Maybe it was his young age or his natural temper, but Merlin lost it.

The air around the Greasy Git shimmered as he willed him to change. Before Snape knew what was happening, he was a kid - maybe ten years old or so.

Young Snape looked around him in confusion while Dumbledore gasped and covered his mouth.

“What did you…” Snape started saying but stopped when he heard his high-pitched voice.

Merlin stood there and bit his knuckles, taking a moment to appreciate just how well he got him.

Snape was a small boy who looked rather malnourished and sickly. His dark hair was overgrown past his ears. His black eyes were not as narrow as in adulthood, making him look almost cute like a wet puppy who wandered to your door. He was drowning in his black robes and his trousers fell to the floor.

Merlin looked away, trying hard not to laugh.

“As I said,” Snape held his trousers up, cleared his throat and tried to speak in a lower tone, resulting in a raspy voice, “your maturity level is outstanding. Undo this at once!”

Dumbledore circled the Little Git, his hand still covering his mouth.

“Marvelous. How do you feel, Severus?”

Snape glared at him sideways and hissed through nearly closed lips, “Young.”

“Most remarkable.” Dumbledore clapped his hands. “You must let me try this one time.”

Merlin shrugged. This was going to cost him but since he already started, why not go all the way?

“As you wish, Albus.”

The old wizard’s eyes bulged, he did not expect “one time” to be now, but before he could protest, the air shimmered around him and he shrunk from his significant height to a body only slightly taller than the Little Git.

Dumbledore’s long robes hung on a body of an adorable auburn-haired boy who looked at himself and laughed out loud.

“This is wonderful, Merlin,” he exclaimed and exchanged an amused look with Snape.

They were quite a contrast next to each other. Snape looked pitiful while Dumbledore looked
ecstatic. Sallow features and sickly-pale complexion next to rosy cheeks and a slight tan.

The not-so-old-now wizard gathered up his robes and ran in little steps to the other side of the room where a large mirror stood.

He laughed, seeing his reflection and Merlin couldn’t help but smile in satisfaction.

“You should’ve let me try this years ago, Merlin. This is fabulous!”

He skipped back, struggling to hold his long robes.

“How long can you maintain the spell on all of us?”

“Not forever, but I can give you a few more minutes to enjoy it.”

Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder. It was strangely satisfying to finally be on the same eye level.

“Don’t overexert yourself just for my enjoyment, my friend.”

His face was unrecognizable now but his kind eyes were the same even without the frame of wrinkles.

“I’m okay, Albus. I wouldn’t do this if I couldn’t.”

Snape huffed, not amused by the sight of the three of them looking like children.

“Then keep the spell on the Headmaster and return me to normal.”

“Awww, but you’re like that for my enjoyment, Professor.”

His lips lifted in a snarl like an ungrateful wet puppy who didn’t like being toweled off.

“How come you made him look normal but made me like this? I wasn’t this scrawny!”

Merlin put his hands up.

“Believe me, I couldn’t make this up. This is all you.”

Snape must have gotten tired of holding his trousers up and sat down on the couch where he crossed his arms and pouted in silence.

Dumbledore grabbed his wand, transfigured his robes into what he must have worn at this age - gray shorts with long socks and a matching jacket with a sailor collar. Merlin was pretty sure that the sailor theme was fashionable for younger kids but maybe the old wizard felt sentimental about it.

The not-so-old wizard ran up to his turntable, put on some chamber music and started skipping to the lively beat in a combination of graceful and whimsical dance moves.

“This song was all the rage when I was young.”

Merlin watched him twirl and jump around and felt a strain on his magical energy. Holding the spell on all three of them was costing him, and he decided to stop it before they noticed his weakness.

“Join me!” Albus shouted while trying out a pirouette.

“I’m going to get going now, Albus,” he interrupted and the young wizard ran up to him with a
broad grin.

“Of course. This was marvelous. Thank you. Maybe we could repeat this some other time?”

Merlin slightly inclined his head in confirmation. He was more than ready to release the spell but realized that Albus needed a reminder.

“You need to transfigure your clothes back unless you don’t mind ripping these to shreds in front of us.”

Albus startled.

“Blubber and nitwit. Right away.”

Once he was ready, Merlin changed him back and the old wizard put his hand on his lower back and winced. It wasn’t fun to be old.

Merlin turned around and started walking away.

“You forgot something,” Snape’s high-pitched voice called after him.

“No, I didn’t.”

Merlin faced him, not even trying to hide his smirk. Snape pressed his lips together, and while in adulthood it made him look menacing, now, he just looked like a grouchy kid who fell from his bike and got a boo-boo but didn’t want to cry in front of his friends.

Merlin chuckled at that image. He was going to remember him this way.

“Yes, child,” he said as if addressing a toddler. “It’s your turn to be a big boy.”

Snape shot up from the sofa and pulled out his wand, ready to throw something at him but swayed on his legs as Merlin undid the aging magic. He fell on his backside with his trousers at his ankles just as Merlin was leaving the office, laughing out loud.

It was going to be so much more fun now that Snape knew who he was. He didn’t have to hold back anymore. Oh, what a freeing feeling this was.

On the way back to the Gryffindor Tower, Merlin kept his hand in his pocket, feeling his magic restore with the crystal’s help. He had to be more careful and reduce showing off. Well, maybe only for the Greasy Git. He was a special case.

While holding the crystal, he got a strange vertigo feeling.

His vision went black and he saw the face of a girl dying on the floor. He recognized her. It was Ginny Weasley! Something awful was going to happen to her.

The vision ended as quickly as it came. He leaned against a wall and tried to understand what he saw.

He pulled out the red crystal which pulsed in his hand.

Goddess did this with her blessing. He was meant to take this particular crystal to receive the visions one at a time. It possibly was an even better method of receiving visions, instead of getting them all at once with no context or chronological order.
“Clever, but why didn’t you just tell me to do this? Why did you trick me into it?”

As if on cue, he saw the silhouette of Ginny at the end of the corridor and immediately ran to her. He had to do whatever he could to stop what he saw in the vision.

Ginny was on her way to her dorm when Merlin caught up with her. She thought he was away for the holidays.

“Hey, Ginny. I just wanted to talk to you about that enchanted book.”

She dropped her eyes to the ground and tried to shrink down. She had not thought about Tom’s diary in days.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you before I got sick - you should really bring that book to Professor Dumbledore immediately.”

“I… I… I don’t have it.”

She wasn’t sure why she was stuttering right now.

“Well, where is it?”

“I threw it away. You said it was evil, right?”

He took a long breath and continued, “Objects with Dark Magic don’t just disappear. If you threw it away, someone is bound to find it and could fall prey to it. Where did you throw the book, Ginny?”

She did not like how intensely he stared into her eyes right now.

“No one will find it,” she said in a small voice.

“We cannot take this risk. Take me to where you threw it and I’ll make sure it makes it to Professor Dumbledore so he can dispose of it safely.”

She wanted to protest but something in his voice sounded so authoritative, she felt compelled to listen.

He looked puzzled when he saw where she led him.

“Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom?”

“Yes. No one goes here.”

She looked inside the stall where she was sure she threw the book into but it wasn’t inside or outside of the toilet. She checked each of the other stalls and he helped her look but they didn’t find it.

“Moaning Myrtle moved it?” she asked hopefully.

“There is a limit as to how much ghosts can interact with the physical world. They can’t hold objects in that way, Ginny.”

In that case, she had no idea what could have happened to it, but honestly, she didn’t care too much.

He ran a hand through his face.

“This isn’t good.”
He put his hands on his hips and stared at the tiled floor while grinding his teeth. She couldn’t help but feel how heavily disappointed he was with her.

“Don’t look for the book, Ginny,” he finally said, surprising her. “And if you do find it, tell me or Professor Dumbledore directly if you’d prefer.” He smiled at her though it looked sad. “At least you’re out of the danger. I’ll walk you to the Gryffindor Tower. It’s not safe.”

Ginny walked back with him, feeling strangely free. He was right. There was something wrong with that book and she was glad that it was no longer hers. She was feeling better than she had in months, she was sleeping better, no longer sleepwalking. She no longer felt tired all the time. She was even looking forward to her roommates returning so she could get to know them better.

She did not want to know where Tom’s diary was now.

‘Sorry, Tom,’ she thought. ‘You’re going to have to make a new friend.’
A handful of tricks

Jack was reading the same paragraph of Professor Lockhart’s book *Holidays with Hags* for the tenth time and still couldn’t remember what it was about. Something about offerings of pastry which did not sound right. He had never seen hags eat sweets. They liked meat - fresh raw kind was their dessert, not sugar.

He wondered if he should ask him about this but at the same time, he was afraid to be questioned on how he knew so much about hags.

He read it again but again found himself distracted. The door frame was still empty of his friend. It was difficult to focus on this book when the prospect of not being stuck alone was so close by.

This holiday, he found himself short of friends. His sister’s idea of fun leisure time always involved the library and he spent time with her but there were limits to how much of it he could take.

He managed to convince Ginny to play Quidditch with him and it was fun but then, she’d taken to stalking the common room. He wasn’t completely sure, but she might have a crush on Potter. That was so unfair. Not her too!

Most days he entertained himself by planning pranks with Peeves. Filch had become his favorite target and his office provided a constant source of pranking materials.

The newest one he acquired was called a Frog Spawn Soap according to Peeves and was supposedly really fun to execute. Now, he only had to pick a lucky recipient and switch their regular soap for this one. Could he somehow trick Potter into it? He had to think ahead on how to make it work.

Merlin walked in and Jack dropped the book. Finally, they would have some fun!

His friend hung his cloak and adjusted his scarf. He didn’t take it off - of course, he didn’t. That was such a typical Merlin.

“So, what do you want to do?”

Jack was ready to get out of the Tower. Maybe he would show him his special room on the seventh floor. He wondered what Merlin’s idea of a perfect play setting was.

“Sorry, not now. I need to catch up with Harry.”

Jack felt these words as if they were a punch in his gut.

“You just got here.”

He clapped Jack on the shoulder and headed for the door.

Potter. Always Potter first. Jack could wait, right? He should just sit tight and wait like a good boy, until all the important people no longer needed Merlin, right?

“Excuse me for keeping you away from the Golden Boy.”

Merlin shook his head.

“There’s no need for that.”
“No need and yet you run to him like a lost puppy.”

“Jack,” Merlin dropped his hands, exasperated. “Why are you making this into a big deal?”

“Run along. Obviously, you have more important people to spend time with.”

Merlin put a hand on his hip and released a long sigh.

“You’re jealous? Jack, there’s no reason…”

“I’m not jealous,” he countered and crossed his arms.

What a ridiculous accusation. Jack - jealous of Potter. Jealous of what? He was nothing. Jack was better at everything. He was smarter, better at magic. People liked him better. He bet he could even beat him at Quidditch if only he was allowed to play the game.

“Jack,” Merlin smiled at him as if he was talking to a toddler, “you can’t expect me to have only you for a friend. And you have other friends besides me. You’re good friends with Luna and Ginny.”

“But they’re girls!”

“In a few years, you’re going to be very glad that you get along with girls so well.”

“Forget it.”

Jack walked away and sat on his bed with his back to him. This wasn’t how he wanted to spend Merlin’s first day back - alone in the dorm (AGAIN!) while Potter got all of his attention.

Merlin walked up to him.

“What is this really about?”

Jack wished he knew how to say why he didn’t want to be always stuck with girls. How do you tell someone that after a lifetime of living with women, he was the first boy you got to know? How do you tell someone that you wished you meant to him as much as he meant to you? How do you tell someone that you wished he would choose you for a change?

“Just go. Your friends are waiting.”

He looked out the window, begging his eyes to not tear up. He was spending so much time with girls, he was turning into one - always crying, always so emotional. Merlin never cried. He’d never seen another boy cry. Maybe he was a girl already.

He felt that he couldn’t hold the tears back anymore and didn’t want his friend to see him this way so he closed the curtains of his bed to hide.

He could hear that Merlin still lingered in the room, and secretly hoped that he would stay and insist to find out why Jack was upset. He would stubbornly sit in front of Jack’s bed and demand to open the curtain. And Jack would hesitate, but then he’d open it and Merlin would give him a hug and apologize and stay and they would do something fun together.

Jack smiled, imagining it. That was what friends did.

“I won’t be gone for long,” Merlin said and left the room.

The walls of the curtain prison were closing down, making his body too heavy to keep upright,
forcing him down.

The room was quiet and empty again, but it didn’t have to be. Jack pulled out his wand and conjured two dozen huggers. He curled up into a ball and they swarmed him, covering him like a blanket. He wasn’t alone.

He carefully brought one of them close to his chest to cuddle up with it. He wasn’t alone.

Huggers would give him the warmth of a hug.

He wasn’t alone.

Merlin came back to his dorm with a heavy heart. While he was away, the trio decided to not wait for him and used the Polyjuice Potion on their own. They found out that Malfoy was NOT the Heir of Slytherin and did not know who was.

What did that mean? How did Dobby, Malfoy’s servant, know about the Chamber if the boy wasn’t involved in it? There was something fishy going on here. He refused to accept that the elf was a dead-end clue.

And there was an unfortunate side effect - Hermione’s Polyjuice transformation went horribly wrong and she was now in the Hospital Wing. He couldn’t help but wonder if he could have saved her from this fate if he had been there. He was supposed to watch over these kids to ensure they didn’t get hurt while executing their crazy plan. He failed them.

His eyes fell on the closed curtains around Jack’s bed. He somehow managed to make him cry again. He had to check on Harry first, Harry was the reason why he was here in the first place, but he could feel the hurt in Jack’s voice and wished he could split himself in two.

His relationship with the boy was very confusing. On the one hand, Merlin felt like Jack was his peer and a friend, on the other, the boy always triggered parenting instincts in him. He wanted to protect him and make up for how he treated him in the past but somehow he was making it worse. He wished he was in his adult body right now so he could comfort him properly.

“Jack, are you awake?”

There was no response and he didn’t know if the boy was sleeping or ignoring him.

He sat down on his bed and watched the closed curtain.

He wondered what he did to nearly destroy the plans Triple Goddess had for the twins. Was it the truth potion? Was he not meant to learn the boy’s secrets at this time? Now, this only increased his curiosity but he had to bite it down.

Was there anything he wasn’t a failure at?

Oh, but it got worse. With the whole dying event, he forgot about Ginny’s book. He knew it was imbued with Dark Magic but failed to tell Dumbledore about it before leaving. The old wizard could have taken the dangerous object from the girl and dealt with it in his absence. Instead, he forgot to tell anyone about it, the girl got rid of the book and now someone else at this school held it, someone unknown could suffer from its magic.

That would shift the danger away from Ginny and yet the vision he got showed the girl dying. Was it related to this evil object? Was she going to fall victim to the Chamber monster? Or was there
another threat at this school, yet another danger he failed to detect? And most of all - could he stop it?

Argh! Why were his visions always so limited?

Snape was right. He wasn’t useful at all. The Great Merlin was a fraud - he was just a kid with a handful of magic tricks.

But maybe there was a use for his tricks yet.

Merlin got up and went to the Hospital Wing.

Colin, Justin, and Mrs. Norris still lay in their frozen positions, and at the end of the room, there was a patient blocked from view by curtains.

He pulled Madam Pomfrey aside.

“How is Hermione?”

The Healer linked her hands in front of her and spoke in a morose tone, “A transformation gone wrong. I don’t know what these kids used, they didn’t say.”

“Polyjuice Potion,” Merlin clarified and she raised her eyebrows.

“In that case, it’s even worse than I hoped. It will take me weeks to get her back to normal. She must have used an animal ingredient.”

“Yeah, I heard it was a cat.”

“Poor girl will have to stay here during this time. She’s most embarrassed about her look.”

“Let me see.”

Her eyes grew wider - she wanted to see his healing magic again. He didn’t catch up with her after she saw him come back from the dead so he was a little surprised at how easily she accepted his identity. It was refreshing.

He quietly walked up and pulled the curtain aside. Hermione was asleep, curled up under her blanket. Her face was covered by fur, she had whiskers and real cat ears. A furry tail poked out from under the sheets.

Merlin was glad that she didn’t suffer any worse fate. This was mostly just an inconvenient and embarrassing external change. It could’ve been worse. She could have ended up with a cursed existence, become a half-breed who didn’t belong in the wizarding world or the wild. But this condition was reversible and it did not require weeks.

After he assessed her, he walked with Madam Pomfrey to her office where she had a brewing lab set up. Without wasting any time, he got started. She had a good supply of ingredients on hand and he found everything he needed. She helped him where she could but it didn’t take him long to brew the potion.

“Have her drink it all in one go. It should have a slightly minty flavor. I can write down the recipe for you if you’d like. You never know when this happens again.”

“Oh, it’s happened many times,” she joked. “I will most appreciate it.

The next day, he came back to visit officially and found that the curtains were pulled away,
Hermione was sitting in her bed and grinning broadly. There was not a whisker or fur in sight.

“Merlin, you’re back!” she beamed at him.

“I am. How are you feeling?”

“I am so much better! Madam Pomfrey said I can leave today. This is such a relief, I was afraid I’ll have to spend weeks in here.”

“You would’ve hated to miss out school.”

“You know me so well.” She smiled and patted the bed, inviting him to sit.

He got himself comfortable and tried to assess her condition. His potion worked perfectly.

He was disappointed with the education of modern Healers. He hoped that wizards would improve their healing magic over time - Muggles improved their medicine capabilities in amazing ways - but it was the opposite. While progress was made in some areas, they forgot others, deeming them a myth.

Maybe he could work out some plan with Madam Pomfrey to discuss how he could teach her some of his tricks. Maybe it was the right time to write another book to revive the old methods within the wizarding community. He was starting to see how he could become useful again. It seemed that he had multiple Hogwarts missions now.

“You regret not catching me in a furry costume?” Hermione joked.

“I’m just glad you’re okay.”

He chatted with her and when he got ready to leave, she embraced him and held him tightly. He didn’t realize how much he needed that hug until now. He’s been feeling down lately. Guilt was pressing down on him along with the burden of the long list of failures. It felt good to be able to do this one thing right and bring happiness to at least one person.

On his way out, he stopped by Colin’s bed. He owed it to him to stop these attacks and make the school safe again.

“Hang in there, Colin,” he said to the boy. “I’m working on it.”

Elsa sat on a rock, overlooking the Great Lake. Mist hovered over the surface, blurring the other bank of the lake. Gentle ripples disturbed the stillness of the water. There were areas where ice started forming and she wondered if the whole lake would freeze over later in the winter.

Jack stood at the edge and was throwing pebbles into it.

”What’s this newest pointless game you've invented?”

He shot her an annoyed look but explained, ”I'm trying to skip a rock.”

He threw another pebble, angling it horizontally. It fell right in without any skipping.

”You're not very good at it.”

He stuck out a tongue at her and gave up his game. He jumped onto the rock next to her but just stood there and looked down at the bottomless depths instead of sitting down. When she looked down, she saw her own reflection in the lake but not his and it made her feel uneasy.
"Jack, sit down before you fall in the water again."

"What are you, our mother?"

To annoy her, he stood on one leg and waved his hands around, trying to catch his balance. Every time it looked like he was about to fall, Elsa’s stomach clenched. He was continuously making her gasp.

He laughed at her nerves and she hit him in the thigh from frustration.

The impact made him finally lose his balance and he fell in.

The water was deeper than she thought it should be and he disappeared under it without even a splash as if it swallowed him like a hungry liquid monster. She immediately stretched her hand out to him but he struggled to make it to the surface. He couldn’t swim and couldn’t reach her hand. She extended it further and her fingers touched the water. It instantly turned to ice.

"No. No. No!" she begged it to stop.

The ice started spreading with audible cracks and he banged his fists against it. She could see the fear in his eyes which only amplified her own panic.

"NO!"

She had to save him! She tried to break the ice but her touch was only making it worse - the ice became thicker. She could no longer see his outline under it as the darkness swallowed him and painful silence filled the air. He was gone.

"NO!"

Elsa’s scream woke her up.

She frantically looked around her, looking for the lake, the ice that needed to be broken, and for her brother who needed to be saved. Instead, she found herself in her dorm, sitting on her bed.

Moonlight fell onto a rug in the center of the room, the only light in the otherwise dark and quiet space. Her roommates were still away on holiday so her scream did not wake anyone. She was alone in her horror.

Tears were still trailing down her cheeks even though she was starting to understand that it was only a dream. But it seemed so real! She had to make sure it wasn’t real.

She sent a desperate signal to her brother. He didn’t respond. Was he asleep? She had to wake him. She kept sending him the signal, making it more forceful on each try. She got up and started pacing. Why was it taking so long?

“It was only a dream,” she murmured to herself and repeated it over and over.

She hated that she couldn’t just walk over to his bed and check on him. The images of the dream flashed before her - the contrast of his happy grin as he was just having innocent fun and then the fear in his eyes when he couldn’t reach her hand. It might have been an accident but it didn’t feel like it. It felt like she killed him. She made him fall in and trapped him there. She killed her own twin!

After what felt like hours but most likely was only minutes, he finally responded and she collapsed to the floor, this time crying from relief. He was okay. It didn’t happen. She didn’t kill the only person
who loved her.

“It was only a dream,” she sobbed into the rug.

She curled up on the floor and stared at the half-crescent moon. Clouds were lazily passing by, covering it at times, but it always came back. Her tears dried up already and her body felt heavy from exhaustion but her mind was fully awake.

Elsa had bad dreams before, her whole childhood was plagued by nightmares, but there was something different about this one, something wrong and surreal about it. It was almost like a vision.

She stopped breathing and slowly lifted herself off the floor, her eyes still locked on the moon. Could it have been a vision? Did she just see the future? Was her brother about to die at her hand?
“You’ve had a few weeks to think. Do you have new questions?” Merlin said to the gathered group. He decided to have another Old Religion meeting now that everyone was back from the holiday break. The six children, Luna, Jack, Elsa, Harry, Ron and Hermione plus three adults, Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape, sat cross-legged on the floor in a circle. Merlin insisted on it to make the meeting feel more equal. He didn’t want the teachers to be “overseeing” it but rather be participating in it. It looked strange to see them on the floor with the kids but he thought it was an effective equalizer.

He shook his head. “Hermione, I’m still not a Professor.”

She dropped her hand and cleared her throat. “Are you a polytheist or a henotheist?”

“I suppose I’m a polytheist but one goddess is more important to me - Triple Goddess. She’s most connected to the magic of Old Religion. She’s the one you want to appease.”

“That is a strange name. Why Triple?”

“Three is a sacred number which is often used to describe the deeper reality which falls just beyond our human perception. For example, the concept of past, present, and future. Among other abilities I know of, Triple Goddess can see all possible futures and can guide us to the most optimal one. There used to be three Seers dedicated to interpreting her will for the benefit of mankind. We don’t have that now but The Goddess is still there and can guide us on our way as long as we bother to listen.”

“What can she do?” Harry asked.

Ron snickered. “We could ask her to help us pass a test.”

Hermione elbowed him. He was going to have a lot of bruises if he kept this up. Oh, Goddess. He was dealing with children.

“Do not bother The Goddess with such trivial matters. Deities are known for their impatience.”

“Is she the one that’s referred to as Maiden, Mother, and Crone?” Elsa asked.

Merlin took a short pause to think about how to answer this tricky question. It was frustrating how easily the knowledge got lost in mistranslations and overactive imagination of successful writers. The girl must have stumbled upon this description while reading up on the topic. He wanted to applaud her effort but wished she had better materials to learn from. Maybe one day, he’d check what the school library held and guide her to the correct information.

“Number three could be associated with many deities which have a triadic nature. The one you refer to was made popular by a work of fiction which somehow many assumed to be a belief of the ancient Celts. I don’t worship her.”

Elsa scrunched up her brows.

“So you’re saying there’s more than one Triple Goddess?”
“Even Earth Mother can be called a Triple Goddess to represent the cycle of life in nature - birth, growth, death, and yet Triple Goddess of Old Religion is an entirely different deity. It’s just a name.”

Elsa still held his gaze and chewed on her lip like she was thinking over something. He gave her a moment to phrase her next question. Nearby, Hermione seemed very interested in this conversation. Merlin wondered if the girls would bond over their love of research or become competitive about it.

Elsa asked, “You mentioned Seers. How did they get their visions?”

“Anyone who has magic can scry to prompt a vision but it doesn’t guarantee results. Naturally-born Seers use the same methods but are better at it and can also receive visions or prophetic dreams involuntarily.”

She started to blink rapidly and he had a hunch that this topic was of personal interest to her and not simple curiosity. She swallowed and discretely snuck her hand to put over Jack’s. Merlin assumed, to calm her nerves.

“How can you tell if a dream is just a dream or if it’s a vision?”

This was a very straight to the point kind of question. Has she had a vision? Did The Goddess send her a message? He was conflicted now. He wanted to help the girl figure it out. Visions were difficult to understand and were usually scary, especially for a child, but Goddess didn’t want him to intervene. All he could do was give her general information.

“Prophetic dreams are possible even if you’re not a Seer - magic has a way of leaking into every part of our lives. However, more often than that, I find that dreams act as guides. Usually, when this happens, you don’t understand what the dream means until the day comes when you’re faced with a decision. Only then the dream will make sense and you will understand what it tried to tell you.”

“That sounds rather difficult to interpret,” she complained.

“Yes, it is.”

She looked like she wanted more explanation but he couldn’t offer her more help.

Merlin looked around the room if anyone else had any questions but they were all quiet at the moment. Dumbledore watched the gathered children. McGonagall appeared to be uncomfortable while sitting with her legs folded beneath her and he wondered if that would convince her to stop coming to these meetings. Snape was so still, he would make a convincing statue.

“Have you been practicing the spell I taught you?”

Luna answered first, “I’ve tried to use it on Nargles but they’re resistant to that spell.”

Merlin didn’t know what to answer to that so he checked on others.

“Elsa is really good at it,” Jack said with a grin. “She made me fly so high up.”

She winced. “I dropped you.”

“I’m alright, aren’t I?”

“You’re so much bigger than a Nargle,” Luna said. “Good job, Elsa.”

“How big are Nargles?” Jack asked and she indicated about an inch with her fingers.
Merlin was impressed but was surprised that someone as cautious as Elsa would practice spells on her brother. Maybe he didn’t know her very well.

“That spell isn’t meant to carry people. Please, don’t try it on each other.”

“It was fun,” Jack protested. “I tried it on my own but it’s difficult to control it. Can you practice with me?”

“There are plenty of spells we can practice that don’t involve risking injury.”

Jack pouted. “But I want to fly.”

Merlin didn’t like these experiments. The twins showed very promising potential but it came with great risk. He looked at everyone around, hoping they all heeded his words.

“The spells I teach you when mastered can be much more powerful than the magic you’re used to. You need to be cautious and respect the balance. If you want me to continue teaching you, use the spells in the way they’re intended.”

Jack huffed, crossed his arms and mumbled, “You’re no fun.”

Elsa shot him a scornful look and answered for the both of them, “I’m sorry. I won’t try anything new without you.”

“Thank you.”

He hoped she would keep her promise.

“Harry,” he was ready to move on the conversation, “how are you doing with the spell?”

