**Emrys Ascending**

Summary

In the depths of the Crystal of Neahtid, Merlin sees the resurrection of Lord Voldemort, an event that will tip the balance of the world so far out that only he has the power to intervene and set it right, or stop it from ever happening. For that, he'll have to pose as a student and attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The only problem is, he's been chosen instead of Cedric Diggory as a Triwizard Champion, and there's a recently reborn Arthur Pendragon in Gryffindor House.

Notes

Please enjoy my baby :)

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Resignation

Chapter Notes

Header is art by the absolutely amazing, wonderful, perfect and talented mushroomtale! You can find them here: http://mushroomtale-fanart.tumblr.com/

Edit: as of 04/10/16 I'm going back and re-writing some chapters I'm not too pleased with. If you're re-reading and notice things are a bit different, that's why!

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Mist creeping along the ground, swirling around broken gravestones like old lovers reuniting; thin air cold enough to pierce bones and so gloomy and dark it blocks out the moonlight. A large cauldron sits above a green fire and beside a young boy tied, another spread-eagle, eyes wide, dead.

A small hunched figure holding a bundle of cloth, dropping it into the cauldron and it is searing red, scaled, bloody and crippled.

Slice, slit, cut, drop.

Mist congregates around a figure of pale white, snakelike, scarlet eyes- scar burning, screaming, death, destruction- a skull and snake of stormclouds in the air.

The balance tips- breaks-
He’s back.

Merlin burst forth into consciousness feeling the tingle of magic in the air, holding a crystal so tightly that it had broken his skin, trickles of scarlet red blood (*the same colour as his eyes*) flowing down his wrist to dampen his sleeve. He breathed fast and heavy, with eyes swirling golden that were reflected in the pale crystal; the last glimpses of the horrifying future fading in the refracted and jagged surfaces.

He ran a shaky hand through long grey hair, and knew that he would have to intervene as he hadn’t been able to in centuries, always watching and waiting by his lakeside cottage, eyes peering out every day for a familiar face and form.

Sighing, Merlin placed the Crystal of Neahtid back into the enchanted box he’d kept it locked in for centuries. His eyes glowed as he ran a hand over the box, locking it to anyone but himself, locking it like he kept all his powerful magical objects hidden away. If anybody ever found them… there was no telling what sort of destruction could be wreaked.

“Times like these I wish Kilgarrah were still here,” Merlin sighed, remembering the advice he’d often sought from the great dragon, though most often than not it had been cryptic and mostly useless. His voice was croaky and ragged as though he hadn’t used it in a while, when in fact the complete opposite was true. Sitting in silence, waiting and staring at the surface of an unchanging lake had become boring for decades on end, and he had eventually decided to fake a history masters under the name Morgan Emery. He’d been a professor at the local university for twenty-seven years now.

In order to intervene in the future he’d just seen (*death, horror, the magical and un-magical worlds clashing together violently, viciously*) he would have to resign from his job, say goodbye to his students and colleagues, then de-age himself and go back to school – to Hogwarts, for he had recognised the boy tied up in the vision: Harry Potter.

He grinned unexpectedly. “This should be interesting,” he said to himself. Hauling his old body off his bed, Merlin picked up the magical box and placed it on the shelf in his basement, indifferent and utterly identical to the other boxes that lined the walls. He pulled on a jacket to protect him from the chill that emanated from the lake, and ascended the stairs.

The journey to the university he taught at was barely a twenty minute walk. As he passed through the campus grounds students waved and called out to him; he waved back with a slight limp in his step. A particularly energetic student of his, a young woman named Elise who reminded him dearly of Gwen, bounded up to him with arms full of binders and books.
“Hello professor! How are you today?” she asked, smiling brilliantly. She had dark brown hair and eyes just as dark, with skin a few shades lighter, and she always wore a deep burgundy lipstick.

“Fairly well, Elise,” Merlin replied. “How is the paper coming along?”

Elise looked a little sheepish at the question. “Honestly? Not very well, professor,” she admitted. “It’s difficult to find credible sources that aren’t just made-up fairy stories that’ve been embellished on over the centuries. Primary sources are virtually nonexistent – are you sure this essay is actually doable?”

“Of course it is, Elise, you just have to look in the right place,” Merlin laughed. “In fact, I have a book that may help if you’ll accompany me to my office. I won’t be needing it anymore.” He twitched his hand for her to follow him, and she happily walked alongside him, slowing down her hurried pace to suit up. Merlin wondered how many cups of coffee she drank each day.

“Thank you, professor, that’s awesome! Why won’t you be needing it anymore?” she asked, head tilting in curiosity.

“Unfortunately I’m handing in my resignation letter today,” he replied. “I’m getting just a tad too old for this job, and my mind isn’t what it once was.” Elise’s expression immediately dropped into one of absolute devastation, pulling herself to a stop.

“No, professor, you can’t leave!” she argued. “You’re the best lecturer I’ve had in years! You teach absolutely fascinating things and you make history fun, which is surprising considering that it’s always been absolutely boring in the past for me and I really only took the paper to fill an elective slot.”

Merlin laughed at her guilty expression as she admitted that. “I’m terribly sorry, Elise, but I really am getting far too old for this job. Marking papers isn’t as easy as it once was. I only hope that you all don’t mind if I leave, I’d hate to disappoint you all,” he said, beginning to climb the stairs into his building. He had to lean heavily on the bannister for support, and was glad that his joints wouldn’t be so creaky and stiff soon, and that his body would finally be young and healthy again. He’d had to keep his aging going since he started at the university, and didn’t think that he’d enjoy it so much to stay for so long.

“Of course not, professor, we’ll just be sad to see you go,” Elise said. Merlin smiled as they reached his door, gold letters spelling out Prof. M Emery, PhD on the frosted glass pane. He twisted the
door knob and entered the office, placing his satchel on his desk. He then turned to rifle through his shelves that were crammed with old leather-bound tomes, some of them of his own creation.

He pulled out an incredibly rare book titled *The Life and Heroics of King Arthur Pendragon* in gold embossing. With a smile he handed it to Elise, who reverently opened the book and stroked the pads of her fingers down the old, crackling pages.

“This is amazing, professor!” she said in awe.

“It’s incredibly rare, like most of the books in my possession are,” Merlin said with a smile. “I believe there were only five or so copies of that book ever made, well over a hundred years ago. Many of these first editions are worth thousands, and I’ll be donating them to the library once I leave. That one, however, can be yours, for being such an enthusiastic student.”

Elise’s face lit up with a broad, toothy smile, and she dumped all her binders in order to wrap her arms around Merlin gratefully.

“Thank you, sir, I’ll treasure it forever,” she said, pulling back with eyes swimming with tears.

“I should hope so,” Merlin replied. “I must print out my resignation letter, so I recommend you get reading and write that paper, it’ll be the last thing I mark before the end of semester. I won’t be marking or moderating your exams, unfortunately.” Elise smiled and thanked him, then rushed out of the room, attempting to balance all of her books and binders in her arms.

Merlin watched her leave, and then with an errant wave of his hand, a single piece of paper stating his resignation materialised on his desk. He picked it up and headed down the hallway to the building’s main reception, handing it into Doris Weatherby with a sad smile.

“You’re leaving?” she asked, so shocked that the glasses perched on her nose fell off and hung limply around her neck from the cord that held them there.

“Unfortunately, Doris, my mind isn’t what it once was. I’d like to live what I imagine to be the last years of my life in peace and quiet, not surrounded by rowdy teenagers complaining about pulling all-nighters,” he lied calmly. He was often so exhausted and sore in the mornings that he barely wanted to get out of bed – he didn’t know how Gaius had ever kept up with him at his age.
“Well I hope you find that peace, Morgan,” she said sadly. “I’ll hand this in immediately. Because lectures are done you just need to wait for us to send through your class’ final papers, and then you’ll be done. We’ll be sorry to see you go, though, are you sure you don’t want a goodbye lunch?”

Her smile was cheeky as she asked this. “You know me, Doris,” he replied. Within a few more words, Merlin left the building, the university, and his old life.

The class’ final papers were sent to him a week and a half later, and it was three weeks from his resignation that he’d finally graded them all and his resignation had gone through. He’d been sent small gifts by some students and the faculty, and he appreciated them greatly. It had been a long time since he’d had people he could call friends – since Arthur, almost.

He’d made a few acquaintances in the magical community during the last war with Voldemort, though none of them were alive anymore, and since he had been unable to intervene, he’d simply watched from the sidelines as he was forced to live his life within the non-magical world.

Merlin opened his bedroom window and breathed in the crisp summer air – it sometimes managed to get stiflingly humid within the town, but right by the lake, the air always seemed to give the impression that he was at a higher altitude than it appeared. He stuck his head out the window and gave a short whistle, punctuated by glowing eyes.

A tawny owl flew down from a nearby forest, landing comfortably on his windowsill. He passed it an envelope and asked it to deliver his letter, giving the owl directions through another burst of magic. It happily flew off after a quick petting, and Merlin smiled.

All he had to do now was wait to get accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He’d crafted a cover story that should hold up against the likes of Albus Dumbledore, so all that he’d have to do after the acceptance letter was buy his school things from the magically concealed Diagon Alley, de-age himself, join the rest of the seventh years, and restore balance to a world that was on the brink of destruction.

Another Tuesday then.

It was a druid’s duty to the Old Religion to keep the balance within the world – the balance of life and death, and the smaller balances that came alongside that, residing in all aspects of the world, known to some as yin and yang. Of course, small unbalances were not problems, because the world was very good at naturally righting itself. But with an event like the resurrection of Lord Voldemort…
The scale would tip so far and dramatically that without druidic intervention, there was a high chance that the world would never be able to right itself again, only continue to get worse and worse. Since Merlin was the only druid remaining, or indeed the only remaining user of the Old Magics, it was his duty as Magic Incarnate to prevent or restore the upcoming unbalance.

It had taken many years for Merlin to realise this. After Arthur’s death he had visited every druidic encampment he could find and had interrogated their leaders for information. Once he had discovered that he was immortal and couldn’t die... well, he knew then that he’d be spending the rest of his life righting imbalance until Old Magic returned to the world or until Arthur himself came back.

Those two events, however, were most likely related. Merlin himself was a result of a severe imbalance – when Uther decimated the number of druids, the balance of magic in the world dropped massively. The only way the world could right itself was by placing all of that magic into one human – into Merlin.

Merlin heaved his old body off his window seat and ambled over to the full-length mirror in his room to stare at himself. He saw an elderly man with ancient eyes, long grey hair and a long grey beard, a tweed jacket and a limp, wrinkled skin and liver spots...

Slowly it all began to recede as his eyes glowed a bright, effervescent gold. His hair turned darker and shrunk back into his skull, the beard disappeared all together as his skin smoothed out and complexion repaired. His rounded and hunched shoulders straightened up and he stood proudly as his aching joints were made anew.

Within a minute, Merlin was staring at a face he hadn’t seen in decades. He looked as every bit as young as he was when he’d first met Arthur, except his eyes were impossibly old, and it showed.

He practiced his bright smile, the one that seemed to be perpetually on his face whenever Arthur had been around, and succeeded. He looked like himself again.

Frowning, Merlin realised that he wasn’t able to pack for Hogwarts yet, considering that he hadn’t been accepted and therefore didn’t have a list of supplies and books. September 1 was still a good two weeks away though, and that was more than enough time for Dumbledore to get back to him. He could only hope that his story would hold up; the elderly wizard was extremely perceptive, almost unsettling so, and always seemed to know things he shouldn’t.
Merlin shrugged and put it out of his mind. For now he would need more modern-looking clothes, considering that his old man wardrobe consisted entirely of tweed jackets, sweater vests and slacks. He managed to dig up a pair of jeans and a simple blue button-up from within the back of his closet, grabbed his satchel, and headed back out into town.

He’d lived there for so long that he knew it like the back of his hand, and went straight to the nearest thrift store. There was no need to splurge on clothes, despite the fact that he was quite wealthy considering that his account at Gringotts had been open for centuries. He picked out some more pairs of pants and jeans, some button-ups and t-shirts, a pair of comfortable and worn-in brown oxford shoes, a pair of leather boots and just for the hell of it, an old leather jacket. On the way to the counter he spied a red piece of cloth that could be used as a neckerchief, and grinned while he paid for it.

With arms full of bags, he headed to the nearest coffee shop, located directly across from campus. He ordered a large caramel macchiato, enjoying the sweet taste, and sat down in his usual seat. On the opposite side of the shop he noticed Elise hunched over her table, pouring over the book he’d given her, only a few pages away from the end. He couldn’t help but smile at the intense look of interest on her face and sipped his hot coffee, peering out the windows to see his students milling about, hurrying around to attend lectures and heading to the library.

He’d miss all of these kids – Carrie MacDonald, an A+ student; Steve Carlsburg who was a bit of a jerk; a girl named Tali who always wore a purple hijab; a dance major Hoseok who always had a smile on his face; Sebastian Pelle who dreamed of being a pilot. He’d miss their inquisitiveness and unique insight, their thirst for knowledge and tales of weekend escapades, the students who came in on Monday mornings with sunglasses and large, steaming coffees.

But, he supposed, they’d be replaced by students at Hogwarts he would soon befriend. Some of them though, he wouldn’t be able to forget, not in a million years. Students like Elise he’d remember forever.

It took two days for his tawny owl to get back to him, tapping on his bedroom window to wake him up, clutching a thick parchment envelope in it’s beak. Merlin hurried over to the window and took the offered letter, giving the owl some water in thanks. It gave him a sleepy hoot and lapped up the water gratefully.

Merlin broke open the wax seal on his envelope, an imprint of a lion, badger, eagle and snake surrounding a large letter H. The words inside were carefully written in emerald green ink.

Dear Mr Emery,
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Due to your unusual circumstances and situation, you will be Sorted with the first years upon arrival at Hogwarts, and you shall be placed into seventh year classes. If you have any issues with these, please take it up with myself or Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall.

Term starts on September 1. If you require any assistance in acquiring any school items, please ask a Hogwarts representative located at Flourish & Blotts in Diagon Alley.

Yours Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster (Order of Merlin First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Merlin’s heart jumped a little when he read his name within Dumbledore’s array of titled, and then remembered that he was a legendary figure within the wizarding world. He’d heard many people use his name as a curse and a blessing during the few years he’d spent in the wizarding community. He’d have to get used to that, or someone would get suspicious every time he flinched when his name was said.

The second piece of parchment contained a list of supplies and schoolbooks – he’d been enrolled in all the basic classes that students were required to take up to OWL level, covering all the bases considering he’d never attended Hogwarts. There was also a list of books he would need for his elective subjects, all of which intrigued him.

Scanning the list, Merlin decided to pick some subjects that he knew next to nothing about, even after centuries of walking the planet. He picked Alchemy, which had always stumped Gaius, a subject available due to high demand with the seventh years; and Ancient Runes. He’d need to buy *Intro to Alchemy* by Adalbert Waffling and *Advanced Rune Translation (Grade 2)* by Thor Norsson.

He couldn’t quite suppress a grin at the thought of learning so much – he’d always had a thirst for knowledge and even though Merlin had been alive for an incredibly long time, he didn’t know everything, and was always keen to learn more. He had lied to his colleagues about his memory – if anything it was getting better with age, even though it took him a little while to remember things. They were always there, just… hidden away a little.
Merlin tucked the parchment into his satchel and pulled out his old Sidhe staff from where he kept it under the bed, just like old times. Focusing his magic, he managed to transfigure it into something resembling a wand, albeit with a shard of sapphire on the end, with miniscule runes winding their way down the wood.

With a handy trick Merlin had learned some decades ago, Merlin turned on the spot and apparated, landing just outside the Leaky Cauldron. He hurried inside before any Muggles could see, and entered the alleyway around the back. It took him a while to remember the correct sequence to reveal Diagon Alley, but grinned widely as the bricks shuffled aside to reveal one of the main hubs of the British magical community.

People were hustling and bustling about, clad in robes and pointed hats, carrying bags full of books and ingredients that were bursting full with quills and ink. It was busy, as always, but nowhere near as busy as it would be the few days before September 1st when all the last-minute shoppers would be panicking and scurrying about, looking for their supplies among the throngs of people.

Merlin moved relatively quickly to Gringotts, enjoying being in such a different environment to his town, feeling the magic in the air that made his heart soar. A goblin led Merlin down into his ‘family’ vault, a very long way down.

They turned a corner and Merlin almost let out a cry as he saw a poor, blinded dragon chained up outside a nearby vault. It was so terrified and scared, looking so much like Aithusa that it was painful to even look at. Merlin vowed that second that after this whole business was over he would come back and free the dragon – it was cruel to keep something so beautiful chained up and scared for it’s life, not even Uther had treated Kilgarrah in such a way. He whispered words of comfort under his breath that his magic carried over to the dragon, promising that it would be freed.

The cart finally came to a stop outside his vault. Merlin gave the goblin an old key of his that he’d nearly lost over the years, and was nonplussed by the mounds of gold that lay inside for him. He only scooped as much as he needed into a drawstring back, and then headed back out into the bright light of Diagon Alley.

Seeing as he didn’t need to go to Ollivanders for a wand, he headed first to Flourish & Blotts to get his books out of the way. He bought all the ones he needed (and some he didn’t), then picked up his Potions ingredients at the Apothecary. Madam Malkin’s took care of his robe fitting, and Merlin overhead a few people talking excitedly about the Quidditch World Cup.

Damn, he’d forgotten about that. He really should get some tickets.
The witch fitting his robes tutted moodily about how lanky he was and how he should eat more, and Merlin had almost forgotten what it was like to be fussed over. When Merlin was done and sure he had everything he needed, he apparated back home and packed everything neatly into his trunk with an extended hand and a flash of gold eyes.

With another owl sent out, Merlin managed to receive a ticket to the World Cup within a few hours, located just beneath the top box, some truly brilliant seats.

Smiling, Merlin lay down to bed, dreaming of his future at Hogwarts.
Arrival

Chapter Summary

Merlin attends the Quidditch World Cup and arrives at Hogwarts.

When Merlin opened his eyes the sun had still not risen beyond the horizon of the still, grey lake. Mist swirled around the surface, blanketing it in thick fog, reminding Merlin of the eerie graveyard he’d glimpsed in the Crystal of Neahtid. With the reluctant sigh of one who did not want to wake up, he made his way into the kitchen, bare feet padding on the floorboards. His mornings usually consisted of sitting on his porch, sipping a good cup of tea, peering out over the still waters of Avalon Lake.

He seemed to be the only person to realise that the surface of the lake never moved, never rippled, not even in the rain or the midst of a storm. He stayed outside until the sky began to lighten to a blue shot with golden orange, and headed inside to change once his mug had been drained.

Pulling on his new clothes, Merlin packed his robes and World Cup ticket into his satchel. He’d created it a few years back from the leather of his bag from Camelot, pulling it apart and painstakingly creating something newer and more modern, one of the only possessions he had from his home, the leather protected by his magic. It was supple and smooth now, impossibly aged.

Before he accidentally fell into hours of reminiscing, Merlin turned on the spot and disapparated.

The air exploded with noise as horribly dressed figured ran about in hoards, yelling about their teams and discussing who they supported. About forty metres away Merlin could see rows of tents completely covered in Irish shamrocks, while on the other side of the field the magically enlarged face of Viktor Krum frowned and brooded at anyone who passed.

Merlin approached the nearest Ministry representative who informed him that he was three fields over under the care of the Muggle man Mr. Rogers. It was a quick trek over there, and he paid the poor, confused man before heading to a section of empty grass. The area was surrounded by tents of various sizes and what he was sure was actually a man crouched under a jacket held up by a pile of sticks.
He took out his wand, made sure nobody could see his eyes, and conjured up a small tent. Satisfied, he entered and found that it was rather roomy, filled with pillows and throws of different patterns and colours; candles hanging in glass lamps and the floor covered with soft, comfortable rugs. Merlin was impressed, considering he’d bought the tent a few years back but had never actually used it before. He placed his satchel onto the futon bed and turned into his casual emerald green robes.