Harry looked to the floor and answered quietly after a pause, “I forgot how to say it.”

Merlin assured him it was okay and practiced the spell with him for a few minutes to refresh his memory. He should have had them write it down. Old English was a completely foreign language to Harry. He was going to need help.

He was disappointed that Harry did not reach out to him to ask how to say the spell again. Was he not interested in learning this? Merlin so rarely had pupils, he would hate to lose one so early on. He wondered what he could do to make Old Religion more appealing to the young generation of wizards.

Elsa asked, “You’ve said something about balance before. What exactly is it?”

“Old Religion teaches about principles and values we uphold to maintain a balance in the magical world. If you try to break or abuse one of its laws, there are consequences.”

He wondered if this method of teaching was too dry. Did he focus too much on the theory? Maybe what these children needed was something more descriptive.

“I think I can explain it better with an example. It’s storytime.”

He rubbed his hands together and deliberated on the best story to explain the concept of balance.

“There is an ancient chalice called the Cup of Life. It is imbued with truly unique magic which can heal any mortal wound and stop death. Once upon a time, a vengeful High Priestess abused its power over life, tipping the balance. Each soldier in her the army bled a few drops into the Cup and
she used them to attack her unsuspecting enemies. Her soldiers could not be killed for their lives were tied to the magic of the Cup. With an immortal army under her complete control, she could conquer any kingdom she wished. The world was going to fall on its knees before her.”

Merlin stared out the window. He learned many great lessons from his encounters with the Cup of Life. This one was probably the most important.

“It did not matter how skilled the knights protecting the kingdom were, they had no chances against an immortal army. One young sorcerer was determined to end the attack on his kingdom but he couldn’t fight magic this powerful. No spell is mightier than the protection given by the Cup of Life. Innocent people were dying. The kingdom fell into the enemy’s hands. What could he do?”

For a moment, he forgot that he was in the middle of a tale. He had a flashback of immortal warriors recovering from fatal wounds as if Camelot knights’ swords were toys. And when all hope seemed lost, he found help. There were forces greater than him which desired the restoration of the balance.

He finally snapped out of his reflections and turned back to his audience. This was a lesson.

“In abusing the power of the Cup, the sorceress tipped the balance between life and death and there was a consequence. What do you think was the price these soldiers paid by letting their lives be bound to the Cup of Life?”

The children hang onto his words with fascination. He wondered if they realized that he wasn’t making this up. Dumbledore was watching him with a slight smile, correctly guessing that this wasn’t a story but a memory. Snape’s face was expressionless as usual and Merlin was tempted to dive into his head to check what his reaction was so far.

“What did the young sorcerer do?” Harry asked.

“He found the Cup and emptied it of the blood. The soldiers died instantly. That was the price they paid for their immortality - they gave up their lives. The balance was restored.”

“And the sorceress?” Snape asked, his eyes narrow as slits.

Merlin smirked. “She paid her own price. Goddess does not protect those who abuse the balance.”

The sorceress Morgause did not die that day but the day he defeated her marked her end.

Someone once asked Merlin what price he paid for his immortality. He didn’t know what to answer then, but by now, he knew what it was. His price was much more subtle, it only revealed itself after a while. He gained hundreds of lifetimes which he always tried to live to the fullest but each was stunted, felt incomplete. He never felt like he was living - rather that he was waiting to live. It wasn’t just his body that was frozen in time - his life paused when he failed to stop the prophecy that announced Arthur’s death and wouldn't resume until he came back.

Luna tilted her head. “You sound like a bard.”

“Tips are welcome,” Merlin joked and got a few chuckles out of the group.

“Where is that Cup now?” Ron asked.

The lie came out with ease, “Who knows?”

Dumbledore shot him a look and Merlin kept his expression innocent. He had the Cup, of course, but an object like that had to be protected at all costs. No one could know.
“Will you show us some cool magic today?” Harry asked.

They always wanted tricks. He supposed he had himself to blame for that. He kept promising them amazing things. He had to deliver and entertain.

Jack encouraged, “Come on, Merlin. Show off!”

Merlin glanced at where the teachers sat. Dumbledore and Snape knew about him so only McGonagall was the problem. But was she? Dumbledore was so keen to keep his identity a secret, but honestly, Merlin wouldn’t mind if she knew. It would be one less person to have to pretend for.

He smiled as he got a perfect idea.

“Would you like to meet Triple Goddess?” They stared at him with confused expressions. He supposed it wasn’t something he could explain but had to show. “Give me a moment to prepare.”

“How do you prepare?” Hermione asked.

“I suppose, it’s my version of praying.”

He took a couple of long breaths, closed his eyes and tuned out their whispers.

He focused on the magic within him and let himself fall into it. It was easier to navigate it when he imagined it as a tree. Each bird flying around the tree represented a person he knew. He willed the birds symbolizing the people in the classroom to land on one branch. Then, he felt deep into the roots and made his request.

_Goddess, I humbly seek an audience._

He only resorted to contacting her in times of dire need but he also knew that he could bring others to her. She usually allowed him - she wanted him to teach people about her and he couldn’t blame her. She didn’t want to be forgotten.

The vision changed into a bright sunny day in a grassy meadow where he found himself with the six children and three adults, standing right beneath an ancient oak. They looked around in bewilderment, taking in their new surroundings.

“Please, be respectful.”

He didn’t get a chance to give them any more instructions.

“You’ve brought a lot this time.”

Triple Goddess appeared right in front of him and he dropped on one knee in a bow.

He heard gasps as they all took her in. She was her usual ethereally beautiful self, and her magic seemed to follow her as she slowly made her way around the group. Everyone fell silent. Merlin was pretty sure that the whimper belonged to Ron.

The Goddess looked at each person in detail and put her hands on the twins’ shoulders as she passed by them. They stared at her in awe and smiled, feeling the divine magic of her touch. Was this enough or did she want alone time with them? He supposed she would let him know.

She continued her assessment of the wizards and witches he brought to her and finally stopped by Luna who gaped at her with an open mouth.
“Don’t forget your affinity, child,” she looked down at her and Luna’s eyes became even wider than usual. “You can help.”

With a flash of warm light, Merlin was pulled out of his magic and dumped back into his body. His eyes felt droopy and he put a hand in his pocket to use the crystal. It was a short audience but he exerted a lot of energy to bring them all with him.

Still, the pleasantly shocked expression on the faces of the gathered group was worth it.

His eyes fell on Luna. Goddess picked the girl for something.

McGonagall got up, straightened up her long gown and cleared her throat. “What did you just do, Mr. Ealdor?”

“Triple Goddess granted us an audience.”

“How did you do that?” Hermione asked with an intense look in her eye.

“It takes practice. I’m not sure how to explain it.”

In truth, he could explain it but if he did, he would betray too much of what he was.

It was a sheer miracle that he found that one scroll eons ago which taught him how to contact her. Only High Priestesses of Triple Goddess were normally privy to this knowledge or had enough power to execute it. He was never trained in the craft but eventually figured it out once he had the scroll. Given enough time, all magical secrets could be cracked and time was something he had plenty of.

“You’re not insinuating that we just saw a real deity,” Snape said slowly.

“Professor, surely you don’t think me capable of creating an illusion this powerful?” Snape narrowed his eyes on him and Merlin wondered if that was what he really thought. This saddened him. “It wasn’t a trick. It was the real deal.”

Snape looked away, still skeptical.

Albus smiled next to him. “Thank you for letting us experience that. It was remarkable. I didn’t know it was possible.”

At least Albus understood how significant of a gift he received.

“Magic makes impossible possible,” Merlin whispered.

He wondered how many of the gathered really believed that they just met the Goddess and how many thought it was a trick.

His eyes fell on Luna again. Goddess gave him a clue to follow.

“Luna, what is your affinity?”

Chapter End Notes

Theory time. What is Luna’s affinity?
“Luna, what is your affinity?”

The girl tilted her head and looked at the ceiling, spilling long blond hair from her shoulder.

“I don’t know.”

Merlin had to help her figure it out. The Goddess spoke directly to her and she never did things without a reason.

“When children accidentally use magic, many call it wild magic because it appears out of control. Well, I call that natural magic - it is our main affinity, that little special something we are born with. Usually, there is a pattern to it which can point to what the child’s affinity is. What were the magical accidents that used to happen to you, Luna?”

She looked to the side with a vacant smile and he resisted an urge to tell her to hurry up. She raised her hand and moved her fingers as if she was touching an invisible object.

“One time, I was sitting on top of a huge tree. My dad thought I apparated there but I think it grew underneath me.”

“Did that happen more than once?”

“The tree just one time. I might have made some flowers bloom at other times.”

“This would explain why you’re so good at Herbology,” Jack commented and she switched to look up into the other side of the room.

“Perhaps.”

“Plants then,” Merlin said.

He wondered what the Goddess wanted with an affinity like this one. Did she want the girl to grow something?

The realization hit him of what it could be and he inhaled sharply.

“I know what she meant.”

“Who?” Luna asked.

Merlin got up and stretched out a hand to her. “Come with me.”

She didn’t ask any questions but came with, completely trusting him.

If he was correct, this was wonderful news. Oh, if only he knew earlier that the girl had this ability! He rushed out, holding her hand and everyone followed them.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked.
“There are spells which can allow any witch or wizard to speed up the growth of plants but certain plants - especially those which contain Old Magic - they resist spells like that.”

He looked behind them and couldn’t hide the excitement out of his voice.

“But a person with a natural affinity for plants has a special connection to all plant life, ESPECIALLY plant life containing Old Magic.”

“What are you trying to say?” Dumbledore asked, having a hard time keeping up with the pace as they ran down the stairs.

Merlin led them outside. Thankfully, Hagrid had shoveled the snow to make a pathway to the greenhouses.

“Are you going to get to the point?” Snape asked, a little out of breath.

Once in the warm and humid greenhouse, Merlin finally slowed down and faced the girl.

“Only you can do this, Luna. You can help.”

She smiled at him, clueless as to what he wanted of her but not protesting at all.

Harry wiped the condensation off his glasses and exchanged a look with his friends. “You’re freaking us out, mate.”

Merlin led Luna to the back where the mandrakes grew.

“You can speed up the growth of a mandrake, Luna. I’ll help you. We can revive Colin.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jack shouted and was about to run up to them but Merlin held up a hand to stop him and thought at him.

We’ll celebrate when we succeed. Wait.

Luna looked down at the ugly plants in front of her.

“Okay.”

This girl was the best: no fuss, no questions, just a straight-up willingness to help.

He put one pot on top of a small table. Luna walked over and he stood opposite her.

McGonagall said, “No spells work on mandrakes, Mr. Ealdor. You don’t actually think you can do this?”

“I can’t. She can. Are you ready to try, Luna? I can’t guarantee that we’ll succeed on the first try, it might take you a while before you learn how to control it but I’ll do what I can to help you through this.”

He was aware that McGonagall was watching his every move but he decided to ignore the fact that he wasn’t playing his role of a helpless-like-a-Muggle child. This was too important. He wasn’t going to let Colin stay in his petrified-like-a-Muggle child. This was too important. He wasn’t going to let Colin stay in his petrified condition just so one person didn’t grow suspicious of him. He’s been failing at everything recently. Maybe there was one thing he could do right. Goddess thought it possible or else she wouldn’t have mentioned it.

“What do I do?” Luna asked.
“Put your hands over the plant and close your eyes.” She listened and he continued. “I want you to think about this plant as an individual. Reach out to it with your mind and make a connection. Search for it until you feel its magic.”

He gave her a moment to attempt this. Everyone stood silently and watched as she stood there with her hands over the mandrake. She started to hum and he wasn’t sure if he should tell her to stop. Was it distracting her or helping?

“I feel it,” she whispered and he smiled in relief. They were so close.

“I’ll help you.” He put his hands over hers. “Just imagine this mandrake growing. That’s all you’re doing.”

He felt a tingle of magic in her hands and knew that she was following his instructions correctly. What he didn’t say out loud was that he suspected that her magic alone wouldn’t be enough to grow this plant. It was a skill which would take her a long time to hone, maybe years, but he could solve that problem.

He grabbed hold of the magic she was releasing and guided it to the plant. Once it enveloped it, he amplified it, made it powerful as if he was the one that cast it in the first place.

The mandrake started to slowly grow and Luna must have felt it.

“Don’t stop,” he urged her, feeling her magic slipping. “We’re almost there.”

She resumed humming and her magic rekindled again. The plant continued growing until it was so large, it barely fit in the pot. When it was fully mature, Merlin released the magic and the girl’s hands.

She opened her eyes and looked right into his.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

He smiled at her and answered into her mind.

_You know my name._

Two days later, Merlin walked to the Hospital Wing with his hopes soaring. Snape was supposed to be finished with Mandrake Restorative Potion last night and so Colin should wake up soon.

Madam Pomfrey greeted him with a smile while fussing about her patients.

“It’s great to see you again, Merlin. I’ve been administering the Potion to all patients since early morning and have just finished. They should be waking up any moment now.”

Merlin sat down next to Colin who was still stuck in his strange position from when he was holding his camera. Of course, he wanted Justin and Mrs. Norris to wake up as well, but he was most anxious to see life in Colin’s chocolate-brown eyes.

“How is she?”

Filch walked in and looked at his cat longingly as if the mangy beast was the most beautiful creature in the world.

“It shouldn’t be long,” Madam Pomfrey answered while checking on Justin.
Filch sat down next to Mrs. Norris and stroked her fur.

“Come back to me,” he said to her in a shaky voice and broke into pitiful sobs.

Merlin looked back to Colin and fidgeted with his scarf. Why was it taking so long? The boy was still frozen and showed no change. He started to wonder if he should’ve insisted to prepare the potion. Did Snape brew it correctly?

A high-pitched sound disrupted his thoughts. He turned around and his heart skipped a beat.

Mrs. Norris stirred and Filch made an unintelligible squeak. Madam Pomfrey ran over and checked on her.

“She’s waking up. I wasn’t sure what dose to give her. The Drought is meant for humans but I’m glad it was enough.”

Mrs. Norris meowed and tried to stretch.

The Healer soothed her with words and a gentle touch. “You’re waking up from a long nap, but it’s finally over, Mrs. Norris.”

The cat complained but seemed too weak to fight. After a thorough check-up, Madam Pomfrey allowed Filch to pick her up.

He was crying crocodile tears and making cooing noises at the cat who was wriggling in his arms, determined to get away. They finally disappeared and the Hospital Wing became quiet again.

Colin should wake up at any moment. Merlin touched the boy’s hand and tried to bend his fingers to test if the petrification was easing up yet but it was of no use. He looked at a wall clock. Fifteen minutes had passed since Mrs. Norris woke up. Surely, Colin was going to be next.

The clock ticked away the seconds and Merlin was aware that he was missing out on the morning classes but he didn’t care. Colin was more important.

The boy’s fingers twitched and Merlin took his hand in his.

“That’s right, Colin. I’m here.”

It took a long time from the moment when his fingers moved to when he was able to lower down his stiff arm, to when he blinked and licked his lips. Merlin encouraged him and tried to be patient but he was coming out of his skin. Finally, something good happened!

Colin managed to turn his head and slightly smile.

“Why are you crying?” he croaked.

Merlin wiped his eyes, he wasn’t even aware that they were wet.

“Welcome back.”

Colin took a few long breaths and tried to flex his fingers. “I’m still so stiff.”

“Give it time, child,” Madam Pomfrey said over from Justin’s bed. He also started stirring.

“Do you need anything? Water?”
Colin smiled. “I want to get up, that’s what I really want.”

Madam Pomfrey did not allow him to sit up until she gave him a proper look-over. When she was finally satisfied with his vitals, she let Merlin help the boy up into a standing position.

“You should rest, child,” she fussed, looking at the bed like she wanted him to lay down again.

“I’ve been resting for… How long was I out?”

“It’s January,” Merlin answered.

“It felt like years. I was aware the whole time, Merlin. I could hear everything around me. It was boring! I need to get out of here,” Colin complained and Merlin chuckled.

It took a lot of arguing to convince Madam Pomfrey to let the boy out. If she didn’t know who Merlin was, she wouldn’t have allowed it but he assured her that he was going to take care of the boy.

As they slowly walked over to the Gryffindor Tower, Merlin felt the weight of guilt for not realizing that the petrified patients were aware and not asleep.

“I’m sorry I didn’t visit you more often. You were all alone there.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know. Madam Pomfrey talked to me sometimes. Jack visited me almost every day. I appreciated it but I’m rather conflicted about him.”

Merlin remembered the night Colin was petrified.

“Before you were attacked, you tried to tell me something. What was it?”

“Merlin, Jack is… I don’t know what he is. When you develop a picture with him in it, at first, it looks like he isn’t in the shot. But once you add the Photo Potion, he’s there. When it first happened, I thought that maybe it was a timing problem or I imagined it. But then, I developed a picture of Nearly Headless Nick and the same thing happened.”

“What are you trying to say, Colin?”

“Is Jack a ghost?”

“Definitely not. He’s solid. He can’t be a ghost.”

“A zombie? A zombie-ghost.”

Merlin wanted to laugh off the small boy’s crazy theory but then he heard the cackling of Peeves at the end of the hall and had a startling thought: Peeves was solid when he wanted to be and yet he wasn’t even technically alive. Would mischief personified show up in a picture?

What did this mean?

Colin insisted, “Jack and his sister, just like ghosts, will not show up in photos unless a magic potion is added. I’m scared, Merlin. He’s not… normal.”

“I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for all of this,” Merlin said, trying to calm down the small boy but internally, he completely agreed.

He had seen enough evidence over those few months to send his head for a spin. He couldn’t make
any sense of Jack but it has always been just hints or suspicions. He never had any proof.

Who would have thought that the small excitable eleven-year-old Muggle-born would figure out such an astounding detail of Jack’s strangeness. A detail which could be replicated and proven.

Merlin had a lot to think about but at the moment, he had to deal with Colin’s fear.

“Colin, has Jack ever done anything scary? And I don’t mean strange, I know that he’s strange, I mean anything that would make you think you should be scared of him.”

Colin’s lower lip quivered but he shook his head.

“No. He’s always nice. When he visited me, he just talked about his day and that he missed me. I was conflicted because I was scared of him and was completely helpless there, but at the same time, he visited me like a real friend and...” He took a long breath. “You’re right. He’s a nice person.”

“He is. Whatever the reason is for the strange photos, you don’t have to be scared of him.”

Colin seemed to relax finally and gave Merlin a little smile. “What do you think he is? I’m really curious.”

“I’m curious too but we’ll have to wait until he’s ready to tell us.”

No sooner he said those words, the answer became obvious to him. What type of people did not like to speak of their ancestry and would get offended if you asked them? Didn’t Jack try to convince Merlin that Hogwarts should be more accepting of non-humans? He gave himself away right there.

“It looks like you have an idea,” Colin said, noticing Merlin’s change of mood.

“He’s a half-breed. It makes total sense.”

“Only half-human? What is his other half? An alien?”

“In the end, it doesn’t matter, Colin. He’s our friend.”

Jack was tapping his foot on the floor. Merlin did not show up to any of the morning classes. He must have gone to the Hospital Wing. Why didn’t he tell him? Jack wanted to check if Colin was awake just as much. Instead, he was stuck in the dungeons, listening to Snape.

When the lesson ended, he flew more than ran to the Hospital Wing. He only found Madam Pomfrey there. All of the beds were empty.

“They’re all awake,” she happily answered the question he didn’t ask yet. “Your friend took Mr. Creevey to the dorm. Please, do try to not overexert him.”

Jack didn’t wait to listen more and ran. He stopped before the staircase because he realized that it was lunchtime and Merlin could have brought Colin down to the Great Hall. He ran there first and found them sitting in their usual spot.

Colin waved with a smile and Jack threw himself at him. This was the happiest day ever.

“I can’t breathe.”

Merlin pried Jack’s arms off of the small boy and only then, he realized that he might have squeezed him too hard.
“Sorry, sorry. Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling great. You have no idea how awesome it is to finally be able to talk. And, on Merlin’s scarf, I forgot how tasty food was.”

Jack grinned at Merlin who looked down at his scarf and shrugged.

“Thanks for visiting me so often. You kept me pretty informed on everything that was going on,” Colin continued while chewing.

Jack supported his head on his elbow and gladly listened to the rambling. He missed his voice.

“So I feel pretty caught up, although I missed out on quite a lot of the school year. I hope the teachers won’t expect me to make up all the essays and exams you took but I do want to learn the spells. I hope Professors Flitwick and McGonagall will give me time to catch up. And, Happy Birthday!”

He wrapped his arms around Jack whose throat felt tight. Did Colin hear him when he came to visit on his birthday? That was embarrassing. Jack didn’t remember what he said but it probably sounded pathetic. It was a depressing day.

“How old are you now?”

“I’m twelve and officially older than you, kid,” Jack patted his head and Colin swatted it away.

Merlin chuckled. “Sorry I wasn’t here for it. Do you have any gift requests?”

“Having Colin back is the best gift.”

Colin grinned and shoved him playfully. The three of them were back together again. Now, things would go back to normal.

Harry Potter’s gang came over and sat down across from them.

“I’m glad to see you back,” Potter said and Colin grinned.

“Thanks. So Justin was attacked right after me, huh? He’s a nice kid. I got to know him right before I was petrified. I was so sad when I heard the teachers say his name - that he was the next victim. I didn’t see what got me, mind you, I remember a pair of yellow eyes, nothing else. It hurt, I thought it killed me but then it didn’t. Oh, did I take a picture of it?”

“It destroyed your camera, sorry,” Merlin answered.

“Oh, no. I suppose it’s better that it destroyed my camera and not me. I wonder what they told my parents. Don’t tell them that I know, but I overheard McGonagall’s conversation with Madam Pomfrey. They’ve been keeping it all a secret. They don’t want people to start panicking but they are panicking themselves.”

“They should,” Merlin added, “this is a serious situation. What if the next victim dies?”

“Thankfully, Merlin was there to speed up the mandrake growth,” Jack gave him the credit he deserved.

“That was Luna. And we should thank the Goddess for giving us this clue.”

“You and your Goddess,” Weasley grumbled while devouring a chicken leg.
"You saw her and you still don’t believe?" Jack complained.

"It looks like I missed something." Colin said, looking between them.

Merlin sighed and Jack wanted to do something violent to the ignorant redhead. Merlin shared the most amazing experience with them all - they were all in the presence of an actual goddess! That was mind-blowing. How could Weasley still insist Merlin was making this up?

“I just wish we knew what type of a monster we’re dealing with,” Hermione said.

“It’s a Basilisk,” Merlin said and they all stared at him.

“What?” Potter asked.

“Don’t ask me how I know, I don’t want to get into that, but basically, it’s a giant serpent. It can kill with its eyes so it will be better if you all look down whenever you’re walking down corridors.”

“Blimey,” Ron said in a squeaky voice. “How do you know this stuff?”

“What part of Don’t ask me did you not understand?” Jack cut in. If Merlin didn’t want to talk about it, he would defend him. Weasley should be glad that Merlin told him at all.

Thanks, Merlin thought at him.

Jack kept his chin high. Maybe Merlin would finally see that he was a better friend than these two ungrateful idiots.

“So why did it petrify me and not kill me?” Colin asked.

“That’s a good question.” Merlin helped himself to another sandwich. “What do you, Justin and Mrs. Norris have in common?”

All of them were quiet for a moment until Hermione spoke up, “Colin, you made a good observation.” Colin’s eyebrows flew up and she continued. “The Basilisk’s stare destroyed your camera instead of killing you. You didn’t die because you didn’t look directly into its eyes.”

“That’s brilliant, Hermione,” Merlin praised and she blushed. “Yes. And Justin must have seen the Basilisk through Nearly Headless Nick!”

“And Mrs. Norris?” Jack asked.

Merlin thought for a moment but then smiled. “There was a puddle on the floor. If she looked at the reflection of its eyes, she’d suffer the same fate.”

“Wow,” Jack ran a hand through his hair. “That’s a lot of luck you three had. You were so close to…”

He couldn’t finish the sentence. The idea of Colin dead terrified him.

“They’re keeping it all hushed up outside of Hogwarts,” Potter said. “Malfoy said that they’ll sack Dumbledore if the attacks continue.”

Merlin pointed his sandwich at him and a piece of ham fell out. “They want a scapegoat, of course. What we really need is figuring out who’s ordering the attacks since it’s not Malfoy.”

“It’s probably someone you’d never suspect,” Colin said.
“Like clackety skeletons?”

Colin, Merlin, and Jack laughed while Potter and Friends looked confused.

“You said giant serpent,” Hermione interrupted and Merlin sobered up again.

“Yes. It’s a Great Snake - a creature of Old Magic.”

“ONE a Parselmouth can control?”

They all looked at Potter who tightened his lips.

“Yes,” Merlin said quietly while still looking at Scarhead. “You might be able to control it, Harry.”

“He might be able to find it!” Colin added.

Merlin popped the last piece of the sandwich into his mouth and asked casually, “Have you heard it around the castle or sensed it in any way?”

Potter waited for a beat but finally spilled the beans. “I’ve been hearing a voice from time to time but I don’t know where it’s coming from. I don’t know how something so large can move around without anyone spotting it.”

They were all quietly thinking until Hermione gasped.

“Pipes!”

“The school plumbing.” Merlin fiddled with his scarf absentmindedly. “Good theory. Then, it would need a place to come out of - somewhere where the pipe opens up. Like a bathroom but which one?”

“If it’s using a bathroom, wouldn’t people encounter it all the time?” Potter asked. “Someone would have been attacked in a bathroom but so far no one was.”

They all scratched their heads or stared at the food on their plates, thinking hard, and a realization hit Jack like a brick. Someone died in a bathroom a long time ago. He inhaled sharply and Merlin noticed.

“You have an idea?”

Jack locked his eyes with Merlin’s.

“Myrtle died in a bathroom.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay! We’re going on a monster hunt! Are you excited?

In other news, are you a fan of Carnival Row? I’ve got a new short story up that will eventually become full-length. Check it out if you wish.

I’m prepping for November NaNoWriMo challenge. That new story plus book 2 of The NOOM (this series) is on my to-write list. Will any of you take the challenge this year?
The snowstorm picked up again and beat against the window in unforgivable gusts. Merlin would’ve hated to be outside right now, but though he was indoors, he had to deal with a different type of storm.

“You can’t do this.”

Jack stood in the doorframe, blocking his way out.

Merlin sighed. He really did not want to resort to using magic against his friend but it was tempting.

“Please, stay with Colin. I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“That’s not why you’re leaving me behind.”

Merlin put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Jack, please, don’t fight me on this.”

They owed Jack for giving them the Myrtle clue but Merlin did not want to endanger yet another child. He still wasn’t sure how he could get rid of the other three.

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not. And I’ll know if you try to follow us. You’re staying here. It’s final.”

“Jack, just give up,” Colin said from his bed. “He’s more stubborn than you.”

Jack, in turn, put his arms on Merlin’s shoulders. “I don’t trust that Potter will have your back.”

Merlin didn’t know why all of a sudden the boy felt so protective of him.

“I can take care of myself.” Jack still didn’t look convinced so Merlin thought of a way to assure him. “Remember the Sidhe crystal?” Jack’s eyes dropped to the top of Merlin’s shirt under which the crystal was hidden. “It’s a powerful weapon. I’ll be okay.”

Jack bit his lip. “At least take an adult with you. You never know what you’re going to encounter.”

Merlin was glad that the boy could be level-headed and cautious when it mattered. As he was now officially his pupil, he felt proud of him.

“That is the plan. We’re going to talk to Myrtle first, and once we know where the entrance is, we’ll let Dumbledore know so he can take care of the monster.”

“It didn’t sound like it when you were scheming with Potter.”

“I promise, we will notify him.” He finally moved him aside. “We’re not stupid. Don’t worry.”

Merlin escaped to the common room where Harry, Ron, and Hermione already waited for him. They left before Jack got any ideas to follow them.

It took all six of them to put the clues together. Only when they cooperated and shared their
knowledge, they arrived at some theories. Merlin wondered if he could have figured it out on his own. Could Dumbledore?

Ideally, he would’ve preferred to deal with the beast alone but he could use Harry’s Snakelord skills. Ron and Hermione refused to let him go without them and so Merlin had three children to look after. He promised himself that he wouldn’t let any harm to come to them. He didn’t care what magic he had to pull out in front of them or if his disguise suffered. Their lives were more important.

Myrtle was thankfully in her stall so they could question her immediately.

“Hi, Myrtle,” Merlin called her.

She sniffed loudly. “You won’t hurt me, will you?”

“How could we hurt you anyway?” Ron asked. “You’re already dead.”

“There are ways!” she snarled.

She was in one of her vengeful moods today and they needed her cooperation. He shot Ron a look to shut up and tried to be his most pleasant self.

“I would like to officially apologize on behalf of whoever wronged you.”

Merlin slightly bowed his head. The trio stood quietly behind him, waiting to see if his words placated her.

“You’re much nicer than other boys,” she said with a pout.

“Myrtle, would you mind telling us the story of how you died?”

She moaned pitifully and went into her tale.

“It was dreadful. Oliver Hornby was teasing me about my glasses and I hid in that stall to cry.” She pointed to the stall where she liked to hang out in. “I heard a boy speak some gibberish so I opened the door to yell at him to get out and then… I died.”

“Do you know who was the boy you heard?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” her mood had changed again. “I was DISTRAUGHT!”

This sounded promising - a sudden death, speaking Parseltongue. It fit. Merlin had to get more out of her before she got too angry.

“Do you remember what killed you?”

“I remember a pair of big yellow eyes,” she pointed at the row of sinks, “over there.”

Then, she moaned and floated back inside her toilet stall.

Harry tentatively approached the area Myrtle pointed to and examined it. He peered inside the drain, inspected the basin and the pipes below. No water came out when he turned the copper tap and he investigated it in more detail.

“There’s a tiny snake carved here.”

“Say something in Parseltongue!” Ron encouraged.
“What might you be doing?”

They all turned around and saw Professor Lockhart in the door with a confident smirk on his face. He made a ”tsk” sound.

“Three boys in the girls’ lavatory? You must admit, this doesn’t look good.”

Merlin felt momentarily speechless. They were caught past curfew. Oh, he should have taken some precautions, what now?

“Professor,” Hermione, the only one who did not fall into shock, said in a polite but eager tone, “we might have found the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. This is your area of expertise, isn’t it? You should investigate it.”

Merlin resisted an urge to groan. Did Hermione really believe that everything this fool put in his books was real? This wizard was useless.

“You found…” Lockhart cleared his throat. “How do you know?”

“Try it,” Ron told Harry.

Harry stared at the tap and said, “Open up.”

“That was English.”

Harry braced his hands on the sink, locked his eyes on the tap and tried again. This time a string of hissing came out of his mouth and a distant rumbling sounded beneath them. Then, the basin started sinking down, revealing a pipe large enough for a person to get through. Or a Basilisk.

“Would you look at that…” Lockhart muttered and peered down the dark depths. There was a bead of sweat on his forehead. “What’s down there?”

“A Basilisk,” Merlin answered. “A giant serpent which can kill with its stare.”

Lockhart reached into his pocket to where his wand was while he adjusted his blond hair with the other hand. Merlin narrowed his eyes on the wizard. It looked like he was planning something.

“Alright, we shall investigate it. In you go. I’ll follow you.”

Ron looked like he was going to jump in and Harry stopped him, seeing the same thing Merlin did.

Merlin thought at him, Lockhart is up to something. Why is he holding a wand?

The wizard tried to dazzle them with a smile and Merlin didn’t want to take any more risk so he dived into his mind.

Lockhart was giddy with excitement, he couldn’t wait to write a book about how he saved four foolish children who tried to take on the monster on their own. He planned to have them jump in, fight the monster, and whoever came out of it alive, he would erase the memory of so he could take the credit for himself.

Merlin got out of his mind, immediately disarmed him and handed the wand to Harry.

“You wrote your books by stealing credit from those who really did those deeds and erased their memories. And now, you want to do it to us!”
Lockhart gaped in surprise, stumped as to how he lost his wand and how Merlin learned his secret. Hermione gasped and covered her mouth.

“Is this true?” Harry asked.

Lockhart’s eyes darted around but kept coming back to his wand in Harry’s hand.

“Now, wait a minute, children.” He tried to recover. “This… Taking my wand - that’s…”

Ron snickered. “Look at him. I knew he’s a wuss. The secret’s out. We’ll tell everyone and you will never sell another book.”

Lockhart made a strange whimpering sound and his chin quivered.

“What should we do with him?” Merlin asked.

Harry shrugged and exchanged a look with Ron.

Lockhart huffed and pointed at the pipe entrance. “You’re really going to go down there on your own?”

They all glanced at the dark depths.

“We should get Professor Dumbledore,” Harry suggested. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy being eaten tonight.”

Using the distraction, Lockhart quietly launched at Ron who was closest to him and stole his wand.

Merlin wanted to hit himself over the head. He couldn’t believe that he fell for the “Look there!” trick again. He was an idiot.

Lockhart was pointing the wand at them and looked smug.

“I don’t know how you kids found out but... **OBLIVIATE**.”

A jet of light exploded out of the wand and Merlin reacted instinctively, creating an energy shield around the children, but he never felt the spell reach it. Instead, the memory charm rebounded on the wizard who fell on his backside.

Merlin released the shield - Hermione gave him a strange look which he tried to ignore - and walked up to Lockhart.

His eyes were wide open and a broad smile framed his face while he took in his surroundings.

“Hello. I don’t have to pee. Do you?” He looked around at them all and chuckled. “Who are you? Are you my children? I don’t know if I like children. I like fried chicken. Do you have any chicken around here?”

“I think your broken wand malfunctioned again,” Harry said to Ron who shrugged and walked over to pick his wand off the floor.

“I wouldn’t use that if I were you,” Merlin said, looking at the wand apprehensively.

It was taped in the middle. Broken wands were irreparable and produced very unpredictable magic as they just witnessed.
“It’s what I’ve got,” the redhead mumbled and Merlin wondered why he had not gotten a new one yet.

Hermione looked down the pipe with worry. “We’ll take him to Professor Dumbledore. I don’t think he’ll blame us.”

Lockhart crawled over to them on his hands and knees and looked down the hole.

“What an odd thing. Is there chicken down there? I wonder if I’ll fit in it.”

He jumped in head-first, yelling out, “Weeeee,” and the kids looked down the pipe in shock, trying to comprehend what just happened.

Merlin got a brilliant idea. He could use this to send the kids to safety.

“You three go get Professor Dumbledore. I’ll go down and ensure this idiot doesn’t get himself killed.”

And he jumped in before they could stop him.

He slid down the long, slimy pipe which stretched for what felt like miles and landed hard on nasty floor filled with old animal bones. He shook them off himself and looked for signs of Lockhart or the Basilisk.

He heard what could be footsteps within a dark tunnel and cursed the fool for going in. He would call out to him but did not want to alert the serpent and so he quietly went in, without any source of light. He used his sense of touch to feel his way around and tried to not make splashing noises on the wet floor.

He tripped over something and finally conjured a ball of light.

He saw the size of the Basilisk before when it killed him, but it all happened so fast, it was easy to forget how huge the beast was. And here on the floor was an evidence of its size. The object he tripped over was a green snake skin, at least twenty-feet-long, lying curled across the tunnel like a little teaser to prove to him how huge a monster he was about to fight.

He considered dropping his aging spell to be at his full strength but he would rather avoid doing that. It was difficult to get the age right and his friends would immediately notice if he grew a couple of inches in one day. Besides, his strength would not determine his victory tonight. Rather, he had to time his attack and aim accurately, and most of all, not get killed before he got a chance to strike.

He resumed looking for Lockhart but heard something behind him. There was no place to hide and this was not a good spot to make his stand so he ran forward, the glowing orb lighting his way so he wouldn’t trip anymore. He was running so fast, he nearly ran into a wall which appeared in front of him.

The only way out was through an even more narrow opening which would turn him into an easy snack. He quickly hid in the corner, put out his light and kept his eyes on the floor. It was a small space which would prove difficult to fight in but he braced himself. The moment was coming.

The splashing sound got closer as his pursuer approached and he saw a source of light reflected in the surface of the water on the floor. He dared to look up and his knees felt weak when he saw the face of Harry grinning at him. He clutched his heart and closed his eyes.

“You gave me a scare,” he whispered.
Harry chuckled and shook his head at him.

“Where is Dumbledore?”

“Ron and Hermione went to get him. Why did you go in by yourself?”

“I was trying to find Lockhart before he got eaten. I’m pretty sure he went in there.”

Merlin pointed to the tunnel and wondered how to get rid of Harry. The boy wasn’t supposed to accompany him into the danger!

“What will you do if the monster shows up?”

Merlin didn’t have to think long but figured that he could use the same explanation that worked with Jack. He untied the leather string from around his neck and undid his transfiguration. Within seconds, he was gripping the Sidhe staff which was now slightly taller than him.

Harry admired it and smiled lightly. “You’re still an idiot for thinking you can do this alone.” He sighed. “Let’s get Lockhart. Hopefully, Dumbledore will get here before the monster shows up.”

Harry moved to go inside the tunnel and Merlin grabbed his arm. If the Basilisk showed up, what would he do? The boy was going to be a liability.

“Harry, there’s no need for both of us to risk it. I’ll get Lockhart and bring him back. You stay here.”

Harry looked nervously inside the tunnel and back at him. “I’m not letting you go in there alone.”

“Just stay and wait for Dumbledore.” Merlin wondered if he should use magic on the boy.

“What, you think your life is less important than mine?”

What spell would be best? Merlin could put him to sleep but it would make Harry completely defenseless if the monster snuck up on him.

“You wanted to be friends. This is what friends do. Merlin, you’re such an idiot. I don’t get it what Hermione sees in you.”

Merlin got taken aback at this unexpected mention of the girl. “Hermione?”

Harry gaped at him with an open mouth. “How blind can you get? Merlin! She likes you!”

Merlin felt light-headed and had to lean on his staff for support. He did not see that coming. How did he attract the interest of a twelve-year-old girl? Oh, this was bad.

Harry chuckled at his stupefied expression and went inside the tunnel, not waiting for him anymore.

“Get your staff ready.”

His echoing voice snapped Merlin back to reality. “Wait up!”

Chapter End Notes

You didn’t think I would cut Harry out of this fight, did you? There’s a method to my
madness. Let’s get that monster before it gets us!
Meet Salazar’s pet

Merlin didn’t know what to expect when he walked into the Chamber of Secrets but knew they would face something large and ugly. Like Salazar’s statue.

He followed Harry through the narrow tunnel and marveled at how messed up it all was. He had to get that fool Lockhart and Harry out of this place before any harm came to the boy. Harry was too important. He shouldn’t be here.

Stone pillars with - what else - serpents carved into them framed the long chamber. The floor was made of smooth stone and their shoes made an echo even though they tried to step quietly.

Harry’s eyes darted to the dark corners. His breath was shaky from fear but he bravely trudged on. Merlin’s senses were alert. He was using his Mind’s Eye to see through the darkness and watch for danger.

“Look to the floor as much as you can,” Merlin said in a hushed tone. “If the Basilisk comes out, close your eyes. There’s water everywhere so his eyes could reflect. If you collapse to the floor petrified, it will likely eat you so it’s not better than death.”

“Got it.”

“You can try to speak to it in Parseltongue to calm it down so it doesn’t kill us. I hope it works.”

“How can we kill it?”

“His skin is impenetrable and resistant to spells so we need to aim for the open mouth - that’s the largest target, the easiest, but also the eyes and nostrils will work. I wish you had some weapon, more than just a wand…”

“We’ll work together,” Harry assured him. “We can do this. And Dumbledore will be here soon as well. We can find Lockhart and get out of here before the Basilisk even notices us.”

There was one more thing Merlin worried about. “Harry, promise me, if something happens to me, run. Don’t try to be a hero and save my body. Just run. Please.”

Harry smiled. “Believe me, I’m not a hero.”

Looking at the boy, Merlin wasn’t so sure of that. He was brave for coming after Merlin. Not many kids, even adults, would do the same in his place. His need to protect others brought out the valiant spark that reminded him of Godric Gryffindor.

Godric was cheerful and rowdy, the center of attention in every room he was in. By contrast, Harry was quiet and reserved, but when it came down to danger, he put others before himself just like Godric would have.

At the end of the chamber was a statue illuminated by a green glow reflecting off of a pool of water at its feet. Something moved on the floor and Merlin’s heart jumped to his throat as he thought that it was the monster, but it was only Lockhart.

They quietly ran up to the clueless wizard who kneeled near the pool. The statue of the balding wizard with a long beard was easy to recognize - Salazar Slytherin. Of course, he would make a giant statue of himself. He was disappointed they didn’t let him place one on the grounds.
“Salazar,” Merlin couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “Think he was overcompensating for something?”

Harry snorted but then sobered up again. “Where do you think it is?”

Merlin liked this chamber much better without the monster in it. He just wanted to get these two out of here, hand them over to Dumbledore and sneak back to face the Basilisk alone. He was the only one who couldn’t be permanently killed. It had to be him.

Lockhart was staring down the green water. Merlin hesitantly looked in. It was too murky to judge if it was deep enough to hold the Basilisk.

“Let’s go, Professor,” Harry whispered and tried to lift the wizard off the floor.

“I think there’s someone down there,” Lockhart said in a cheerful voice and Merlin’s heart clenched. “I want to say, Hello.”

Was he right? He didn’t want to find out.

They grabbed Lockhart by his arms and started backing up, but the water now visibly stirred and Merlin feared that they were out of time. He glanced at Harry who was holding up well, despite being scared. He thought instructions at him.

*I’m going to do some magic to hide us. Don’t freak out.*

Harry nodded and Merlin got to work. He set a powerful glamour on them to hide them from view. It was a draining spell and he would have to rely on his crystal to keep it up but this was not the time to hold back.

“I didn’t understand that,” Lockhart said loudly. “What language is it?”

Harry gasped once he could no longer see them but stayed quiet. Merlin grabbed both of their arms to have a handle on where they were and moved them away from the water while whispering another charm which turned Lockhart into a mute.

*I wish I got a chance to teach you telepathy. Would be useful now.*

“T’m trying,” Harry whispered.

Was the boy trying to communicate? He applauded the effort but it was too late to practice that skill now.

The water stirred again and Merlin tightened his grip on the staff.

*There’s definitely something in the water. No matter what, do not look up.*

“How can you aim if you’re not looking?” Harry whispered so quietly, Merlin barely heard it.

That was a good question. He would have to figure it out somehow. In the meantime, he found Lockhart’s face and covered his eyes for him. Thankfully, the clueless wizard did not put up a fight and instead, leaned to Merlin’s hand like a cat looking to be pet.

“Should I try to speak Parseltongue to it?”

Merlin was undecided. There was a chance that the snake would listen to the boy but that would reveal their location. Did they want to take that risk?
“I want to try,” Harry squeezed his arm.

Then, two things happened at the same time. They heard a slushy sound and then dripping water as the monster emerged from the pool, and then they heard music. Only when it got closer to them, Merlin realized what it was.

*It's a song of a Phoenix. Fawkes is here!*

Dumbledore must have sent the bird to them. Merlin resisted an urge to look up. Something dropped in front of them and they both jumped from surprise. Fawkes, having made his delivery, flew past them and in the direction of the beast. The object the bird dropped by their feet turned out to be the Sorting Hat. Why it was sent to them, he had no idea.

They heard a hissing of the snake and the shrill cry of the bird. Harry gripped his arm tighter.

*No matter what, don’t look!*

But someone had to look so he slowly started to raise his eyes, down the gray stone floor, the edge of the pool and the body of the giant snake which was halfway out of the water. He didn’t dare look higher but he could tell that the snake was thrashing, trying to fight off the bird who flew around its head.

“Get the eyes! Get the eyes!” Merlin urged, hoping that was what Fawkes was doing.

The serpent sputtered and hissed so loudly, their ears hurt. And then, Fawkes flew away and landed next to Harry, not fooled at all by the glamour.

Merlin finally dared to look at the damage the bird did.

*Fawkes gouged his eyes out!*

Merlin dropped the glamour and sighed in relief, it was an effort to hold it on all three of them, but they weren’t safe yet - the snake could still hear them and smell them.

Basilisk hissed pitifully in pain as its blood dripped from the eye sockets to the floor. It was still searching for them. It opened its mouth only a little and stuck out its tongue to smell better.

*We need it to open its mouth wide so I can deliver the killing blast.*

Harry nodded and spoke an order in Parseltongue. The beast immediately turned in their direction and slithered towards them, moving its massive body with ease.

“It’s not listening.” Harry muttered and it was quickly obvious that they were in trouble.

Merlin shoved Harry to the side and ran in the other direction.

“Hey! Maggot, come and eat me!”

The snake turned on him and advanced with surprising speed. Merlin was ready with the staff but instead of opening its mouth, it surrounded him with its massive body, trapping him there. That was not part of the plan - he needed space. He tried to blast the snake away but spells bounced off its scales with no effect.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harry charge towards him, he was holding something shiny.

The snake must have heard him too because it turned its head while the rest of the body was
encircling Merlin.

It started opening its mouth to attack Harry and Merlin couldn’t miss that opportunity. He jumped over its impressive body, avoided getting hit by the tail, and ran right under the oversized mouth which was much larger than him.

He found himself shoulder-to-shoulder with Harry who was holding a sword - where did that come from? The beast opened wide, its giant fangs a promise of a painful death, and they struck together. Harry drove a sword through the roof of its mouth, while Merlin sent a deadly blast of energy from the staff down its throat.

There was a moment when the time suspended and they wondered if their attack did anything or if they were about to be eaten anyway, but then the beast’s giant head started tilting and Merlin pulled Harry away as it fell down.

They stared at it, waiting for any flicker of life. Merlin wasn’t sure how long to wait before they could call it dead but stayed away just in case.

They looked at each other, both assessing the other for any damages, and Harry broke in a grin.

“We killed a Basilisk.”

“Cool sword.”

“Fawkes brought it with the Sorting Hat.”

Merlin took the sword from Harry to admire it. It was of beautiful workmanship, made of well-polished and sharpened silver and the handle was inset with rubies. Just beneath the hilt was the engraving of its original owner.

“That’s Godric Gryffindor’s sword,” he gave it back to the boy and clapped him on the shoulder. “Fawkes didn’t bring it. You summoned it.”

“What?”

He decided to leave the explanations until later. He felt spent and reached into his pocket to use the crystal.

The feeling of vertigo gripped him as if it had talons, bringing in a vision loud and clear.

Ginny Weasley was lying nearly-dead on the floor, Harry lifted the Gryffindor sword and stabbed a leather-bound book with it.

When Merlin came to, he was in Dumbledore’s office, on the same couch where he woke up from the dead before. The old wizard was nearby with Harry, discussing the Gryffindor sword which Harry was still holding. The Sidhe staff was propped up by the couch.

When Merlin sat up, the world swam in front of him. He closed his eyes and put his face in his hands, trying to get a grip.

“Finally!” Harry’s voice reached him.

He still felt too clammy so he stayed in the bent position. Harry sat next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.
“I was worried. You just collapsed. Fawkes got us out of there.”

“I’m okay.”

Merlin lifted his head which felt like it came out of a grinder. This vision did a number on him.

Oh, Ginny. Ginny was still in danger and the book was the reason. He failed so badly by letting it slip through his fingers. His work here was far from done.

“I think you overexerted yourself,” Dumbledore said with a small smile. “You need to ease up on those glamour spells.”

Harry was grinning. “I think it’s brilliant that you can do magic like that but it’s not good if it does this to you.”

The glamour wasn’t what knocked him out but he didn’t want to say that in front of Harry. He shot Dumbledore a look to let him know that he needed to speak to him.

“We have plenty to discuss, Merlin. Please, see me tomorrow after you rest.”

He supposed it would have to wait then.

Merlin walked back to the dorm with Harry, both were badly in need of a shower, his staff was transfigured again and under his shirt. The castle hallways were safe again but he wasn’t in a celebratory mood.

“You don’t look very happy,” Harry said. “We just slew a monster. It doesn’t get cooler than that.”

Merlin tried to smile but it probably didn’t look genuine.

“You did well there, Harry. Did Dumbledore explain to you about the sword?”

“He said that it only shows itself to True Gryffindors. I’m still unsure what that means.”

“It means that you deserved it.”

Harry was still pumped up after the event. “I remembered what you said that you wished I had something more than my wand so I wished I had a weapon to help you fight and then I looked at the Sorting Hat that Fawkes brought us and there was something shiny inside. And I pulled out the sword!”

“How did Fawkes know to bring the Hat?”

“Dumbledore doesn’t know. He said that as soon as Hermione and Ron told him that you went down there, he told Fawkes to help you since he could get to you faster, and Fawkes grabbed the Hat on his own.”

“Smart bird.”

Merlin wondered if Phoenixes possessed the Sight in a similar way to the Great Dragons - could they see glimpses of the future?

“Dumbledore arrived right after you collapsed. He missed the fight by seconds.”

As they climbed the stairs back to the Gryffindor Tower, Harry made a sad sigh and Merlin looked over. He knew what troubled him but what did the boy have left to worry about?
Harry said the password to the Fat Lady’s portrait, and as they climbed inside, he finally said what thought changed his mood.

“We got the monster but we never caught the Heir of Slytherin.”
All is well. Or is it?

“A band of idiots,” Jack murmured quietly, careful to not wake Colin.

He paced across the dorm and felt like pulling hair out of his head. This wait was killing him.

Judging by how many hours had passed, they didn’t let the adults handle the monster but went in on their own. Why take a risk like that? An army of wizards should’ve attacked the Basilisk, not four kids. Why didn’t anyone listen to reason?

What if Merlin needed him right now? He could help. He was sure he could. He was tempted to run to Myrtle’s bathroom and the more he thought about it, the least reasons he could find why he shouldn’t.

“Colin is safe,” he reasoned with himself, reluctant to leave his sleeping friend. “Merlin is not.”

But it felt wrong to leave the boy when he spent months alone. Jack hesitated and continued pacing until Merlin came through the door, sparing him the decision.

Seeing him safe and sound felt as if a heavy boulder was lifted off of his chest and he was able to breathe again, but then, he shook his head at the state of Merlin, whose robes were quite filthy. His suspicions were correct.

“Let me guess, you fought the monster, not the adults.”

Merlin couldn’t hide a smirk. “What matters is that the monster is dead. And I wasn’t alone - Harry had my back.”

Jack felt a sting somewhere deep inside him. While he was glad that Potter was useful for a change, he wished he had been there to help. Why didn’t Merlin trust that he could handle it? Did he also think him useless? How could he change that?

The next day, he fully expected the Harry Potter Fun Club to be given a celebratory feast, but instead, they were all sworn to secrecy by the Headmaster in an effort to not tip off the Heir of Slytherin of what they had done.

At least Colin knew about the monster and so he didn’t have to be scared of anymore.

Merlin had something to discuss with Dumbledore and ditched their Charms class - it was becoming a habit of his.

While before he was attacked, everyone ignored Colin, he was now very popular. Random students kept walking up to him to congratulate him on being back. Jack wondered if any of them visited him or that other petrified boy in the Hospital Wing. Slytherins, on the other hand, glared in the boy’s direction and so Jack accompanied him everywhere, determined that no one bothered his friend.

Filch was strutting in their direction, holding Mrs. Norris like a prize and whistling off-tune. Jack didn’t like him but he was glad that the cat was okay. She was a victim just like Colin was.

She hissed at him as they passed and he resisted the urge to throw a frostball at Filch.

”Are you okay?” Colin was looking at him sideways. ”You’re like an overinflated balloon that’s about to pop.”
'I look like a balloon?'

'You're acting like one.'

'What?'

Before they walked into the classroom, Elsa ran up to them.

'Jack, did you hear from Reed or... you know?'

Was she looking for news of their father? He got no more fairy visits and didn’t expect any. He caused quite a winter out there, and even though he stopped calling in the snow, it would take a long time to melt. No fairy would come to him now.

'Nothing yet.'

'Why is it taking so long?' she groaned.

Colin stood quietly and didn’t comment on the Sylph conversation he didn’t quite get and it struck Jack as uncharacteristic. Before, he was always so chatty. Jack wondered if it was a leftover of being stuck petrified for so long.

'I’ve been researching the...' Elsa paused and glanced at Colin, ‘those spirits. Most of it is a bunch of folklore rubbish but one theme that’s repeated, and I wonder if there’s any truth to it, is that they are muses of the artists: painters, writers, and poets.’

Jack imagined Elsa as a muse, inspiring artists to be creative and then criticizing their creative imperfections. He chortled at the idea. She’d make the worst muse.

She cocked an eyebrow and put a hand on her hip. ‘Do you have a problem with artists?’

‘Being an artist is fine but poetry is stupid.’

She huffed. ‘It is a difficult art form to turn a feeling into words so others can experience it.’

He waved his hand to dismiss her. ‘Difficult? Please.’

’Oh, so you think you can do it? Please, go ahead. Wow me with your poetic prowess.’

He smirked.

’Oranges are orange
But black eyes are blue.
Poems are silly
And so are you.’

He poked her nose on the last line but quickly took his finger away, seeing that she looked like she was about to bite it.

Colin chuckled next to him. At least one person appreciated his jokes.

‘That wasn’t poetry,’ she hissed.

‘According to your definition, it was. It turned my feelings into words and you felt something, didn’t you? I mooooded you.’ She hit his arm but he continued. ‘I inspired your feelings of... violence.’
“You’re very talented on that front,” she growled while he exchanged an amused look with Colin. Then, she took a long breath and calmed down. “Can you meet me at the Owlery Saturday after breakfast?”

As none of them owned an owl, that was a curious location. Was she planning something? He was up for it.

“Sure.”

“See you there. Bye, Colin,” she walked away, grumbling to herself something about poetry.

In the afternoon, he went down to the dungeons with Colin. While Snape did not require the boy to make up the essays the rest of the class wrote during the weeks he was petrified, he would not let him get away without preparing each potion.

“Professor, I hope you don’t mind if I help Colin prep the ingredients and clean up so he can get through this faster?” Jack pleaded, not wanting to leave his friend all alone but also, looking for something to occupy himself with.