Upon exiting the tent, Merlin noticed a large group of people heading towards him, the morning sun catching on their bright ginger hair. Amongst them was a young dark-skinned girl with bushy hair that seemed to be all over the place and- dear Avalon- Harry Potter. The most famous wizard of all time except for himself and Albus Dumbledore, the boy who miraculously defeated Voldemort as a child, defeated him at Hogwarts and later this year, according to the Crystal, witness the return of his parents’ murderer.

Whispers of the reinstated Triwizard Tournament had reached Merlin’s ears on his trek through the fields, and though he hadn’t been interested, he just now pieced his vision together. Harry in the graveyard where Voldemort was reborn, another boy dead on the ground, and a glowing cup that was most likely the Triwizard Cup. That meant that Harry would be competing in the tournament, which meant that Merlin would have to enter as well in order to protect the boy.

There went his plan for skating by unnoticed at Hogwarts.

The red haired company stopped at the blank patch of grass next to Merlin, and the eldest man held his hand out with a smile.

“Hello, neighbour, nice to meet you!” the man introduced. “I’m Arthur Weasley, and these are my children Fred, George, Ron, Ginny and their friends Hermione and Harry.” Merlin couldn’t stop himself from smiling at the man’s contagious enthusiasm and shook his hand politely.

“Nice to meet you too, I’m Morgan Emery. Lovely day for the World Cup, eh?” he asked, making conversation as he watched Harry in his peripheral vision. The boy was young, only fourteen he guessed, and was looking all around them in awe.

“Definitely,” Arthur replied. “You here on your own?”

“Unfortunately. I don’t have any family left but I manage to get around, which is much easier since I’m overage,” Merlin said, sticking to his cover story.
“I’m so sorry,” Arthur said with a sympathetic look. “Are you still at school?” As he spoke, the twins Fred and George seemed to be trying to figure out how to put up the tent by themselves and were failing miserably, with Hermione and Ginny laughing at them.

“I’m starting my final year at Hogwarts next week, actually,” Merlin said, catching the attention of the children who looked up at him with interest.

“You’re transferring?” Hermione asked. “Aren’t you a little… old for school?” She winced at how badly her wording came out, but Merlin laughed and gave her a forgiving smile.

“I’ve been homeschooled my entire life, you see, but the last member of my family passed away recently, leaving me alone. I’ve decided to get at least one year of proper education in and hopefully get my NEWTs, though considering I never took OWLs, I’m not sure how well I’ll do,” Merlin explained. “I’m only nineteen, so it shouldn’t be too much of an age difference.”

Arthur grinned happily at his words. “Well, I hope you have a good time there! This lot all attend Hogwarts, so there’ll at least be a few familiar faces to settle you in.” Merlin couldn’t help but smile back at the man – he seemed delightful, if a little odd, and extremely laid-back in all situations. “Now… how will we do this?” he murmured to himself.

Merlin looked on with a wry smile as Arthur insisted on pitching their tent the Muggle way. After a few disastrous attempts, he acquiesced with a piercing look from his daughter, and erected the tent with a swish of his wand. He sent Harry and Ron off to retrieve water from the campground tap, and insisted on lighting a fire with matches, which he’d never used before. Hermione kindly helped out when Arthur broke his eleventh match, and showed the man what to do.

The sky darkened slowly, and as it did the veil of vague normality dissolved as the hours passed, more Weasleys apparating in. More magic presented itself: children flying about on kids’ broomsticks, sparks flying through the air and magically conjured flames of all colours popping up across the fields. Wizards and witches changed out of their mismatched Muggle clothing into robes and the volume swelled as the time of the match approached.

Merlin didn’t recognise either of the men who were introduced at the Weasleys’ tent, Ludo Bagman and Barty Crouch, but it became apparent that they were of relative importance at the Ministry. Merlin had an excuse for not knowing them, thanks to his cover story of being homeschooled his entire life, and over the course of the hours situated himself half in his camp and half in the Weasleys’.

Magic filled the air and Merlin found himself thinking how he could have ever left this for a Muggle
life, could’ve left magic that was different to his own but was still his, was still his world. Then he remembered Elise and his students, remembered how technology had advanced so quickly, and knew that there were wonders in both lifestyles.

He bought an Irish shamrock from a nearby souvenir vendor, sticking it to his robes, though Ron had told him that they’d be better off supporting Bulgaria thanks to their Seeker, Viktor Krum. Merlin had recognised his face on the Bulgaria supporters’ tents from the few issues of the *Daily Prophet* he’d occasionally receive, and wondered if the kid was really as good as they said.

Finally the sky darkened and the golden arena in the distance lit up, and the crowd were magnetised towards it like moths to a flame, anticipation swelling in the air. Merlin headed over with the Weasleys, got knocked around a bit by the overexcited crowd, and ended up being seated only two rows below the Weasleys.

He stretched his hearing with a simple spell, listening in on their conversations, hoping to get any sort of information on the Triwizard Tournament. He got none of that, though he did get a thorough earbashing from the disapproving tones of Lucius and Draco Malfoy. Judging from *that* conversation, Draco was a school rival of Harry, Ron and Hermione’s, and Lucius Malfoy was a well connected pureblood maniac who had it out for the Weasley family.

Merlin wondered how men like that would’ve reacted when they found out that the most legendary sorcerer of all time had been raised in a small village by a non-magical mother, and had been a servant for a decade.

Turning off his hearing when Ludo Bagman addressed the crowd, Merlin watched in wonder as the mascots came out. It’d been a while since he’d attended a Quidditch game, and in fact the last time he saw a match was probably not too long after the game had first been invented. The players had definitely improved since then, though it was only possible to tell what was happening with his enhanced vision. He seemed to be one of the only men oblivious to the charms of the Veela, though it probably helped that he’d dated one eighty or so years ago, and knew how they got when they lost their tempers.

The match was fast, intense and furious as blood was spilt. Merlin found himself agreeing with Ron and the *Daily Prophet* at Krum’s admirable ability on the broomstick. Seeing the Bulgarian seeker in action almost made him want to shred his shamrock to pieces, but he resisted, and was grateful at the end when Ireland won by a mere ten points.

Cheering and whooping with the crowd, Merlin turned to watch the Top Box as the teams entered, noticing that Krum wasn’t all that graceful on the ground. His handsome face was covered in blood from his broken nose, but Merlin still noticed quite a few witches batting their eyelids at the boy, though he couldn’t have been older than eighteen. Merlin managed to find his way back to his tent.
with the Weasleys afterwards, his sense of direction useless in such a massive crowd and area.

He decided to let loose and celebrate a little with the Ireland supporters. One particularly excited teenage boy nearly set fire to his shamrock-covered tent, much to the surprise of Merlin but not to anyone else – apparently he was rather prone to accidental fires and explosions with his magic. Someone offered Merlin a firewhiskey, and he enjoyed the warm cinnamon sensation of it heading down, burning pleasantly hot-cold in the hollow of his throat. He was glad that he had a high alcohol tolerance, because the next thing he knew he was darting upright in bed, entirely sober, listening to the cheering devolve into screaming.

For a few seconds he thought that maybe that Seamus kid had actually managed to set something on fire. Then the screams multiplied, getting closer, and through the linen walls of his tent, Merlin saw bursts of flame. A dark presence settled over the area, like a swarm of shadows suspended on dust, and he immediately knew that something was wrong.

Merlin slung his satchel over his shoulder, grabbing his wand, and emerged from his tent into chaos. The dark night was alight not with colourful green sparks of joy and victory, but bright menacing orange flames that emanated from the chanting figures slowly approaching. They were marching in time, clad in skull masks, black robes and pointed hats, like the KKK.

A second later Arthur Weasley burst from the tent next to Merlin, his wand at the ready. His eldest sons followed with their wands also drawn, to see what was happening. Seeing the carnage, Arthur darted back inside to retrieve the younger children who emerged flustered and confused.

Arthur ordered the younger ones to get to safety, while he set his eldest the duties of getting as many people to safety as possible.

“I’ll take them into the forest,” Merlin said to Arthur, who nodded, entrusting his children to a stranger he’d only met that day. Merlin led Ron, Harry and Hermione into the nearby tree line, seeing Fred and George do the same with Ginny. It wasn’t long before they came across Draco Malfoy in the woods, who smirked and looked far too pleased with himself, at least until Merlin levelled his wand at the pale brat.

It was only a few minutes later that they heard a throaty voice within the darkness of the forest proclaim ‘Morsmordre!’. A dark shape appeared in the sky, a gleaming emerald skull-and-snake that sent shivers down Merlin’s spine, sending Harry’s hand flying to his forehead in pain. Merlin hadn’t seen that mark in fourteen years, and it was once that he hoped he’d never see again. Any of the friends he’d made in the last wizarding war had been lost to that exact symbol, and memories unbidden flew to his mind’s eye.
He managed to snap into action, however, at the sudden sounds of apparating echoing throughout the forest. He yelled at the trio of kids with him to duck, and not a moment too soon, as what seemed like hundreds of stunning spells zapped out of the trees.

The following conversation was a disaster, and Merlin managed to lead the kids and Arthur Weasley back to their singed but standing tent to get a few hours of uneasy sleep. Arthur shook his hand, thanking Merlin profusely for the help.

“It’s what anyone would’ve done,” Merlin argued back. He apparated himself back home a few minutes later with an uneasy feeling in his gut.

He knew that Voldemort was planning his return, but he hadn’t predicted the Death Eaters publicly attacking the largest wizarding event in the world or the conjuring of the Dark Mark for the first time in over a decade. The Balance was tipping ever so slightly, shifting with each demonstration of Voldemort’s power. It felt like the Earth was a pendulum and they were swinging upwards, towards the highest point, and that once they reached it the slightest push would send them crashing down into oblivion, the Balance destroying itself before Merlin’s very eyes.

Harry may be considered the Boy Who Lived, and Albus Dumbledore was said to be the only one that Voldemort had ever feared, but none of that would mean anything unless Merlin could step in and restore the impending disaster that loomed over the United Kingdoms.

Over the few days leading up to September 1, Merlin scoured through every copy of the *Daily Prophet* and the *Quibbler* for any information about the attack and other suspicious dark activity. In the end the only thing he could find was a fear-mongering article written by Rita Skeeter that made vague allusions towards Arthur Weasley.

Merlin packed and re-packed his trunk hundreds of times, pacing the floor of his basement, wondering if he would need any of his ancient artefacts. He spent a whole two days pondering his need of the Crystal of Neahtid, but ultimately decided that it was too risky to use. Merlin had learned from his past mistakes and knew that the predictions the crystal made were accurate, but the chain of events leading up to the culminating result were unpredictable, and were best left to obscurity.

Finally the morning of September 1 rolled around, and Merlin was halfway dressed and ready to go before he realised that he still didn’t have a pet. He vaguely wished as he always did for Kilgarrah to be at his side, because the dragon was a useful companion even if he had been annoyingly cryptic and self-assured.

In the end he summoned the tawny owl that he’d originally used to send his letter to Dumbledore.
The creature was happy to co-operate, and he cheekily named it Gaius as he locked the animal away. He then grasped his trunk, slung his satchel cross-ways over his body, and twisted on the spot, apparating to a deserted alleyway just outside of King’s Cross.

He’d asked the Hogwarts representative at Flourish & Blott’s how to get onto Platform 9 ¾, and they had told him to pass through the barrier at the station. He was a good half hour early, so he put his things away and found himself an empty compartment on the Hogwarts Express. People watching was an entertaining past-time of his, and Merlin watched the hustle and bustle of students, parents and lost pets, the platform getting more crowded the closer to eleven a.m. it got.

He spotted Harry and Hermione come in with the Weasleys, noticed Draco Malfoy and his parents. Draco’s mother would’ve been very beautiful if she hadn’t been looking down at everyone from her self-imposed pedestal. He also noticed Seamus, the boy from the World Cup, press a kiss to the cheek of a dark-skinned boy.

He recognised Augusta Longbottom with who must’ve been her grandson. Frank and Alice had been friends of Merlin’s, and his still hands shook at the memory of what happened to them.

There were a few other familiar faces, and soon the train was filled with students trying to find a compartment. He somehow managed to remain alone the entire trip, as the younger students weren’t willing to disturb a seventh year, and the other seventh years avoided him because they didn’t recognise him. He changed into his black robes as they pulled into the station at Hogsmeade. In the very distance, Merlin could see the top spires of the magnificent castle that was Hogwarts, his home for the next year.
Chapter Summary

Merlin arrives at Hogwarts, gets sorted, and meets his new friends.

Chapter Notes

I am not sorry for the amount of other fandom references in my OC’s names.

Upon leaving his carriage, he heard a loud voice proclaiming “Firs’ years over ‘ere! Firs’ years! And a Morgan Emery!” Merlin followed the voice to see a giant of a man, or at least half a giant, with large quantities of bushy, tangled hair and black beetle eyes. Merlin approached him and the man smiled at him.

“Emery, right?” he asked, and Merlin nodded. “Rubeus Hagrid, gamekeeper. ’S been a while since I’ve seen a transfer student. Yeh alright going with the firs’ years?” he asked, and Merlin nodded again, looking at the frightened first years, the tallest of which just reached the middle of Merlin’s back. They looked terrified and excited, huddling around each other in the light of Hagrid’s lamp, while the rest of the students hurried off to the Thestral-drawn carriages. It’d been a while since Merlin had seen one, and it brought a type of sad happiness to him.

“All righ’, if yer all here, we’d better get going,” Hagrid said, and the hoard of eleven-year-olds and Merlin followed him to the edge of a great black lake, the shining flame-lit castle of Hogwarts in the distance. Merlin hopped into the boat with Hagrid, which swayed and almost capsized when the half-giant got in it. Soon the boats took off over the lake, which reflected the glittering lights of Hogwarts and gave the appearance of twinkling lights under the water. Although, that might’ve been the Hinkypunks.

The castle was even larger up close, and Merlin couldn’t believe that it was the first time he’d been here in person. The great front doors open and a strict looking woman with her dark hair pulled into a tight bun peered at them over the top of her glasses.

“Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I am the Deputy Headmistress Professor McGonagall, if you could all follow me,” she said, and the hoard followed them. “I trust they all got here alright Hagrid?”
“Yeh, nobody fell in this time,” he said, with a grin that implied that somebody had fallen into the lake in the past. Hagrid broke off from the group with a smile and headed through a side door. From where he went, Merlin could hear the loud chattering and buzzing of the Hogwarts students, and something like adrenalin began to pump through his limbs. It’d been a while since he was so excited, and he clenched his hands into fists to make sure they weren’t shaking. McGonagall explained the houses and the rules, and then headed off through the same door Hagrid left to see if they were ready to be sorted.

Conversation struck up with the first years, all with shaking voices as they wondered what they’d have to do to be sorted, someone swearing that you had to survive a dragon attack, while some of them snuck looks at Merlin.

“Don’t worry,” he told the group, and all eyes snapped to him. “The Sorting Hat is just placed on your head, it reads your mind and tells you what house you’re in.” This information put a few relieved smiles on some faces.

“Why’re you here? You’re too old,” one particularly bold first year asked.

“Transfer student,” was all he said, when McGonagall came back and motioned for her to follow them through the main doors. The Great Hall was jam-packed with students in pointed hats and coloured robes, sitting at four tables representing each house. The ceiling was beautiful; bewitched to look like the clear night sky, stars twinkling down at them, and it was so realistic Merlin would’ve thought he was outside. Hogwarts had some very impressive magic, and he was keen to learn all that it had to offer, although he knew that it would take the rest of his life to fully learn all of it’s secrets, and that was a long time.

An old hat sitting on a stool opened its mouth, or a rip in its brim, and all of the students quieted down as it sang a song about the houses. Merlin clapped with everyone else, and then McGonagall stepped forward with a parchment scroll in her hand.

“Before we begin the sorting, I would like to announce that we have a transfer student entering seventh year, Mr Morgan Emery. I trust that his house will treat him with respect, and welcome him,” she said sternly. She then nodded at Merlin, who headed up the few stairs to the stool, and had the hat placed on his head. It was silent for a few moments, and Merlin wondered if something was wrong.

*Uh… hello?* He muttered in his mind.
Merlin Emrys! I- what are- what an honour! The Hat stuttered, and Merlin suppressed a laugh.

The honour is all mine, he replied. So... sort me, I guess.

But where to put you? You possess every quality of each house in massive quantities, you would easily belong in any house you wished! It squeaked out.

So you mean that I can just choose any house? You're not going to sort me? He asked it.

I-Well, I didn’t exactly mean that, the Hat stuttered again.

Let’s start from the bottom then, shall we? What house’s qualities to I display the least? Merlin asked it.

I suppose that would be Slytherin, the Hat said, finally in it’s element. You definitely possess ambition and cunning, but not so much that it overpowers your other qualities.

So that leaves Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. What next?

That’s where it gets a bit tricky, the Hat said. You possess intelligence, but I suppose, if you don’t mind me saying, that is from gaining much common sense and knowledge over your long life span, and it is not inherently... a quality you were born with, it said almost apologetically, and it sounded a little scared at offending him. Merlin just laughed.

No, you’re definitely right there, he laughed, noting that the Hall was starting to murmur at how long his sorting was taking. It wasn’t unheard of though, a Hat Stall, so he continued on unhurried.

So Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, right? Bravery or loyalty? He asked.

More like recklessness or loyalty in your case, the Hat muttered, and Merlin once again suppressed a laugh.

You’re right there. I was always reckless in my plans to save Arthur, but I suppose, my loyalty to
Arthur was always my strongest point. I would never leave him, not ever, under any circumstances, and I’d never betray him. I risked my life for his so many times I lost count, so I guess we know where to put me, he finished.

Yes, yes, the Hat said, you’d make a great… “HUFFLEPUFF!” It announced.

The Hufflepuff table cheered and stamped their feet as the Hat was finally taken off Merlin’s head. He headed down to the Hufflepuff table, and within a group of seventh years, a space had already been made for him. This warmed his heart, and he knew that there was no other house he could truly belong to. Of course he could be in Gryffindor to keep a better eye on Harry, but in all honesty he wasn’t all that brave. In his past it was recklessness and loyalty, and now it was his knowledge that he was immortal. Hufflepuffs were friendly and loyal, and they’d already opened their arms to welcome him, and this was exactly where he belonged.

“Haven’t met a transfer student before!” a handsome blonde said from across the table, holding out his hand to shake. “Cedric Diggory, nice to meet you.”

“Morgan Emery,” Merlin said, shaking the boy’s hand. Diggory had a kind smile, and Merlin was sure that he’d heard Arthur Weasley talk about him and his father at the World Cup. The mocha-skinned girl on Merlin’s right introduced herself as Cora Dallas, and on Merlin’s left a boy with a Russian accent introduced himself as Pavel Kaidanovsky.

“So what’s your story, Morgan?” Cedric asked as a first year was sorted into Slytherin.

“Not really much of one to tell,” Merlin said with a casual shrug. “Family died, figured that I might as well get one year of education and some formal exam results for the future. Home-schooled most of my life.”

“I'm sorry about your family,” Cedric said, and then cheered as a frightened girl was sorted into Hufflepuff. “I haven’t seen a Hat Stall in a while.” All Merlin could do was shrug.

“Said I had the attributes of quite a few houses, took a while to sort me out,” Merlin said.

“You must be one hell of an interesting guy,” Cedric smiled, and Merlin laughed.

“Not really.”
The feast was absolutely magnificent, piles of food, the likes of which Merlin hadn’t seen it years. He gratefully devoured as much as he could, listening to the conversations of the people around him. It was mostly what people did in their holidays, what classes they were taking this year, what they were going to do when they left Hogwarts… but there were a few hushed conversations about the events of the World Cup. Merlin tried to listen in on them while appearing to be intently concentrating on his trifle, when Professor Dumbledore stood up and the hall immediately went silent.

“It is my unfortunate duty to announce that this year, the Inter-House Quidditch Tournament will not be taking place,” he said, and there were no angrier people than Fred and George Weasley. Dumbledore raised his hands in an effort to placate the crowd. “Because a much more interesting and exciting event is taking place. I have the honour of telling you, that the illustrious Triwizard Tournament will be held at Hogwarts this year!” he said. Fred and George Weasley went from angrily yelling to excitedly murmuring.

“Triwizard Tournament? No way,” Cora hissed under her breath, eyes glittering with excitement.