“You may. Watch carefully, Creevey.” It was amazing how he never seemed to need to blink. “You might learn something from your classmate.”

“Snape likes you?” Colin asked when they were gathering the ingredients in the storage room.

“He’s not as bad as everyone says. I mean, he’s brutal on the details but overall, he’s just a vampire teacher.”

Colin covered his mouth to stifle an outburst of laughter. “You think he’s a vampire?”

“Have you ever seen him outside in the daylight? It would explain so much. For example, he’s in a bad mood because he’s thirsty all the time and tasty students are just within his reach. But he resists so he’s a good vampire. Why should we hold it against him? It's not his fault that he's different.”

“So, we should be accepting of his kind,” Colin said while staring at Jack with a smile.

“Exactly. He’s trying all he can to fit in with the humans. So what if he sticks out a bit?”

Colin gave him a quick hug, why, Jack had no idea, but the vampire theory seemed to put him in a good mood and calmed his nerves.

Jack only helped with the prep and clean up as promised and offered tips when needed. Snape was pleased with the resulting Forgetfulness Potion, gave Colin a good grade and suggested that they partner-up until the end of the term.

Later, when they were getting ready for bed, Jack wasn’t sleepy yet so he conjured a few huggers to entertain himself.

“Where did these bats come from?” Colin asked.

“Oh, I… sorry.”

“Remember how I tried to teach him the Avis spell during the Halloween feast?” Merlin said. “It looks like Jack has been practicing it in secret and got really good at it.”

“But why bats?”
Jack shrugged while cupping one in his hands. “I don’t know why I like huggers. I just do.”

“Huggers?”

Jack sent a couple of them to hang from his bed curtain. They obeyed, grabbed the fabric with their feet and hung upside down, their wings wrapped around them.

“See how they sleep in a hug?”

Colin giggled. “Imagine a world where bats are called huggers. We’d have Huggerman, Huggercave, Hugmobile, Hugarangs.”

Merlin grinned from his bed while Jack was confused. “What are you talking about?”

Colin stood on his bed, stuck out his chest proudly and put his hands on his hips.

“I am vengeance!” he said in a low throaty voice. “I am the night! I am HUGGERMAN!”

Merlin laughed into his pillow while Jack sighed. “Whatever you say, Colin.”

The small boy plopped down on his bed and grinned widely. “I can’t believe you can conjure live animals, Jack. You’re like Tony Stark but your inventions are magic!”

“Who’s that? Was he a Gryffindor?”

Colin started laughing so hard, he fell off his bed. Merlin laughed at that too and Jack wished they would explain what was so funny. He hated being left out of a joke.

“I know what present I’ll bring you from the Muggle world,” Colin said while trying to calm down. “I need to introduce you to the world of comics, my friend.”

Merlin sat in History of Magic and drummed his fingers on the desk as the ghost of Professor Binns drawled about the Soap Blizzard of 1378. Jack dozed off a while ago and his fingers twitched as he dreamt. Binns’ voice had that effect on all students. A couple of rows ahead of them, both Colin and Ginny were slumped in their seats.

Looking at the girl reminded Merlin of the danger she was in. He still hadn’t found the location of that cursed book.

He spoke with Dumbledore and revealed what he saw in the vision. The old wizard listened while nodding his head and responded with, “Curious,” and a bunch of vague ideas of how they should keep a watch on Ginny. Merlin felt that his warning wasn’t being taken as seriously as it should be.

Maybe it was the relief that the danger Salazar’s monster posed was over, or that all petrified victims were okay, or that the school wasn’t going to be closed, or that he wasn’t getting fired. Maybe it was all too much good news for the old wizard to fully appreciate the gravity of this newest threat. But Merlin got that vision for a reason. He wasn’t taking it lightly.

They decided to keep the news of Basilisk’s death a secret. Dumbledore hoped that they could still catch the Heir of Slytherin and so he set up patrols by Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Merlin set up his own patrol - it was a boundary spell which would alert him of every person that walked in there. Few days had passed, and no one entered yet. It would be only a matter of time.

Lockhart was a different case altogether and Dumbledore didn’t know what to do about him. When the wizard cast Obliviate with Ron’s wand, the spell backfired, clearing his memory. He was
currently in the Hospital Wing but Madam Pomfrey complained that he needed to be moved to St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries for long term care.

Their Defense Against the Dark Arts class was being taught by whichever teacher was available which created a very chaotic feel to each class. However, Lockhart was so useless as a teacher, maybe this would be an improvement and the kids would actually learn something for a change.

Merlin questioned Dumbledore again why he hired him in the first place and was a little surprised at the answer.

"For a while, I’ve been suspecting that he’s a fraud. I was hoping he would expose himself here. Besides, no one else applied.”

Merlin rolled his eyes at the old wizard’s schemings. There were many better methods to expose a liar besides giving him a job.

Gryffindor’s sword was now safely stored in the Headmaster’s office. It was truly remarkable that Harry summoned it after it had not been seen in centuries. Magic worked in mysterious ways.

After classes, Hermione caught up with him and once again asked him for a replay of everything that happened in the Chamber. It didn’t sound like she wished she was there to fight the monster but she wished she could’ve seen them do it. Today, he finally found out why she was so obsessed with the topic.

“The shield you created to protect us from Lockhart’s spell - that was advanced magic and you did it wandlessly and nonverbally. And Harry said you created a glamour which made all three of you invisible! You’re an insanely powerful wizard, aren’t you?”

“Hey!” he pretended to be offended. “There’s no reason to call me insane.”

“So when will we have our next Old Religion meeting? Will you teach us this glamour spell or the shield? I know I won’t be able to do them but I’ll gladly watch.”

The girl’s enthusiasm would have been welcome if only he didn’t know what Harry told him. How was he supposed to handle her crush? Has he done anything to encourage her? He decided to try his best to do everything in a group setting so she wouldn’t get the wrong idea.

“Sure, we’ll meet up soon.”

But he wasn’t in a rush. Finding that enchanted book was more important than his wish to pass on his knowledge. He had to focus on the danger. Ginny’s life depended on it.
The pathway to the Owlery was shoveled and easy to walk through. The constant snow was fun but Jack stopped calling it in when he saw out the window how Hagrid shoveled it for hours. This pathway was the longest and Jack felt a tad guilty for creating so much hard work for the Groundskeeper.

But some snow came naturally without his help. Just like today. He stopped and decided to try something new.

He focused on the clouds and willed them to disperse. It was harder to stop the natural course of nature, it fought him back but he stuck it out, wishing to find out if it was within his power.

The snow stopped and the clouds let a little sun through. Now, that was more like it - a beautiful sunny day. He knew he could do it. He was not useless.

With each passing minute spent outside, he was feeling better, his grumpy mood was dissolving, and so he was grinning broadly when he ran up the stone steps to the Owlery.

Elsa was waiting for him in the doorless door frame.

“Nice weather we’re having.” He gestured at the lazily floating clouds.

“Okay.” Her tone was laced with an eye roll.

“So, why are we here?”

“I like to spend time here with the owls and thought that maybe you wanted to meet them?”

He thought her favorite place would have been something boring like the Library. She was full of surprises.

He was amazed at how many birds were inside. They were flying in and out through the many window openings. Some were perched or sleeping in their nooks.

The circular stone room had multiple levels, some you could get to by stairs, some only owls could access.

“Entire families live here,” Elsa commented while he checked them out. “I heard that when spring comes, we’ll see baby owls in these nooks. I can’t wait.”

“Can you imagine how stinky it is here when it’s warm?” he chuckled. “This place must reek!”

“I don’t know why you assume that owls stink.”

“I mean… poop.” He shrugged and she tried to hit him on the arm but he swerved out of the way.

Something crunched under his foot and he looked closer to investigate.

She tried to warn him, “Oh, don’t look at…”

“Eeeewww. Bones!”

There were tiny rodent bones on the floor, mixed in with the straw and - as he correctly guessed -
poop. He did not envy whoever was in charge of cleaning this place. Was it Hagrid again? That guy got the worst jobs.

Elsa raised her hand and an owl swooped in to perch on her wrist.

“Is it the same owl that found you in the fairy colony?”

“Yes. She’s a school owl.”

“How do you know it’s a she?”

“I’m guessing.”

He cautiously walked up to the bird who turned her head halfway and blinked at him with only one of her yellow eyes.

“What’s her name?”

“I’ve been thinking about it but so far, I’ve got nothing. What name would you say fits her?”

The bird closed both eyes under her touch. He still wasn’t sure if he wanted to touch her. His huggers were so much more approachable.

“Tell me what you know about her.”

“I looked her up - she’s a Short-Eared Owl. She hunts by day and sleeps in that perch.” She pointed to one close to the ground. “There are a few similar owls here that I’ve seen her interact with. I wonder if they’re a family.”

“Short-Eared? I don’t see ears. Birds have ears?”

Elsa sighed and pointed at the top of the bird’s head where feathers were sticking out a little.

“Yes. This owl has short ear tufts. There are Long-Eared Owls with larger ear tufts, hence the name, I think I’ve seen some here. But the actual ears are somewhere here,” she pointed to the side of the bird’s head. When he still looked confused, she clarified. “They’re not like our ears. Just ear holes.”

Ear holes? This was strange but also interesting.

“You’re really getting into this owl stuff, huh?”

“They’re beautiful creatures. I feel connected to them. Do you?”

He looked around the room and decided to brave it. He stuck his arm out and waited, cautious and a little worried as to what bird decided to come down. A small brown owl chose to land on his wrist and he sighed in relief. He didn’t like those large ones who looked at him as if they wanted the claw his eyes out.

He petted her head the way Elsa did and the owl closed her eyes one at a time.

“She’s cute.”

“That’s a Little Owl.”

Her yellow-green eyes reminded him of cat eyes but her pupils were perfectly round. Her white eyebrows made her look very handsome. But her little beak and overall round shape made her by far
the most adorable bird in the Owlery.

There was something in her eyes, some kind of understanding as if she recognized him but he couldn’t quite explain the feeling. He immediately knew that this owl would be loyal to him till the end of its life. How did it bond with him this quickly?

“I think I know what you mean about feeling connected.”

He looked around the tall room and the many higher levels.

“I bet the view from the top is awesome!”

He put his new owl friend on his shoulder and she nibbled on his ear most gently. Then, he started climbing the stairs.

At the top, there were fewer bones and poop, the breeze was stronger, and he gladly inhaled it as he greeted the few top-level occupants who turned their heads in his direction. He braced his elbows on the window opening and looked out at the view of the castle and the highlands surrounding them.

His little owl flew down to the window sill where she stood right in front of him as if she wanted to be the only view he looked at.

“You’re such a little thing with such a big character! You deserve a name.”

He heard footsteps as Elsa followed him and then stood in another window.

His little owl turned her head to look at Elsa’s large owl, who looked at them all as if they were her prey. Then, the little owl started to bob her head side to side in some strange dance until Elsa’s bird looked away.

“You’re a feisty little one,” Jack joked. “Feisty Bobbin’ it is then.”

“Please, don’t tell me that’s the name you came up with,” Elsa groaned.

“Yours has a sort of a death stare going on.” He got a brilliant idea. “Scowl! That’s her name. Get it? Because of the way she stares and she’s an owl? Scowl?”

“No.”

“Why not? It’s perfect - a name and a pun in one!”

The intensity of her glare was as strong as her owl’s.

He winked at her. “You know how they say that owners start to look like their pets after a while? You’re a Scowl too.”

She hit him on the arm hard. Feisty Bobbin’ screeched in freight and flapped her wings.

“Ow,” he rubbed the area which would now have a bruise. “Why do you always hit me?”

“Because you’re annoying!”

He was the one glaring at her now. She was annoying him too but he never hit her.

Some flicker of emotion passed through her features as if she remembered something important and she now rubbed the arm with him.
“I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I always hit you.”
This was weird. She had NEVER apologized before.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes.”

She leaned on his arm affectionately and now he was really worried if spending so much time with owls messed with her brain.

“How often do you come here?”

“Whenever I’m fed up with the wizards and witches. Which is quite often.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder while looking at something on the wall.

“What is that?”

They left their owl friends on the windowsill to investigate the source of a blue color among the earthy tones of the Owlery.

One of the bottom nooks was occupied by some small creature - definitely not an owl. They crouched by it and saw a humanoid being slightly larger than a Fairy with blue skin and white hair.

“It’s a Sylph!” Elsa gasped.

“Sleeping with the owls?”

She gently poked the being who was curled up on his side and he lifted his head and blinked rapidly. His translucent-white wings stirred behind him.

“Hi,” Elsa said in a high pitched voice. “Sorry to wake you, but are you looking for us? We’re waiting for a message from the Sylph.”

He yawned and looked around him as if he couldn’t remember where he was. Then, he looked behind him and back at them.

“You see me?”

“Yes!”

In a motion so fast, Jack didn’t even see when, the Sylph launched up until he was right by Elsa’s face. She flinched in surprise but waited to see what would happen. The Sylph touched her cheek with his tiny hand and broke into a smile.

Elsa’s expression changed on contact. Where before she was her usual tangle of nerves, she now looked peaceful and dreamy. Did he use some magic on her?

Jack was worried if he should interfere, if this being was hurting his sister in any way.

“Do you have a message for us?” he asked impatiently. “Were you able to find our father among your kind?”

It couldn’t be a coincidence that they stumbled upon a Sylph all of a sudden. This guy could know something and resolve the whole mystery of who their father was and if they would ever get to meet
him.

The Sylph let go of Elsa and hovered over to Jack, reaching his small hand to his cheek in turn.

Jack felt unsure about this but then remembered how nice fairy touch felt. Merlin’s Sidhe crystal felt wonderful and they too were also some small flying beings. Maybe Sylph magic would feel just as pleasant? But why did this Sylph want to touch him at all?

His curly white hair fanned over his shoulders and moved by the wind created by the wings, which flapped so fast, they were just a blur. From up close, it was even clearer that Sylph similarities to Fairies ended on “small flying being with pointy ears.” While Fairies were like delicate butterflies, he was a fierce dragonfly, a beautiful predator. He was as different from them as a squirrel was from a hugger.

The Sylph closed the distance, and Jack couldn’t remember why he was hesitant about this. Sylph touch felt cool and warm at the same time. All of his senses dimmed until he only felt the warmth of magic spreading through his body, paving a path through the distracting static within his veins until at last, his blood was attuned to the right frequency. His magic was at home.

The Sylph’s sky-blue irises which filled the entirety of his almond-shaped eyes shimmered with tears too large for such a small creature. He let go, but Jack’s skin still tingled where he touched it. He wanted more.

The Sylph spoke, “The song of your blood stands proof of your roots. You are Half-Sylph. I’m Enlin, your father.”

The twins stared at him in shock. He wasn’t just a messenger!

Elsa cupped her hands, inviting her father - how wonderful it sounded to even think the word - to sit on it.

He huffed and stayed where he was. “I am not an owl!”

Jack snorted and bumped her shoulder. “One minute in and you’re getting scolded already.”

She wanted to hit him again but resisted, determined to unlearn that habit. That dream, in which she caused his death with a punch to his thigh, was still fresh on her mind.

“An equal chat requires a matching eye-level,” Enlin said and disappeared so fast, they didn’t catch in which direction he flew.

Jack tapped her on the shoulder and pointed behind them to the small figure of her father, who was in the air. His wings were beating so fast, they were invisible. The air around him seemed to ripple, a mist enveloped him, and something dark started taking shape within it. The shape started to grow, giving her a scare, but when mist dissolved, a smiling young man came out.

His hair, as well as his eyes, were now brown. His complexion was tan with no traces of his Sylph-blue skin. His whole face seemed to be stretched out and pointed, with his bones prominent, and while it made him look handsome and distinctive, she guessed that he would have a hard time blending in among humans. It was in the bridge of his nose which just wasn’t recessed enough and the set of his eyes which seemed to be a little further apart than they should be. She wondered if he realized that his disguise wasn’t perfect.

He sat cross-legged on the floor, not concerned about staining his white tunic and trousers on this floor, and Jack copied him with a grin.
She sat on her folded legs next to her brother, her heart beating a little faster, and a small smile formed on her lips. After the endless research and wait, he was finally here. She had previously written down all the questions she had for him and wished she had the list with her.

“I do not shift often,” he said with a grin. Even though he was human-sized now, his voice sounded the same, “but for my children, I will.”

“You’re really our father?” Jack asked, still looking at the Sylph’s features, fascinated with his exotic look.

“Is your mother Dark Beira who dwells in Ben Nevis?”

“Yes.”

Enlin smiled. “You’re my blood.”

Jack grinned widely and exchanged a look with her.

Elsa got straight to her questions. “Why did you leave?”

“I did no such thing,” Enlin frowned. “She hid you away, refused my right to meet my child. Inside the mountain she fled, where she knew I could not follow.”

Elsa always suspected that there was more to the story. The way Mother refused to speak of him suggested that she was the one that distanced herself from him. But why - that was the question.

Enlin continued, “A deceptive being, that mother of yours, eluded each of my traps. Though I patrolled the mountain, not once I caught her taking you out.”

Elsa tilted her head absentmindedly, the rhythmic cadence of his speech was hypnotic. She could listen to him all day.

“She never did,” Jack said sourly.

“Did what?”

“Take us outside.”

Enlin’s eyes widened as he looked back and forth between them.

“You don’t... You cannot mean... Do you...” He covered his mouth with both hands. “Keeping Half-Sylph underground is unheard of. How long did this go on?”

“Always,” Jack answered in accusation and Enlin whimpered as if he heard that someone died. “We never saw the light of day until we escaped last spring. We would still be down there if we didn’t.”

“And the price of father’s failures shall be paid by his children.” Enlin dropped his head, took a couple of long breaths, and looked up, his brows furrowed. “I am truly sorry. Please, understand, elemental spirits must remain connected to their element. Air cannot exist within an enclosed space. Even this Owlery makes me nervous, though I can feel the wind.”

Right on cue, a strong breeze blew in and he closed his eyes to breathe it in. He opened them and grimaced as if he was in great pain.

“Containing a Sylph within Earth, Water or Fire is a death sentence. You were underground. I couldn’t...”
“We understand,” Elsa interrupted, feeling that this guilt-trip he was going through was unnecessary.

She appraised him, from the way he sat on the floor barefoot (and didn’t that remind her of someone) to his shapeshifter appearance, and something felt off.

“When you shift, do you choose what you look like?”

“No. Fate decides the form a Sylph takes on. For some, it is an animal or a creature of magic. For me, Fate chose this human appearance.”

She didn’t comment on his failure to look human but one thing still bothered her.

“I couldn’t tell when you were in your Sylph form but like this, you look too young to be our father.”

He tilted his head. “I do not understand.”

She blinked, taken by surprise and exchanged a look with Jack, who shrugged.

“I mean, you look like you’re barely twenty years old.”

He exhaled a long breath and shook his head like a teacher who was greatly disappointed with his students. “The Sylph do not age like humans, child. My youth will last for a couple of centuries.”


“About five hundred years, give or take a century.”

It was unfair. How was she supposed to have known that? The Sylph were such a secluded race, none of the books had this information.

“I just realized,” Enlin said, looking from her to Jack, “I don’t know your names.”

“I’m Jack.”

Jack stretched out a hand, but Enlin looked at it like he didn’t know what to do with it. His brother slowly dropped his hand, his smile faltering. She hoped he didn’t take it too personally. It was possible that the Sylph didn’t greet each other with handshakes. She wondered how different their customs were from everything she took for granted and couldn’t wait to learn all about them.

“I’m Elsa. Why were you sleeping in the Owlery?”

“The castle was sleeping upon my arrival and the owls invited me to share their dwelling. I fell asleep, I suppose. Oh, what a surprise it was to find that there are two of you. Fate has given me a doubly gift.”

“What luck that we came here this morning,” Jack whispered.

“Luck? No, child. Fate. Was it luck that brought Half-Sylph twins to this human school? Fate put you on a path. Of that, I am sure.”

“They’re not just humans,” Jack defended, while Elsa wondered what he could have meant about a path. “They’re wizards and witches and we’re learning magic from them. And... where else would we go?”

This brought them to the most important subject.
“Father,” Elsa spoke the word for the first time and liked the sound of it, “we would much rather live with our kind. So, can we live with you?”

They waited expectantly but instead of answering, he waved a hand to call in a breeze and closed his eyes to feel it.

He responded with a question, “Can you shift?”

“What?”

“Only Sylph can live with Sylph.”

“Teach us how to shapeshift, then.”

He sighed and called another breeze. She was starting to wonder if it was a soothing gesture that he did to calm his nerves. Well, her nerves were starting to stir up because he wasn’t answering, and his frown and the fear in his eyes made it look like the answer was ‘no.’

“How old are you now?”

More questions. Elsa could see why her mother was so irritated when hearing them.

“We’re twelve.”

His shoulders drooped. “A pure-blooded Sylph of your age can fully control the shift.”

She was growing frustrated with his incomplete answers. “So?”

“If you haven’t shifted yet, you won’t. It is not something you can learn.”

Elsa slouched in her sitting position, disappointed that she wouldn’t get to see what she would look like as a Sylph or ever have wings. It was so unfair that she wasn’t Sylph-enough.

“Though your desire to live together matches mine, it is unattainable.”

“Why?”

“The world of Sylph is meant for the Sylph. It is no place for halflings. We live at high altitudes and move a lot - by air.”

“There are other ways to fly.” Elsa felt like he dismissed the idea too soon. “Even wizards have a way - they use brooms! And we can use them better than they can, surely, because we are Half-Sylph. Jack, tell him how high you flew.”

Jack was looking at the little owl in his lap - when it got there, she didn’t notice.

“I was above the clouds,” he said softly, without raising his head.

“And you were okay so high up, right?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Father, we’ll find a way to fly together with you even if we don’t have wings. We have magic.”

“There’s more, child,” Enlin said.

She didn’t know what more there could be to it. Whatever the issue, there had to be a solution. Every question has an answer, as long as one looks for it long enough.
“Sylph dwellings are small, our colonies are small, everything in my world is too small for you. You don’t belong there.”

Elsa felt icy anger build inside her. Where did she belong if not in the world of her parents?

Enlin continued. ”The warm home you yearn for, I cannot provide, but wherever Fate places you, I’ll find you there.” He put a hand on his chest. “You can count on me.”

Elsa got up, already having heard enough of his pretentious steaming pile of goat manure. She was sure that he was wrong and there was a way to make it work but she wasn’t going to beg him. If he didn’t want to be a family, then she didn’t want him.

She stormed down the stairs and out of the Owlery, not looking back or worrying about Goodbyes.

She couldn’t believe that she was so stupid to get her hopes up. She thought that if only they found their father, everything would be all right, they could finally stop living this lie among the wizards and have a place where they could be themselves, drop their masks and worries and be free.

She did not for a second imagine a possibility that their father would come to claim them and at the same time, abandon them.

_Fate will help you, so I don’t have to. Figure out where to live on your own, kids. I’ll visit you._

And Jack called their mother a monster. Despite what he may have thought about her, Mother was not evil, and most definitely, she would never have abandoned them like this. Maybe this was why she kept them hidden away - so they would never have to meet this disappointment of a father!

It all made sense now. They lived underground because of him! If he was out of the picture, their childhood would have been different.

Jack caught up with her and kept up with her fast pace, cupping his little owl in his hands, but was wise enough to not say anything. He must have understood it too. Mother was right to keep their father away.

“I shouldn’t have gone on this entire quest to find him! You were right to be hesitant in the beginning. I wish I had listened to you.”

Jack sighed. “I’m glad I met him, but yeah, I’m bummed too because we’re back to where we started.”

He pulled her arm to stop her.

“Elsa?” His eyes were darting everywhere but finally settled on her. “There are no beings like us anywhere. What will we do?”

While her heart was filled with anger at herself and at her father, his eyes held pain and she recognized what he needed. She immediately hugged him and he buried his face in her neck while his little owl flew up, watching them from above.

She dug her fingers into his white _Sylph_ hair. She spat the word in her thoughts. Why couldn’t they have inherited their mother’s hair color? She didn’t want this constant reminder of her useless parent. Being Half-Sylph only made life more difficult - it made them invisible among Muggles and too noticeable among wizards. There were no advantages to it.

In the end, they could only rely upon each other. They were a family of two.
Hagrid’s pets

My name is Harry Potter

Hello, my name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?

Someone tried to flush it down a toilet.

Lucky then that I recorded my memories in a more lasting way than ink.

Memories of what?

Of terrible things that happened at Hogwarts while I attended it as a student. Things that were covered up.

That’s where I am. At Hogwarts and terrible things have also happened. Do you know anything about the Heir of Slytherin?

Of course, I do. I caught the person who released the monster.

Who was it?

I can show you if you’d like.

OK.

“Watch out!”

Merlin ducked just in time to avoid getting hit by a fast-traveling firework which zoomed by his head, turned around and landed in a pile of parchments, scattering them through the common room.

“Who did that?” Percy Weasley, the owner of said parchments, shouted.

Several people in the common room giggled but no one claimed responsibility.

Over in the corner, out of Percy’s view, the Weasley twins were crouched over a box, whispering something to each other. One of them noticed Merlin and put a finger to his lips, followed by a wicked grin.

It would be wise to leave the common room before they completed whatever plan they were cooking up right now so Merlin got a move on.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were in their usual spot by the fireplace and got up as soon as they saw him.

Merlin’s grin started fading when he noticed the excitement in Hermione’s eyes. He didn’t know how to act around her now. How exactly was he going to turn her down if she made the first move? “I’m too old for you” would not work since he was supposed to be a year younger. Turning her down cold was going to be so cruel. He was not looking forward to it.

“We’re going to Hagrid’s,” Harry explained. “Grab your cloak.”
As he was leaving with them, he cast a glance to where Ginny was sitting with her roommates. Figuring out what danger was waiting for her was more important than meeting the groundskeeper, but he honestly didn’t know where to start, so he tried to assure himself that she was safe in the common room.

Merlin tightened the cloak around himself and wondered why the school wasn’t built in a warmer part of the country. While the weather had started to warm up the last couple of days and he hoped it was a sign that the winter was starting to wane, today, the cold air stung his face and assaulted his nostrils as if Winter was in a bad mood.

The kids were talking excitedly about some riddle but he tuned them out, unable to focus on their prattle.

Was there anything he could do to scan the school for signs of the book? He has been observing the students but has not noticed any odd behavior. Everyone seemed to relax since there were no more attacks and the petrified students were back.

They arrived at Hagrid’s hut, which was a wooden house at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry knocked on the large door, and the Half-Giant peeked out.

“Who’s a-knockin’?” He noticed them and his bushy beard turned up into a smile. “Harry, Ron, Hermione, an’…”

“I’m Merlin.”

“Come in, then. Don’ just stand there in the cold.”

Inside the wooden hut was cozy and warm. A copper kettle hung above the happy flames roaring in the fireplace. Dried herbs were suspended from the ceiling among animal skins, bundles of rope, empty cages and so many knickknacks, Merlin could entertain himself for hours just by trying to guess what they were used for.