“Two other wizarding schools will be joining us – the students of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, arriving in October. It is also my painful duty to tell you that due to the danger of the situations, only students over seventeen will be able to compete,” Dumbledore said.

“That’s rubbish!” The Weasley twins yelled, angry again. Cedric had just moved closer over the table to excitedly chat with Cora about the tournament.

“Are you gonna enter?” he asked.

“ Heck yes!” Cora said excitedly. “I’ve read so much about the Triwizard Tournament, it’s dangerous as hell but the prize is a thousand Galleons, can you imagine having that much money? You’d be practically set for the rest of your life!”

“The Triwizard Tournament actually began in Russia—“ Pavel began to say, but he was cut off by Cora.

“Yes, of course it was, along with Quidditch, Dumbledore’s parents and Gringotts. What isn’t from Russia?” she sighed, and Merlin got the idea that this was a very common argument between the two.
“What about you, Morgan? Are you gonna enter?” Cedric asked. Merlin looked into the boy’s eyes and an image came to his mind – spread eagle on the dark grass, glowing cup just out of his reach, eyes horribly wide open, unseeing, dead. Cedric was the Hogwarts champion, he realized, and Cedric was the one who was going to die.

“Definitely,” Merlin said, and Cedric grinned. Dumbledore sent everyone off after the chatting died down a little, and Pavel sneaked a few tarts into his pockets before the food dematerialized from the table.

“I don’t know why you’ve got to steal that food,” Cora sighed as they headed down a passageway with the other Hufflepuffs. “We’re a corridor away from the kitchens.”

“So it’s a crime to be hungry now?” Pavel accused.

“I’m not saying that!” she argued back, and Cedric gave a long-suffering sigh but winked at Merlin. The two continued to bicker as they arrived just in front of a seemingly normal suit of armour, bar the Hufflepuff crest chiseled onto its chest.

“Honour,” Cedric said, and the knight moved out of the way to reveal a cleverly concealed door, the handle only visible when the knight stepped aside. Cedric pushed the door open, and they arrived in a lovely common room.

The Hufflepuff common room was large and spacious, and surprisingly classy. The walls were a light custard yellow, the same colour as the squishy couches that were dotted around the room, and all of the fixtures and accessories in the room were black – including the roaring, magically enlarged fireplace. A few black study tables were scattered around the room, and on the far wall, large bay windows were covered with curtains of a yellow-and-black damask pattern. Merlin could just imagine how it would be on a sunny day with the curtains pulled back, sunlight streaming through the large windows, giving the room a bright and happy feel. He was also sure that from the angle of the room, they’d have a view straight onto the Quidditch pitch. They must’ve been a few stories up, and when he pushed the curtains aside, he saw the glittering Black Lake just on the right.

“Thoughts?” Cora asked, her arms wide as she turned around.

“It’s amazing,” Merlin said, awe in his voice. He couldn’t get enough of just how well decorated the room was. He had to admit to himself that ever since he’d seen the tacky yellow-and-black robes that Ludo Bagman wore, he’d assumed that the Hufflepuff common room would be just as garish. It was
surprisingly pleasant, especially when he saw that there was a large bookshelf on one of the walls, quite a few books already on it.

“Community bookshelf,” Cedric said. “It’s been an idea in Hufflepuff house for centuries. People place their unwanted and unneeded books here; both school texts and not, and then set up a simple rule: take a book, leave a book. It’s an honesty system that’s worked for years in our house.” Merlin smiled, and knew that the books he had buried at the bottom of his trunk would be a welcome addition to the shelf. “Anyway, we’d better get to bed, it’ll be a long day tomorrow.”

They bid Cora goodnight and headed up to the boys’ dormitory, which was absolutely massive. There were at least thirty black doors lining the walls, each engraved with a golden number. Cedric and Pavel led Merlin into room number seventeen, where their trunks were already waiting for them. There were five beds to a room, squishy double beds with yellow comforters and around eight pillows a bed, all in different yellow and black patterns. The walls by each bed were adorned with different posters and pictures, some of them moving and some of them not.

Merlin spied his trunk at the foot of what was now his bed, a brand new pair of Hufflepuff robes and uniform waiting for him, including a scarf and beanie.

“How in Avalon’s name did they know that I’d become friends with you lot?” Merlin said in disbelief, and Cedric laughed.

“Absolutely no idea,” he said. Merlin headed over to his trunk and opened it, pulling his satchel out first, followed by his pajamas and toiletries. He was glad that he’d compartmentalized his trunk, as there were no closets to hang his things in. There was a smaller bookshelf for everyone’s books, but since Merlin had quite a few personal books, he elected to keep them in his trunk. He tucked his plain black robes into the bottom of his trunk and placed his Hufflepuff ones on top. Changing into his pajamas, Merlin crawled into his bed, which honestly felt like lying on what candyfloss tasted like.

“These beds are heaven,” he sighed, and Cedric laughed from somewhere in the room.

The door opened and another boy came in, quite large and with hair that looked as though it could never be tamed.

“Hey Rob, meet Morgan. Morgan, Rob Carter,” Cedric introduced. Merlin waved a hand, and the guy smiled and launched himself onto his bed, bouncing a few times on the squishy mattress.
“I’ve been looking forward to these all summer,” Rob sighed, burrowing into his blankets.

“They’re Hogwarts’ best kept secrets,” Cedric agreed.

“Probably from Russia,” Merlin found himself mumbling, and Cedric barked out a laugh. Pavel rolled his eyes and pulled out a copy of a book in Russian from his trunk. Twenty minutes of conversation later, the final member of their dorm entered – dark skinned and muscular with a buzzcut of ebony black hair. He had kind eyes and blindingly white teeth.

“Hey, man!” Cedric said, hi-fiving him as he walked past. “How was your summer?”

“Pretty good, headed over to Cali to meet up with the rest of the family, played some lacrosse, you know how it is,” he said in a deep, soothing voice. “Carlos met a new guy and decided to stay over there this time, lucky he’s already graduated, he would’ve had a tough time deciding between Hogwarts and his new crush.”

“Good for him,” Cedric said with a smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. “Oh! We’ve got a new dorm mate, Morgan Emery, transfer student.”

“Saw you at the sorting, took a while,” the new guy said.

“Couldn’t decide where to put me,” Merlin explained with a shrug.

“Name’s Vernon Summers, everyone calls me Vern,” he said, and Merlin nodded. Vern headed over to his bed and sat down heavily, stretching his neck as it popped a few times on both sides. After about half an hour of idle conversation, the lights were turned off and Merlin quickly fell into a deep sleep, though troubled by dreams of his future visions. It had seemed much easier to deal with when he didn’t know Cedric, who was so kind and caring. Merlin could tell that they were going to become good friends, and he just hoped that he’d be able to prevent the death of his new friend just as much as he hoped to stop Voldemort from coming back.
Merlin awoke in that strange way where you’re still tired but immediately aware, opening his eyes to the wooden ceiling, warm and comfortable in his bed. He was almost surrounded by pillows, and from the soft sounds of snoring at least one person was already awake and gone. He checked his watch – 6am, far too early to a teenage boy to be getting up, he reasoned, wanting to stay in bed longer. He elected to ignore the tiny voice in the back of his head that reminded him that he wasn’t a teenager and hadn’t been one for a long time, and he used to get up earlier than this on weekends anyway.

As quietly as possible, Merlin changed into his new robes, grabbed his satchel and snuck out of his dorm and into the common room. The sun had just come up over the horizon, the shades in the sky reminding him of one of the final days he’d spent at his home, watching over Arthur like he had every day for hundreds of years. Leaning against the large windows, Merlin felt an iron ball of guilt sit heavily in the pit of his stomach, tendrils sneaking out and grabbing hold of his organs, making him uncomfortable and like he couldn’t breathe. He’d sworn to himself that he’d look over the lake and wait for Arthur to come back, would never leave until he did.

And now he was here. In a school for teenage wizards, having fun and making new friends when he should be looking out for his number one priority, waiting for his king to come back. Avalon, he was horrible.

“Alright there, Morgan?” a familiar voice asked, and Merlin turned to see Cora looking at him with a reassuring smile.

“Fine… just, I broke a promise I made to a friend by coming here, and I can’t help feeling guilty,” he said honestly. He was sick of the lying and maybe just by telling a few truths here and there, that guilt wouldn’t pile up and weigh him down like it had in the past, like at Camelot, where everyday he’d been holding it in and trying not to burst apart in front of Arthur.

“I’m sorry. Where’s your friend?” Cora asked sympathetically.
“Far away,” Merlin sighed, staring out over the school grounds, noticing that there was already someone flying around on the Quidditch pitch, quite adeptly too. Cora stood next to him for a few minutes in silence as the sun fully rose over the grounds, the dew making the grass glisten, and the smooth surface of the Black Lake was broken by a single tentacle waving above the water.

“We could probably go and get breakfast now, it’s nice to have another early riser around,” Cora said with a smile. “Pavel doesn’t wake up until at least ten minutes before the end of breakfast and Cedric is always a bit erratic with his sleeping patterns. Acute insomnia or something, it sucks, but usually he just heads to the kitchens and gets a hot chocolate or something. The Prefects out don’t mind, he’s a star pupil anyway.” Merlin smiled and followed her out of the common room, only vaguely recognizing the route she took to get them to the Great Hall.

The hall was mostly empty, only a handful of students from every house at the tables, yet the teacher’s table was mostly full already, with a few exceptions. Merlin sat down next to Cora and helped himself to a bowl of porridge and some orange juice, and noticed that she piled her plate with everything she could get her hands on.

Cedric came in about twenty minutes later when most of the students had begun to file in, and his hair was mussed and his eyes tired, but he still gave them a bright smile. Rob and Vernon came in after that, piling their plates high with mostly bacon, and true to Cora’s words, Pavel came rushing in, white blonde hair sticking up in all directions as he practically collapsed at the table.

“In Russia we don’t have to wake up this early,” he mumbled into the wooden table, and everyone let out a snort of laughter. Professor Sprout came along the tables handing out timetables, tutting at the state of Pavel’s hair. A groan emanated from Merlin’s nearby vicinity as everyone realized that they had Potions with the Slytherins first period.

“They don’t hate us as much as they hate Gryffindor, but they’ve made it well aware that they think we’re a bunch of idiots,” Cora explained at Merlin’s confused look.

“They sound like lovely people,” Merlin said.

“Some of them are,” Cedric said defensively. “It’s just that most of them believe that they have to live up to the stereotype of their house, and they’re worried that if they show any type of respect to anyone not Slytherin, they’ll get beat up or something.” It looked like he personally knew a few of those people, and Merlin sighed.
“Why can’t everyone just get along? It’s not that difficult,” he groaned. He remembered the times where there was a rivalry between Camelot and the Druids, just like the rivalry between Slytherin and the other houses. Merlin’s little group headed up to the common room to retrieve the books they’d need for the day, and then headed down to the dungeons for their first class. Merlin was hoping that he’d be good at Potions; he’d worked with Gaius for long enough to know that following exact instructions and measurements were paramount.

Cora and Pavel sat at their table, Cedric and Rob behind them, and Vernon helpfully had an empty seat next to him, and he was more than happy to let Merlin join him there. The dungeon filled up with yellow and green robes, the class clearly divided between the houses, except for one pair up the very front of the classroom, who had moved as far away from each other as possible without falling out of their chairs.

As soon as Professor Snape swept his way into the classroom, everyone immediately went quiet and looked at him.

“Today you will be brewing the Draught of Living Death to prepare for your NEWT exams at the end of the school year. It requires just under an hour to brew, and you have just under an hour of the lesson left. Whatever you have in your cauldron at the end you will stopper and give to me, if it is incorrect you will be writing a foot-long essay on what you have done wrong and how to properly brew it. Begin,” the man said, waving his wand towards the chalkboard. Instructions and measurements wrote themselves onto the board in neat, slanting handwriting.

It didn’t take long of measuring out ingredients for Merlin to realize that his sense of balance was greatly affected by it – he could measure out exact weights and ingredients with ease, and when he noticed that his potion was going too far one way, he would add something in to balance it out, even if it wasn’t in the book. Vernon was looking at his cauldron with awe – Vernon’s was looking alright, he’d been following instructions, but he didn’t have the sixth sense that Merlin had.

It was rather soothing, Merlin thought, chopping up and weighing and stirring, that he really didn’t need to fully concentrate on what he was doing, losing himself in a calm, serene zone of tranquility. He didn’t even notice Snape coming along the rows, sniping at everyone’s potions, until the man was standing right behind him.

“Morgan Emery, the transfer student,” he said in a slow drawl, and Merlin nodded, not daring to take his eyes off the measurement of belladonna dust. There were a few seconds of intense silence, Snape obviously trying to find something to call him out on, and was unable to do so.

“Have you had any prior experience or training in Potions?” he asked.
“No, sir,” Merlin replied, stirring his cauldron six times counter-clockwise before adding in an improvised clockwise stir to balance it out, and the potion immediately changed to the correct colour.

“Don’t lie to me,” Snape hissed, disbelieving Merlin as the potion was brewed perfectly right in front of him. Merlin supposed that it did seem unlikely that a new student with no prior experience in Potion making could make a perfect Draught of Living Death.

“I’m not sir, I did help out an uncle of mine for a few months, but nothing as complex as this. I’ve just got a good eye for balance,” Merlin defended calmly, and he noticed that his four friends in front of him were all looking back at the conversation. Snape remained behind him until the end of the lesson, standing uncomfortably close and almost breathing down his neck as though trying to intimidate him. Merlin however remained calm under scrutiny, and with only a minute to the end of the lesson, the potion turned the flawless shade of onyx black with the final stir.

He could practically feel Snape frown, then the professor swept his way back up to the front of the class, where he conjured up the stopper bottles for their potions. It seemed that every student had taken notice of Merlin’s talent with Potions and the professor watching over him, because he was nearly tripped up four times on the way back to his cauldron by the Slytherins. He carefully scooped up his potion into the bottle and corked it, inking his name on the label. He was nearly back to Snape’s table when an errant foot stuck out and he tripped slightly, just enough for the bottle to fly out of his hand and smash on the floor.

“Are you really so jealous of my ability that you want us all to get killed?” Merlin asked the kid. The mess was cleaned up with a wave of his wand, and he took another stopper bottle back to his cauldron. This time he managed to return it in one piece, and he then left the classroom with Cora fuming next to him.

“How could those idiots do that? Yes, trip up the guy who’s carrying the only potion in the room that could successfully kill us,” she murmured sarcastically, and Cedric put a calming arm around her shoulders.

“That’s why they’re not in Ravenclaw,” he joked, and Cora barked out a laugh. The two of them took further off down the corridor, while Merlin followed them on his way to his first Transfiguration class. He hung back with Vernon, who was fiddling with the lid on his ink pot.

“I swear lids have a personal hatred for me,” he muttered, finally screwing on the lid tight enough that it wouldn’t leak out all through his bag. “You’re amazing at Potions by the way, Morgan,” he complimented.
“Thanks,” was all Merlin could say.

“Is it true that you don’t have any experience? I mean I’ve been taking Potions for six years and I’m nowhere near as good as you, hell, Cedric isn’t as good as you and he’s always been top of the class,” Vernon asked.

“It’s honestly true, I helped out my uncle sometimes with his potions and stuff, but it’s the first time I’ve ever done proper Potions,” Merlin replied. Cedric and Cora suddenly disappeared up ahead, and Merlin stopped, a little confused.

“Tapestry shortcut,” Pavel explained, appearing behind him like he’d apparated, and pulled the fabric aside to show a narrow path that Cedric and Cora were walking down, their voices carrying back through the hallway. Merlin grinned as he went inside, wondering how many secret passages Hogwarts had, and if he could find all of them. They arrived at their Transfiguration class and quickly filed in with the Gryffindors, Merlin finding a spare desk at the back he could sit at.

Professor McGonagall entered the room shortly after that and explained the outlines of the year’s lessons, gave instructions, and then came back to talk to Merlin.

“Mr Emery, I understand that you haven’t done any Transfiguration before, or at least not any professionally taught, am I correct?” she asked. Merlin was slightly discomforted under her gaze as she peered at him over the top of her glasses – it was eerily like the look Gaius gave him when he knew Merlin wasn’t telling him something.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said respectfully.

“Then if you find today’s lesson difficult, I will permit you to go back through the work for the previous years and work up to what we are doing. You will, however, have to be caught up to this year’s workload for your NEWT examinations at the end of the year. Mr Diggory and Mr Kaidanovsky are extremely talented in the Transfiguration field, however, and I am sure that they will be more than willing to help you should you need it.” She gave him a comforting smile then, and she moved back to the front of the class. From the desk in front of him, Pavel gave Merlin a comforting smile as he waved his wand and turned a vase into a living swan.

Merlin knew that newer magic was a little difficult for him to adjust to – many of his spells had been difficult for him to use, even though Old Magic came to him as easily and naturally as breathing. So tapping his vase and muttering a Latin incantation wasn’t really doing much for him. He did swear that his vase got a bit more of a feathery pattern on it, but he couldn’t be too sure. He was just about to give up and use a bit of his own magic when-
“Mr Pendragon, you may have the name of a king but you are not one yourself, so stop whatever vulgar act you are attempting to get away with behind my back and get on with your work,” McGonagall warned sternly.

Merlin’s eyes snapped up to familiar laughter and an impossibly familiar face – exactly the same as he remembered it. Arthur Pendragon, golden haired and blue eyed, Gryffindor robes reminiscent of his red cape. Arthur scoffed and gave a little mock bow, then tapped his wand on his vase, watching it immediately transform itself into a fluffy swan with full, pure plumage. His friend clapped him on the shoulder.

Merlin was frozen, wand half raised as he stared, eyes drinking in a face he hadn’t seen in decades, in centuries, in so long he’d nearly forgotten what it looked like outside of his dreams. He’d forgotten how the light could shine off Arthur’s hair and make them look like individual strands of gold, how his eyes were the colour of deep, treasured emeralds. Forgotten how his face lit up and his eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed, even forgotten the cocky expression that could grace his face.

He only vaguely noted that Arthur had a glittering Prefect badge on his chest, as the boy threw his head back and laughed, a sound he hadn’t heard in forever.

“Morgan, you okay?” a concerned voice asked. Merlin dragged his eyes away from the one person he wanted to continue looking at more than anyone in the world. Cora, Pavel and Cedric were peering at him, concerned.

“I... yeah...” Merlin muttered. He could hear Vernon and Rob arguing about something a few desks up.

“Do you know him?” Cedric asked, nodding his head in Arthur’s direction.

“I... he just, reminds me a lot about someone I used to know...” Merlin murmured, still extremely shell-shocked. Cora stepped forward and put a comforting hand on his arm.

“Your far, far away friend?” she asked gently, and Merlin nodded with a smile that barely reached his lips. Another laugh emerged from Arthur Pendragon, and Merlin’s eyes immediately snapped over to him, drinking up the sound of his laughter and every single detail on his face, the colour of his skin and the way he twirled his wand between his fingers like he’d been doing it for years, and he probably had, and Arthur and magic was weird but also right in ways he couldn’t explain.
The rest of the lesson passed in a blur, and any hope Merlin had at transfiguring his vase vanished. He just couldn’t take his eyes off Arthur. In between the Arthur-king-friend-love-protect and magic-Arthur-wrong-right-always he was wondering how Arthur had been reborn, how he’d gotten into Hogwarts, and how he’d missed it.

Then just as the bell resounded throughout the stone castle, a memory suddenly cropped up in front of him. One morning eighteen years ago when he’d awoken with a massive rush of magic thrumming through him, every object in his room levitating as he was hauled back to consciousness. He’d known then, been so sure that Arthur was back, and had run outside and stood by Avalon Lake all day, waiting for a ripple in the surface that would announce Arthur’s arrival, his king rising out of the watery depths to be reunited with him. Arthur had never come out though, and Merlin had resigned himself to the fact that he must have dreamed it.

What he had never dreamed, however, was that Arthur would have been reincarnated, much less with magic. Arthur and his friends left, the swans still confusedly squawking about on their desks, adjusting to their newfound existence, Merlin suspected. He hurriedly followed them out, leaving Cedric and the others to scramble after him.