Once inside, he also noticed a large crossbow hanging on a hook by the door. He always had respect for wizards who could protect themselves without magic. On the other hand, a need for weapons often meant that the wizard wasn’t very skilled at combat spells. But who was he to judge. He had his own weapon collection which he nearly never used, always preferring magical dueling.

Hagrid invited them to sit at a round wooden table. Harry sat on an oversized chair while the three of them squeezed together on a bench. Hermione was next to Merlin, of course, her arm was touching his, and he wished he had more space to get some distance from her.

“Good timin’. I’m just makin’ tea.”

Hagrid brought them large mugs and served them some fruitcake, looking very happy to have guests, then, he sat down on the patchwork quilt of his bed and looked at them with delight.

“What brings yeh here?”

“We’re just visiting,” Harry said before burning his lips on the scalding tea.

While the kids looked at the cake rather skeptically, Merlin didn’t want to be rude so he got started on his. It wasn’t as bad as it looked.

“What brings yeh here?”

“Hagrid,” Hermione broke the silence, “Merlin also loves dragons.”
He might have let something slip up about dragons in the past, but of course, he didn’t tell her that he was a Dragonlord. Even Dumbledore didn’t know that. It was yet another of his many secrets which were better left hidden for fear of how it could be used.

“Dragons?” Hagrid rubbed his hands together. “I had me a Norwegian Ridgeback egg here last year.”

Merlin already did not like where this was going but tried to not show it, so he swallowed his fruitcake and asked casually, “What did you do with it?”

“I took care o’ it an’ he hatched! I named him Norbert. He was the most beautiful baby.”

Harry and Ron exchanged glances like they disagreed with Hagrid’s description.

“What happened to him?”

Merlin tried to keep his temper down but he felt outraged at the idea of an egg being stolen from the mother.

Hagrid looked pitiful like he was about to cry. “I had ter hand ‘im over ter Ron’s brother.”

“Charlie works with dragons in Romania,” Ron added.

“Good.” Merlin would have hated for this baby to become a chained plaything.

“Vastly misunderstood creatures, dragons,” Hagrid said while looking out the window.

That summed it well. And Hagrid misunderstood them as well if he thought he could raise one like a pet.

“Speaking of creatures,” Harry said, “Hagrid, did you happen to store a pet at the castle when you were a student?”

Hagrid’s eyebrows knit together and he rubbed his hands on his knees.

“Ah, what do yeh mean?”

“I know that you like dangerous pets,” Harry exchanged glances with Ron and Hermione, “and I heard a story about a pet that was at Hogwarts.”

Hagrid got up and tended to the fire.

“Don’t be botherin’ yehrselves with old stories.”

“I know that you got expelled because of that pet. I want to hear your side of the story, Hagrid.”

Hagrid got up and pointed a finger at him.

“Aragog was innocent. He would never!”

Merlin felt lost in this conversation. Maybe he should’ve listened when they were discussing it on the way here, but for now, he sat quietly to watch what would unfold.

“So you did keep a monster in the school.”

“He’s not a monster!”
“What is he?”

Hagrid looked at their expectant faces and sat back down on his bed which creaked in protest.

“He’s an Acromantula. Thankfully, he escaped ter the Forbidden Forest before they had a chance to catch ‘im.”

The trio sighed in relief while Merlin’s eyes bulged.

“You released an Acromantula into this Forest?” he looked at the relaxed faces of the kids. No one seemed to understand how serious this was. “Don’t you know they’re fast breeders? There are probably hundreds of them there now!”

“What’s an Acromantula?” Ron asked.

“Giant, and I mean GIANT, spider with a taste for human flesh.”

Ron whimpered. He should be scared. Merlin couldn’t believe that such vicious creatures lived so close to hundreds of children. The “Forbidden” part of the Forest’s name was always ignored, maybe it even motivated the students to venture inside the woods. And Hagrid raised it inside the castle! What was wrong with this man?

“He won’t hurt anyone,” Hagrid waved his arm in dismissal. “I still keep in touch.”

Merlin hid his face in his hands. What other “pets” had Hagrid released into the forest? Thankfully that dragon was taken from here before any harm could come to it.

“Are you okay?” Hermione whispered.

Merlin’s nerves were barely hanging on. He was going to snap if he didn’t get a handle on himself. He took a couple of deep breaths, composed his features, and straightened up in his seat, back to being a master liar.

“I’m fine. I don’t like Acromantulas.”

Ron nodded in agreement, took a bite of the fruitcake, but winced, having bitten on something hard.

“So your pet wasn’t a Basilisk,” Hermione asked.

“O’ course not. I never liked snakes much anyway. And aren’ they extinct?”

Now they were. At least, he hoped Salazar’s pet was the last of them.

“Then you’re not the Heir of Slytherin,” Harry summarized and relaxed in his seat.

Merlin tried to not show the shock on his face. They suspected Hagrid of opening the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago! Was this what they were discussing earlier? He really should’ve listened.

“No one really believed that,” Hagrid grumbled, “but a girl died an’ they wanted ter cover it up, so they used me as a scapegoat.”

“That’s really unfair,” Hermione said.

Hagrid sighed and clapped his large hands on his knees. “What’s done is done. It was a long time ago. Dumbledore always knew I was innocent so he hired me once he became a Headmaster. He’s bin good ter me. Good man, Dumbledore. That he is.”
They stayed in the hut a while longer, Hagrid insisted that they finish the cake, and chatted in a relaxed atmosphere, now, that the mystery of his expulsion was revealed.

The more he got to know him, the more Merlin started to like him. The man had very poor judgment as to what constitutes a dangerous creature but had a good heart. Dumbledore was right to take him in.

Life in the modern wizarding community was difficult enough for half-breed wizards like Hagrid and the Ministry of Magic made it worse. Wizards who didn't complete their education were disallowed from carrying a wand, but Merlin noticed a suspicious-looking little pink umbrella among Hagrid’s possessions - one just large enough to hide a wand inside. Maybe Dumbledore’s gift? Good for him. Hagrid didn’t deserve the fate wizarding world thrust upon him. It was a stupid law to demand of wizards to live like Squibs.

When leaving, Merlin turned to the Half-Giant. “It was a pleasure to finally meet you, Hagrid. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Got a polite one ‘ere.” Hagrid joked at the trio and they chuckled. “Right back at yeh, kid. Don’t be sleepwalkin’ in the snow now.”

Ah, so Hagrid made the connection that Merlin was the kid he caught out in the grounds that one morning months ago.

Hermione pulled him away. “Let’s go, Polite One, before our toes freeze off.”

As far as nicknames went, it could be worse, he supposed.

The trio was in a much better mood on their walk back to the castle, now that another mystery was solved. They started discussing what additional classes they would take in their third year. Hermione was excited at the prospect and wanted to take each available subject.

“We’re only required to take two, not all of them,” Ron pointed out.

“But they all sound so interesting.”

“How will you find the time?”

“I’ll find a way. I know that you have another year before you have to choose, but what do you think you would do, Merlin?”

“I think I would take Muggle Studies. I could use a neat summary of what they’ve been up to recently.”

“I don’t need to take it as I’m well familiar with the Muggle world, but it would be fascinating to see it from the perspective of wizards. What else would you take?”

Merlin shrugged. “Care of Magical Creatures?”

That sounded like it wouldn’t be completely boring. At least, he wouldn’t have to pretend to not know magic in that class.

“I might take that too,” Harry said.

“You’ll help me with Ancient Runes, right?” Hermione looked so hopeful. How could he refuse?

“Anytime.”
She beamed but then became serious.

“Why were you so upset over at Hagrid’s?”

Merlin took a beat to answer and decided to tell her the truth.

“I could just imagine baby Norbert growing too large for Hagrid’s hut. What would Hagrid do? Release him into the forest where he’d be eaten by hundreds of hungry Acromantulas.”

Hermione took his hand in his and he wasn’t sure what to do. He appreciated the gesture of comfort, he even craved her friendship, but now he knew that it meant more than that to her.

He took his hand back, adjusted his scarf hid it in his pocket, but she still found a way to hold onto him by linking her arm through his. She was acting as if she was his girlfriend already. How did he not notice it before? Harry was right. He was blind.

“I think Divination would be worth taking,” Ron said. “Knowing the future could be useful.”

Merlin did not comment, knowing that he would stay as far away from that subject as he could. He’d had enough of visions and prophecies. He did not need crystal balls or tea leaves to make it worse.

But it wasn’t the fact of getting visions that upset him the most. Rather, it was everything he did not know, everything that the visions omitted: when and where the event would take place, and most importantly, how to stop it. He lost count of how many times he worked on preventing something from coming true, and by doing so, he caused it.

As they walked back to the Gryffindor Tower, he couldn’t get that thought out of his head. Could he stop the events in his last vision from coming true? Could he save Ginny Weasley?

He glanced over at Ron, who pulled the woollen hat off his shaggy, red head, and wondered how the boy would have reacted if he peered into a crystal ball and saw a vision of his sister dying. Were visions a useful insight into the future or a cruel joke?
The invisible stalker

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The stale castle air was overdue for refreshing but no one dared to open the windows. Jack escaped to the Clocktower Courtyard and greedily inhaled the crisp February breeze, hoping it would cure all his problems away.

The snow melted in the sun yesterday and froze overnight, which created patches of ice on the stone steps. Jack sat down on the bottom one and traced his fingers on the frozen puddle, creating an abstract frost drawing.

Ever since the Great Scowlery Debacle, as he referred to it, his mind was in a fog. He found no motivation for activities he normally enjoyed and hoped that a break outside was the remedy he needed.

Unlike his sister, he did not expect anything out of meeting his father, and yet he couldn’t deny that he too was disappointed. To not have the opportunity to live with him like a family, to know that their search was all for nothing, it made him want to curl up into a ball and hide under the snow for an indefinite amount of time.

But he had to be strong for his sister. He was the only family she had. He couldn't disappoint her by giving in to this feeling. He only needed a few minutes outside to clear his head, and then, he would go back in and find a way to distract her. Maybe he could plan something with Luna - she was full of good ideas.

A fluttering sound disrupted his thoughts and he didn’t even get a chance to notice which direction it came from, before Enlin, the last person he wanted to see today, showed up right in front of him in his Sylph form. He waved in greeting and landed on a balustrade.

“Jack, I’ve awaited your arrival outside.”

Jack sighed in frustration, feeling cornered. This was supposed to be his few minutes of peace and quiet.

“Am I mistaken or is your sister cross with me?”

“That’s an understatement.”

Enlin’s wings drooped. ”My sorrow runs deep for I cannot grant your wish. Surely, you must understand that such a request is infeasible.”

How absurd of them to want a parent and a semblance of a home. How did he put it? “Fate put you on a path.” Yeah, maybe Fate would make a better parent and grant their infeasible wish.

”Son, there are pressing matters we must discuss.”

“Like what?”

Jack picked up a chunk of snow and was tempted to test his father's reflexes.

“Your mother.”
“What about her?”

Jack molded the snow into a perfect ball and judged its weight in his palm. Enlin was a fast flyer but could he outrun one of Jack’s throws?

“Do you know what type of being she is?”

“Not really.” Jack threw his snowball up in the air and caught it, still tempted to surprise his father with an attack. If he kept bringing up these unpleasant topics, he just might. “She told us that she was a Winter Spirit and so were we. It made sense - her powers, our powers, you know, but fairies said that we can’t be Winter Spirits, so now, I don’t know what we are.”

“Exactly. The mystery of her origins eluded all the wise sources whose aid I sought in my attempts to identify her. May we discern the truth together?”

“What do you know?”

“The elders heard tales of an ancient deity who went by the name of Cailleach Bheur, The Winter Queen, who fits her description, but your mother is not a goddess, is she?”

“No. And I’ve met an actual goddess so I think I could recognize one.”

“There are less reliable sources. Human myths speak of Beira, the Queen of Winter, who traps Bride, jealous of her beauty, and keeps her prisoner until spring, when Angus, the Summer King, frees the girl and at the same time releases spring. And so every year, Beira will reign until Bride is released from her prison.”

“I think I would’ve noticed if my mother trapped someone every winter. It sounds weird too. Why would Bride get caught every year?”

“The flaw of human mythology is its goal - they use these fables to explain what they don't understand - the change of the seasons in this instance. In another version of this myth, Beira becomes Bride in the Spring, turning from an old hag into a beautiful maiden.”

Jack frowned at that. This was a stupid version but not completely off.

“Mother gets old every winter.” He wondered if it was a secret she wouldn’t want anyone to know. Oh, well. He didn’t care if he spilled it. “She goes somewhere every first day of spring, then takes a nap and wakes up young again.”

“I’ve seen this.” Enlin’s wings fluttered enthusiastically and he lifted an inch into the air. “She reverses her age. How?”

“She keeps this a secret. Even the hags don’t know.”

Enlin folded his wings again and sat back down.

“Her methods are as elusive as her motivation to seduce me.”

Jack glanced at him sideways and Enlin looked away, embarrassed.

“A naive youth is but a toy in the hands of a skilled seductress. She desired a child with a Sylph - any Sylph. I was a mere tool.”

“Why?”
Jack hated being a half-breed. He had no kind, no race, he didn’t even know what to call himself. It was unfair to be born into a life like that and it was yet another reason why his mother was a monster. She had to have known that her children would suffer the fate of half-breeds. It was all her fault.

Enlin’s wings stirred behind him.

“The intricacies of her ambitions weigh my heart for I fear her plans for you, my children. Might she know your whereabouts already?”

Jack grabbed a new chunk of snow and started molding it into a perfectly round ball.

“She’ll figure it out and could come for us any day.”

Enlin flew over in a fast blur and settled on Jack’s knee where his magic pulsed out in a steady rhythm. Jack hated how much he enjoyed the sensation.

“You will have my aid and yet…” Enlin hung his head. “I am no match for her.” He raised his head tentatively. “You found refuge with the wizards. May you find protection as well?”

Jack focused on his snowball and tried to squash his feelings into it. “She’ll know that she’s outnumbered here. She won’t attack. Elsa thinks that if Mother demanded it, the wizards would hand us over without a fight because to them we're just a couple of runaways. It won’t matter who she is or what we want.”

Jack squashed his ball so hard that it crumbled. Enlin was quiet while still sitting on his knee and Jack felt an urge to chase him away like a fly so his magic wouldn’t keep distracting him. Instead, he started working on a new snowball.

He picked snow from a spot right next to someone’s frozen footprint and paused. His father was so small, his entire form would’ve fit within it.

Jack turned the snowball around in his hands, trying to smooth it out. Maybe they were too large to live in a Sylph colony but their father would’ve fit anywhere. They could’ve escaped together to a new place far away from the threat of Mother. They’d build a house high up in the mountains so Enlin would feel at home, and have no walls so he wouldn’t feel trapped. If there was no existing place where they belonged, then they could build a new one which was just right for them three and carve out a life for themselves. But his father didn't want that.

Jack didn’t know why Mother hadn’t come for them yet. He was sure that as soon as winter came, she would use the North Wind to find them, but it has been quiet, too quiet.

“It’s always quiet before a storm,” Jack whispered to himself, suddenly losing interest in his snowball.

Sometimes he wondered if there was even a point to any of this. His father was convinced that everything happened due to Fate. Would Fate bring Mother right here? Was it their Fate to be free of her?

The growing silence was broken by a chunk of ice which slid off the roof and landed right next to them. Enlin screeched in fright and flew onto Jack’s shoulder. As he settled himself, Jack could no longer ignore the warmth of his magic. He was tempted to clutch him to his chest like a hugger but figured, his father wouldn't like to be treated like a pet.

“How goddess did you meet?”
“Triple Goddess,” Jack mumbled while trying to resist an urge to cup him in his hands.

“What was she like?”

Jack couldn’t think of anything comparable to the feeling he got in her presence. Her magic filled him up until he felt nothing else. He could taste it, hear it, smell it. How do you explain the taste of godly powers?

“Divine.”

Enlin barked out a laugh. “I must teach you to speak like a proper Sylph, to wrangle words and sprinkle eloquent genius on each syllable you utter.”

“That’s a battle not worth fighting.”

If his father thought he could turn him into a poet, he would be greatly disappointed. Jack couldn’t express his feelings even in normal words, let alone flourished ones.

“Listen and learn how you should have answered that question.”

Enlin flew in front of him, spread his arms wide and recited,

_Yet the Everlasting Dawn_  
_My humble senses rejoice_  
_Your touch healed my soul._

He bowed deeply and his long hair spilled out like a white curtain which gently swayed in the breeze. He stayed in that position for a beat as if waiting for applause. When he snapped his head back, he was grinning widely as if he got a standing ovation.

Improvised poetry was not Jack’s idea of a fun pastime but the corner of his mouth lifted involuntarily.

“Your poetry lessons are wasted on me. I didn’t inherit your skills but Elsa might have. At least, she likes that stuff.”

Enlin landed on his knee again. “May you convince your sister to come outside?”

Jack shook his head, knowing his sister and her black-and-white view of people. Once she made up her mind about someone, she wouldn’t be swayed. Enlin needed a miracle to get on her good side now.

Enlin spoke softly, “I grieve for the years I had lost, unable to watch you grow up. I’ll recompense for my absence twofold. You have my oath.” He crossed both arms on his chest and bowed his head in further theatrics. “I yearn to get to know you. Won’t you tell me about yourself?”

Jack shrugged and hoped that would serve for an answer.

Enlin probed further, “You’re learning magic here? Sylph possess magic as well.”

“Can you show me?”

“I’m a Purifier.”

Enlin flew up and made a wide gesture with his hands as if he was gathering something. Then, he inhaled an unnaturally long breath - his lungs couldn’t possibly hold that much air, it had to be magic
“You purify air?”

“My noble trade is in great demand to fight the never-ending battle against the damage humans have unleashed upon Air. The Sylph like myself are the last protectors of this most vital element.”

“Never heard of them. Earth Spirits?”

Jack snorted, thinking Enlin was joking but he looked absolutely serious.

“Worms are like bugs but have no arms or legs.” Enlin’s confused expression was priceless. “Our Herbology teacher said that they’re good for the soil. They purify it.”

Enlin flew back to the balustrade and settled down with a long sigh. “You’re comparing me to a common bug, son? An EARTH-worm to be exact? It is my honor to be a Purifier. By insulting my life’s work, you are insulting your own heritage.”

Jack tried to contain his laughter. “Sorry. It’s funny because it’s like saying mosquito is an Air Spirit.”

“Preposterous.”

Enlin looked away with a scoff and Jack giggled as a visual formed in his head.

“Imagine a war between mosquitoes and earthworms!”

Inspired by that idea, he kneeled on the snowy ground where he created little worms and mosquitoes out of frost and simulated a fight between them.

“Mosquitos would surely win with their airborne attack, right? Do earthworms even have any defensive skills? They’ll get sucked dry.”

His frost-mosquitoes launched down in a “V” formation. The situation looked deadly for the poor defenseless worms who wiggled pitifully.

“Oh, but worms don’t have blood, do they? What if their bodily fluids are poisonous to the bloodsuckers?”

He simulated the mosquitos falling dead one by one and the worms jiggling in a victory dance.

He chuckled at his creation and glanced back at his father who didn’t even crack a smile. Was he offended at being compared to a bloodsucker or upset that the worms won the war?

“I suppose I learned two things about you,” Enlin said grumpily while looking down at him. “You’re immature and disrespectful to your elders.”

Jack had a sudden desire to stick his tongue out but resisted. Having a sense of humor did not make him immature!

He got up and shook the snow off, leaving his frost creations on the ground. “I should get back.”

On his way up, he slid on an icy step but caught himself just in time. He hated these uncomfortable shoes.
Enlin flew up to him. “When will you come out again?”

“When I feel like it.”

He wanted to add, ‘Can you not be here when I do?’ but something stopped him.

His hand paused on the handle. Did he want his father to come back? He only kept annoying him but… Maybe?

“Bye,” he said and closed the door before Enlin got a chance to say anything else.

He only made a few steps when someone called after him, “Who were you talking to?”

Jack spun on his heel and his head flopped lazily. Oh, Malfoy and Company. Goodie.

The pale-blonde sneered and joked to his bodyguards, “I was watching you out the window. Playing with imaginary friends?”

Jack closed his eyes and shook his head. He was not in the mood for this.

“Are you done?”

Malfoy gasped in an exaggerated attempt at looking offended. “I’m done when I say I’m done.”

“That doesn’t even answer the question.”

“I ask the questions here. What’s the name of your imaginary friend?”

“I don’t know yet. What’s your mother’s name?”

Malfoy’s nostrils flared and he whipped his wand out. His goonies followed.

“Don’t you dare speak about my mother!”

This was so easy, it wasn’t even a challenge. He was as gullible as Potter. Jack could feel the corner of his mouth lifting. Now, this was a fun he was in the mood for.

He flinched when he heard a whisper in his ear, “Stall them. Peeves has a plan.”

The poltergeist was currently invisible and apparently, in the middle of some prank. Jack had come to trust him over the past few months. His plans were brilliant and the times they didn’t work as expected, it was often for the better - like that accidental fire-fart prank.

“Do you know this one? How do Malfoys walk into a room?” Jack paused and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “They slither in.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “That’s an old one.”

Oh, but Jack had more.

“Knock knock.”

The taller of the goonies played along. “Who’s there?”

“You know.”

“You Know Who?”
Jack grinned while the boy scratched his head and demanded, “You Know Who???”

He looked like he wanted to punch Jack for not finishing the joke until Malfoy put a hand on his shoulder. “Just stop. That’s the joke.”

“But I want to know how it ends!”

Jack tried to limit himself to a simple smirk but it was difficult when next to him, invisible Peeves was barely containing himself from the anticipation. What was he planning?

Peeves pushed Jack one step to the right. “That’s perfect. Provoke them now. Make them throw a spell your way.”

Jack knew of a perfect way to make that happen.

“Why didn’t Malfoy laugh at a joke?”

Malfoy’s lips lifted in a snarl. “I’m tired of your jokes, Nix. Pull your wand out.”

“He waited until his father heard about it.”

“Duel me, Nix.”

“How many Malfoys does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”

“Shut up!”

“Malfoys don’t screw in a lightbulb. They screw in a manor.”

Malfoy’s eyes grew wide and he immediately shot a curse at Jack, “Stupefy!”

Jack jumped away just in time and watched the curse hit Filch who was just behind him. The old caretaker flew backwards with a scream and slid down the hallway on his back.

Peeves put his hands on Jack’s shoulders, but instead of transporting them out of there, he made them both invisible and quietly pulled Jack to a different part of the hallway where they still had a good view.

“What’s this ruckus?”

McGonagall came out of a nearby door, together with Snape.

“They tried to kill me with a spell!” Filch shouted from the floor. He was still sprawled on his back and had a hard time getting up.

Mrs. Norris stood in front of the trio with her back arched and hissed at them fiercely.

McGonagall went over to check on Filch while Snape approached the three Slytherins.

“What happened, Draco?”

Malfoy looked around frantically. “He was here. I swear, he was here. Did you see where he went?”

“Who was here?”

“Nix! He was talking rubbish and then he jumped away and Filch was there and I wasn’t aiming at Filch.”
“You were aiming at Mr. Nix?” McGonagall asked from her spot, her Scottish accent leaking through.

“There was no one else here,” Filch said. “Just these three. They tried to kill me!”

He cried pitifully and seemed to be in pain which made Jack feel a little guilty. In his defense, he didn’t know that Filch was behind him.

“Why would you do this, Draco?” Snape snapped.

“But Nix was here!”

“What spell did he use, Argus?” McGonagall asked the caretaker.

“Stupefy,” he answered in sobs.

“You used a stunning spell against school staff?!”

“It wasn’t meant for him! Maybe he’s invisible?” Malfoy ran over to the spot where Jack jumped to earlier and swung his arms around in desperation, unable to find him. “He was here. He was.”

“Where do you suppose he hid in such a short time?” Snape hissed while pointing at the long, empty hallway. “Your lie is not helping you, Draco.”

McGonagall helped Filch up and hobbled over with him. “Even if you tried to insinuate that Mr. Nix disapparated from here - A first-year! In a school where apparition is not possible! - that still wouldn’t excuse your use of this spell.”

“There will be consequences,” Snape said. “Argus, which one of these cast the spell? All three?”

“Just the little one.”

Malfoy growled at the term but didn’t say anything under Snape’s narrowed-eyed scowl.

“You two - dismissed. I’ll deal with you later. Draco, you’re coming with me to the Headmaster. Can you handle him, Minerva?”

“Yes. I’ll take him to the Hospital Wing.”

Filch whined and McGonagall strained under his weight but trudged on. He had a hard time walking, still affected by the stun.

“This could mean suspension, Draco. I don’t know if I can get you out of it.”

Malfoy’s lips trembled as he looked up at Snape. “But Nix…”

“Silence. You’ve said enough. We’re going to have to inform your parents of this incident and it will go on your record…”

They walked away, Snape still listing everything that was going to happen to Malfoy, and Jack felt very satisfied with this outcome. Filch could be healed, so no permanent damage done, and Malfoy would get what he deserved for trying to pick on him. Maybe he would finally learn that Jack was not an easy target to bully. Peeves was a master at giving Jack something to smile about and turning his sour mood around.

“Take me to the Gryffindor Tower, Peeves.”
They appeared in front of the Fat Lady portrait as he requested, now visible, it was amazing how easily Peeves could do that, and Jack stretched out his hand.

“Good prank day.”

Peeves shook the hand more than he should. “Always a pleasure, Jack-Friend.”

He laughed in his high pitch, did a few flips in the air and disappeared.

Jack walked into his common room and immediately noticed Colin who waved to him from the sofa where he was doing homework with Merlin. Jack went over, his mind clearer than ever.

His father was right. Fate brought him to a place where he had friends, both human and spirit alike, where he had fun every day. Even if he wasn’t like them, even if he always had to pretend and fight prejudice, he wanted to belong among them. Maybe Fate knew what he needed.

It was sunny today, a nice welcome from the gloomy cold which has been tormenting them all winter. Ginny stared out the window and wondered what to do. She’s been getting along well with Chatties recently, but today, they all decided to visit Professor Lockhart in the Hospital Wing and she quickly said, “No, thank you.”

She did not share in their adoration of the wizard. Blonde and pompous was not her type. She liked brunettes who were reserved and nice but could stand up to a bully. Those with pretty green eyes which crinkled at the corners when they smiled. Those who were athletic and skilled at Quidditch, who were fierce and loyal friends. Those who… Oh, who was she kidding. There was only one boy like that.

Ginny sighed and walked away from the window. It was so nice outside, maybe a walk was what she needed.

Her steps landed softly on the patches of grass under the melting snow. The next Quidditch game was going to be in late February and all teams practiced around the clock even in bad weather. If it stayed as nice until this weekend, she’d come to watch Harry practice. Maybe she’d come even if it was dreadful.

She walked inside the empty Quidditch Pitch and imagined zooming through the air, chasing the Quaffle, trying to score points for her team. She wanted to drag Jack here again for another practice session. That room he found in the castle which he called “My special room” was pretty cool but there was nothing better than the real thing.

Was there anyone else they knew that could join them? Maybe Ron would, he wasn’t on the Gryffindor team but back home, he usually played with Fred and George. But Ron could be so annoying sometimes, she didn’t know if she wanted to deal with him.

Her walk took her to the Changing Rooms where she stopped in her tracks as soon as she walked in.

“Ginny!!”

Ginny covered her eyes and got out of there immediately.

What did she just walk in on? She didn’t want to know what they were doing. Nope. She saw too much. Nope

“Forget what you saw, Ginny. You saw nothing.”
She stomped back to the castle and tried to flush the image out of her mind. Someone grabbed her shoulder and she jumped from surprise.

“Ginny,” Percy pleaded, his girlfriend catching up, still buttoning her sweater. “We need to talk.”

“No. I saw nothing.”

She saw nothing. She remembered nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“You can’t tell anyone. Please.”

“I can’t tell about something I didn’t see and I saw nothing.”

Percy’s girlfriend who was a Ravenclaw Prefect whispered something in his ear.

“It’s okay, Penny. Ginny will keep this a secret. Right, Ginny? You’ll keep our secret?”

“Sure. I saw nothing anyway.”

Ginny started running and left them behind. She ran through the castle, up the endless staircases and into the common room where she ran right into Harry, causing both of them to fall down. She immediately got up and ran to her dorm where she hid under her blanket.

Only then she realized that she should have said something to Harry, at least apologize. She was so stupid. It was all Percy’s fault.

She threw the blanket off and stared at the ceiling.

On the other hand, she had just landed on Harry Potter, and as she replayed that brief moment in her head, it chased away the last of the memories of what she saw in the Quidditch Changing Room.

Chapter End Notes

What did Ginny see? What did she see? We can only imagine. Percy was an avid Quidditch cheerleader - so maybe Quidditch objects were involved. Outrageous misuse of the Golden Snitch? So many ideas… Tell me your theories in the comments - be creative but keep it clean for the youngins, please.
Let’s ”study” in the library

Hello.

Hello. Who is writing to me now?

It’s Harry Potter again. I wanted to ask you about that memory you showed me.

Sure.

You were the one who told on Hagrid and got him expelled!

Yes.

But he was innocent. He wasn’t the Heir of Slytherin.

I didn’t know that.

You ruined his life.

People were getting attacked by a monster and I knew of a monster. What would you have done? I did the responsible thing to protect my friends.

I wouldn’t have done that without having proof.

I’ll show you another memory to prove to you that it was the right thing to do.

Harry? Are you still here?

After another boring Potions lesson, while Merlin was packing his things, he noticed that Snape pulled Jack aside. He slowed down to “accidentally” overhear their conversation.

Snape asked in his usual monotone voice, “Did you have an encounter with Draco Malfoy yesterday? He said that you were involved in the incident with Argus Filch.”

“I saw him but didn’t see what happened to Mr. Filch.”

“Did you have an argument with him?”

Jack dropped his head and lifted only his eyes, which took on their innocent puppy look.

“He doesn’t like me.”

Snape’s face didn’t betray an emotion but the way he gently put a hand on Jack’s shoulder did.

“It would’ve been easier to get along with Draco if you were in the same House.”

Jack smirked but somehow still looked innocent. “Nothing wrong with a little competition.”

Snape’s mouth lifted slightly - was that a smile? Jack really knew how to work this guy.
“Stay out of trouble, Jack.”

Merlin slung his bookbag over the shoulder and shook his head at the boy, who came back with a smug expression.

“Everyone says that Malfoy is Snape’s favorite, but he’s taking your word over his. It’s like you have a superpower.”

“I’m just nice to him. Nothing super about it. Try it one time.”

“You are the only Gryffindor he addresses by a first name.”

“He keeps asking me to switch to Slytherin.” Jack sighed and Merlin couldn’t believe what he heard. Has that ever happened before? “But can you imagine being in the same House as Malfoy? I don’t know who’s worse, him or Potter.”

“Do you really have to ask? Get to know Harry a bit and your opinion of him will change.”

“I bet people say that about Malfoy as well.” He smirked. “Or you.”

“Hey!”

“Merlin?”

“What?”

“Your bag…”

Jack didn’t have to finish as Merlin’s things spilled around him. He apparently held his bag upside down.

He started picking it all up and was thankful that Jack helped instead of laughing.

Over by his chairless desk, Snape sported a tight-lipped smile. Yes. The Great Merlin was a clutz. So much for a fearsome reputation.

After classes, Hermione invited him to the library, hoping for his help with locating a good book to start ancient rune studies.

She hugged her notebook close to her chest. “I’m really excited to learn runes but I’m also a tad nervous.”

“Don’t worry. It’s just a language. I’m sure you’ll be brilliant in it as always.”

Once in the linguistics section, Merlin started searching for a volume that could be helpful for a beginner and Hermione spoke softly, “Merlin?”

He slowly turned his head and right at this moment, she leaned to him. He understood what she was about to do and turned back to the shelves just in time for the smack of her lips to land on his cheek and not his lips.

How did he let this get so far? It was time for The Talk.

“How did this get so far? It was time for The Talk.

“Hermione…” he whispered and snuck a glance at her.

She was gnawing on her lip, her cheeks flushed, her eyes full of hope.
"Hermione," he couldn't believe he was about to crush the spark in her eyes, "you're a wonderful girl, but this can't be." Her grin was fading, making his heart heavy with guilt. "I like you but I only want to be friends."

She stared at the floor and he hoped she wouldn't start crying.

"I thought we would be good together," she whispered. "Everyone thinks we make a good couple."

"You should be with someone," he wanted to say 'your age' but how would that make sense? "who deserves you."

She huffed. "All other boys are so stupid. You're younger and yet you're more mature than all of them combined. I really like that."

"I'm repeatedly being told off for being too childish," he joked and smiled at her.

"Whoever said that doesn't know you very well."

She was staring at her shoes as if they were the most fascinating things in the world and he had a feeling that it wasn't over. As he feared, she started blinking a lot and her lip trembled. He braced himself for the drama.

"Why?" Her voice cracked as she raised her eyes to him and he just couldn't take the guilt of it.

She was only twelve. It wasn't her fault that he was pretending to be her peer but was far from it. He was tempted to tell her who he was. He had a feeling that she could handle the truth and it would be so refreshing to be honest with someone.

But he stopped himself from saying it. Too many people already knew. He needed to keep this identity for a few more years. It was too early to reveal himself.

“I just… don’t feel that way,” he whispered, knowing well that he was crushing her self-esteem.

She was so brave to make the first move. Friendzone hurt. He knew - he’d been on the receiving end of it, but there was no other choice.

How would she take it? Would she break down into sobs, declare that she hated him or would she keep trying to win him over?

She nodded and stared at her feet again, then she took a deep breath and looked up at him, trying to smile.

"When Jack said you fancied me, I figured I'd make it easier, but then you were confusing me because you never made that first step. I thought you were just shy so that's why I tried to kiss you. I guess he was wrong."

"Jack told you what?"

She sighed and pulled the first book she found, showing more maturity than he’d seen in many adults.

"Let's just really study this time."

It was hot and humid in the greenhouse, and Elsa wanted to leave as soon as she came in, but she stayed for Luna.
The girl was all the way in the back and by the time Elsa got to her, she was drenched in sweat. She kept her cloak on because she coated the inside of it with a thin layer of ice, and it was the last thing keeping her from passing out.

“You came!” Luna exclaimed as if she was surprised. Of course, she came. Luna was her best friend.

The light behind her gave her an otherworldly glow. Mandrake leaves stretched out to touch the ends of her loose hair. She picked one of the hundreds of pots around her and gently caressed the large leaves.

“I want to make it grow,” she said, smiling down at it. “Will you help me?”

She put her hands over the mandrake and waited.

Elsa tried to copy what Merlin did before, putting her hands over Luna’s but had no idea of what to do next.

Luna started to hum a melody and then looked up. Her gray eyes were smiling. “I miss my mom.”

Elsa never knew what to do when her friend got sentimental like this. She wished she knew what to say or do to comfort her, but wrong words could have the opposite effect so she decided to just be a good friend and assist her with this task.

“So, how do I help you?”

“Just blend your magic with mine. That’s what Merlin did.”

Elsa concentrated on the warm magic she could feel coming from the girl and was yet again made aware of how hot it was in the greenhouse. A bead of sweat slid down her neck, and she tried to wipe it off.

Luna tilted her head. “Do you miss your mom?”

Elsa flinched internally at the mention of her. She told everyone that her mother was dead but she never showed grief the way Luna did. Could Luna tell that it was a lie?

“I do,” Elsa whispered and felt deep inside her that this was not a lie.

She closed her eyes and put her attention back to Luna’s magic, trying to blend it with hers like the girl requested. She was not going to think about her mother.

The more she tried to push those thoughts aside, the more vividly her mother’s image imprinted itself on her eyelids: her golden locks, lighter in shade than Luna’s, though just as long, and her graceful movements which Elsa always admired.

Grace came so easy to her. It was in each move of her fingers, in the way she closed her eyes or raised her eyebrows. Her beauty didn’t come just from her looks, it came from the way she carried herself. There was something mystical about it like she was a lot more than what she appeared to be.

Elsa resembled her a lot but would she ever achieve this level of feminine elegance?

“I do miss her,” she whispered again and opened her eyes.

But she didn’t find Luna’s vacant smile. Where her friend stood before, now was a statue made of ice. Everything in the greenhouse was made of ice, every plant, pot, table, the walls, the floor, and
the ceiling. Elsa was the only living thing left in there.

“No! Luna!” she cried out and woke up with a start.

A quick look around told her that she was in her dorm. Luna wasn’t in her bed and Elsa got up to look for her. She had to be sure that it was only another weird dream.

Elsa found the girl in the common room where she was in the middle of a strange repetitive exercise: she took a book off the shelf and stacked it on the other side of the room.

“What are you doing?”

Luna ignored her and kept up the strange behavior one book at a time, creating a teetering heap.

Her eyes were wide open but they weren’t looking and she bumped into an armchair every single time she passed by it. At one point, she used a book to slap the armchair and threw it across the room. Then she proceeded to walk to the stack, her hands out as if she was still holding it. She set down the invisible book and walked back to the bookshelf to grab another one and continue the process.

Elsa sat down on the stairs and watched her friend sleepwalk. Luna warned her before to not wake her if she ever caught her do it.

It was fascinating. The girl could see but not everything. She mumbled incoherently and sometimes picked up non-book objects to put on her stack, which would later topple to the floor.

At one point while Luna was in the middle of the room, she stopped, waved the book like a wand, mumbled, “Warmus biscuitus,” and walked back to the dorm where she curled up with the book on her bed.

Elsa laid down with her eyes on the girl who was now sleeping peacefully.

Why did she have such a strange dream about her? First, she dreamt that she killed her brother, now she dreamt that she killed Luna. Why?

She did not forget the part of the dream when she realized that she missed her mother. Her mother was never warm or loving, but she was the only one she had. She was lucky to still have one. Luna would never see hers again.

Elsa tossed and turned in her bed and her eyes landed on the Moon again. Mother always spoke of it. Her favorite expression was “On Moon’s everlasting glow” and Elsa always wanted to know if the Moon was as beautiful as Mother described it. When she saw it for the first time, she was not disappointed. It was magnificent and her eyes were drawn to it like a nail to a magnet.

Elsa wondered if her mother looked at it at the same time. Did her mother miss her?

She did not regret escaping. She cherished this experience and the opportunity to see the world, but she felt lost and wished she had someone to turn to, to ask for advice.

She was dangerous. If she lost control of her power, she could hurt people, even her friends. It was irresponsible to expose them to this risk. But then the dream with Jack suggested that he wasn’t safe from her magic either when in reality he was the only person who was.

Or did it mean something else?
Hmmm. Elsa’s dreams freak me out.
If there was no age difference, would you ship Mermione?
“Happy Valentine’s Day, Ginny!”

“You too, Colin.”

They settled down while Professor Flitwick used a spell to write something on the blackboard.

“I heard that Lockhart wanted to hire singing dwarfs dressed as Cupids!” Colin said in a hushed whisper.

Ginny recoiled at the idea of receiving a Singing Valentine in public, but who was she kidding, no one would send her one.

“Then, it’s a good thing he isn’t well enough to organize that.”

“I don’t know. It would’ve been funny. Do you think dwarfs can sing well? I don’t want to discriminate or anything, but I imagine these old-looking guys dressed up in ridiculous clothes and singing in a raspy voice. Do you know what happened to Lockhart?”

“No. They’re keeping it all hushed up.”

“I have a feeling that Merlin knows but maybe Dumbledore asked him to keep it a secret. I guess our teacher’s medical problems are not our business. I hope he’s okay.”

“My roommates created hand-drawn cards for him,” she whispered, hoping none of the Chatties overheard her.

“He’ll probably get loads.”

“Did you send any?”

“Nah,” Colin grinned. “I don’t have a crush. I am thankful to Luna though for helping with the mandrakes. Should I send her one?”

Ginny shrugged. She had no idea if Luna wanted to get a Valentine from a “friend” and not an admirer.

“I already thanked her in person, she’s so nice, she doesn’t even ask for credit. What about you, Ginny?”

Ginny begged her cheeks to not burn up.

“I didn’t send any;” she answered quickly and tried to focus on Professor Flitwick.

She almost did so yesterday afternoon. She drew an anonymous Valentine for Harry, but she must have dropped it on her way to the Owlery because by the time she got there, it wasn't in her pocket anymore.

Maybe it was better this way. The poem was pretty lame anyway but it was the first she had ever written.

While she was there, she pet Hedwig, Harry’s Snowy Owl, and noticed that the bird already had a stack of cards, waiting to deliver them in the morning. He would get so many cards, he wouldn’t care
about the one Ginny wrote.

And so Harry did not get her Valentine today. Even though she tried to convince herself it was for the best, she still felt a little bummed about it. She just wished there was a way she could let him know how she felt without the risk of being rejected.

Ginny was staring at her feet when coming out of the Charms classroom, and so she didn’t notice a boy who was running past and they collided.

She scrambled on the floor and found Harry next to her, his glasses skewed, his bookbag contents thrown around them. That did not just happen again!

“I’m so sorry,” she mumbled.

“That was my fault. Isn’t it funny how we keep running into each other?” Harry joked.

Ginny sighed, thinking how it was more like destiny tried to smash them together. If only it were that easy.

She helped him gather his things: many Valentine cards - he stuffed them in quickly, before she got a chance to count - quills and ink bottle, but among it all was one thing which froze her in place: Tom’s diary!

He quickly picked it up, smiled and said in a rush, “I need to go. Bye, Ginny,” and resumed running while she kneeled on the ground, her heart hammering in her chest.

“Got a close encounter with your boyfriend?”

Malfoy was suddenly in the corridor but she was too much in shock to properly react. She walked away without a word while he made kissing noises behind her. Any other time, this would’ve sent her running with her cheeks burning, but this time, all she could think about was Tom.

Tom knew everything! She spilled ALL of her secrets to him and majority of them centered on Harry. And now that Tom would have figured out that she got rid of his diary, he could tell Harry in revenge!

She walked up to a wall and placed her forehead on the cool stone. She was in so much trouble. Her only hope was that maybe Harry had not figured out how to talk to Tom yet.

As the stone cooled her forehead, a thought became clear in her mind - there was more she could do than just hope.

She was only starting to calm down when someone made her jump.

“Ginny?”

She whirled around, worried that it was Harry again.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.” Merlin smiled and raised his hands apologetically. “I just wanted to ask if by any chance you’ve seen that enchanted book that you threw away?”

Her heart banged so loudly, she wondered if he could hear it.

“I don’t have it.”

He stared at her like he didn’t quite believe her. Why was he so pushy about it?
She wasn’t surprised that Harry didn’t show Tom’s diary to him yet, even though they were friends. Tom had that effect, wanted to be kept hidden.

“That’s good then.”

She tried to smile to assure him that everything was fine, but a cold feeling filled her stomach. Merlin was convinced that the book was dangerous, that it could cause harm. Now, Harry could get hurt by it.

“If you’re ever in trouble, ask me for help, Ginny.”

“Thanks… I guess.”

“Come, we don’t want to be late.”

Now that he invited her, she had no choice but to let him walk her to class.

On their way, she contemplated telling him that Harry had the book, but then she worried that the two of them would sit down and start asking Tom questions. They would laugh at her silly crush and she would never get her chance with Harry.

No, she couldn’t tell him. Tom was her problem.

The stairs leading to the Gryffindor Tower had to have extended by several kilometers today. At least, that’s what it felt like to climb them on achy feet. Jack wildly fantasized about “accidentally” losing his shoes in some violent fashion to end the torture.

"Since Lockhart won’t be coming back, do I still have to read that *Holiday with Hags* book?” Colin asked.

“Don’t bother with any of them,” Jack answered. “You’re not missing anything.”

"Good. I don’t know how I’d find the time. I’m still not fully caught up with all subjects. But that Magical Me book was really funny, especially the part where he described how many steps he took in choosing what to wear.”

Merlin was in one of his serious moods this evening and Colin seemed determined to cheer him up.

"I had a funny dream last night. We were all knights in a medieval army. We wore shiny armor, held these long, heavy swords, and rode on horses - the whole knight package. And then a troll was in our way. And then you,” he addressed Merlin, "jumped off your horse and pointed your sword at him. But it was no longer a sword, it was a long stick with a blue tip, and then a lightning bolt struck him, but the sky was blue, not a cloud in sight. And the troll exploded into smoke. And then, the smoke dispersed but it turned out that it wasn't smoke - it was bats! Hundreds of bats!”

Jack giggled at the visual. Colin had the best dreams.

"Then, they all gathered up into a ball and formed one giant bat. And Jack got off his horse, climbed that bat and flew away.”

Merlin didn’t even crack a smile. Maybe he wasn't listening?

They exchanged a look, shrugged and snickered, both amused by their quiet companion.

"Since I'm not reading the hag book, will you tell me what hags are?”
Jack explained, “They look like ugly, old ladies even when they’re young but they’re far from frail. They have these long gnarly fingers and curved yellow fingernails.”

He demonstrated a creepy finger curl and Colin giggled.

“Don’t get me started on their feet - four nasty toes. They love their warts and want to be famous for them. Sometimes, they might grow a wart on top of a wart and go around showing it to each other. Bonus bragging rights if there’s a hair growing out of it.”


Jack wagged his finger in Colin’s direction. “They’re not the smartest but they have magic so that’s a scary combination. If one decides that you’ve offended her favorite shaggy goat, she might jinx you so bad, you’ll walk funny for a few days.”

“Shaggy goat?” Colin kept chuckling. “How come you know so much about them?”

Jack paused, thinking how to phrase this. “I’ve met some.”

“You left out the most important part,” Merlin spoke for the first time, surprising them. Maybe he was listening after all. “Their diet.”

Jack flinched at the memories of watching hags eat raw meat, digging into it with their long fingernails.

“What’s their diet?” Colin asked.

“Hags are known to steal children - to eat them. So, if you ever see one, run.”

Jack remained quiet but his head was spinning. He did not know that!

He had a brief flashback of hags moving about, their backs bent, the screechy sound of their laughter, and how it annoyed him when they would pinch his cheeks, saying, “You look good enough to eat.”

He never knew they meant that literally!

This revelation put a new perspective on a lot of his memories. Didn’t Mother threaten him that she would give in and let them take him just because he annoyed her? A shiver ran down his spine when he realized that he was always only one cheeky retort away from getting eaten.

Sure, maybe she could control them, they always obeyed her, but why did she even associate with them? She was a monster just like they were.

“Did you leave your new camera in the Study Hall?” Merlin asked when they stopped by the portrait of the Fat Lady.

Colin gasped and patted his neck and chest, looking for the camera strap. “Oh, no. I was sure I grabbed it. I triple-checked! I’m such a scatterbrain.”

And he ran back down, leaving the two of them alone.

Merlin was quiet again as they made their way to their dorm and Jack was painfully reminded of his aching feet. The Common Room fireplace danced hapily as if asking him to throw these torture devices in. Watching them burn would feel so good.
Despite how much he hated these shoes, the pain was a welcome distraction from the turmoil in his head. As winter was coming to a close, the passage of each day felt like the ticking of a clock. Mother was coming and they had no plan.

Merlin seemed to be very knowledgeable about wizard laws and customs and Jack was tempted to tell him a part of the truth about his mother to seek his advice. There had to be something they could do. While they waited for Colin, it was a perfect timing to bring up the issue.

Once in the dorm, Merlin slammed the door with magic, making Jack flinch in surprise.

He stood with his arms crossed and got straight to the point. “You told Hermione that I fancy her?”

Jack scratched his head, barely able to remember that day. “That was a long time ago.”

Merlin opened his mouth and closed it like he couldn’t find the right words. Jack tried to get out of his torturous shoes but they were putting up a fight.

Merlin shook his head and made wide hand gestures. “You cannot say things like that!” His voice too loud for the small room. “Unless you’re sure that it is true, don’t just assume and blabber it!”

“But… I was sure. Why else would you be spending so much time with her? Don’t pretend that you really needed tutoring!”

Merlin looked away and exhaled heavily like he wanted to punch something.

“So you don’t fancy her?”

“I don’t.”

Jack shifted on his feet, it was like his soles were made of needles.

“But then why did you… Potter? You hung out with her to get closer to Potter?” Merlin didn’t react and that seemed to confirm it. “You fancy him?”

“NO!” Merlin boomed and Jack stumbled backwards onto his bed, sitting down with a plop. Merlin advanced a step. “I don’t fancy anyone. Just get it out of your head!”

Jack hunched down instinctively, suddenly reminded of all the times Mother towered over him this way.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“The last thing I need is for you to tell Harry nonsense like that! Do you ever think before you speak?”

Jack’s throat felt tight as he realized that he might lose his best friend over a stupid mistake.

Merlin huffed, standing above him. “Never mess with people’s emotions. She took the rejection pretty well but your foolish mistake had the potential to break her heart. She did not deserve that!”

Merlin was right. He was stupid. A useless freak of nature like him should just stay quiet and never say anything. Bad things happened when he told people what he thought. He was kidding himself, he obviously did not know how to act human and wasn’t fooling anyone.

Jack felt so small at the moment like he was made of nothing at all, like he could evaporate at any second. He would run away if he had somewhere to run to but all of his friends were here - if he still
had any left.

“Shit,” Merlin said, getting Jack’s attention. He’s never heard him swear before. “I didn’t mean to make you cry again.”

Jack gritted his teeth and put every effort into keeping his eyes dry. “I’m not. It’s just these shoes...”

He pried them off at last, thankful that he had a reason to not look Merlin in the eye. He couldn’t let himself cry in front of him again. He bet Potter never cried. He shouldn’t even be upset. It wasn’t like he’s never been yelled at before.

“Oh, Jack,” Merlin kneeled down. “How long has this been going on?”

He put his hands over Jack’s sore feet and emitted some warm magic which healed the blisters away.

“A few weeks,” Jack whispered and sighed in relief. He forgot what it was like to not be in pain.

Merlin took the cursed shoes and sat down on his bed.

“You outgrew them, that’s all.”

He hovered his hand over them, said a spell which Jack roughly translated to “fit the feet that wear you,” and sat them down on the floor. “They’ll fit now.”

“Thank you.”

Merlin sighed heavily. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

Jack stared at his loafers, feigning interest in them, but really, avoiding further looking at him, afraid that he would provoke his anger further. He stayed quiet just in case. It usually worked with Mother.

Merlin started unloading his bookbag. “Let’s just forget this misunderstanding.”

Jack was spared having to respond as Colin came back.

“I can’t find my camera anywhere! I searched on top and under every table. Do you think someone took it?”

“It’s right over there,” Merlin pointed at Colin’s nightstand where the camera was sitting, unbothered by anyone.

“How?” Colin picked it up and looked at it from all angles. “I had it with me earlier. How did it get here?”

Merlin busied himself with getting ready for bed. “It is a magic castle after all.”

Colin looked confused but for lack of any explanation, he dropped the issue.

Jack’s brain felt like it was put through a grinder so he climbed into bed, wanting this day to be over already.

He snuck a peek at Merlin. He couldn’t even remember why he told Hermione his suspicion. Merlin was right, he had to learn how to think before speaking. Awful things happened when he was honest.

“I had so much fun in Charms today,” Colin said from his bed. “It’s definitely my favorite class.
“What’s yours?”

“Now, that Lockhart’s gone, I like Defense Against the Dark Arts although it depends which teacher we get.” Merlin turned to Jack, who blanched, having been caught staring. “What about you, Jack?”

His voice was friendly and did not have the sharp undertone from before. Did he forgive him for messing up?

“I like them all,” Jack said quietly.


“Great time to catch up on some sleep.”

“True,” Merlin said, “or work on the dreaded Potions essays. Although, you probably don’t even have to try. Snape will give you a good grade anyway.”

“That’s not true. He likes me because I’m good at Potions. If I start delivering rubbish, that will change.”

“Merlin is good at Potions and Snape does not like him,” Colin pointed out, lifting his head.

“He despises me with all his heart,” Merlin said with pride. “And it’s mutual.”

Jack never understood what exactly was going on between those two but Merlin’s mood always changed in Snape’s presence. He would become confrontational and daring like he wanted to get in trouble.

“You probably hold a record on detention times with him this year.”

Merlin grinned. “Worthy achievement.”

Colin yawned and turned to his side. “I’m tired. Good Night.”

“Sleep tight. Don’t let the hags bite,” Merlin joked in an undertone.

Jack snickered. For such a serious guy, Merlin had a good sense of humor.

“That’s kind of scary,” Colin murmured.

“Sorry for spooking you,” Merlin said. “Don’t worry, you’re safe here. There are wards on the castle and the grounds made specifically to keep hags out.”

This assured Colin who eventually dozed off and started quietly snoring.

But Jack couldn’t sleep. All he could think of now was how much he wished there were protections around the school to keep out his mother as well.

“Where’s Ron?” Merlin asked Harry when he caught up with him in the morning.

“He’s helping Neville look for his pet toad.”

“Is it a magical toad?”

Harry stopped and scratched his messy hair. “I don’t actually know.”
Then, Harry’s smile faded as he looked at something behind Merlin.

A tall wizard holding a cane walked past them, his pale-blond hair billowing behind him like a cape. Merlin recognized him as Malfoy Sr. A step behind, Dobby the House Elf followed him, looking pitiful in his dirty pillowcase. Malfoy Sr. shot a sneering glance at Harry who returned the glare.

Merlin couldn’t miss an opportunity like that. They still hadn’t caught the culprit behind the attacks and the answer could be right here. He slowly followed them and dived into the wizard’s mind.

_Foolish boy, getting himself caught like that, giving me more work._

Malfoy was only thinking about Draco who was in trouble with the school for some reason. His thoughts were not on the Chamber of Secrets or the Heir of Slytherin at all.

Something stopped him, and Merlin snapped out of the wizard’s mind to find Harry grabbing his arm.

“Where are you going?”

“That’s Dobby.”

“I know. I was just saying that he must serve the Malfoy family.”

“Do you know why Malfoy is here?”

They watched the wizard be greeted by Snape who led him towards the Headmaster’s office.

Harry snickered. “Probably about Draco, trying to buy his way out of suspension.”

“How did he get suspended?”