“Morgan, where’re you going?” Cedric yelled after him. Merlin ignored him and kept following Arthur, outside into the last rays of summer sun. Arthur and his friends gathered in a circle, talking in hushed tones, and then all turned to face a Slytherin student on his own, who was pale and looked as though he couldn’t throw a stone, but his facial expression suggested that he’d have no trouble throwing an Unforgivable Curse at him.

The Slytherin stood up, hand flying to the wand in his pocket, but Arthur was much too quick, and had disarmed him before he could raise it. The Slytherin glared at him as Arthur’s friends laughed, and this was starting to feel vaguely familiar. Merlin could feel Cora and the others come up behind him, but they didn’t say a word, watching what was going on just as intently.

“That all you got, Martin?” Arthur taunted, and the Slytherin’s face screwed up in anger. He turned around to reach for his fallen wand, which was a good few metres behind him, when Arthur sent another spell at him, causing the boy to fall to the grass. A few other students were watching from a distance as Martin tried to pull himself back to his feet. He finally got there when Arthur sent a jelly-legs jinx that he just managed to jump away from.

Another stunning spell and what looked suspiciously like a body-binder curse later, Martin had given up on finding his wand and was just attempting to avoid the spells and jinxes being sent more rapidly his way, zigzagging in a rather ridiculous manner through the grass. Eventually a leg-locker curse got him and caused him to fall down at Merlin’s feet. Another stunning spell was sent at him, but within a split second, Merlin had his wand out and had blocked the spell with ease. He’d been here before,
he knew. It was almost uncanny how similar the situation was to when they first met.

“Hey, c’mon that’s enough,” Merlin said, locking eyes with Arthur.

“What?” Arthur demanded, confused with unrecognizing eyes.

“You’ve had your fun, my friend,” Merlin argued back. Arthur scoffed and walked towards him, evident swagger in his step, his cronies chuckling from where they stood. As Arthur approached, Merlin could feel Cedric and the others take an awkward, unsure step back.

“Do I know you?” Arthur asked.

“I’m Morgan,” Merlin said, holding out his hand. Arthur batted it aside with a scoff.

“Then I don’t know you, yet you call me your friend?” Arthur mused, and oh Avalon, Merlin thought, this Arthur was so much like the prat he’d first met. It caused a deep longing and hurt inside him, burrowing through his joy at seeing Arthur again like a mole burrowing underground.

“Obviously, that was my mistake,” Merlin said, coming almost toe-to-toe with Arthur. “I’d never have a friend who could be such an ass.” Silence shrouded the immediate area, and Merlin could almost hear Rob gulp behind him. Hushed whispers emanated from the crowd of people who were watching nearby.

“Or I one that could be so stupid,” Arthur said, eyes boring into his. “Tell me Morgan, are you new around here?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Merlin said. “Are you supposed to be impressive, or something?” he asked, pointedly ignoring the shining badge on Arthur’s robes. The blonde laughed, and barely even noticed that Martin had un-cursed himself and had dashed off to find his wand.

“Actually, yes,” Arthur said, hissing it through his teeth.

“Why, are you supposed to be Head Boy?”
“Actually, I’m Head Prefect,” Arthur replied, eyes narrowed. Merlin inwardly laughed, and wondered how the hell Dumbledore could ever make somebody as arrogant and cocky as Arthur Head Prefect. Mind you, he’d made James Potter Head Boy, and that had been just a strange decision.

“Well I realized you were an ass, I just didn’t realize you were a royal one,” Merlin taunted, and a nerve jumped in Arthur’s jaw as the murmuring got louder and the crowd got larger.

“I could take you down in one spell,” Arthur threatened, fingers tightening expertly around his wand. Merlin smirked.

“I could take you down in less,” he teased. Arthur’s jaw twitched, he looked around to laugh with his friends, and before anyone could even take notice, he’d raised his wand and sent a stunning spell at Merlin. It should’ve immediately incapacitated him from the short distance between them, yet the spell hadn’t even hit him. It repelled off an invisible barrier, and Merlin smirked.

“You missed,” he teased. There was a flurry of movement, and within seconds, he and Arthur had their wands raised and were hurling spell after spell at each other, the crowd dispersing to get away from the ricocheting jinxes and curses. Their duel was completely non-verbal, two talented wizards facing off with each other, aiming to injure yet not a single spell hit the other. Arthur had just sent what promised to be an explosive and terrifying bat-bogey hex, when a familiar voice shouted at them, halting all movement.

“Pendragon! Emery! What is going on here?” McGonagall yelled, striding onto the grass. “A duel where so many people could be hurt? What are you thinking!?” Merlin immediately lowered his wand, and Arthur did so reluctantly.

“Professor-” Arthur began.

“Quiet, Pendragon! I should have expected more from a Prefect, especially one in my own house! Twenty points from Gryffindor,” she shouted, “And as for you, Emery, I’ll give you a warning only because you are new here, but know that if I ever catch you having an unauthorized duel I will not hesitate to take points off Hufflepuff!” Merlin nodded in understanding, and with a final piercing glare McGonagall was striding back into the castle.

Arthur narrowed his eyes at Merlin and walked back to his friends, and Merlin also headed back to Cedric and the others, unable to keep the small smile off his face, where he was immediately
bombarded with questions.

“What the hell was that?”

“Where did you learn to duel like that?”

“How did you do that?”

“Why did you do that?”

“I thought you didn’t know him!”

Merlin laughed as their voices began to overlap, and he pocketed his wand again, confident that Arthur wouldn’t sink so low as to attack someone with their back turned after he’d just had 20 points deducted on the first day.

“Let’s just say that he *definitely* reminds me of the friend I used to know,” Merlin said with a chuckle.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Pavel gushed. “Arthur’s top of the year in Defense Against the Dark Arts, undefeated in duels and had the highest OWL and NEWT marks for the subject in the history of the school! What you did was… amazing!”

“As amazing as Russia?” Merlin joked, and everyone burst into laughter, the tense atmosphere disappearing. The questioning stopped as everyone headed back inside to Charms, their break over.

They were just entering the classroom with the Ravenclaws when Cora brushed up against Merlin and murmured, “There was certainly *some* chemistry there.” Merlin laughed and walked into the classroom, blood thrumming through his veins like it never had before, the guilt gone from his insides that had been replaced by a feeling of weightlessness, like he’d float off into the sky at any moment.

His destiny was here.
October came quickly, and soon everyone was buzzing at the arrival of the two other schools, who would be arriving later in the day. Merlin had thankfully been able to avoid any more confrontations with Arthur, but kept a close eye on him. He was trying hard to convince himself that these were two completely different people, but it was difficult. He wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around Arthur and sob, apologize for letting him die, and be with his king again. He’d accepted that he was in love with Arthur quite a few centuries ago, even if it wasn’t reciprocated.

Although the schools would be officially introduced at the dinner feast, everyone’s classes were interrupted when a giant carriage flown in by huge palomino pegasi flew straight past the windows to land on the front lawn. Similarly, a few hours later everyone was distracted from learning when a great mast erupted from the centre of the Black Lake, followed by an entire ship.

The school was buzzing with excitement by the time dinner came around, and Merlin excitedly joined his friends at the Hufflepuff table, waiting impatiently for all the students to file in.

“I’ve heard that all of the Beauxbatons students wear silk,” Cora scoffed.

“Silk? In the middle of autumn? They do know how cold it is around here, right?” Rob asked in disbelief.

The conversation continued on for a few more minutes until the doors of the Great Hall slammed shut behind the final student, and Dumbledore stood at his podium. There were several more chairs
beside the teacher’s table, where Mr Crouch and Ludo Bagman were sitting, both polar opposite in personality. The excited murmuring died down to complete silence when Dumbledore raised his hand.

“I would like to introduce to you the students of Beauxbatons Academy and their Headmistress, Madam Maxine,” Dumbledore announced. The doors opened and a graceful array of periwinkle-blue clad males and females came filing into the Great Hall, poised and in formation. The girls did a performance for the boys, and everyone’s eyes were on them and the younger girl at the front performing incredible gymnastics feats, until the huge woman entering the room took their attention away.

“Bloody hell,” Vernon swore under his breath. Madam Maxine must have been at least a foot taller than Hagrid, and that’s saying something, Merlin thought, watching the woman enter. She wore a slim fitting suit of something that looked to be dragon or snake skin with fur around the collar, and her face was handsome and wide. Everyone clapped when the Beauxbatons’ performance ended, and Madam Maxine shook Dumbledore’s hand and took a seat at the High Table.

“Next, the men of Durmstrang Academy, and their Headmaster Igor Karkaroff!”

Next, a chanting drumbeat sounded throughout the Great Hall, and everyone whirled around to see the Durmstrang boys in robes of dark blood red, fur around their collars, beating staffs against the ground in an impressive display. Merlin could almost feel something magical stir up in his bones as he watched them, adrenalin pumping with every beat of the chant. They too performed some aerobatic feats, and their headmaster entered behind them, furs and robes of grey and silk. Behind him, with a gasp that resounded throughout the room, came the heavy-browed Viktor Krum.

“That’s Krum!” Cedric gasped as the international star passed right by their table to join the other Durmstrang students. Everyone cheered for the schools, and they took their seats – the Beauxbatons students at the Ravenclaw table, and the Durmstrang students at the Slytherin. Merlin could see Ron Weasley ogling a fair-haired Beauxbatons girl, and saw Harry narrow his eyes, where across the room Viktor Krum was seated next to Draco Malfoy.

The feast materialized on the table, and Merlin noticed that their were foreign foods for all of the foreign students, including what looked like a black sort of blob fish. Cora dared Pavel to try it, and he did, turning green and almost spitting it out from the moment it entered his mouth. He swallowed it with a dramatic shudder, making everybody at their table laugh.

“The texture… it is like… slippery chicken,” Pavel admitted, and he was unfortunately overheard by a Beauxbatons girl, who glared at him. “Oops.”
The feast was fantastic, and Merlin could barely fit in his slice of cheesecake at the end of it. Finally, the food disappeared from the tables and everyone was chatting amiably, until Dumbledore and Mr Crouch stood up. The room once again went silent.

“The Triwizard Tournament Champions will be decided by an impartial and unwavering judge,” Mr Crouch announced. A large golden casket was wheeled into the room, and with a tap of his wand, it almost seemed to melt away to reveal a large, almost bland-looking cup.

“The Goblet of Fire,” he said. As the words were spoken, a large blue flame suddenly bloomed from within the depths of the goblet. “All who wish to enter, and who are over the age of seventeen, will simply write their names onto a piece of parchment and drop it into the Goblet. The results will be announced in three days’ time.”

“I’m going for it,” Cedric said excitedly, whirling around to whisper with everyone.

“Me too,” said Cora. “You?”

“I’m not sure…” Vernon said with a twist of his mouth. Rob and Pavel had the same reaction, Pavel once again muttering something that could probably be Russia related, and they all turned to Merlin.

“You said you were going to enter, didn’t you?” Cora asked.

“Definitely,” Merlin said with a false smile. On the inside, he knew it was to right the balance of the world and to keep his new friend alive. The question was how he was going to guarantee that his name was going to be pulled out of the Goblet. Would an object like that recognize his name as worthier than the rest of the Hogwarts candidates, or would he have to place a charm on it to trick his name into coming out?

Merlin went to bed that night with his head spinning, multiple timelines spreading out in front of him like a rapidly growing tree, its roots growing and multiplying with every minute. With every main root that sprang out, at least ten other splintered off and separated into a completely new chain of events. Merlin didn’t know exactly what those events were, but he knew that they’d lead to the events in the graveyard in the end, the only difference being if it would be him or Cedric there with Harry.

The thought process of cascading causation, he often referred to it as, allowed him to view and experience every single possible outcome and each chain of events leading to and from each event, a
process that was long, arduous and tiring but ultimately worth it in the end. He didn’t sleep at all, lying awake in his sinfully soft bed, working out what he should do to ensure that events stayed the same, except with his presence in the graveyard, hopefully changing the future beyond that instance.

He’d learned however that both action and non-action could have differing results in a predicted future. Mordred’s escape and betrayal, for instance, would never have happened had Merlin not interfered, trying to prevent that exact thing from happening. If he hadn’t done anything and let the future unfold, it would have changed the future predicted to him, which was a confusing concept in of itself. However the opposite could also happen, if he didn’t do anything, the events would most likely continue to unfold ending with Cedric dead in a graveyard, heartbroken friends and family, and the return of Lord Voldemort.

Shit, this was more difficult that he’d anticipated. He hated the future.

“Morgan, wake up!” a voice said, calling him from the depths of his intense pondering. Merlin turned around in bed to see Cedric with hair mussed and a sleepy smile on his face. “I want to get breakfast before the Durmstrangs eat it all.”

With yet another failed attempt at waking up Pavel, the four dorm mates met Cora in the common room, and they headed down to the Great Hall.

“Speaking of food, you guys’ve still gotta tell me how to get into the kitchens,” Merlin said as they all sat down, piling pancakes onto their plates. It was a Saturday and everything was calm, the proper weekend breakfast food coming out instead of the usual amount of porridge and eggs.

“We’ll go down for a celebratory feast on Monday night for the Hogwarts Champion,” Cora said with a devilish grin. “I hope it’s a Hufflepuff.”

“I just hope it’s not a Slytherin,” Rob muttered. Nearly all of the pancakes were gone by the time Pavel stumbled into the room, robes half hanging off his shoulders. He poured himself the largest amount of coffee his goblet could handle, and sat bleary-eyed, staring off into nothing for a good five minutes.

“We’ve got to write that essay for Professor Merchant on the basic elements of Alchemy and the one for Charms as well,” Cedric pointed out.

“Don’t forget the two-foot-long Potions essay on what we all screwed up last lesson,” Cora muttered
“I’ve got a foot-long for Magical Theory,” Rob said. “Honestly, I don’t know why I’m taking it, Old Magic isn’t even used anymore, and there’s basically nothing on it,” he huffed. Merlin’s eyes snapped up.

“They teach Old Magic here?” he asked, suddenly interested.

“Well it’s an extra-curricular elective, meaning that you’ve got another class to add on top of your other subjects, and that’s one part of it, yeah. It explores Magical Theory, hence the name, including Old Magic, current magic, the linguistics of modern spells and I think some weird Muggle science related thing later on in the year?” Rob explained. “You’d probably like it, it’s really interesting, even if most of it isn’t relevant at the moment.”

“I’d definitely be interested. Where can I sign up?” Merlin asked, drowning his last pancake in strawberry syrup.

“Just come to the next class, I think it’s during your free period on Tuesday, and you can sign up there. Professor Sinistra teaches it on top of Astronomy,” Rob explained. Merlin thought the subject was fascinating, but he was also interested in how much of Old Magic was still known to this day and if any of it was correct or not.

“When’re you guys going to submit your names?” Pavel asked, finally speaking up.

“Does tonight sound good? After our essay cram, of course. If we get it all done today then we can spend tomorrow relaxing,” Cedric asked, looking around the table. There were general nods of agreement from everyone.

“Why aren’t you a Ravenclaw?” Merlin asked quietly, and Cedric laughed.

“The Hat did have a difficult time, but apparently my loyalty won out in the end,” he said with a smile.

“Me too, apparently my bravery is actually recklessness and intelligence was not something I was born with,” Merlin admitted, and his group roared with laughter. It was a nice laughter though, it made him feel included and like he was making other people happy, rather than any mocking
laughter he’d probably receive at any of the other house tables. He really couldn’t believe how amazingly lovely his friends were in such a short space of time. He hadn’t had any proper friends since Camelot, and it was so good to feel so loved again.

He did, however, feel a longing in his chest for Gwen and Gaius, for Lancelot and Gwaine and Elyan, Percival and Leon, Freya, Kilgarrah and even his Arthur, who he could see across the room but still wasn’t his.

“Well c’mon, grab your coffees to go, the weather’s supposed to be good tomorrow and I want to soak up the last rays of sun before the weather turns to shit,” Cora insisted.

“How d’you know what the weather’s going to be like tomorrow?” Rob asked.

“Trelawney said,” Cora smirked, and their group laughed again. Merlin had already heard tales of the crazy Divination teacher Trelawney, but he'd always had the strangest feeling that she was the genuine thing.

The weekend passed quickly, their group easily getting their essays done together at a large study table in the Hufflepuff common room, books spread out and an awkward array of coloured inkpots clustered in the centre, balanced on a few unneeded books. It took them a large portion of the day to write them, but since they all shared the same classes, it was easy to compare ideas and get enough information to fill their parchment. Merlin, however, didn’t have to write the Potions essay as everyone else did, as his potion ended up being perfect, but instead he had to write a Transfiguration essay on the basic principles of the subject, which was quite embarrassing. He also had a short paragraph to write for Ancient Runes, a subject that he picked up rather well too, which he took with Rob and Cora.

Trelawney apparently was right about Sunday, and Merlin found himself out on the lawns by the Black Lake, leaning up with his back against a large beech tree, soaking up the warm rays of sun, knowing that they would be the last they’d see in a very long time. He’d noticed Arthur swaggering about as well, telling off a few younger students just for kicks. He did notice, however, that he walked past Martin without even a glance towards his apparent mortal enemy. Maybe Merlin had unfortunately filled that spot.

And that again was another thing that Merlin had to worry about. Even in the modern day with a reborn Arthur, the past-king would still need him as much as he did in Camelot, but seeing as they got off to a wrong start, Merlin wasn’t sure how to go about that. He didn’t dare ask Cora, as she’d assume that he had a crush on the blonde (which wasn’t entirely incorrect), but he just wanted to be friends with Arthur again.
A person he’d missed so much in the past, someone he’d spent every day waiting for, searching for, yearning for until there seemed to be a hole in his heart that would never go away, a darkness around his soul that was perpetually reaching out for his dead king, his best friend, his confidante, his love. He needed to make up with Arthur as well.

“Come on, Morgan, you’ll miss the choosing!” Cora said with a manic grin, pulling Merlin down the stone hallways and into the Great Hall, where every table was almost full to the brim, some students electing to sit on the tables themselves. Luckily there was a small spot next to Vernon that they’d managed to save, and Cora and Merlin managed to wedge themselves in.

Cedric, Cora and himself had placed their names into the Goblet the night before. Merlin had performed a tricky little charm on his parchment, where to anyone it would simply read the name ‘Morgan Emery’, but to the Goblet and the Goblet alone, it would read ‘Merlin Emrys’. Apparently in this day and age, his name had become almost sacred, his druidic title forgotten, and surely the Goblet would realize what the parchment said and pick him. It was his only hope. (He also knew that Arthur had put his name in the Cup, which also lowered his chances of being picked, if the Goblet recognized the soul of the original Arthur Pendragon, and not just a student from his descent, like it should).

Dumbledore held his hand out as the last student sat down at the Gryffindor table, and the torches around the edges of the room flickered to a dim light, casting eerie shadows throughout the room. The atmosphere was so tense; it was like one sudden move would send everyone flinging around the room.

The Goblet’s blue fire flashed into a red flame, and a single piece of parchment flew out of the cup and into Dumbledore’s outstretched hands.

“The Beauxbatons champion is… Fleur Delacour!” he announced, and everyone clapped as the silvery-haired girl smiled and flounced towards the door past the teacher’s table. A few girls and even a few of the boys from Beauxbatons burst out into muffled sobs.

Another red flare, and the Goblet spat out another name. “The Durmstrang Champion is… Viktor Krum!”

The Durmstrang students all stamped their feet in support as Krum slouched off to the same door that Fleur had left through. “Who else would be picked?” Cora whispered. Now that the Hogwarts champion was going to be chosen, the tension in the room was most definitely palpable, Cora practically vibrating from her position next to Merlin. He felt utterly useless, the only thing he could do was cross his fingers and pray that he’d done the right thing and that he’d be picked instead of Cedric, instead of Arthur, that he could restore the balance and save the lives of everyone who would die at the hands of Lord Voldemort. He didn’t have any other choice.
Finally the Goblet flared again, and the final piece of parchment flew into Dumbledore’s outstretched hand. He read it with a strange smile on his face and announced…

“Morgan Emery!”