“He shot a curse at Filch! Can you imagine? Not that all of us didn’t want to do it at one time or another but to actually do it?” Harry chuckled and shook his head. “I heard that he was trying to frame Nix for starting it but Filch insisted he wasn’t even there.”

Merlin recalled how Snape was discussing something with Jack that involved Malfoy and the boy was acting all innocent. Snape believed him over a son of a prominent pure-blood family? How Jack managed to do that was a mystery.

“Honestly, I believe Malfoy,” Harry continued. “Nix is always trying to provoke a fight. He got Ron in trouble too. I don’t know how he always manages to slither out of trouble himself.”

“He’s cunning,” Merlin sighed. “He knows how to cause mischief without getting caught.”

“He should be in Slytherin then,” Harry mumbled. “Would be less trouble for all of us.”

“I’m not sure about that. Can you imagine if he was on Malfoy’s side? Malfoy’s cruelty and Jack’s resourcefulness would make for a very bad combination.” He wished he didn’t always have to defend one boy from the other. “He’s a good kid, Harry. Don’t write him off.”

Merlin continued staring at the gargoyles guarding the entrance to Dumbledore’s office, thinking about Malfoy and his House-Elf and what their involvement might be. The Heir had to be caught to put this whole problem to rest and the answer was so close by.

Merlin considered hanging outside the office to eavesdrop on Malfoy’s mind. Maybe eventually he would think about the Chamber.
If it came to that, should he force his way in? The wizard would feel that someone broke into his mind unless he put him to sleep or modified his memories afterwards, but it would be difficult to do that around witnesses. He wondered if Dumbledore would be for or against a plan like that. It was difficult to tell with the old wizard.

“You’re taking that scarf apart.” Harry snapped him back to reality. “I just thought I should warn you.”

Merlin looked down, and sure, he didn’t even notice that he was picking at a loose thread and the scarf was unraveling. He could fix it later. He let it go and huffed in frustration.

“What’s eating at you?”

“Dobby,” Merlin answered, pointing at the gargoyles. “That House-Elf knows something about the Heir of Slytherin but is bound to secrecy as long as he serves Malfoy.”

“You think if he wasn’t bound to the Malfoys, he’d tell us what he knows?”

“He’d tell you. He’s a big fan of yours.”

“So how do we free him?”

Merlin’s lips turned into a grin.

“You want to free Malfoy’s servant?”

That was beyond naughty, approaching villainous, essentially theft, but it could work.

“Here’s what you do.”
You pulled what out of a toilet?

Merlin ran from the Owlery back to the castle, positively giddy at the thought of what they were about to do. Harry was guarding his post at the corner of Dumbledore’s office.

“They’re still in there,” he confirmed. “How will the owl know when to come?”

“I’ll call it.”

Thankfully, Harry didn’t question how, which was good since Merlin didn’t have a lie handy to explain the magic he was planning to use.

They didn’t have to wait long. Malfoy Sr. soon came out with Snape and Dobby right behind. Merlin waited with Harry in the shadows until they passed and then stealthily followed.

“Dumbledore is the worst thing that ever happened to this school,” Malfoy commented. “Very poor judgement.”

“We work with what we have, Lucius,” Snape responded in his monotone voice. “Don’t worry. I’ll oversee his detentions and will go easy on him.”

Merlin resisted an urge to say something. He bet Draco wouldn’t have to wash dirty cauldrons or dice pungent onions. No, that punishment was only reserved for Gryffindors.

Malfoy scoffed. “Detentions. Even that is too much. What about that other boy that Draco said was involved?”

“I questioned him myself. It appears that the encounter with the boy happened before the incident. Maybe Draco was distraught and took out his frustration on Filch, who knows. It’s done.”

“He needs to learn to control himself,” Malfoy complained.

“I’m sure he will with age.”

Even though they made no noise as they followed them outside, Dobby noticed them. Harry put a finger to his lips and the Elf stayed quiet. Merlin sent a magical message to the owl to signal that it was time.

Snape continued walking Malfoy out to the gate where a carriage awaited. There was nothing to hide behind up ahead so they couldn’t follow any further and took cover behind a bush.

“Dobby,” Merlin whispered and the Elf turned to him. Those big ears did give him a better hearing. “When he gives you the package, open it.”

Dobby looked confused and walked backwards for a moment but then turned around and ran back to his master.

A large owl swooped down with a neatly wrapped box, screeched to get the wizards’ attention, and dropped the package in Malfoy’s hands. He sagged under the weight - Merlin put a bunch of rocks in it to make it heavy - and gave it to Dobby, barely glancing at it.

“Valentine’s Day gift,” he chuckled and covered his perfect teeth with the back of his hand. “Late too. Atrocious delivery service.”
Snape grumbled something Merlin couldn’t hear from his spot and opened the gate for them.

Dobby looked at the package in his hands and then at the bush where Merlin and Harry were.

“Open it. Open it. Open it,” Harry whispered to himself, shaking from excitement. “Open it, Dobby.” Then, he said to Merlin, “Do you think he heard you? Will he know what to do?”

Dobby still looked like he was afraid to open the box so Merlin helped him out by popping the lid off with a little magic.

The Elf’s eyes became larger than tennis balls and he gently put down the box on the ground.

Malfoy was getting in the carriage and noticed what his servant was doing. “Dobby! You useless…”

“Thank you, master,” Dobby said and pulled out the small object out of the box. “Master presented Dobby with a sock.”

Malfoy got out of the carriage. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Dobby is free. Thank you, master.”

“What? No, I didn’t give it to you. You’re not free! Severus, help me here.”

Snape looked at the box and at the sock which Dobby was pulling onto his oversized foot, but didn’t have any help to offer.

“This package wasn’t for you, clearly,” Malfoy insisted and picked up the lid to read the label.

As he stared at it, Harry whispered to Merlin, “What did you put on the label?”

“Just *Happy Valentine’s Day*.”

He still had a hard time believing his plan worked. The wizard was so used to people sucking up to him, he didn’t even question getting an anonymous gift a day after Valentine’s Day.

Malfoy growled and threw the lid at Dobby who easily swerved out of the way and admired the sock on his foot. He would’ve been even more excited if he knew it was Harry’s sock.

“Who sent it?” Snape asked.

“No name! Someone lost me my servant! This was deliberate, Severus. Who did this?”

They scanned the grounds but didn’t see Merlin and Harry, who were well hidden in their bush.

As soon as he thought those words, Dobby looked in their direction with a big goofy smile and Malfoy followed his line of vision. Merlin was ready to turn on his glamour on them, expecting the wizard to furiously stomp in their direction, but instead, the pale-head pulled out his wand and was about to send a curse their way.

He never got a chance to because Dobby sent a blast of magic which knocked him off his feet.

“You shall not harm Harry Potter!” Dobby said in the most confident voice Merlin ever heard from any House-Elf.

“He outed you,” Merlin said in a frustrated whisper. Dobby was a fierce protector but wasn’t very sharp.
“Potter?” Malfoy growled from his spot while Snape pointed his wand at the elf.

“You dare attack a wizard?”

Before Greasy Git could do anything, Dobby disapparated with a loud pop and appeared right next to Merlin and Harry. He was about to start babbling but Merlin covered his mouth and instead hid all three of them with glamour.

He did it just in time because Snape ran over to the bush.

“No one here,” he said but continued staring at the ground where they crouched.

Malfoy shook the dust off his pristine suit and got into the carriage. They could still hear his swearing as he rode away.

Snape stood in front of the bush for a beat, but then huffed and walked back inside, his black cloak billowing in the wind.

Merlin waited a minute longer to ensure he didn’t come back before releasing the glamour.

“That is such a cool trick,” Harry said and clapped him on the back. “It’s like an invisibility cloak you carry around with you.”

The Elf looked at Harry with tears in his huge eyes. “You set Dobby free.”

Merlin’s hand dived into his pocket but he paused right before touching his crystal, worried that he was going to get a vision again if he used it. He reminded himself to stop being afraid of the visions. He got them for a reason and had to let them come. He closed his fingers around it and sighed in relief when he felt strength pour back into him and nothing else.

“Dobby will be forever thankful,” the Elf wasn’t done in his gratitude. “I can serves an honorable master now.”

Merlin remembered why they went through the motions to release the Elf from his loyalties. He grabbed the pillowcase clothing and asked him urgently, “Dobby, what do you know? Why did you think that Harry was in danger?”

Dobby gasped and answered in a rush, “Master Malfoy planted a book on a Hogwarts student. It’s imbued with Dark Magic, sire. It contains the memories of Heir of Slytherin who left it behind so someone would finish the work he started.”

Harry shouted, “Tom is the Heir? Now it makes sense! That’s why he framed Hagrid! I’m so stupid for not putting it together. Merlin, I still have that book!”

Merlin nearly fell over from surprise. Were they all thinking about the same book?

They left Dobby with a quick goodbye and ran to the Gryffindor Tower.

Merlin was energized by this new discovery. It all started with the book and would end with it. He could destroy it, stop the danger to Ginny and resolve the problem with the Heir of Slytherin. It would all be over in just a minute. Oh, what luck that Harry was the one who found it!

“There you are,” Ron caught up to them. “I was looking everywhere… Why are we in a hurry?”

Harry explained, “The diary, Ron. It’s the diary of the Heir of Slytherin!”
“Blimey,” Ron breathed out. “I told you there was something wrong with it.”

“How did you get that book?” Merlin asked while keeping the fast pace with the boy.

“I asked Moaning Myrtle why she flooded her bathroom. She got upset because someone threw this little book into her toilet and it went right through her.”

Merlin’s disgust must have shown on his face because Harry asked, “What?”

“You pulled a book out of a toilet?”

“It was on the floor. It came out when Myrtle flooded… Stop looking at me like that. No one uses Myrtle’s toilets!”

Kids! It didn’t matter where an object came from. If it was interesting enough, they’d pick it up.

“I tried to talk him out of taking it,” Ron pointed out. “I warned you that it could be dangerous. Didn’t I?”

Harry sighed. “Yes, you did. I don’t know why I took it or why I kept it. I can’t really explain it. It was like…”

Merlin understood. “Like it wanted you to hold onto it.”

“Yeah.”

“Just for the future, Harry, if an object makes you feel things or do things, it is a sign that you shouldn’t touch it. Especially if it’s been in a toilet.”

“Drop it, Polite One.” Harry shoved him playfully and sped up his stride. “What will we do with it?”

“We’ll bring it to Dumbledore so he can get rid of it properly.”

They stopped in their tracks upon seeing the state of Harry’s dorm. Clothes, books, and rolls of parchment were strewn on the floor, especially around one messy bed. Harry stuck his hand under the mattress.

Even before he said the words, Merlin knew what he was going to say.

“Someone stole the diary.”

Earlier that day, Ginny waited until everyone went down for breakfast and snuck to Harry’s dorm. She rummaged inside the trunk that had his initials on it, pulling everything out. She checked the nightstand, pulled the drawer out and emptied it. She threw everything out of the cupboard and checked the pockets of his clothes. It wasn’t there. Where did he keep it?

Her eyes landed on his bed which hadn’t been made yet. She threw the cover off, checked inside the pillowcases and stuck her hand under the mattress. Finally, she pulled out what she was looking for - Tom’s diary.

Of all the people the diary could have found its way to, what were the odds that it had to be Harry? It was like fate was working against her!

She felt a sudden need to open the book but resisted it and stuffed it in her pocket instead. She snuck out and sprinted to her dorm, unseen by anyone. Once there, she dropped it to the floor, fighting the
The growing need to clutch it close to her chest.

She forgot how intensely the book affected her but she was able to fight it. It was only magic and she was a witch!

Oh, if only she could have the assurance that Harry hadn’t talked to Tom yet. She could ask Tom but would he answer truthfully? He was probably going to be angry that she threw him away.

No, she couldn’t risk writing to Tom anymore. The sleepwalking and the fatigue that she was feeling before would likely resume again. Not to mention, the whole thing with people ending up petrified - she didn’t fully understand it but couldn’t deny that it was connected. It didn’t escape her notice that there had been no attacks at all after she got rid of the book.

She threw a fire spell at it and bombarded it with the most destructive spells she knew but they did nothing. The diary was protected by its magic.

There was another option. She could throw it to the bottom of the Great Lake, weighed down by something heavy and no one would find it there. No one would be in danger and no one would find out what she had told Tom.

She stuffed it in her pocket with great difficulty, it was begging to be held, and it took all her willpower to not pull it out. How did she manage it before? Ah, she didn’t. She always gave in to the feeling, unaware of how much control it had over her. What would it have done to her if she did not throw it out that day in December?

‘Fight it, Ginny,’ she told herself. ‘Don’t open it. Don’t let Tom suck you in again.’

The strength of its pull only proved what Merlin told her before - this book was dangerous.

As she started to make her first steps down to the common room, she feared that she wasn’t going to make it all the way to the Lake. With each second, the battle within her mind became more ferocious, and she clasped her hands, straining to keep one of them from reaching into the pocket.

The common room was empty except for Fred and George who sat at a table, doing their homework. She didn’t know how much longer she could hold on to free will and resist Tom’s pull. There was no other choice left. She needed help getting rid of this diary.

She made her way towards them, her feet felt heavy, each step was harder than the last, but she dragged on, determined not to let the magic of the diary overpower her.

“Hi, Ginny,” George smiled at her and she tried to return it.

At this moment, Percy came down and stared at her intently like those times when he was looking for students who were breaking the rules. Could he tell that she was in possession of something that could get her expelled? She was sure that objects imbued with Dark Magic were forbidden. Would he tell on his own sister? She couldn’t let him know. Fred and George were the safer bet.

The urge to pull the diary out reminded her of why she walked up to the twins and gave her the strength to speak up.

“I need to tell you something.”

They were listening, fully focused on her.

‘Say it,’ she urged herself. ‘Ask for help.’
“I…”

“Hey, Ginny.” Percy walked up, put his hands on her shoulders and steered her away. “Sorry, I just need to talk to her.”

He dragged her to the side and checked that they were out of anyone’s earshot.

“Ginny, I thought we agreed on this.”

She blinked up at him, unsure of what he wanted. In her pocket, the diary pulsed with power.

“I thought you were going to keep my secret, Ginny. You can’t tell anyone.”

While her mind was on Percy, her hand involuntarily reached into her pocket.

“If anyone finds out, I could lose my Prefect badge.”

When her hand touched the diary, she felt relief as if everything she ever needed was right there.

“Be a good sister and stay quiet. Forget what you saw!”

Ginny felt so much better. Everything was going to be fine now.

“I won’t tell anyone, Percy,” she answered with a relaxed smile. “I’m good at keeping secrets.”

Under Percy’s watchful gaze, Ginny walked past the twins and had a vague impression that someone called after her, but she ignored it, eager to feel that happiness of having a true friend again. She went back to her dorm where she picked up a quill.

*Hi Tom. I missed you.*

*Ginny? Where have you been?*

*I had a moment of weakness but I’m back now. We can be friends again.*

*Perfect. I know just what we could do together.*

*Tom, one thing still bothers me. Does your diary have something to do with all those people who were petrified?*

*Don’t worry, Ginny. It’s over now. I have a better plan.*

*What plan?*

*One that is all about you, Ginny.*
Meet the Heir of Slytherin

“It could only have been a Gryffindor,” Ron said, sitting down on his bed.

Harry looked at the mess of his things with a depressed resignation, not in the mood to clean it up yet.

Merlin was sure that Ginny had found out that Harry had the book and took it back. Was she in her dorm now?

Why didn’t she tell him? He tried to genuinely assure her that he could help her but somehow she didn’t trust him.

He was really getting tired of all the secrets. If everyone just communicated, shared what they knew with each other, they could have resolved this mystery months ago instead of running around like headless chickens, having all the answers right in front of them, but without those crucial pieces of information, unable to put the clues together.

Ah, but he was guilty of this as well, wasn’t he? He had not told Harry and Ron what he knew either.

Suddenly, he felt a pull deep inside him and it took him a moment to recognize what it meant - someone activated the ward he had set up in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.

He had a moment of hesitation. He didn’t want to endanger Harry again and was tempted to deal with the problem on his own, but two thoughts changed his mind. One - it was time to stop with the secrets. Two - the vision showed Harry stab the book with the Gryffindor sword. It was a clue that Harry was destined to be the one to destroy it. He had to be involved.

“I know where she is!” Merlin said and turned around.

“Who?” Harry called after him.

Merlin didn’t stop, not wanting to waste any time. Thankfully, the boys took the cue and followed him.

“Ginny,” he answered while walking through the portrait hole.

“My sister? What about her?”

“She took the book.”

“How do you know?”

While walking down the stairs, they bumped into Hermione who was coming back from her classes.

“Harry, you never showed up to Charms,” she complained as if he had committed a crime.

Merlin grabbed her arm and steered her to go with them.

“What’s going on?”

“Explanations later,” Merlin said curtly and continued down.
“Ginny is in Dumbledore’s office?” Harry asked when he saw where Merlin led them to.

Merlin knocked and tapped his foot while waiting to be let in but no one answered and no sounds came from the inside. He finally pulled the handle and barged in.

The large office was empty and the kids hung by the door, hesitant to come inside. Thankfully, the sword wasn’t well hidden. Merlin pulled it out of a tall cabinet and immediately gave it to Harry.

Harry exchanged an unsure look with Ron but took the sword.

“Merlin, what’s going on?” Hermione asked when they left the room.

“Ginny Weasley is in danger. She has that book. It’s the book of Heir of Slytherin, Hermione. He’s been controlling her all this time.”

Hermione gasped but didn’t demand any more explanations. Merlin led them to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom and barged in, not caring about the ghost.

“GET OUT!” Myrtle shrieked when she saw them but they ignored her.

“Again?” Harry asked, looking at the sink he had opened just a few weeks ago.

“Again,” Merlin sighed.

Harry spoke in Parseltongue, revealing the entrance and they all jumped into the slimy pipe, leaving Myrtle’s shrieks behind.

They went through the familiar underground and splashed through the wet ground of the gloomy tunnel, which did not feel as sinister now when they knew that there was no monster hiding within.

They could see someone at the end right before the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. It was a teenage boy, aged sixteen or so, who stood over Ginny who laid motionless on the floor.

“Ginny!” Ron exclaimed.

The kids ran up to her while Merlin faced the teen who had to be the Heir of Slytherin. The dark-haired handsome boy wearing a Hogwarts uniform looked oddly familiar but Merlin couldn’t remember where he could have met him.

The boy looked at them with a charming smile but when he saw Merlin, his mask slipped.

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Merlin murmured. It bothered him that he couldn’t place the boy’s face. He definitely met him before.

The teen did nothing to stop them, so Merlin kept an eye on him while crouching down to check Ginny’s vitals. She was alive but barely. Her skin was pale, her heart rate slow.

“It won’t be long,” the boy said.

Harry looked up at him. “What did you do to her, Tom?”

Ron had a look of madness in his eye, pulled out his wand and shot a “Stupify” at the teen but his wand malfunctioned again and only a puff of smoke came out the end.
Tom laughed but then Harry repeated the spell Ron couldn’t cast. It met its target but went through him as if he was a ghost. No, a ghost would’ve felt that.

“You can’t touch me. I’m only a memory but not for much longer.” He eyed Ginny who laid on the floor, her breaths slow. “Then, we can play.”

“Why?” Ron demanded with a squeak in his voice.

“Stupid girl made it too easy.” His charming smile was slipping again. “It’s her life for mine.”

Ron tried to tackle him to the ground but fell right through him. They truly couldn’t do anything. How was this even possible?

“What spell did you put her under?” Hermione asked.

“I suppose I can tell you.” He glanced in the direction of the narrow opening to the Chamber of Secrets. “You’ll be a meal for my friend anyway. You’ll never leave these tunnels.”

Ron said, “What? But…”

“Ron,” Merlin interrupted and shot a warning thought at Harry.

*Don’t tip him off about the Basilisk. Keep his attention here so he tells us everything.*

Harry nodded in acknowledgment and took the lead, “What are you trying to do, Tom?”

“Well, I’ve been dying to meet you face to face, Harry Potter,” Tom answered with his nose held high. “I had to find out who this boy was who defeated the greatest wizard to ever be born. For months, Ginny’s been pouring her heart out to my diary, and little by little, I started to absorb her life force. She nearly got away but as soon as she touched my diary again, I had full control over her. I meant for her to die at the feet of Salazar Slytherin’s statue but she didn’t make it that far, and so this tunnel will be her burial place as well as yours. You can’t stop this. The process is nearly complete.”

Ron whined next to his little sister and Hermione had to hold him back from lunging at the spectre in front of them. Merlin guessed that once Tom absorbed all of Ginny’s life force, he would be semi-human again and they could attack him but that would kill the girl. They had to find a different way. He noticed the sword which Harry dropped on the ground and remembered his vision. The book - Tom’s diary - was the key but where was it?

Tom spoke loudly in Parseltongue.

“He just called the monster,” Harry translated.

“Your Parselmouth skills will not help now. He will only obey Slytherin’s Heir - me.”

They already knew this, of course, since Harry couldn’t control the Basilisk before. They had little time left before Tom realized that the monster was not coming and tried to speed up taking the girl’s life.

“Who are you?” Harry demanded while Merlin frantically scanned the surroundings for signs of the diary.

Tom used his wand to write in the air and the letters hung suspended in light.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE.
Merlin’s eyes bulged. He remembered who Tom Riddle was. He met him a decade ago in amid a battle when Tom was an adult.

The teen waved his wand and the letters of his name rearranged into:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT.

They had to act quickly. While the kids were properly shocked at the news that young Voldemort stood before them, Merlin pretended to check on Ginny while in fact, he started searching her robes.

“How did an insignificant baby defeat me at the height of my power?” Tom said while eyeing Harry.

Merlin had to give it to the boy. Despite the shock of knowing who was in front of him, he looked ready to stand up to him in defense of Ginny. Godric Gryffindor would’ve been proud.

“How did you do it?” Tom insisted.

Merlin finally felt something in Ginny’s pocket, carefully pulled it out and laid it down behind her.

“I don’t even know,” Harry spat. “I guess you’re not as powerful as you thought.”

“A mere memory of me can bring down this school,” Tom said with confidence but his eyes travelled sideways in the direction to the Chamber. He was probably wondering where his monster was.

Merlin picked up the sword and put the handle in Harry’s palm.

“What do you think you’ll do with that?” Tom said with a smirk. “You can’t fight a Basilisk with a measly sword.”

“The Basilisk is dead,” Merlin said and watched Tom’s shocked expression.

Just as the boy turned around to look inside the Chamber, Harry lifted the sword, understanding its purpose without further explanations, and brought it down to the small book on the floor.

“NO!” Tom screamed.

Ink started to pour out of the little book like blood and Tom halted in place. His face held horror as light started to fill him and destroy him from the inside. He disappeared without a trace as if he never was.

A gasp brought their attention to the small figure on the floor. Ginny opened her eyes and Ron immediately hugged her, followed by Hermione and Harry.

She looked at the diary on the ground which now had a big hole in it.

“It was me. I released the monster, didn't I?” Ginny said in a shaky voice while taking in her surroundings.

“It’s over now,” Harry said, holding his sword with pride.

“I’m going to be expelled,” the girl worried.

“You were a victim, Ginny. You’re not at fault,” Merlin assured her.

Hermione cautiously picked up the destroyed book. “So all it took was to stab it with something?”
“Not just something.” Merlin pointed at Harry’s sword. “This isn’t an ordinary sword.”

“What’s special about it,” Harry asked, “besides looking cool?”

“This type of weapon absorbs only that which makes it stronger. You used it to kill the Basilisk so now it is imbued with its venom. I can only imagine what else it could have been used for over the millenium. It’s a very powerful weapon.”

He supposed its power might equal Excalibur which was imbued with the magic of the Great Dragon - Kilgharrah.

“I can’t believe I nearly set free a second You Know Who,” Ginny whispered. “I’m sorry, Merlin. I would’ve told you when I learned that Harry had the diary, but I thought I could handle it and could get rid of it myself. I was so stupid.”

“The diary’s magic affected your judgment,” Merlin assured her. He didn’t want her to blame herself when she was the victim of the game Voldemort was playing.

Once the initial shock of what had happened wore off and Ginny felt well enough, they walked back to the entrance and since they didn’t have any other option, Merlin used his magic to send them back up through the pipe. Thankfully, no one questioned how he was able to do yet another advanced piece of magic. Maybe by now they grew used to it.

Merlin went with Harry to Dumbledore’s office to drop off the sword while Hermione and Ron took Ginny to the Hospital Wing to have her checked over by Madam Pomfrey. They caught the Headmaster on the way and explained to him what had happened.

Apparently, he wasn’t in the office earlier because Tom Riddle made Ginny write another message on another wall: *Her skeleton will lie in the chamber forever*, and the old wizard was on the way to the Chamber right now. It was funny how they got rid of Tom Riddle before Dumbledore even got there.

“I’d like to have a word with Harry,” the old wizard said.

“Sure,” Merlin inclined his head and gladly turned to leave. He was craving a nice bath and a nap.

“Merlin,” Dumbledore called after him, “good work.”

Two figures stood at the bank of the Great Lake. The setting sun illuminated their forms but set no shadows.

Jack was throwing pebbles into the still surface and groaned when they didn’t bounce. Merlin picked up a few rocks and chose one he liked.

“Pick a flat-looking pebble and angle it like this.”

He swung his arm and the rock skipped three times before it disappeared in the water.

“That’s so cool!”

Jack crouched down to find that perfect pebble. Merlin helped him get in the right position and set it up. When Jack threw it, the rock skipped once before falling in.

He broke into his lopsided smile and Merlin clapped him on the back.
“I knew you could do it.”

Jack jumped on top of a large rock and stood still, overlooking the mountains. Merlin sat down next to him, propped himself on his arms and relaxed.

“You love it here, don’t you?”

“Who wouldn’t? This place is perfect!”

Jack lowered himself down, wanting to sit as well and slipped on the wet stone. He fell into the water which swallowed him without a splash.

“Jack!”

He was just beneath the surface but couldn’t swim up. Merlin thrust his hand into the water and their hands linked in a tight grip. Merlin grunted and pulled him up. He took him to the edge of the lake where Jack coughed and wiped the water out of his eyes.

As he sat there, breathing heavily, water dripping from his white hair, he spoke in a hoarse voice, “Thank Goddess you were here.”

Merlin clapped him on the back and joked, “We, clumsy-heads, have to stick together.”

They laughed.

“Ms. Nix!”

Elsa jolted awake when Sue Li nudged her arm. She was in a classroom and all eyes were on her.

“Who did Emeric the Evil lose a duel to?” Professor Binns asked in his drone voice.

She blinked the sleep out of her eyes and recalled reading about this. “E the E” won against “E the E” - that was how she remembered it.

“Egbert the Egregious,” she said and was surprised at how mumbly it came out.

“Correct. Five points to Ravenclaw.”

He continued his lecture and the rest of the students went back to whatever they were doing to pass the time. She had a vague sense that she just dreamt of something but couldn’t remember what it was. It wasn’t a bad dream but it tickled her senses like it was familiar.