The Hufflepuff table launched into raucous applause and Merlin felt himself sag with relief, an iron ball of anxiety uncurling itself from his gut as everyone clapped him on the shoulder and back, Cora giving him a tight hug. Cedric winked at him as he stood up and walked past Dumbledore, past the teachers, and down into the room below where Fleur and Krum were waiting. They all introduced themselves, and Merlin knew that upstairs, Harry Potter’s name was being called.

Said Gryffindor came down the stairs a few moments later, a shell-shocked and almost nauseous expression on his face.

“Harry, are you alright?” Merlin asked, approaching the fourteen-year-old.

“I… yeah… it’s just… my name got pulled out of the Goblet of Fire,” Harry said with a soft voice, stunned expression and confused eyes.

“I… are you serious?” Merlin asked with concern. “Is that even possible? I mean you’re fourteen, your name shouldn’t have been in the Goblet in the first place. Is it even legal, for it to announce the name of a fourteen-year-old?” Merlin asked.

Just that second, the door from upstairs burst open as Dumbledore came down the stairs, flanked by McGonagall and Snape, with Karkaroff, Moody and Madam Maxine bringing up the rear.

“Harry,” Dumbledore asked calmly. “Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire?”

“No, sir,” Harry replied back, truthfully and honestly, still a touch of fear visible on his face.

“Well of course he is lying!” Madam Maxine yelled indignantly, the top of her head nearly brushing the stone ceiling of the room they stood in. She and Karkaroff began arguing with Dumbledore, and Merlin couldn’t help but put a comforting arm around Harry’s shoulders. He may have been the Boy Who Lived, been the only person to survive the Killing Curse; he may have been a Gryffindor and if
the stories were true, he may have defeated Voldemort twice already. However, he was still a terrified fourteen-year-old boy, and he was shaking under Merlin’s hand.

“I know you didn’t put your name in,” Merlin whispered to Harry, who looked up at him gratefully. “I might not have known you for very long, but I can tell you’ve had enough fame for one life.” Harry smiled at him, and after almost an hour of debate, Harry’s position in the Tournament was secured, and the four were free to go.

Merlin entered the Hufflepuff common room with almost thunderous applause, a Hufflepuff banner being draped across his shoulders and tied like a cape under his chin. Cora almost launched herself on him with happiness, tears streaming down her face. Cedric clapped him on the back, and he was enveloped by Rob, Vernon and Pavel, the last of which chattering excitedly away in his ear.

“This calls for a celebration!” Cora announced before she dashed out of the common room with a few more of her girlfriends. They arrived five minutes later with arms laden with sweets, cakes, drinks and food to pass around. Someone managed to procure a half-finished bottle of Firewhisky, and one of Cora’s friends who was very close to the Weasley twins utilized some skills to bring in some Butterbeer. The party raged on until past midnight, where even Professor Sprout couldn’t firmly tell everyone to go to bed.

“I’m very proud of you, Morgan, and I hope you do well,” she said happily, patting him on the cheek. “Hufflepuff doesn’t get a lot of recognition these days.” Merlin gave the woman a quick hug, to which she blushed at, and half-heartedly told everyone to go to bed. She also grabbed a custard cream and a pint of Butterbeer on her way out of the common room. Eventually everyone filed out to their dorm rooms at around one o’clock in the morning, and Merlin sighed as he dropped down onto his bed of clouds.

“Hey, Morgan… you know how Harry Potter’s name got pulled out of the Goblet?” Vernon asked in the silence of the room. Merlin could tell that everyone was still awake and listening. “D’you think he put it in there? I mean, he did look quite shocked.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Merlin defended. “I know him, not well, but I met him at the World Cup earlier this year. He barely wanted to be noticed there, let alone have even more fame and attention drawn to him because of this. He’s just a scared fourteen-year-old kid who doesn’t know what’s happened to him and is probably going to get an awful lot of hate because of this.”

“I talked to him there too, Portkeyed with him and the Weasleys in,” Cedric admitted in the dark. “He was as modest as can be. Played Quidditch with him last year as well, a great match aside from the fact that Dementors showed up and made him fall off his broom. He’s a good kid,” he defended.
“We’ve got to stick up for him, because nobody else is going to,” Merlin said.

There was silence for a few seconds and then, “all the other houses are going to hate him,” Rob said quietly. “I mean, Slytherin is a given, but Hufflepuff finally gets something and it’s taken away by him. The Ravenclaws will probably side with us, and there might even be a few Gryffindors who think that he’s a pompous attention-seeking git.”

“Even more reason to look out for him,” Merlin said, and the five of them soon dropped off to sleep, relief and anticipation swirling about in Merlin’s gut. Tomorrow was going to be a whole new day.
Not even two days had passed since Harry’s name was pulled out of the cup, and Merlin was already seeing some petty badges on the chests of the majority of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw house and all of Slytherin house proclaiming *Emery Rules, Potter Stinks!* Merlin found it very childish and luckily none of his friends were wearing them.

Everyone he saw wearing one he asked them to get rid of it, but he’d usually see it back on their robes a few hours later, roaring with laughter. He noticed that barely anyone was sticking up for Harry, not even his best friend, and Merlin couldn’t help but feel sorry for the kid. Fourteen years old, world famous for dead parents, and now he was getting even more negative attention.

“Emery!” a stern voice yelled. Merlin snapped out of his thoughts to see Professor McGonagall frowning at him from the front of his classroom, hands on her hips. He must’ve been spacing out in class, his vase still sitting primly on his desk, absolutely no changes to it. Merlin gave her a sheepish smile, and she approached him.

“I see that you are having trouble with your Transfiguration, perhaps you should start with something simpler? Match to a needle, perhaps?” she asked, picking up a match from the empty space next to him. Merlin could see Arthur cackling up the front of his classroom with his friends.

“It’s not that, ma’am,” he insisted. With a flick of his want, Professor McGonagall was holding a shiny, pointed needle. “It’s just that… I can’t turn a vase into a swan. I can’t turn something inanimate into an *animate*, living being. It doesn’t make any sense in my mind, there’s an imbalance there somewhere that I can’t get past.”

Surprisingly, McGonagall smiled warmly at him. “You have a very interesting way of thinking, Mr Emery, quite reminiscent of the Old Magics. Are you taking Magical Theory classes?”

“Yes I am,” Merlin nodded. “I went to my first one with Rob yesterday, but we’re still focusing on Old Magic and will be for a while.”

“Perhaps you should ask Professor Sinistra if you can borrow a book on modern magic. That may help you to understand the transformation between inanimate and animate objects and help you with your Transfiguration. For now though, you can continue on transforming inanimate to inanimate or vice versa.” With a smile, she headed back to the front of the classroom.
“She only likes you because you’re a Champion,” Cora teased.

“No she doesn’t, I’ve still got to take the exams at the end of the year, I’m not exempt from that, it’s the whole reason I came here in the first place,” Merlin replied with smirk.

“That sounds horrible,” Cora shuddered.

“Well I’ve never done an exam before, so it should be interesting,” Merlin said honestly. Oh, he’d marked exams before, but he’d never actually written one or taken part in one. He kept a mental note to ask Professor Sinistra for a book on current magic, which he still didn’t fully understand, unlike Old Magic. Anything he didn’t know about that would come to him instinctually as it had over the years, but new magic was something that he didn’t quite understand. He wasn’t sure how waving a wand and saying something in Latin would make anything happen.

As explained in his first Magical Theory class, nearly everything related to the Old Magics had disappeared throughout the years or had been burned by Uther during his reign. Professor Sinistra had explained that Old Magic was about balance and drawing magic from the world around you, while current magic was focused on magic from the self being channeled through a wand, which was a semi-sentient object.

Merlin had been extremely intrigued in the differences between them, and he’d gladly taken on the three-foot report cataloguing the differences gladly. Rob had thought he was insane, but he was obviously grateful that he had someone else to take the subject with him and help him with the report that was due in three weeks time.

Cora took his arm as the bell for the end of period ended, and their group headed to Potions, which was quickly becoming Merlin’s favourite subject. He liked how he could just completely zone out and make a potion, almost by instinct, only occasionally checking his book for ingredients and instructions. He sat down next to Vernon, and Snape entered the room from his store cupboard.

“How you will be brewing the highly controversial potion Felix Felicis. Surely you are all aware of what that is,” he drawled.

“Liquid luck!” Cedric whispered under his breath. “You might be needing some of that, Morgan.”

“This potion takes two weeks to brew, and you must be able to come in during out-of-class hours to
continue to brew this potion as per the instructions. I am not expecting any of you to be able to produce something that even resembles this potion,” Snape said, and Vernon scoffed with a look at Merlin, “but nevertheless you shall be brewing it anyway. I will be warning you now – this potion is dangerous brewed both correctly and incorrectly. Therefore you will not be taking any samples of this for yourself.”

Cora shared an awkward look with Pavel, and Merlin really wanted to know the story behind that.

“If I see that any of you have attempted to take some of this potion for yourself, I will personally put you into a month’s worth of detentions and I will not be responsible for any consequences that come from your ingestion of the potion. Is that clear?” Snape said menacingly. A chorus of yes’s resounded throughout the stone dungeon, and everybody headed to the store cupboard to get their ingredients. Many of the ingredients needed were in Snape’s personal store cupboard, so he’d brought that out for them as well.

“What was that look you shared with Pavel earlier?” Merlin whispered, and Cora let out a snort.

“We stole a couple vials of Swelling Solution last year and snuck into the kitchens to put it into some of the Slytherin’s drinks,” she snickered. “There was an entire table of swelled up Slytherins all waving their little fat fingers while rolling around on the ground like too many beach balls in a small space,” she chuckled.

“That was worth the detentions!” Pavel whispered, grabbing a few strands of unicorn hair.

“I thought pranking was the Weasley Twins’ job?” Merlin asked.

“It is, but they don’t mind when other people have the opportunity to pull something. If anything, it adds more credibility to their alibies, and it confuses teachers who try to punish them when they realize that someone else must have pulled the prank, so they aren’t punished as much,” Cora explained. She carefully measured some gold leprechaun dust into a vial, nearly dropping it as an eavesdropping Slytherin bashed into her shoulder.

Merlin gathered the last of his ingredients and headed back to his cauldron, where it was suspended over a crackling blue flame.

“Cora, do you ever feel weird being the only girl in a group of guys?” Merlin asked as he placed his ingredients down to open up his potions textbook.
“Not really,” Cora shrugged. “I mean I’ve got girlfriends of my own, it’s hard not to when you room with the same people for seven years, but I just prefer these idiots. I’m not really into the whole fawning over boys thing, y’know?” Merlin grinned as she flicked her hair back over her shoulder to begin measuring out her Niffler hair shavings.

Merlin sunk back into his usual dream zone as he began to measure out ingredients, waiting for his mermaid pool water to reach boiling temperature before he could add his four-six inch of unicorn hair. By the end of the lesson, his potion had taken on the perfect metallic mint shade that was expected, and he noted that he’d need to come in just after dinner to add in a few counter-clockwise stirs, although it looked like he needed to add two clockwise stirs in there as well, his sixth sense told him.

Looking around, he saw that Cedric’s potion was a mint-ish shade; Cora’s was a bubblegum pink that was making her scratch her head; Rob’s had turned into some sort of sludge, Pavel had a sort of mustard yellow and Vernon’s was in the general vicinity of some green shade.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Pavel muttered as they left the class. “I follow instructions exactly and it goes yellow, not even green like Cedric’s or Vern’s!” He threw up his hands in exasperation, nearly hitting an unfortunate third-year as he did it.

“Did you add the moonstone before or after the rainbow fish scales?” Merlin asked. Pavel stopped completely, Cora banging into him from behind. His face fell, and he let out a whining sound so loud a couple of first-years mistook it for a type of school siren.

“My potion is ruined! I may as well not even bother going back in!” Pavel groaned.

“I think if you add in two dragonfly wings and a fox hair, it should counteract the effects of your potion,” Merlin said with a soft voice, his eyes unfocused as he did the math in his head, and it seemed right.

“I… how do you do that?” Pavel said again, and everyone laughed.

Merlin helped his friends with their potion for the next two weeks, often the one with the painful duty of waking the others in the middle of the night to go an add a single Japanese cat hair to their potion or dragging them out in the middle of breakfast to stir their potions exactly four times clockwise and three and a half times counter-clockwise. By the end of the two weeks, Merlin’s potion was clear like glass and the perfect viscosity. Cedric and Pavel’s potions were extremely
close, Rob and Vernon had managed to get theirs to the right thickness but they were still a slightly misty colour, and it didn’t matter how much he tried to help Cora, her potion still ended up as a watery sapphire mess.

“I don’t even know how you can get that so wrong,” Merlin sighed as Cora happily handed in her blue potion to Professor Snape. Merlin was sure that if the man ever expressed emotions, he’d be absolutely bewildered, especially since he’d had to tell Merlin off three times for giving her help.

“It’s a talent,” Cora said, flipping her long black hair over her shoulder. The group all filed into the Hufflepuff common room and commandeered their usual corner table, thick black cushions on the chairs almost as comfortable as their beds. Rob immediately pulled out his Astronomy paper and began to scribble over his page in what could barely be described as words.

“I- Rob, you still haven’t finished that? It’s due tomorrow!” Vernon exclaimed. Rob sent him a dirty look and continued to label planets and stars, leaving smears and blots of ink all over the pages.

“You know what we should be talking about?” Cora asked. “The fact that Rita Skeeter wrote an article on the Champions and barely mentioned Morgan at all, and the entire bloody thing was some bullshit tragic history of Harry Potter’s life!” She slammed the paper on the table, which she’d been carrying around all day since it was published in the Daily Prophet that morning.

The woman had interviewed Merlin a week earlier, after the wand weighing ceremony had taken place. She’d only really seemed interested in Harry though, but she did ask quite a few questions about Merlin’s transfer to Hogwarts. Merlin had been extremely worried when the wand weighing had taken place, as his wand was really a shrunken Sidhe staff, and he wasn’t sure how Ollivander would react to it.

The elderly man had peered at it for a while and announced its properties – English oak wood, Sidhe hair core, 13 inches long and “extremely powerful”. He’d given Merlin a strange look when he’d handed it back, but luckily the old man didn’t say anything, and Rita Skeeter obviously hadn’t noticed the exchange.

“How could she do this? For one, Harry’s not the only Champion, two, she misspelled Fleur’s name and three, how could she do that to Harry? It’s obviously painfully made-up, as if he needs any more negative attention,” she defended. “Plus, the first task is in three days!”

Cora was extremely loud, but the common room was unusually empty as it was a Hogsmeade weekend, and nearly everyone from the third year up had gone. Unfortunately the seventh-years already had so much work that they couldn’t afford to head out. They’d spent most of the day
writing up all of their essays in the common room, took a break to hand in their potion, and were now taking a break before they tackled the rest of their work.

“We don’t even know what the first task is, I’m surprised you aren’t terrified,” Vernon said, chewing on a spare licorice wand.

“I can’t do anything about it, I might as well stay calm and not psyche myself out,” Merlin shrugged. He had the slightest inkling that Harry already knew what the first task was, as he’d been looking worried all day, and whenever he caught a glimpse of the fourth-year, it’d been like he was about to say something to him. There had also been the extremely entertaining event of Moody turning Draco Malfoy into a ferret, but before Harry could make his way over to Merlin, he’d been dragged off somewhere by Moody.

“I’m a little hungry, anyone up for study food?” Cedric piped up, and everyone raised their hands.

“I’m finally going to get a chance to visit the kitchens,” Merlin said with a smile. He, Cedric and Cora headed out of the common room while Pavel helped Rob with his Astronomy homework.

Merlin was surprised when the entrance to the kitchens was literally one corridor away, and all one had to do was tickle a pear which would turn into a door handle. Merlin was familiar with all of the oddities at Hogwarts – doors that were just pretending to be, walls that were doors, what looked like solid walls but were actually a very passable secret passageway – and wondered just how many of Hogwarts’ many paintings were something else entirely.

The kitchens were overrun with house elves wearing toga-style tea towels stamped with the Hogwarts crest. The creatures were more than happy to give the Hufflepuffs packages of sweets loaded up with sugar, perfect for study, and beamed and bowed when they were thanked. They also grabbed a few bottles of Butterbeer and were halfway back to the Hufflepuff common room when a voice called out Merlin’s name.

He turned around and Harry stood awkwardly at the end of the hallway, twisting his fingers together anxiously. Merlin motioned for the other two to head back into the common room, and he approached the fourth-year.

“All right, Harry?” he asked. “You know, I’ve asked them not to wear the badges but-“

“It’s dragons. The first task is dragons,” Harry blurted out. “They’ve got one for each of us.”
Merlin’s mind temporarily blanked out as he flashed back to his old friend Kilgarrah, who most often was more of a hindrance than help, but was a comfort in his last few years with Arthur when it came to advice.

“I… are you serious?” Merlin stuttered, and Harry nodded. “Do the others know?”

“Yeah, Hagrid showed Madam Maxine and Karkaroff nearly ran into me in the Forbidden Forest when I was heading back to the castle,” Harry said, almost muttering the last bit. “I just thought that… it’s better now that we all know. A clear playing field, and I’d feel bad if you were the only one who didn’t know.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Merlin said gratefully, and Harry gave him a little smile. “So… dragons. Bloody hell, I wouldn’t have expected them to let a seventh year face one let alone a fourth year, are you going to be okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, Moody gave me a bit of advice,” Harry said. “Do you have any idea what you’re going to do? I would’ve told you earlier but I only found out last night.”

“I’ve… got a faint inkling,” Merlin said, smirking as he thought of his ‘affinity’ with dragons. “And I’m really sorry about that idiotic article that Rita Skeeter wrote.” Harry blushed.

“It’s been mental, especially with Malfoy taunting me every time he comes near me,” Harry muttered dejectedly.

“Don’t worry about him Harry, he’s an idiot,” Merlin said, placing a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You’re one of the bravest people I’ve ever met, being able to put up with this stuff year after year, and you’ll definitely make it through this Tournament.” Harry smiled.

“You’d better get back to your common room though, it’s getting late. Just be lucky you aren’t in seventh year, the workload is massive,” Merlin advised.

“I can see that, where’d you get the food anyway?” Harry asked.

“Kitchens. Secret Hufflepuff information, y’know how it is,” Merlin teased. He waved goodbye to Harry and headed into the common room, where the food was spread across the table in between all of the parchment, textbooks and inkpots. Merlin slumped into a chair and lay his head down onto his
folded arms.

“What’s up?” Vernon asked, helping himself to a pumpkin pasty.

“All of the champions already know what the first task is, including Harry and I, and it’s not pretty,” Merlin sighed. He heard everyone clamor to hear him, inkpots sliding off the table and making a mess on the floor as everyone scrambled to get closer.

“What d’you mean? What is it?” everyone asked feverishly, questions overlapping each other.

“Can’t tell you, but you’ll find out anyway,” Merlin replied evasively. He didn’t want to worry any of his friends unnecessarily for days before the first task. He refused to answer their questions, and eventually they gave up and everyone went back to eating their sugary foods and finishing their essays, scourgifying the spilt ink on the floor as they did so. Merlin half-heartedly wrote down something plausible for his essays, but his mind was mainly on his dragon. Dragon. A Dragon. He was so screwed.

A difficult decision back-and-forthed through his mind all of dinner, all through the night and even up until midnight, he was still weighing pros and cons with the causation flowing throughout his mind.

Should he use his ability as a Dragonlord?

Technically he’d be allowed to, it wouldn’t be cheating or breaking any rules, because he’d be using his own skills, which is what a champion was supposed to do in order to beat each task. There was so reason that any of the tasks had to include dragons, and it was just lucky that Merlin was the last Dragonlord. The shock of his ability would probably impress the judges and give him a high mark despite how short the encounter would be, which was good.

However, how would he explain his lineage as a Dragonlord? Merlin was known in history as the last Dragonlord, and to everyone’s knowledge, he’d never had any children to pass the skill on to (and to his knowledge as well). He’d get a bunch of unwanted attention for his hidden talent, probably at least one scrutinizing and suspicious article written by Rita Skeeter, and he’d possibly lose the trust he had in his friends for not telling them. Not to mention that Dumbledore might figure out who he was in that impossible way he knew things. Would that be good or bad?

So much could go wrong.
Merlin needed time to think, so as quietly as possible, with a stealth gained by many years of sneaking out at night, he pulled a hooded cloak over his shoulders and exited the Hufflepuff common room, needing a good nighttime walk to clear his head. He needed to call on nature, to feel the cool night wind, to clear his mind and make a decision.

He headed down the dark halls, footsteps as silent as if he’d cast a spell for silence. The night was dark, but not full of any terrors, just suits of armor glinting in the moonlight. A full moon, Merlin noticed, as he took a perch on an exposed stone windowsill. The night was clear, the moon bright, and it was dark enough in the countryside that as his eyes adjusted, more stars seemed to appear in the blanketing sky, and within minutes he could see the Milky Way making its way across the black, like a smudge of mist.

Merlin couldn’t say how much time had passed, not more than two hours judging from the moon’s position, when some footsteps came down the corridor. Merlin started, and was figuring out what to do when the figure caught sight of him.

“Hey!” the voice said, and dammit Merlin knew that voice. “What the- you?”

“Prefect Pendragon, how goes the wandering?” Merlin asked, unable to keep the teasing out of his voice and he really shouldn’t be doing that to an Arthur who didn’t know him.

“Much better now that you’re here. You have a reason for that, by the way?” he asked.

“Apart from the fact that I’m facing an unknown enemy in three days’ time in a tournament that has claimed the lives of numerous people in the past while I’m at a completely new school and I have no idea what I’m doing? Not much of one,” Merlin informed sarcastically.

“Oh yeah, you’re a champion now aren’t you?” Arthur mocked. Merlin sighed.

“I… look, Arthur, can I call you that? I think we got off on the wrong foot. I’m really sorry for showing you up in front of the school, and I probably should have handled that a little more tactfully. So… d’you think we can just start over again? I’d rather not have this whole pseudo arch-enemy stuff,” Merlin said, holding a hand out to Arthur. The prefect looked stunned for a few moments.

“You’re saying this so I won’t report you,” Arthur accused, and Merlin sighed again (he seemed to be doing that a lot lately, but not as much as he did the night he had fifty identical assignments to
“I’m honestly not, Arthur. Report me if you want, I do genuinely want to put this all behind us,” Merlin said, insistently holding his hand out. Arthur was silent for a few moments, and then gripped Merlin’s hand. A spark passed between them immediately, Merlin’s soul jumped up and he resisted the urge to pull the blonde into a hug with all of his might. A look of almost realization or recognition flickered in Arthur’s eyes, but it disappeared before Merlin could have been sure he saw it, or indeed before Arthur himself realized it.

“Arthur Pendragon,” the prefect introduced with a smirk.

“Morgan Emery, nice to meet you,” Merlin replied. Arthur let go of his hand and leant against the stone wall next to Merlin’s window.

“So what brings you to this part of the castle at this late hour?” Arthur asked, and Merlin knew that everything was going to be better now that Arthur was coming to his side.
The following night, Merlin headed out of his dorm at midnight again, donned his cloak, and headed back to his windowsill. He still hadn’t made a decision about his dragon. Professor Moody hadn’t offered him any help in DADA earlier that day like he did with Harry, and Merlin thought that was slightly odd that the man was so biased.

Although he’d heard that Mad-Eye Moody was extremely paranoid and probably thought that there was a plan in place to kill Harry via Triwizard Tournament, which wasn’t exactly incorrect. Merlin still couldn’t explain the unsettling feeling in his gut every time he entered the man’s classroom.

Again, about an hour passed on his windowsill before he heard familiar footsteps echoing down the stone floor, so similar to the sounds of Camelot that Merlin experienced some crazy déjà vu.

“Awake again, Morgan? I might have to report you again,” Arthur said, stepping into the moonlight, illuminating his features and his smirk. They’d spent the previous night talking for at least an hour about nothing in particular, and their relationship had definitely improved. Although they were still at ‘acquaintances-in-a-weird-situation’ instead of ‘life-long-friends-brothers-confidantes-die-for-each-other’ like they used to be. It was slightly painful to see an Arthur that had no recognition of him, but hopefully with time they’d rebuild that relationship.

Merlin did worry though, because they’d been friends for ten years before Arthur had died, and rebuilding that relationship in under a year was going to be pretty difficult. He had faith, though.

“Still thinking,” Merlin replied with a smile. “Still in life-threatening danger. You’re up patrolling two nights in a row, how’s that going for you?”

“Absolutely fine,” Arthur said with a cocky grin. There was comfortable silence for a few seconds, and Merlin chewed on his lip as his mind went back to the decision he’d been painstakingly picking apart for the past two days.

“Can I ask you something?” Merlin asked.
“Sure,” Arthur replied, crossing his arms as he leaned on the stone wall.

“Hypothetically, if you were in a tournament that you could possibly die in, and hypothetically if you had a skill that would definitely allow you to succeed, but using said skill, all completely hypothetically mind you, could get you unwanted attention, suspicion and mistrust from your friends, would you use it? Hypothetically, of course,” Merlin rambled, fingers twisting in his robes. Arthur looked at him with a funny look, almost like the fond yet exasperated and slightly confused way he’d look at him whenever Merlin offered to come with him on a dangerous mission.

“Hypothetically?” Arthur asked.

“Completely,” Merlin replied, schooling his face into a neutral expression.

“I guess… if they were really your friends they’d understand why you didn’t tell them about this ability, hypothetically, and you don’t have to explain yourself. Take a risk and make sure that you don’t die. Hypothetically,” Arthur said after a few moments of silent pondering.

“I’ve been thinking about this for days,” Merlin admitted.

“Want to share with the class?” Arthur asked. Merlin gave him a blank, sarcastic look. “…Or not.”

Their conversation soon turned to mundane things, such as their classes and exams and discussing the other Triwizard champions, until the moon began to dip down to the horizon and they both had to head off to bed. The following nights until the first task, Merlin would go for his midnight walk, and Arthur would meet up with him. It was a surprising casual and relaxed relationship; as opposed to the hate they had for each other previously (and in Camelot), without the life-threatening situations of old. Merlin was nervous for the first task and he still hadn’t made a concrete decision on what he was going to do, but having Arthur with him and (kind of) on his side improved his mood and he couldn’t help but smile brightly for days, not even worried when his vase remained the same day after day. McGonagall couldn’t even be stern with him, not before the first task and not when his smile seemed to light up everywhere he went.

“You’re looking awfully cheerful for someone who might die today,” Cora said as Merlin entered the common room, pulling on his Hufflepuff robes.

“It’s sunny and I might survive, you’re being awfully pessimistic for someone who wants me to come out of this alive,” Merlin teased back.
“Maybe I want you to cark it so I don’t have to worry about you making me look bad in Potions,” Cora argued.

“You do that well enough yourself,” Merlin laughed, and just barely dodged a hard punch that the girl aimed at his arm. They met up with the rest of their group just in the hallway, along with a couple of Cora’s dorm mates, and they all headed down to the arena that had been constructed for the task. Merlin broke away from them with a shaky laugh and smile, and headed towards the competitors tent – he was at least half an hour early, a habit that he hadn’t been able to break from his decades of being a school professor.

As he headed down the hill towards the competitor’s tent, he heard a loud laugh behind him, and turned around to see a large, rowdy group of Ravenclaws making their way down to the arena. Then somehow, the world started spinning as something crashed into him and he fell, tumbling and rolling down the hill, only stopping when he smacked his head against a pole tent.

“Oh my god I’m so sorry!” a voice said, and Merlin blinked his eyes open to see a sheepish and slightly panicked looking girl kneeling over him, leaves sticking out of her hair at all angles. Merlin smiled comfortingly and hauled himself back up onto his feet, brushing the grass off his clothes.

“Are you alright? I’m really, really sorry,” the girl said, hands hovering like she wasn’t too sure what to do.

“I’m fine, it’s okay. Are you alright?” he asked. Merlin noticed that she was wearing Slytherin robes.

“Uh, yeah, I didn’t hit my head like you did. Made quite a thunk,” she said awkwardly. “You’re Emery, right? One of the Hogwarts champions? Oh god I’m so sorry what if you like faint during the first task and it’s all my fault-” she began to ramble.

“It’s okay, seriously. I’ll be fine, it wasn’t that hard of a hit,” Merlin placated. The girl looked unsure, and he gave her one of his brightest smiles. “Morgan Emery,” he said, holding his hand out for her to shake.

“Maya Reed,” she replied with a small smile, shaking his hand. Her hair was almost a silver colour it was so pale, and her eyes were quite small, but overall she was quite pretty. She had a flushed face, like she’d been running, and the leaves in her hair gave her a rather odd appearance.
“You’ve got some… leaves in your hair,” Merlin said, gesturing around her hair. She blushed and immediately began shaking her hair out, fervently picking out the little dried leaves and pieces of grass and small twigs. Merlin helped to pick out a twig that she missed that looked rather like a Bowtruckle. She blushed again.

“Um, thanks, Morgan. Can I call you that?” Maya asked.

“Of course,” Merlin said kindly. “Anyway I’d better get back to the tent and prepare for my deadly encounter with the unknown.”

“Yeah, you’d better. Um, good luck,” she said as she turned to walk away. “And I’m sorry about all of the badges and stuff, they’re really dumb. Assuming you don’t hate Harry of course, um,” she mumbled, tapering off at the end.

“It’s alright, and thanks. You’re not too bad for the enemy,” Merlin teased, and Maya laughed.

“You’re not too bad for a duffer,” she replied. She waved, and headed back up the hill, slipping and sliding a few times as she went. Merlin grinned after her and headed inside the competitor’s tent. Fleur Delacour was already there, in some light blue periwinkle athletics robes, the same as their school uniform colour. Merlin must’ve been second, and there were some yellow and black robes hanging up for him, but not anything like Ludo Bagman’s garish wasp robes.

By the time Merlin changed into them and emerged back into the tent, Harry was waiting there, already changed, twiddling his thumbs. He’d apparently been told to wear his Quidditch robes, and Merlin wondered if he’d try anything like that in the arena.

“All right, Harry?” Merlin asked, making sure his voice was calm and even. Harry could hardly speak and just nodded jerkily, picking at some of the loose threads on his gloves. Merlin smiled and began to twirl his wand that he’d stashed in his pocket, the movement calming as hethreaded the instrument between his fingers, mind on a dragon and Arthur and his friends and the new Slytherin girl he’d just met.

Krum came in about ten minutes later with Karkaroff, and Madam Maxine was waiting outside, too large to fit into the tent. Harry was practically shaking at this point, the noises from the crowd getting louder as more and more people piled into the arena, Gryffindors and Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs and Slytherins and the few Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students, teachers and judges and journalists. Undoubtedly Rita Skeeter would be sitting somewhere, acid-green quill ready and her eyes small and beady like a hawk, ready to take in any information and gossip to turn into suspicion and pseudo-fact.
“Champions!” a familiar voice said, and Dumbledore came striding into the tent, Bagman and Crouch on either side. “Gather around, please.” The four of them stood in a semicircle in front of Dumbledore, Karkaroff standing behind Krum, thin hands on the boy’s shoulders. Madam Maxine was peering in through the tent opening, and Bagman gave Harry a thumbs up.

“Today you will be facing the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. The creature you are about to face has been given a golden egg to protect, and your objective is to take that egg from it. If you would place your hand in his bag and take out a number,” Dumbledore said, as Crouch held out a medium-sized drawstring bag. There was a little bit of smoke coming out of the top, and Fleur was first to put her hand in.

She drew out a little miniature dragon with a number 1 around its neck. “The Welsh Green,” Crouch informed her. She looked to Madam Maxine, but she wasn’t surprised, and neither was Krum when he drew out the Chinese Fireball with a number 2 around its neck. Merlin was next to reach into the bag and pricked his finger on a small miniature spike, and then naturally grabbed the tiny dragon next to it, with a number 4 around it’s neck.

“The Swedish Shortsnout,” Crouch informed him, before handing the bag to Harry. He picked out the only one left, the Hungarian Horntail with a number 3, the most violent and deadly looking of all the dragons. Merlin thought that was rather unfair, but he was sure that Harry was competent enough to figure something out. The boy was bright and had already personally beaten Voldemort twice, apparently. He was smart, and skilled at Defense, he was a Gryffindor, and he would be alright. Merlin gave him what he hoped was a comforting smile.

A cannon went off, and Fleur steeled herself as she took out her wand and exited the tent, and entered the arena surrounded by the screaming crowds. Merlin listened intently to their reactions, and after about ten minutes, cheers erupted so loud it could only mean that she could have gotten the egg. Merlin was happy for her, but he also couldn’t help but react to the shouts and screams of the dragons. He was sure that he was the only person who could understand them in the entire world, and they were not happy. They’d been given something to protect, something like a child, and they were being stolen from them. It really wasn’t fair, that people forgot that dragons were magical creatures, and that they were no longer intelligent and almost omniscient creatures, but bred to be base and stupid, relying completely on instinct and primal needs.

“You alright, Morgan?” Harry asked, his first words since he’d entered the tent.

“I- yeah, fine,” Merlin lied, not as smoothly as he would’ve liked. However Harry misinterpreted his sorrow for fear and nodded anyway. The two of them sat side-by-side for a few moments, but Harry got antsy and began to pace, Krum standing solemnly in the corner. The cannon sounded and his name was announced, and the international Quidditch player headed out to face his dragon. There
were a few sounds from the crowd that hinted that he must’ve gotten hurt at more than one point, but
in a few minutes there was a loud cheer as he got his egg. Merlin couldn’t help but put a comforting
arm around Harry.

“Don’t worry, you’ll do great. Stay calm, keep your head and follow your plan. You’re a fantastic
wizard and you’ll make it through this, I know it,” Merlin said comfortingly. Harry managed to give
him a small, genuine smile, then straightened his back and headed out as his name was called. Within
five minutes, the loudest cheer yet erupted from the stadium, and Merlin couldn’t suppress his smile.
The kid was a natural; he’d make a good Auror.

Merlin steeled himself as the final cannon sounded and his name was called, and he walked out into
the arena, hands steady and heart pounding. The Swedish Shortsnout was a large, silvery-blue
dragon crouching protectively over its real eggs, the shining golden egg right in the middle. Merlin
made a mental note to make sure that the dragon didn’t crush any of it’s real eggs – not enough of
them hatched from a full litter anyway, and he didn’t want to lower the dragon’s chance of raising
children.

Opting for a few other evasive, non-offensive techniques, Merlin used a few spells to try to distract
the dragon, but the first idea of transfiguring a rock into a small dog didn’t work, the dragon deciding
that it wanted him more. He didn’t want to blind it, as it might crush the eggs, so he tried distracting it
by conjuring up some large birds, hiding his glowing yellow eyes, to fly around the dragon’s head. It
just burnt them to a crisp, and then Merlin decided to actually get involved. He put on his fastest
speed and ran, weaving throughout the arena and dodging boulders and flames, making his way
around the dragon. He ducked down to dodge a wing intending to smack him, but he didn’t account
for the dragon’s spiked tail, which caught him in the back and sent him flying into a jagged boulder.

The crowd gasped and everything went silent as Merlin got to his feet. He’d gotten thrown around so
many times back in his days in Camelot that it was almost expected that he’d get thrown into a wall
or something else as equally hard. He was on his feet again in no time, faster than the dragon
expected, and he clambered up onto the boulder so he could clearly see the dragon’s snarling face.
Fuck it, he thought, mustering up some Old Magic he hadn’t used in centuries, but the words still
clearly came to him.

“Oh dracon, calma tú féin agus a thabhaitream suas do óir!” he shouted, the magic roiling up in him as
his eyes glowed. The crowd immediately silenced like a spell had been cast on them, and the dragon
stared at him for a moment before obediently moving backwards, revealing the golden egg. Merlin
dropped down from the boulder and walked towards it, keeping his eyes fixed on the dragon’s. He
stooped down, picked up the golden egg, and held it high into the air. The crowds screamed and
stamped their feet, and a quick look at the teacher’s area showed shocked expressions on all of their
faces – including the ever-impassive Snape.

Merlin looked to the judges, feeling a little sheepish, and hoping that they didn’t take any points off
him for his failed attempts or for using a power that he honestly shouldn’t have. He had no idea how he was going to explain that off, but it didn’t matter, because three nines and a ten shot into the air, and the crowd screamed. Merlin noticed Arthur’s smiling face, and with uncertainty looked to the Hufflepuff section – all of his friends were smiling, or shocked, or in awe, but none of them looked disgusted and betrayed. Merlin motioned for them to join them, and headed off to the medical tent, feeling his hot blood starting to drip down his back.

“Oh dear, you look horrible! Dragons, honestly, I don’t know what they were thinking!” Madam Pomfrey tutted, sitting Merlin down on the bed next to Harry, who had some salve on a nasty scrape on his shoulder. “You are by far the worst injured in here today, I’m surprised you haven’t bled out yet.”

“I’m tougher than I look, ma’am,” Merlin said with a grimace as the woman removed the robes from his torso. Harry gasped, and Merlin looked down to see that a good portion of his chest had been scraped and was bleeding, and Pomfrey tutted when she saw his back. Judging by the flow of hot, sticky blood, he probably had at least three deep gouges in his back.

“So Harry, how’d you do?” Merlin asked, trying to distract himself from the burning, smoking salve that was being spread over his back to cauterize the edges of his wounds and stop the bleeding.

“Fastest time, I think,” Harry replied, wincing as a particularly large amount of smoke emerged from his wound. “Summoned my Firebolt and forced the dragon to fly away so I could grab the egg,” he said. He clearly wanted to say more, but he was much too tired, and the smoking wound was taking a lot out of him. Just at that moment, Hermione and Ron came running into the tent, flushed and wild-eyed.

“How did you do that?” Hermione asked, approaching Merlin. “We left after we made sure Harry was okay to see what you did and… that was absolutely amazing,” she gushed.

“What’d he do?” Harry asked curiously.

“He talked to the dragon, mate,” Ron replied, and the three of them looked to Merlin, who looked down at his lap almost sheepishly. “It was like nothing I’ve ever seen. He just… spoke to it, and his eyes were glowing, and the dragon practically backed off and handed him the egg.”

“They never said I couldn’t use any secret abilities,” Merlin muttered.
“How did you do that, though?” Hermione asked, the curious and hungry expression on her face similar to many Ravenclaws, the thirst for knowledge in her gaze that would’ve made her an amazing Ravenclaw.

“A bit of this, a bit of that, being the last Dragonlord, et cetera,” Merlin mumbled, and Hermione’s eyes lit up.

“Of course, that makes so much sense! But… everyone knows that Merlin was the last Dragonlord, so how was it passed down to you?” she asked, and Merlin shrugged evasively.

“Maybe the dude had a brother or a secret lover, I don’t know, recessive genes? Somehow it passed down to me and I’ve been the only person in my family for generations to actually be able to use it. Second time I have, actually, which was the only reason I knew I could do it now. I would’ve been screwed if I didn’t have it,” Merlin reasoned. Hermione frowned but nodded, accepting his answer. It would’ve been too ridiculous for the idea to even cross her mind that he was the actual Merlin, and there was no other option.

“That’s… that’s crazy,” Harry muttered. “You’re lucky the task was dragons.” Merlin laughed.

“Yeah, I was,” he said. It was almost coincidental, as he’d never used his Dragonlord ability in… centuries. He couldn’t read too much into this though, he just had to make it through the next two tasks and get into that graveyard with Harry to set the precarious balance right. A few minutes of slightly awkward conversation later, the four of them headed outside to see the scores – Merlin had surprisingly come in first place, with Harry in a very close second, only because of the unfairly low mark Karkaroff gave him.

Merlin left the arena and tried to make it back to the castle before the hoard of people left, but his cheering and babbling friends immediately swamped him.

“That was the single most brilliant thing I’ve seen in my life!” Cora gushed.

“Insane, that was,” Vernon muttered with a bright smile.