Oh, well. It was only a dream.
The poem is J.K. Rowling’s, not mine but I thought you’d like it. The idea of Merlin’s Book came from Pottermore where it only made an appearance in a quiz and was never explained further. Since we have Merlin here, let’s see what he says about it.

A fly was buzzing against a windowpane, flying up and down, looking for a way out when just two feet over, another window was open. Ginny observed the insect and chewed on the chocolate Madam Pomfrey gave her - definitely the best remedy ever.

This school year was an epic disaster. What were the odds that she was the one who ended up with the diary of a young Voldemort? He was so sneaky. He pretended to be a good friend who wanted to get to know her while really he probed her for information. He found out all her weaknesses and exploited them.

She was afraid that she wouldn’t make friends in this new environment and so he ensured that she was dependent on him and didn’t make friends at all. She revealed that she had a crush on Harry and he kept her talking about him, bringing up Harry whenever she questioned him, knowing well the topic distracted her, all the while having a hidden agenda - he wanted to know how Harry could have defeated him so that later, he could exact his revenge.

He used her to open the Chamber of Secrets. Colin, Justin and Mrs. Norris had some higher power looking after them since they avoided death by that monster. It couldn’t have been pure luck.

All in all, Ginny felt used.

She hoped she would remember this lesson forever: she had to learn how to trust her instincts. If she had listened to herself instead of letting Tom convince her, this mess would’ve been resolved earlier. She knew something was wrong. She knew she needed help. She knew better.

The buzzing caught her attention again and she took another bite of the chocolate. She walked up to the window while the yummy goodness swirled on her tongue. She cracked the window open and the fly flew out.

It was beautiful here - dark forest on one side, teeming with magical life, and snow-covered peaks in the distance. The air smelled crisp. It still felt like winter, but the lighter kind, no longer the harsh coldness that hurt your face, rather, the refreshing wind which swept away bad memories and made space for good ones.

It wasn’t the end of the school year yet. She could still turn it around and make it the year of Ginny. She survived possession by the greatest dark wizard in centuries. She was a fighter.

And Harry noticed her now, though maybe for the wrong reasons. At least she got a group hug which included him. That was a memory worth cherishing.

Later that day, Madam Pomfrey let her out with an order to get plenty of rest and Ginny arrived at
the Great Hall for the evening feast.

Professor Dumbledore made a speech, assuring everyone that they could rest without further worries. In fact, the monster had been slain quite a while ago, but they kept it secret in order to catch the Heir of Slytherin. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Merlin each received recognition for bringing down Tom Riddle. He thankfully kept Ginny’s involvement quiet, but she wondered if the news would get out somehow anyway.

Ginny gladly sat down with her brothers, even though Harry sat very close by. She was a new Ginny now. She had to be braver and couldn’t turn into a mess every time Harry looked at her. It was time he noticed her for the right reasons.

Everyone celebrated the victory and the House Points the four heroes of the day brought in. it was her favorite evening feast this year until Fred and George stood up and banged their forks against their mugs to get Gryffindors’ attention.

“Dear Harry,” Fred started.

“We have a surprise present for you.”

“A lost gift, which though late, you absolutely must receive.”

“Since Professor Lockhart didn’t get to hire those singing dwarf cupids…”

“... we’ll do the honors.”

Fred pulled a folded paper from his pocket and Ginny recognized it immediately. Oh, no...

The twins began to sing - each one a different melody but the same words:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,} \\
\text{His hair is as dark as a blackboard.} \\
\text{I wish he was mine, he's truly divine,} \\
\text{the hero who conquered the Dark Lord.}
\end{align*}
\]

Everyone within earshot of the singing laughed out loud while Ginny put an awkward smile on her face, hoping no one would notice that her reaction was different. That poem was such a bad idea.

“Who wrote that?” Harry asked, his cheeks red like tomatoes. It was actually really cute.

“It’s an anonymous Valentine,” George answered.

Fred added. “Should we sing it again?”

Despite Harry’s protests, the twins repeated the song, few others joined in, and Harry put his face in his hands, embarrassed at the attention.

Ginny started laughing at it too. Her poetic skills were absolutely atrocious. She should stick to Quidditch.

Fawkes was practicing his disappearing act today which involved turning into his golden, fiery form and exploding in a blast of light which sent small objects flying around the Headmaster’s office.

“Am I interrupting something?” Merlin asked, seeing the mess Fawkes left behind.
“Come in, Merlin. Come in.”

Albus waved his wand and brought the objects back to their places where they’d stay only until the Phoenix repeated the exercise.

He summoned Merlin to his office with the intention to thank him in private for solving the mystery of the Chamber of Secrets and catching the Heir of Slytherin. Who knew how long it would’ve taken to find the culprit behind the attacks if not for this sorcerer. They could’ve had more attacks, the school could have been closed. There were talks in the Ministry of Magic to put poor innocent Hagrid in Azkaban prison just to put public minds at ease. And they would’ve sacked Albus from his position as the Headmaster.

And so he was very thankful to the young sorcerer and knew of one way how he could repay the favor.

“I apologize for not giving it to you sooner.”

The cover of the old book he held was made of intricately embossed leather and reinforced with silver. Merlin squinted at it like he recognized it.

“It has been among Hogwarts possessions for a long time.”

Albus absentmindedly turned the book in his hands. He didn’t really want to part with it but it was time. Besides, how else would he learn what was in it?

“They call it Merlin’s Book. Is it yours?”

He hesitantly handed the volume to Merlin.

“It looks familiar.”

He gently opened it to the title page and his eyes widened in surprise. He turned a page with a trembling hand.

“Albus, where did you get this? Do you realize what this is?”

“Not really. No one has been able to decipher these runes. Can you?”

Merlin turned a few more pages, closed the book, clutched it to his chest and closed his eyes.

Albus wondered what the young sorcerer’s reaction was going to be. Was he going to be furious at him for not returning the book earlier? Albus kept it in hopes of unlocking its secrets with time but he was kidding himself. He should’ve let it go decades ago.

A small smile formed on Merlin’s lips. “Albus, you have no idea what this means. All this time, I thought I was unworthy of it and that’s why she took it away.”

“Who?”

“The Goddess! I only got started translating it when it disappeared. I thought she took it and that’s why I stopped looking. To obtain this book, I had to get through quite a lot of trouble and I thought I had angered her, that she never meant for me to have this knowledge. But it was you, Salazar, wasn’t it?”

Merlin turned to look up at the portrait of the Founder hanging above them.
“You stole it!”

Slytherin’s lips were in a tight line. “It was confiscated during a routine search for dangerous artifacts. It was Dark Magic! I had to remove it from your possession for everyone’s safety.”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “You couldn’t even read it. How would you know what’s contained within it?”

Slytherin held his gleaming head high. “How are you so sure that I couldn’t?”

Merlin raised the book and shook it in front of the Founder’s eyes. “This is the last book of the Catha. They had their own language and developed their own runic alphabet to hide the secrets of their legacy so it wouldn’t fall into the wrong hands. No one like you would be able to decipher it.”

Slytherin made a grumbling noise and Merlin turned back to Albus. The other Founders whispered among themselves.


“Shame on you, Salazar,” Hufflepuff scolded.

“I would have worked with him to decipher it,” Ravenclaw said. “You were a foolish man, Salazar.”

Salazar turned his back to them. “I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“Thank you,” Merlin said to Albus. There was a hint of mistiness to his eyes. “I can resume my translation.”

“So, what’s in it?” Albus wanted to at least resolve that mystery since he was parting with the book.

“The Catha was an order of priests of Old Religion. When I was still in my youth, the last one of them was murdered without being able to pass on the secrets of his order. I thought their knowledge was lost until centuries later, I found this.” He lifted the book. “This is the last source of their knowledge. I’m so lucky that the book had not fallen apart yet. At least the Headmasters had treated it well.”

Albus smoothed out his beard. “What type of knowledge is in there?”

“I don’t even know. I didn’t get far enough in my translation to fully understand. The Catha were known for their powers of the mind. They could separate their consciousness from their body. I don’t know what they did with this ability, their practices were a well-guarded secret. Could they travel between realms? Astral projection? Could they manipulate time? Now, I can find out.” He wiped his eyes and grinned broadly. “Thank you. This is the best gift you could have given me.”

“So you’re not angry that I didn’t give it to you earlier?”

“At you? Nah. What would a few decades have changed?”

Albus chuckled to himself. Oh, how little time meant to the immortal.

“I’m only angry at myself,” Merlin continued, “because I let it slip through my fingers. And at Salazar but he’s dead already.”

Merlin put the book on Albus’ desk, held his hand above it and chanted incantations in Old English. Albus wasn’t fluent enough to understand each word. Finally, satisfied with whatever he had just done, Merlin took the book back to hold it close to his chest.
“Just a few wards,” he answered Albus’ questioning gaze. “I’ve learned a few handy tricks since Salazar times.”

“Ow!” An older Ravenclaw student put a hand to her mouth. “It happened again.”

“I don’t know how you keep biting your tongue. Maybe you should see Madam Pomfrey about it,” her friend offered.

“Ya think?”

As they passed, Merlin smirked in satisfaction. His curse was working, though he was disappointed that no one connected it to their filthy vocabulary yet. It was a matter of time.

He strolled down the gloomy corridor, feeling younger than he had in months. This was how his time at Hogwarts was supposed to be: boring classes, watching over Harry, and hanging out with friends. He didn’t mind the action, it made time pass faster, but he completely appreciated the monotony of the daily student routine.

He bumped into Professor Snape in the hallway and was tempted to ask if any of the Slytherin students complained to their Head of House about a strange increase in tongue-biting incidents.

“Merlin, a word,” Greasy Git pointed with his eyes at a corner where they could speak in private.

Merlin followed him with a light heart. He was in a good enough mood to consider taking the git’s curse away, letting him sit down for the first time in months. To his surprise, Snape did not ask about his curse.

“Why did you free Malfoy’s House-Elf? What business is it to you?”

Merlin was taken aback. How did he know?

Snape understood his surprised look. “You and Potter left very visible footprints behind that bush. I figured you had to have used some invisibility spell. Who else could it have been?”

Merlin grinned at him. “Good deduction.” It was curious that he didn’t give them away. He thought Snape was friends with Malfoy. “Dobby had information about the Chamber of Secrets. Freeing him was the only way.”

Snape’s eyebrow twitched. “Are you insinuating…”

“Yes. Malfoy Sr. was responsible for the attacks Hogwarts faced this year. A word of a House-Elf will not count in court, unfortunately, so we have no proof and he’ll get away with it. But I’m glad that we were able to foil his plan.”

Snape remained quiet and looked at Merlin with judgment in his eye. “I’m glad there was a use for you after all.”

Merlin rolled his eyes at the condescending tone. “So you’ll put up with me some more? Great.” He rubbed his hands and smiled wickedly. “I’ve been looking for someone to test a new curse on.”

Snape flinched and involuntarily leaned away from him. “W-what?”

“I call it The Pink Curse.”
Snape’s upper lip lifted in a snarl. “When will you grow up, Merlin?”

Merlin laughed. “Where’s the fun in that?”

He clapped him on the back and walked away.

“You’re not going to curse me, right?” Snape called after him. “I helped you. You’ll remember it, won’t you?”

The echo of Merlin’s laugh was a clear answer - no promises.

Over the next few weeks, Greasy Git was on his best behavior and on Dumbledore’s suggestion, Merlin finally released the chair curse. But to keep him on his toes, he mentioned the Pink Curse from time to time. He truly did want to use it but wanted to stick to his word and wait for the git to slip up in his act. Someone like that could not possibly stay nice forever.

He continued teaching Old Religion to the now seven children, including Colin. The boy could not perform the spells but was most fascinated with the topic and asked the most questions during each meeting.

Merlin felt that he was finally doing things right. He was in the right place at the right time. It was his destiny to help Harry face the challenges that were coming for him. And who knew, maybe these children were the beginning of the revival of Old Religion? They made progress with their spells. They were getting the hang of telepathy - some better than others. Time would prove how far he could take them.

Now, he also had the Catha book which he was sure was lost forever. He couldn’t wait for the school year to be over so he could dedicate all his time to it.

After the harshest winter the area had seen in decades, spring came with a full swing and the highlands were bathed in sunlight. The bright weather reflected in the enchanted sky of the Great Hall put everyone in a good mood. Even the older students, who were studying diligently for their exams, took a moment to look up at the pretty clouds floating above them.

Merlin sat at the table with his roommates and grinned silently as Colin described his latest dream.

“I fell asleep during History of Magic because, you know, I always do, and I had the best dream ever! I was on the sofa in the Gryffindor common room and suddenly the floor disappeared. I screamed and held on for dear life, but instead of falling down into nothingness, the sofa slid down the moving staircases. It was like a rollercoaster! Then, it threw me off and I thought I would fall right into a portrait of this woman picking apples, but instead, I fell inside it and I passed by that apple orchard, grabbed one apple and fell out in front of the portrait of Merlin at the Grand Staircase.”

“You mean that old Merlin?” Jack asked and glanced at Merlin who found it all amusing. “Do you think you’ll grow a long beard like that when you’re old?”

Colin continued. “But that wasn’t the end! So I’m standing there in front of the old Merlin, holding an apple, and I ask him, Do you like apples? He answered, Yes, I do, and it sounded just like you, Merlin!”

Merlin covered his mouth with his hand to contain a nervous giggle. No way that Colin’s dreams were going to out him!

Jack grabbed an apple off the table and presented it to Merlin with exaggerated hand gestures.
“Do you like apples?” he said while wagging his eyebrows.

Merlin exploded with laughter. “Yes, I do.”

The three of them laughed freely, but then suddenly, Jack went rigid in his seat and dropped the apple onto the table. He swallowed loudly and slowly turned his head towards the entrance to the Great Hall as if afraid to look. He quickly looked back at his plate, took a couple of breaths, then turned around to his sister who turned at the same moment. They exchanged a long silent look, got up and walked up to each other.

“It’s so creepy when they do that,” Colin said, half-amused, biting into the apple. “And they used to do it even before you taught them telepathy.”

“Jack?” Merlin called, wondering what the boy’s sudden mood change meant.

But Jack didn’t answer. The twins clasped their hands and walked out of the Hall without a word. They stopped at the double-door entrance where McGonagall was speaking to a young woman.

“Who’s that?” Colin asked.

“No idea,” Merlin answered. “But Jack seemed to recognize her.”

“Do you think they’re related? Like an older sister?”

“Jack said he didn’t have other siblings.” But he supposed the boy could’ve lied about it.

The twins were still clasping their hands tightly while the two women looked down at them. McGonagall appeared to be in one of her furious moods. The other woman’s mood was hard to discern as she shot a bored glance at the students in the Great Hall.

She didn’t look like an ordinary witch. She was taller than McGonagall, wore a long sleeveless light-green gown and her loose hair splayed across her back in gentle blond curls.

There was something about her Merlin couldn’t quite name. Maybe it was her dress, so different from the modern witch attire, or how she looked around with distaste as if she accidentally walked into a school lavatory.

They all followed McGonagall and disappeared from view.

Merlin’s curiosity intensified. He felt a need to eavesdrop in his usual fashion but hesitated because if she was related to them, then it was a family matter.

He tried to resume a casual chat with Colin but deep down, his stomach clenched. He had a feeling that something was about to happen.

It wasn’t his business but he had to know.

He put a hand in his pocket to touch the crystal and let its magic seep into him. He cleared his mind, tuned out all senses and let his Mind’s Eye, now magnified by the crystal, travel the Hogwarts castle. He followed the two women and the twins as they walked towards McGonagall’s office, but when he got close enough to hear, the mysterious witch turned around, looked right at him and smirked as she spoke into his mind.

_Merlin? How rude._

He was thrown back into his body against his wish and a chill went down his spine as the effects of
her magic still lingered within him.

This was the first time anything like that had ever happened. In a millenium and a half that he’s used this ability, no one had ever caught him.

"Who is she?"

As soon as he said those words, he understood a part of the answer. He had just met twins’ non-human parent and she recognized him.
To Hogwarts Witches and Wizards.

I believe that your school houses two children who belong to me. I will come tomorrow to collect them. I trust you will not prevent a reunion of a mother with her children.

Beira.

Minerva read and reread the short letter delivered to her by a raven this afternoon. She did not like this. Even though the letter did not describe the children this woman was looking for, she was sure she meant the Nix twins.

They told her their mother was dead but Minerva had her suspicions that it was a lie. The way they spoke of her - children who have lost their only parent did not speak this indifferently of their loss. But they were scared, she was sure that the fear was not fake. And so their story became clear and simple - they ran away from their mother.

While the rational part of her told her that children belonged with their mother, her instinct told her to be cautious. Minerva did not like the way this witch spoke of her children in the letter and she did not like that she used a raven to deliver the message. No one used these birds anymore because of their past association with Dark Magic. But this witch did not mind what conclusions Minerva would come to upon seeing her bird. Just what type of a witch was she?

Her hands trembled when she folded the letter and stuffed it into a drawer. She didn’t warn the twins that their mother was coming for them, afraid that the news would prompt them to run away again. She couldn’t bear the thought of them out there on their own. They would have to deal with this mess the following day when she showed up.

Besides, maybe she was wrong and this Beira was looking for other children. Perhaps.

She couldn’t sleep all night. Her mind was swirling with worries, dreading the coming day.

She had grown very fond of the twins and wanted what was best for them. Was it really in their best interest to be handed over to a woman who referred to them as her belongings? On the other hand, Minerva knew nothing of her. Maybe she was a good mother after all and the twins ran away for a stupid, childish reason like not wanting to do chores or disagreeing with discipline. She did not know the full story.

She instructed Argus Filch to watch out for a visitor the next morning, but it turned out to not be necessary. She noticed the witch while on her way to lunch.

She was taken aback by her appearance. She was a beautiful woman who looked too young to have twelve-year-old children but the resemblance was very clear, though her hair was naturally blond, not white. She carried herself with an air of authority and natural grace which so many women would kill for. She was the type of woman who knew how beautiful she was and wanted everyone to acknowledge it. Minerva didn’t like her already.

“I am Minerva McGonagall, Hogwarts Deputy Headmistress. Are you Beira Nix?”
The woman’s lip lifted as if she found Minerva funny but then she spoke in a no-nonsense matter, getting straight to the point.

“You received my letter then. Let’s get on with this. I don’t have all day.”

Elsa and Jack had already spotted her and made their way forward, confirming that this woman was indeed their mother.

Minerva couldn’t help but look at them with harsh judgment. She did not like it that they lied to her. It was more than just disappointment, it was a feeling of betrayal. She truly cared for them as if they were her own family but they couldn’t even afford her the truth.

“Follow me,” she said once the twins arrived.

As she feared, there was no touchy reunion. Beira did not act like a worried mother who was thankful that her missing children were safe. Instead, she looked triumphant like she just won a battle. In the meantime, the twins looked scared. They didn’t dare look up, said nothing and held each other’s hands for comfort. Oh, why did they put her in this situation?

She led them all to her office and observed the young witch with suspicion. Everything about her seemed to contradict that this woman was a witch. She wasn’t dressed like one, it honestly was too chilly for a sleeveless gown like that and even in warm weather, most witches were more conservative in their fashion. The leather pouch hanging from her belt was a strange substitute for a purse and Minerva wondered what was inside. She supposed a pouch could have been enchanted to hold larger objects and her wand could be stored there.

And yet, this woman was not a Muggle or she wouldn’t have been able to get to the school so easily. The raven already proved that she did not partake with the wizarding community or she would have known that it would send a wrong message. This would also explain why she never reported her children missing. She was a part of some other community, something Minerva was not familiar with.

If only the twins were not so secretive about their origins, then maybe all of this wouldn’t be such a surprise to her now.

Beira looked down at her children and spoke to them for the first time.

“And so here you are.”

“Yes, Mother,” Elsa answered quietly, her eyes on the floor.

“You made your mother worry,” she accused. “You just disappeared, didn’t even leave a note. I worried that someone kidnapped you or that you got lost and needed to be rescued.”

“We should’ve left a note,” Elsa admitted, biting her lip. “I’m sorry.”

Next to her, Jack took a long breath and held his mother’s gaze in defiance - he wasn’t sorry.

Beira sighed and admired her slender hands. “Is there anything you need from me? I’d like to take my children now.”

She raised her eyes to Minerva lazily as if she was being bothered with the most mundane task.

“Mrs. Nix, you don’t wish for them to finish the school year?”
The woman laughed in a melodious chuckle. “They don’t need this… education.”

“I want to stay,” Jack spoke clearly and Beira shot him a sharp look.

“You will be quiet,” she said in a soft voice which had ‘or else’ implied in it. “Adults are speaking.” She addressed Minerva. “So, are we done?”

Minerva wanted more time. She wanted to probe this woman for more information and hoped to catch a quick moment with the twins to ask them some questions. Her intuition was telling her that they had a valid reason to be scared of their mother.

“We need to get the approval of the Headmaster,” she tried to stall her.

The witch rolled her eyes and waved her graceful hand in dismissal. “Get on with it then.”

Minerva did not like that tone but she bit down her pride. This wasn’t about her.

She got up to leave and noticed that Jack was staring at her intently as if begging her to not leave them alone with their mother. Elsa was still looking at the floor, lost in her own thoughts.

When she was at the door, Minerva added, “Jack, would you come here for a moment?”

Jack shot up from his seat immediately and ran to join her, but tripped on the rug and fell into her.

“Sorry, I’m such a clumsy-head,” he mumbled. “It’s these shoes.”

Elsa audibly gasped in her seat and looked at him with wide eyes.

“What is it?” Minerva asked her.

She cleared her throat. “No. Nothing. I just remembered something.”

She stared at her brother and then at her mother who looked bored and occupied herself with admiring her hands.

Minerva closed the door and whispered to Jack, “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry we lied. We thought we had to. How else would you take us in?”

Minerva wanted to shake some sense into this boy. “Saying your mother is dead is the worst kind of lie you could’ve given me. What am I supposed to do now?”

“I want to stay here. I’m not going with her.”

He crossed his arms and looked at Minerva with a pout.

“Jack, you need to tell me the truth. Why did you run away from home?”

He dropped his eyes and pressed his lips tightly together.

“This is not the time for more secrets,” she reminded him. “I can’t help you if you don’t speak up.”

“I couldn’t live like that anymore,” he whispered. “She’s a monster. I don’t want to become a monster like her.”

“What do you mean by monster? Did she hurt you?”
He shook his head. “It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it? What did she do that is so monstrous?”

“I knew you wouldn’t believe me,” he whispered while looking at the floor. “That’s why we lied. Adults just don’t get it.”

She grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “I’m on your side, Jack. I want to help but you need to tell me what this woman did.”

He shook his head. “She’s not a good person. I swear. I just… I don’t know how to explain this. Believe me.” He looked at her with those blue puppy eyes. “I can’t go back. I just can’t.”

Minerva didn’t know what to do. He did not tell her anything that would indicate that the children would be unsafe with their mother but she did believe him that there was something wrong, that it wasn’t a happy household.

Yet, it wasn’t enough. She needed someone else’s opinion on this. Maybe Dumbledore would have some ideas.

“I will get the Headmaster. Stay in my office. I’ll be back in a minute.”

She walked away back to the Great Hall in a rush. With each step, her resolve was strengthening. She wasn’t a superstitious witch but she did believe that some events were destined to happen. She was meant to find the twins that day in London. She was meant to take them in and bring them here. It was her destiny to protect them.

These children needed her help. They needed a proper home, one they wouldn’t be afraid of - a home she could offer. And she would fight to keep them.

McGonagall’s heels made clackety sounds as she disappeared behind a corner. Jack looked back at the door to her office. His hand felt incredibly heavy when he raised it to open the door. He kept hoping this was a bad dream and Mother was not in that room.

“Please, let this be a bad dream.”

The door opened with a soft creak and he saw Mother in a conversation with Elsa. What did they speak about when he was away? He appraised if his sister needed help but she looked much more relaxed than before. The fear which made her hands tremble earlier was gone.

He wished his fear was gone as well but his fear sat in a chair, looking exactly the way he remembered her - beautiful and cold.

‘You’re a Gryffindor,’ he reminded himself, ‘the House of the brave. Bravery is when you’re scared but you still do what needs to be done. Be a Gryffindor.’

He glared at his mother, who slowly got up from her chair and walked out to the hallway. He was going to be brave and fight for his right to stay here.

“It’s time to go,” she said in a bored voice.

Her tone carried a promise that things were going to go back to what they were. She was going to trap them underground again, cut off from the world, with only hideous hags and smelly goats for company. He had a flashback of a hag’s decayed teeth arranged in a wide grin and a gnarly hand...
stretching out to him while Mother turned away with a bored sigh.

He hated her and he hated her mountain. He hated that life with all his heart.

“We’re waiting for Professor Dumbledore,” he reminded them.

He was not going with her. Whatever it took, he would fight it. Maybe he should’ve lied to McGonagall and said that Mother hurt them, maybe that would’ve given the wizards a reason to help. He thought of the wand in his pocket. He was no longer a defenseless child but did he dare attack his own mother?

Elsa gave him a very tight hug. He returned it automatically but had a bad feeling about it. He snuck a glance at their mother who crossed her arms and tapped an impatient beat with one finger.

“I’m leaving with Mother,” Elsa whispered into his ear.

His whole body tensed.

“What?” he whispered back. “We don’t have to go with her. McGonagall will help. It’s not over.”

“Jack, you can stay with the wizards but my place is at her side. I don’t belong here. I understand why you don’t want to go, but I do.”

She squeezed him one more time and let go. He couldn’t believe what he just heard. Elsa wanted to go without him. It couldn’t be.

“We will see each other again,” she said, giving his hand a squeeze. “This isn’t goodbye.”

She tried to pull her hand out of his but he wouldn’t let her. He had no words to describe the horror of what he was feeling. All he knew was that he couldn’t let her go.

“Jack, I’m cashing in that favor you owe me. Let me do this,” she said softly.

He shook his head. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. He couldn’t live without her. She was a part of him. She was the other half of his heart.

She put her other hand gently on top of his.

“It’s time to let me go, Jack.”

Her eyes, so much like his own, held no hesitation. She wanted him to let go. No, it was more than that. It was worse than that. She was letting go of him.

His hold loosened, and time slowed down. He felt each agonizing sensation as her fingers left his. It felt as if the Earth started to open up beneath him and the darkness of its depth was sucking him in. Her hand was the last thread that kept him from falling in and she just let go.

She smiled at him one last time and turned away.

The same hand, which held his a moment ago, slid inside the waiting elegant fingers of their mother. Dark Beira, the Queen of Winter, had won the right to hold his sister’s hand.

And he watched half of his heart walk away from him without a second glance.

The End of Book 1
Chapter End Notes

Do you want to know what happens next? You’re in luck. Check out my profile or click on the Series link to get to Book 2: Cursed. It's being written right now!

Big thanks to everyone who commented - I read it all. I wouldn’t have finished this story if not for your continuous support. It’s the ultimate reward.

I plan to come back to this book in the future to do some rewriting and your reactions help me spot problem areas so please continue to leave reviews.

If you missed my note in an earlier chapter, Beira has her own story: The Well of Youth. Check it out to see behind the scenes of the twins’ world from the POV of their mother.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!