“Absolutely amazing!” Cedric congratulated with a manly slap on the back. Pavel and Rob both hugged Merlin tightly, and the group headed back up to the Hufflepuff common room, golden egg being passed between them with the promise of yet another party in the air.
Please ignore the whatever-the-heck shitty half-Irish translation of the dragon language, I have no idea how to do it so I just used that. yeah. It roughly translates to (or is supposed to) "dragon, calm yourself and give up your gold"
Merlin thought it was rather rude that the first task was on a school day, and that he’d be expected to attend classes the very next day after he battled a dragon. Cedric tried to convince him that he’d be excused from his classes due to that, but Merlin didn’t fancy suffering the wrath of Professor Snape in double Potions. The Professor knew he was good and had been waiting all term for an opportunity to criticize him on something, which Merlin thought was particularly childish. If he’d been in Slytherin, Snape would’ve been praising and gloating his achievements, but instead he all but ignored him now, trying to find a way to prove that he was somehow cheating.

It didn’t help that all of Hufflepuff house had partied until 3am at the earliest, and had to haul themselves awake on minimal hours of sleep, and Merlin was sure that some people didn’t even sleep that night. The common room had been littered with leftover food, Butterbeer mugs and sweet wrappers, but when Merlin trudged down in the morning with his robes half-on, the room was clean and spotless. He thought that he should give the house-elves something as a thank you for cleaning up such a mess.

Pavel didn’t show up at breakfast at all, still snoozing away in his bed, and Cedric had the sense to bring him some leftover marmalade toast before he dragged the kid out of bed and down into the dungeons for Potions. Snape was especially hard on them, seeing the exhausted expressions on the Hufflepuff’s faces and knew that they’d been up late celebrating, and gave everyone an extremely difficult potion to brew that Merlin had never even heard of. Merlin still managed to brew a perfect potion, and helped out his friends in the nearby vicinity not blow up their cauldrons in their fatigue, and only just stopped Cora from adding something that would’ve filled the room with something similar to an airborne Swelling Solution.

McGonagall looked at him funnily as he once again struggled with turning his vase into a swan, and even Cedric and the others noticed the looks she was giving him. She approached him with a frown and thin lips.

“Mr Emery, are you really as incompetent as you say you are?” she asked bluntly, and some of the Gryffindors laughed loudly, and even Arthur snickered.
“Uh, yes?” Merlin stuttered, wondering what she was talking about. McGonagall looked unimpressed.

“Do you recall during the First Task, your attempt to divert the dragon by transfiguring a rock into a small dog?” she asked, and Merlin blushed a little.

“Uh… that wasn’t proper transfiguration, Professor,” he admitted. “I made the rock look a little like a dog and make noises to distract the dragon, but if you’d been closer you would have noticed that it wasn’t a dog at all. It was literally a barking rock.” At this, everyone who overheard burst into raucous laughter, and even McGonagall’s lips twitched up infinitesimally at the side. She then sighed as if he were a lost cause, and headed back to the front of the class.

Merlin was in the middle of wrestling with a Venomous Tentacula in his next class when he looked across the greenhouse and noticed none other than Maya Reed playing something similar to chopsticks with her plant.

“Maya!” Merlin called, and she spotted him, waved, and then split her two chopsticks into one either side, which made the Tentacula angry. Merlin managed to shove his back into the new pot they were transferring them into, and it acquiesced and curled into itself. Merlin picked his way around the greenhouse, dodging other raging plants, until he found himself standing next to Maya.

“How did you do that?” he asked, after she gently coaxed her Tentacula into its new pot.

“I have an affinity for Herbology,” she said with a grin, slightly bashfully. “I’m kind of crappy with every other subject though, I’m just a little too… clumsy, I guess. Hyperactive, talkative, air-headed, whatever you want to call it.”

“I don’t think you’re air-headed,” Merlin said kindly. “I think you’re just enthusiastic.” Maya gave him a blinding smile.

“You really think so?” she asked.

“Definitely,” Merlin smiled. He opened his mouth to talk when he heard a loud, shrill, scream. Everyone whirled around to see Cora laughing and screaming, her Tentacula attempting to wind its way around her, tickling her even as she was utterly terrified. Maya immediately rushed over, pushing past all of the shocked students in the room, arriving before Professor Sprout could even dash into action. She placed her hands on the Tentacula and stroked it gently, wrapping nimble
fingers around it, gently coercing the plant to let go of its grip on Cora, pushing it into the large pot. It finally settled down, and Cora’s legs failed her as she fell to the floor.

“Are you alright?” Maya asked, looking down at Cora.

“Did I mention I have an intense phobia of spiders? Thank you,” Cora said vaguely breathlessly, and she looked up to lock eyes with Maya. Merlin got a sudden image of those films where two characters meet and that dramatic, intense eye staring goes down, and Merlin felt strangely like he was interrupting an intimate moment. Maya smiled and held her hand out to Cora, who grabbed it and let herself get pulled up.

“Cora Dallas,” she introduced, turning the help up into a handshake.

“Maya Reed,” the Slytherin smiled. “You’re lucky I was here, it might’ve taken you as it’s mate and you’d be having little spider babies,” she joked. Cora blanched and shivered.

“I… sorry,” Maya apologized. “I can never tell what’s inappropriate or not.”

“I can help you with that over a Butterbeer at Hogsmeade,” Cora said smoothly, and everyone who overheard whistled in appreciation. Maya looked almost shell-shocked at how quickly the subject changed, and then she smiled.

“It’s a date,” she confirmed. Just then, Professor Sprout came pottering over, waving her arms.

“More re-potting, less flirting, girls!” she scolded, but there was a smile hinting at the corner of her lips as she pushed Cora towards Cedric, who was smirking so widely his cheeks must’ve been hurting. He elbowed her in the side while wiggling his eyebrows suggestively, and she smacked him on the arm. Maya moved back across the room where the exact same thing happened between her and a chuckling Slytherin boy. Merlin remembered her saying that she wasn’t into the whole fawning over boys thing and now that made total sense.

The next Hogsmeade weekend was only a week away, and by the time it rolled around, Cora was practically vibrating with excitement as she braided her hair with quick fingers.

“I haven’t been on a date in like, forever,” she muttered, pulling the ends of her hair up so she could see the plait in the mirror in front of her. “What the heck do I say? I was so smooth in Herbology but
I’m actually a dribbling mess.”

“You’ll be fine,” Merlin said with a calm tone. “And trust me, she stutters more than you do, and she has a tendency to ramble. And you’re both female so I’m assuming you’ll have more… female things in common.” Cora sent him a strange look.

“Have you ever been on a date, Morgan?” she asked mockingly.

“Of course I have! Just… not many,” he admitted. “Unless you count when I dated that Veela and that was the most terrifying experience of my life.”

“You dated a Veela?” Cora gasped. “What was that like?”

“The kissing was pretty good, up until she grew a beak,” Merlin replied, and Cora burst out into laughter, nearly dislodging her entire plait.

“Oh Morgan, you never fail to amuse,” Cora said good-naturedly. She finally tied her plait and got to work on her makeup, which Merlin watched with interest. Liquid foundation, a type of concealing foundation under her eyes, some type of foundation powder, eyeliner (which looked painful), mascara (even more painful if she poked herself in the eye), something on her cheeks, another pink something on her cheeks, and she finished it off with lip gloss. Merlin’s mind was blown at how much older she looked, and Cora smirked as she caught his eye in the mirror.

“Never seen makeup applied before, huh?”

“Nope. Looks painful and time consuming,” Merlin admitted truthfully. Cora laughed and straightened her robes, flattening them down and making sure that she looked okay. She nodded at herself in the mirror and flounced out of the room, Merlin hurrying behind. Cora was taking Maya to the Three Broomsticks, and Cedric, Merlin and the others would be joining them after about an hour or two, to give them some time to be alone.

“Seriously, you’re going to be fine, just… do whatever you’d do with a guy,” Merlin said, and Cora raised an eyebrow at him.

“What part of raging lesbian do you not understand?” Cora asked, and Merlin flushed a little.
“Uh, I kinda, well, I figured you were... went both ways?” Merlin stuttered. “I mean... look nevermind I’m going to stop talking,” he said at her narrowed eyes. He’d thought that she and Pavel might’ve had a little something going on, but apparently not.

“It’s okay, you’re not the first person to think that I’m dating Kaidanovsky,” she sighed. The two of them descended into the common room where they met up with the rest, and they all headed out to the front gate, where Maya was waiting, excitedly chattering away to her Slytherin friend from Herbology.

“Hey, Simon,” Cedric greeted, bumping fists with the Slytherin.

“Cedric, how are you?” Simon asked, a kind smile on his face. Cedric and Simon chatted away as Cora hugged Maya, the two of them smiling so hard their faces looked like they were about to split in two. Together, the group of eight headed down to Hogsmeade, a chill in the air that promised winter’s coming. Cora and Maya split off once they reached the village to go to the Three Broomsticks, and Merlin sent them both a thumbs up. They laughed, entwined their fingers, and entered the pub, looking like they’d known each other for years.

“Those two are going to get on like a house on fire,” Vernon mumbled, looking slightly concerned. Merlin was too, considering how often Cora nearly set herself on fire in Potions, and how clumsy Maya was...

“This is going to be a disaster,” Simon sighed. “I can see it now. They’ll both try to walk somewhere and end up breaking fifty things on the way, then set eight tapestries on fire before they accidentally kill Mrs Norris.” Merlin laughed, and thought that this Simon wasn’t too bad.

“So, where are we headed?” Rob asked.

“We could all ironically go to Madame Puddifoots,” Simon suggested, and Merlin snorted. “But honestly, Zonko’s is where it’s at. I’ve heard they’ve gotten heaps of new stock in.” One unanimous decision later, and the group of Hufflepuff boys plus one pretty alright Slytherin made their way into Zonko’s, which was absolutely packed full of excited students. Merlin spotted Harry at the other end of the shop, laughing with Ron. He was happy that the two friends had finally made up, because he knew how it felt when your best friend didn’t trust you (read: the battle at Camlann.)

“How d’you think Cora’s doing?” Vernon asked, narrowly avoiding a fanged Frisbee that an overexcited third year had released in the shop.
“I’m more worried for Maya,” Merlin teased. For an hour or so the group managed to lose
themselves in the wonders of the joke shop, and Merlin was sorely tempted to buy a whoopee
cushion from the Muggle joke section to plant on/under Cora, and decided that was too mean. Their
group then made their way over to Honeydukes and stocked up on much needed study food.

“I guess we can go and join Cora and Maya now,” Simon said, checking the silver watch that glinted
on his wrist.

“We might need to have a brave lookout pop their head inside first just in case they’re doing
anything… unsavoury,” Rob said awkwardly, and Pavel burst out laughing.

“I don’t think any of us would be opposed to seeing that,” Pavel joked, and Cedric smacked him
across the back of his head. Nevertheless, the group entered the Three
Broomsticks, where Cora and Maya were sipping their Butterbeer and happily discussing the pros
and cons of integrating Muggles into a wizarding society.

“Hey guys!” Cora called out, waving a hand to beckon their group over. They all managed to shove
themselves around the table, barely enough room for their elbows, but it was a comfortable
environment. Madam Rosmerta came over to deliver their Butterbeer, and they snacked on a few
licorice wands while they all caught up and talked about nothing in particular. Merlin was happily
losing himself in the normality of school life when Cedric brought up something he’d completely
forgotten.

“Morgan, did you ever find out what was in that golden egg?” he asked, and all eyes turned to him.
Merlin frowned.

“I… didn’t actually. I kind of forgot about it, in between the partying and my crappy Transfiguration,
it’s been sitting at the bottom of my trunk,” he admitted. It was true, he’d barely even thought of the
golden egg, and it’d been a week since the dragon had allowed him to take it. A couple of them
rolled their eyes and laughed.
“You’re so bloody forgetful,” Rob muttered, draining the final drops of his Butterbeer. Any other
words he was going to say were drowned out when the door to the pub opened, revealing a rowdy
group of Gryffindors, including Arthur himself. Merlin smiled at him as he walked past with his
friends, and Arthur surprisingly returned it.

“So… what’s changed between you two?” Cora asked, eyebrow raised suggestively, and Merlin
flushed.
“Shut up. We just decided that hating each other took up too much time,” Merlin said. “Besides, the pseudo arch-enemy thing is quite childish.”

“Mmhmm,” Cora said, clearly disbelieving, with a teasing smile on her face. Maya hit her playfully, and Cora nearly snorted Butterbeer out of her nose. Arthur got up from his table to order drinks from Rosmerta, and stopped by Merlin on his way back.

“I didn’t get to tell you, but good job on the first task, Morgan. It’s good that you decided to use that secret ability of yours, eh?” he laughed. “Just watch out for Rita Skeeter, I’ve heard rumours that she’s been snooping around, trying to get a scandalous interview out of you.”

“The only scandalous thing she’s going to get out of me is a raised middle finger,” Merlin muttered back.

“Even still, she’ll probably write something even worse if you do that,” Arthur advised. He smiled again and joined his friends at the Gryffindor table, another one of them with a prefect badge on.

“Why don’t we join our tables?” Cedric asked. “Seriously, we need more friends.”

“We’ve got enough friends!” Rob argued.

“We’ve got two Slytherins and us,” Cedric said. He turned around and hollered at the Gryffindors, who muttered between themselves, and then all got up to drag their table across to bridge the gap. With a bit of shuffling and repositioning, fourteen people managed to sit somewhat comfortably in the middle of the Three Broomsticks. The Gryffindors looked a little unsure at sitting with Slytherins, but once Maya and Simon introduced themselves, they put aside their stigma and welcomed them. Merlin somehow got wedged between Cedric and Arthur, joining the two groups with his presence. Cora and Maya were holding hands on the table, as were a Gryffindor couple on the other side of Arthur.

“Sorry, I should probably introduce you all,” Arthur said. “These two disgusting lovebirds are Sara and Percy, the one eyeing you all up like she’s better than you is Lydia, and the not-siblings are Mako and Rinko,” he introduced. The large group all happily talked amongst themselves, someone producing a pack of Exploding Snap out of nowhere, which drew a few interested spectators, but throughout it all Merlin could think of was the warmth of Arthur at his side again, after so many years. He could feel the Butterbeer buzzing through him, enough to warm him but definitely not enough to make him even consider doing anything stupid. By the time the large group decided to make their way back up to the castle, Merlin and Arthur were deep in discussion about why Merlin was so shitty at Transfiguration, with Cora occasionally butting in.
Pavel looked pretty close to Lydia, who was even smiling when he wasn’t noticing, and their hands brushed with every swing of their arms, and she actually seemed interested in his rants about Russia. Cora and Maya had their arms around each other like it was the most natural thing in the world, and Merlin swore that if those two didn’t end up getting married, he’d eat his robes.

The group said their goodbyes at the junction between the hallways that led off to everyone’s respective common rooms, and Merlin gave Arthur a smile.

“You’re not too bad, you know,” Merlin teased.

“Oh you can talk,” Arthur teased back, but a bright smile lit up his face. “You actually did really well in the first task, and I’m glad you didn’t die.”

“It’s not like you didn’t have a bunch of people helping you,” Arthur retorted.

“At least I didn’t have time to think about it!” Merlin mocked.

“Shut up,” Arthur scoffed. It was so much like their camaraderie it hurt. “I’ve got to go now, I’ll be on patrol tonight if you feel up to a midnight walk. I’ll see you ‘round, Morgan.”

“You too, Arthur,” Merlin said. They both grinned and turned around, heading back to their common rooms, and Merlin couldn’t suppress the smile that grew on his face, making his cheeks hurt. Not even when he reached his dorm room and realized that he still had no idea what the golden egg was.
Merlin sat in the middle of his bed, cross-legged and back straight staring at the large golden egg sitting before him. The decoration on the top of the egg was clearly a handle that one would twist to reveal what was inside, but Merlin was wary. Nothing about the Triwizard Tournament was ever easy, and he wouldn’t be surprised if the egg opened and released billowing plumes of poisonous gas or something of the like.

On the bed next to him, Pavel, Vern and Rob all gathered, eagerly awaiting to see what he would do. Cedric was out doing something, and Merlin gripped his wand tight, the little sapphire shard digging into the soft underside of his wrist.

“Go on, Morgan, open it!” Rob insisted, but Merlin’s mouth twisted up.

“I doubt there’s going to be anything good in here,” Merlin admitted. “I need to be prepared for anything. Plus, I’m waiting for Cedric. Where is he?”

“Prefect duties,” Pavel informed, and Merlin frowned and turned towards him.

“Cedric’s a prefect? Since when?” Merlin asked. He hadn’t seen the badge on Cedric’s robes at all, not like the one that glittered on Arthur’s chest, and he wondered if he’d just been incredibly obtuse and blind.

“Since Gabriel Tate got caught pulling a prank with the Weasley twins and got his prefect status taken off him. Sad, really, because he’d never done anything like that before, but Professor Sprout made Cedric prefect, which was the obvious choice in the first place,” Vern said.

“When exactly did this happen?” Merlin asked.
“Uh… maybe a few days ago, during the aftermath of the First Task, you were probably too stressed to really pay attention, especially with Snape on your arse during Potions and the studying for Transfig. Cedric’s due back any minute though,” Rob said, and Merlin smiled. Cedric was intelligent and had a smart mind, with him in their little group they’d be able to figure out the egg for sure. Of course the Tournament rules said that he wasn’t allowed help, but it didn’t mean his friends couldn’t pitch in their ideas and give advice.

Cedric came through the door not five minutes later, and bunkered down with the others on Rob’s bed and eagerly watched the seemingly harmless golden egg.

“Ready?” Merlin asked, before gritting his teeth and twisting the top of the egg. Immediately a horrendous, piercing shriek echoed through the room like someone was being tortured, and Merlin shut the egg as quickly as possible while the other four slapped their hands over their ears.

“By Merlin, what was that?” Pavel swore. Merlin startled a little when he realized he wasn’t being asked a question, and he’d forgotten that his name was a curse similar to my god that the Muggles used. It was a little surreal.

“That sounds almost familiar…” Cedric mused, and everyone turned to look at him like he was crazy.

“What? That hideous shrieking is something you’ve just happened to hear before? You’re best friends with a banshee or something?” Vern spluttered, and Merlin held back a laugh, his ears still ringing.

“It sounded more like someone being tortured,” Pavel muttered.


The door was then violently thrown open to reveal Cora, her roommates, and what seemed to be the rest of Hufflepuff house crowding the hallway, peering into the room.

“What the hell was that? Is someone hiding a mandrake under their beds?” Cora demanded, looking a little bit shaken.
“Sorry… that was the clue in the egg,” Merlin admitted. “Currently trying to figure out what screaming has to do with the next task.”

“Well don’t open it again without covering it with a blanket or something, that’s hideous,” Cora swore. “Shove it in the sink or something so it’s not so loud.” With that, the door slammed shut, and Cedric almost fell off his bed in his haste.

“I know what that was!” he practically shouted. “My dad works at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, I knew that sounded familiar, thank you Cora! It’s mermish as heard from above water, at the Ministry they have to haul the merpeople in giant tanks and have someone shove their head underneath to listen to them, unless you can actually speak mermish like Professor Dumbledore.” Cedric was panting from excitement, chest heaving, and Merlin grinned.

“Cedric, I could kiss you! Does this just mean that we put it in a bath or something and it’ll make sense?” Merlin asked.

“Yeah, and we can use the prefects’ bathroom, I’ve been meaning to try it out for a while now. C’mon!” Cedric said excitedly. Merlin grabbed the egg and held it to his chest while all five of them ran out of their dorm room like it was on fire, out of the common room and down the halls to wherever the prefects’ bathroom was and they were all panting heavily by the time they got to the fifth floor.

Cedric spoke the password to the statue of Boris the Bewildered, who moved out of the way. The prefects’ bathroom was enormous, with high-arched marble ceilings and two baths that were more like small swimming pools; in the centre stood a column of taps, each with a different type of water.

“This is awesome,” Pavel mumbled, awe-struck. Quickly the five students stripped off while Cedric got in to turn on the taps, and within a minute the entire bath had been magically filled with peach-scented bubbles. Merlin hopped in first, and once all the Hufflepuffs were in, they ducked down under the water as one, and Merlin opened the egg.

Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you’re searching ponder this;
We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss,
An hour long you’ll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour, the prospect’s black,
Too late, it’s gone, it won’t come back.
Merlin popped his head above the surface and took in a deep breath as the others did they same, and they all grinned at each other with the same stupid grin.

“D’you think we were the first ones to figure it out?” Cedric asked.

“Probably, maybe Krum has seeing as they live on a ship surrounded by water, but I’d say we’re most likely one of the first,” Vern said.

“So the second task is probably in the Black Lake, and merpeople will take something that I’ll sorely miss,” Merlin mused. “What will I sorely miss? I don’t have anything all that precious – my wand? No, they let us take those into the tasks. They’ll probably take Harry’s firebolt…”

“What if it’s not an object though?” Cedric interjected.

“Yeah, the song only said they’d take what you’ll sorely miss, they never specified if it was an object,” Rob continued.

“What if they take a person?” Pavel suggested.

“The person I care about the most,” Merlin breathed, his mind immediately conjuring up a picture of Arthur; standing in the sunlit courtyard of Camelot, red cloak flowing in the breeze, the golden strands of his hair shining in the morning sun, grinning at Gwen and Merlin like an idiot. If the merpeople took Arthur and he didn’t find him in an hour…

“But they won’t kill the person if you take longer than an hour, will they?” Vern asked. “They said that they won’t come back, but that would be against the tournament rules, because the people they take won’t be contestants and wouldn’t be put in danger, right?” He was met with silence.

“In this kind of tournament, I think anything is possible,” Cedric said solemnly.
Chapter Summary

The seventh years are subject to the Imperius curse, and a mysterious message is passed around the school that can mean only one thing...

"Today we are wrapping up our preliminary lessons on Old Magic and are turning to the ways of current magic as we know it. Can somebody sum up what we've learned about Old Magic?" Professor Sinistra asked, cross-legged on the ground yet prim and proper as the other students sat in front of her. Magical Theory was an incredibly casual class, considering the fact that only eight students in the entire school took it, and there wasn't really a need for exams or tests - discussion, demonstration and essays were the main forms of learning in the class.

"Yes, Arielle?" Professor Sinistra asked, pointing a black-painted nail to the Ravenclaw.

"Old Magic was last used in the twelfth century during the reign of Queen Guinevere Pendragon, who removed the ban on magic put in place by Uther Pendragon after the death of her husband, King Arthur, appointing the wizard Merlin as court sorcerer," the student recited, and Merlin was once again hit by how strange it was to have his own life described to him in the middle of a classroom.

"Old Magic was used by the druids, and was the dominant form of magic before current magic came into more common practice by the ancestors of the four founders. The druids drew in the magic from the world around them, often living in forests and meditating in caves, fields or by large bodies of water to absorb the magic of the elements," Arielle recited, almost as though it were from a textbook.

"Thank you, Arielle. Now Morgan, how did the druids see the world?" Sinistra asked with a smile.

"The druids saw the world in terms of balance," Merlin explained. "Since their magic came from the world around them, they had to keep it in balance in order for their magic to remain strong and pure - the balance ranged from the universal balance of life and death to the small things like measuring out spices for their food or the balance of a sword hilt," Merlin said.

"Or having an innate ability to perfectly create potions," Rob murmured in a mock-whisper, and the
class chuckled along with him.

"Exactly, Rob," Sinistra said. "Morgan has an incredibly strong tie to his druidic roots, possibly because of the Dragonlord ability that he displayed during the First Task." Merlin was thankful that Professor Sinistra never made a big deal about his abilities, but instead recognised the magic in him and aside from a few questions, never mocked him or boasted about it.

"This sense of balance that you get from the druids, Morgan, means that you have the ability to create perfect potions without having to consciously think about what you're doing," Sinistra said. "But it also means that during modern magic, like transfiguration, you find it incredibly difficult to change objects from animate to inanimate and vice versa because of the power imbalance you recognise that other students would never even think about," she said, and Merlin nodded in agreement.

"How many of you, before now, ever considered how strange it is to be able to turn an inanimate object like a teakettle into an animate, living being, such as a turtle? To seem to create life out of nothing, to turn something man-made into a complex, organic organism?" Sinistra asked, and not a single hand went up as the students had a look of dawning comprehension overtake their face. Merlin laughed at the expression on Rob's face as he realised how much he'd actually been struggling with transfiguration.

"Luckily for you, Morgan, we're going to be studying the workings of modern magic and how it's much more than just speaking a dead language and waving a wand around," she said with a grin, and Merlin laughed. Professor Sinistra was definitely becoming his favourite professor.

"So what's the deal with modern magic and why does it work? You'll be thinking about this question a lot as you'll be handing in a foot long essay in three weeks' time, and not in a large font, Miss Alakous," Sinistra teased, and the Gryffindor flushed and looked down at her lap.

The class ended not ten minutes later, Merlin and Rob heading down two floors to meet with the rest of their friends outside the DADA classroom. Merlin had been enjoying the lessons recently, even if they were a little odd, simply because Mad-Eye Moody was their professor. The man was an auror known by almost everybody in the magical world, and Merlin had seen multiple articles of him the few times he'd ordered the Daily Prophet. He'd ordered the Quibbler once, and only once, simply because it was even too ridiculous for him to take seriously, but it was a good laugh every once in a while.

There had been an article a few days before the semester started that said that Moody had reported a break in to his house, only to realise that it had been nothing after Ministry officials were sent in (including Arthur Weasley), and it was his enchanted dustbins going haywire. However paranoid and insane the papers made Mad-Eye out to be, Merlin didn't think he was at all. He was incredibly
level-headed, if you didn't count the amount of times he shouted out 'Constant vigilance!' during class.

"Have you heard what the younger years have been saying today?" Cedric asked as Merlin and Rob approached him from down the hallway.

"No, I haven't really been listening to the gossip today," Merlin said. It was true, he'd spent all his free time thinking about what the hell the golden egg had meant when it said that it was going to take someone he loved. Merlin assumed that it would probably be Cedric, seeing as he was quickly becoming his best friend in the school, although there was every possibility that one of his other Hufflepuff friends could be taken. He knew that if Cedric was in the tournament like he was supposed to be, Cho Chang would've been taken, seeing as Cedric had been grossly crushing on her for weeks. There was, however, the innate possibility that Arthur could be the one taken, because although they didn't appear to be great friends, Merlin knew that Hogwarts and indeed Professor Dumbledore both had ways of knowing things they really couldn't, or shouldn't.

"They said that Moody's teaching us about the Unforgivable Curses, and that he's even been testing the Imperius Curse on some of the fourth and fifth years!" Cedric hissed, and Merlin frowned. He might not have been too heavily involved in the wizarding community for a few years, but he was pretty sure that was illegal.

"And he's allowed to do that?" Cora asked, concerned.

"Usually it's only the seventh years that are taught about the Curses, and demonstrations are incredibly rare, not seen for a few decades at least. But to teach it on the younger years?" Rob contributed. While Merlin was concerned, with what he'd seen in the future, it seemed like vigilance to be teaching the younger years - especially Harry - how to deal with the Unforgivable Curses. There was every chance that he wouldn't be able to neutralize the threat of Voldemort coming back, and that the world would fall irreparably out of balance, and that knowledge of how to survive like this would become essential.

"Maybe he thinks something's going to happen," Merlin interjected.

"Like what? The man's a paranoid psycho," Cora scoffed. Just at that moment, the door to their classroom swung open by itself, and everybody started to enter. They were taken aback when they saw that all of the desks and chairs had been stacked on either side of the room, leaving an entirely empty space in the middle where Moody was standing, leaning on his staff.

"Surely you've all heard the rumours," Moody began once they all filed in, murmuring and huddling
together. "That learning about the Unforgivable Curses isn't just restricted to seventh years now, but that students as young as the fourth years are learning about them. And you would be correct," he said with a grunt.

"Who can tell me what all three Unforgivable Curses are? Diggory?" Moody asked, pointing a knobbly finger at the prefect.

"The Imperius Curse, the... Cruciatus Curse, and the Killing Curse," Cedric said, somewhat unsure. Merlin shuddered, remembering what those curses did to some of the people he knew during the First War. He hadn't been able to intervene then, it wasn't his place to, so he was forced to watch from the sidelines and give cryptic hints as acquaintances started to die around him, to convert, or even be tortured into madness. Merlin wanted to kill Bellatrix Lestrange for that, but he'd leave that particular job for someone more deserving - perhaps Augusta Longbottom, who was as fiery as she'd been in her youth, and would have no problem killing the woman who tortured her son and daughter-in-law.

"Correct, Mr Diggory, five points. Now, during the reign of You-Know-Who, the Imperius curse was used the most often to bring people from our side onto his side," Moody began. "After You-Know-Who disappeared, however, it was incredibly difficult for us to sort out who had really been under the curse, and who were saving their own behinds." Merlin would've been sure that during this speech in the fourth year classes, that magical eye of his would've turned to Draco Malfoy. That would've pleased Harry and Ron immensely.

"I've been given permission by Dumbledore to demonstrate the Imperius curse on this classroom, and you need to fight it. Fighting the Imperius curse is all about willpower and mental strength - it doesn't matter how big or tough you are, if you aren't smart enough to fight it, you'll succumb," Moody said. Merlin could only imagine that eye swivelling from Draco to Crabbe and Goyle.

"So if you'll all get into a line, we'll get started," Moody said. The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws lined up rather hesitantly, but the tense atmosphere in the room was broken when Gabriel Tate, former prefect, began to hop around the room screeching like a monkey.

A Ravenclaw girl followed, who sang an impressive opera song at the top of her lungs, and then a Ravenclaw boy behind her who backflipped the entire length of the classroom. Pavel was up next, and he began to sing the Russian national anthem in a voice much deeper than his own while sticking his finger up his nose. Cora managed to fight the curse for a few seconds with sheer, unadulterated stubbornness, before she fell to the floor and mimed swimming hurriedly away from a shark.

Rob nearly broke a kneecap when he clambered to the top of the pile of desks on one corner and began making a dramatic speech for the equality of Nifflers, before Vern tackled him to the floor,
pretending to be an excitable dog. Two Ravenclaw boys professed their great love for one another whilst stuck on either side of an invisible wall (and really it was a tear-jerking scene, the boys looked as though they were truly heartbroken that they couldn't touch the other) before it was Cedric's turn.

Moody cast the spell on Cedric, who stood completely still without moving. For a few breathless seconds it seemed as though the spell simply hadn't worked, before Cedric launched into an impressive hula routine with hip swinging and rotations. The girls loved it.

Then Merlin got to the front of the line, and looked Professor Moody in the eye.

"The Hogwarts Champion, eh? Let's see how well you fare," Moody said, levelling his wand at Merlin. He froze, feeling something like warmth seeping into his body, curling up around his ribcage, the feeling like being wrapped in a warm blanket, comforting and happy. His mind cast back to the days where he was the happiest - at Arthur's side, working together to save Camelot, bright smiles cast to each other in relief as battles were won and they were both still alive.

Then Merlin began to feel his fingers twitch without his own accord, and it was like being doused in ice. The happiness and warmth left immediately as the spell tried to take hold of his body, move him without his knowing, to make him do what he didn't want to. To control him, use him, to do anything, to make himself helpless as his limbs moved around like a puppet.

Like Morgana.

Like the times she'd taken hold of his mind or his body to take out Arthur, his best friend, his king, his love.

And Merlin refused to ever feel that way again.

_Dance_, the voice in his head whispered. _Dance for me. Dance until you're free. Dance for me._

_Never_, Merlin replied, and like ripping through tissue paper, the ripped the spell out of him and fell to his knees with a scream, panting like he'd run a marathon. Everything around him was silent, and he could feel his downcast eyes glowing that warm golden, and then cheers erupted around him. Someone fell beside him and tugged him into his arms, the cold disappearing from his limbs, and Merlin could manage a smile.
"You're full of surprises, aren't you Emery?" Moody said as Merlin finally regained the strength in his legs to stand up.

Cora huffed from next to him, and he realised that it had been her who was holding him. He ignored the strange look that Moody gave him - that man was paranoid about anything, and smiled as he accepted the back-slaps and high-fives that the rest of his classmates gave him, before the class continued on with the demonstrations. Merlin wasn't sure if Moody had upped the ante or if the rest of the class just didn't have the will to fight the surprisingly lovely sensations that the Imperious curse brought, but nobody else managed to fight it off, something that Rob and Cora boasted proudly every time a student humiliated and/or bruised themselves during the exercise.

"Your homework is to prepare yourself properly for next class, where we'll be trying this again. Emery, can I have a word with you?" Moody said as the bell resounded throughout the stone halls. Merlin waved his friends on, who were heading to the Great Hall for lunch, and turned to Mad-Eye Moody only when the class had filed out and the thick wooden door had shut behind them. The man was staring at him with both eyes, possibly suspiciously, and it was incredibly unnerving.

"With someone who has such incredible and rare talents as yours, I would've thought that I'd have heard of you, or at least your family line. A Dragonlord ability is incredibly rare, thought to have died out with the great wizard Merlin," Moody began, and Merlin tried to control his heart rate. He wasn't sure what that eye could see through, whether it was able to pierce through his ribcage and see his heart beating double time, or even just the sweat that began to bead at the back of his neck.

"My family was extremely reclusive," Merlin began. "By the time I was a teenager I'd only been into the city once or twice - they didn't really trust the outside world or other wizards. They mostly kept to themselves, we had a family house and farm out by a lake in the countryside, and I was home-schooled up until this year."

"What changed?" Moody asked. There was no change in his voice, pitch or tone, so Merlin had absolutely no idea if the auror was buying his story; but Merlin'd lied enough in his life that he was fairly certain that nobody would be able to tell.

"They died," Merlin said. "My grandparents, aunt, uncle and cousins died in the First War, I barely knew them. It caused my parents to become even more reclusive. My father passed away five years ago, and my mother ten months ago, both from sickness. They refused to go to St. Mungo's, they were too terrified to leave the house. It wasn't a pretty life, or particularly fun, but they imparted enough knowledge as well as they could. I had a great-aunt who would come over from time to time to teach me how to duel and give hands on knowledge, but I have no idea where she lives or even if she's still alive." Merlin shrugged. "I guess I didn't really know how different I was until I came here. I never thought I was special."
Moody stared at him for a few seconds, magical eye piercing almost into his soul, much like he'd imagine it would feel to be under the scrutiny of Dumbledore. Finally, with a grunt, Moody nodded and seemingly accepted his well-thought-out lie (he'd lain awake for hours coming up with it).

"That would explain it," Moody said. "Still, you're a very interesting young man, Emery, and I'm eager to see how well you fare against the second task."

"Thank you Professor. May I go?" Merlin asked. Moody sent him off, and Merlin tried not to fly out of the room at great speed. That was the closest anyone had ever come to discovering that he wasn't who he said he was, and he didn't like that all too much. He hurried down the crowded stairwell to the great hall, where the Hufflepuff table was filled with confused students staring down at slips of parchments in their hands.

"Is there a new timetable out or something?" Merlin asked, trying to peer at the paper in Cedric's hand.

"It's a notice from Professor Sprout asking us all to meet her in one of the empty transfig rooms after class - only everyone from fourth year up got one," Cedric said, showing the parchment to Merlin. Merlin frowned, wondering what it could be. Looking around the Great Hall, students of the other houses were all similarly looking down at pieces of parchment in their hands, including a familiar Gryffindor trio.

"Hold up," Merlin said, and scuttled over to the Gryffindor table next to them. He sat himself down next to Ron, the fourth-years murmuring over the parchment in their hands with an incredibly similar message in Professor McGonagall's handwriting.

"What d'you think it is?" Merlin asked.

"No clue," Ron said. "It was only given to the fourth years and up."

"Same with us, it looks like all the houses have a similar message," Merlin said, pointing to both the Ravenclaw and Slytherin tables.

"It's got to have something to do with the Triwizard Tournament," Hermione interjected. "It's no coincidence that it just happens to be the fourth years and up."
"The fourth years and up are also having the Imperius curse thrown at them," Merlin pointed out, and Harry looked at him.

"Moody did that on you guys too?" he asked. "How'd you do?"

"I was the only one who could fully throw off the curse. Cora was pretty close, and Cedric performed a lovely hula," Merlin informed, and the trio laughed. "You?"

"We were terrible," Ron said. "But Harry managed to get rid of it with scraped knees."

"Well done, Harry," Merlin praised. "Okay, I'll see you guys later then, I'd better go and see if anyone in Ravenclaw or Slytherin know what it is," Merlin said.

"You've got friends in Slytherin?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, they're not all bad you know," Merlin said, waving to Maya who's eye he'd managed to catch across the room. With an eye-roll at the obscene gesture she pulled, Merlin got up and walked around the Gryffindor table before he saw Arthur sitting with his group of friends, minus the red-headed girl Lydia.

"You got it too, huh?" Merlin asked, leaning one hand down on the table.

"Pretty sure it's for the Yule Ball," Arthur muttered, and Merlin couldn't tell whether he was terrified or thrilled at the concept.

"Yule Ball?" Merlin asked.

"Surely you've heard of it," Mako gushed, and Merlin shook his head with a frown.

"Exchange student from a reclusive forest-dwelling family, remember?" Merlin pointed out, and Rinko snorted.

"It's a ball that is traditionally held during the Triwizard Tournament. Usually it's only the sixth and
seventh years that are allowed to attend, but considering the fact that Harry's a champion, they had to allow down to the fourth years,” Rinko informed.

"There's a page in the Daily Prophet where you can order dress robes," Percy informed, passing the newspaper over to Merlin, who took it with a quirk of his mouth. The full-page advertisement was covered in images of wizards and witches in fancy dresses and robes spinning about, the almost obnoxious glittering text informing the reader where to owl their order to.

"Sounds great," Merlin said. "I've never been to a ball before." It was true, he'd managed to get through the entire eighteenth and nineteenth century without being invited to a ball, it was almost a miracle. He'd been going through a petulant few decades then though, and now decided that a ball wouldn't be as bad as he thought it would be - or at least, a wizarding ball.

"I don't think anyone has, unless you're from a pureblood Slytherin family, they're the only ones who actually still have them," Sara said. "I think Maya said that she'd been to one, go ask her."

Merlin thanked her, and looked to Arthur, who looked a little bit pensive.

"You all right?" Merlin asked, and Arthur looked up at him.

"Just wondering if we need dates," Arthur said with a vaguely terrified expression, and Merlin burst out into laughter.

"I don't think you'll be having any trouble there, mate," Merlin said, clapping him on the shoulder, and hurried off to the Ravenclaw table to confront Arielle before he did anything stupid like asking Arthur to go with him.

"Same message?" Merlin asked, and she nodded. "Dance practice with Flitwick, that'll be a sight to see."

"Dance practice?" Arielle asked. "Ohh, the Yule Ball, of course. I didn't even think about it! You think that's what this is about?"

"Yeah," Merlin said. "I talked to the Gryffindors, apparently there's a huge advertisement for dress robes in the Daily Prophet today, it's probably a good idea to start looking through their catalogue now." Arielle rolled her eyes and shoved him away playfully, and Merlin then sat himself
comfortably down at the Slytherin table between Maya and Simon.

"So... Yule Ball, huh?" Merlin began, and Maya groaned and slammed her forehead onto the table while Simon looked like he was trying not to bust a gut. "I can't wait to see you dance," Merlin teased.

"Shut the fuck up, Morgan," Maya muttered into the wooden table.

"Language Maya, or you might not be able to go to the ball. And you want to see Cora in a dress, right?" Merlin teased, and Maya snapped upright to stare at her girlfriend from across the hall.

"...You have a point," she conceded.

"Although, Cora might not want to see you dance anymore after the twentieth time you'll have stepped on her toes," Simon crowed, clearly enjoying the moment. Maya reached around Merlin to punch him squarely on his arm.

"If we're all doing dance practice with our heads of house," Merlin began, "I thought Flitwick would be hilarious, but Snape...?" he trailed off, and Maya had to slap her hands over her mouth to prevent herself from crying out, cheeks gone red and eyes filling with laughter tears. Simon, on the other hand, looked like the mental imagery he'd unintentionally called up had scarred him for life.

"Oh dear god," Simon breathed.

"Have fun, you two!" Merlin teased, getting up to return to the Hufflepuff table. It wasn't until he sat down that he realised that a familiar white-blond head was nowhere to be seen.

"I've gathered some intel from the other houses, we've all got messages from our heads of house, and the most likely scenario is that it's dance practise for the Yule Ball in a few weeks' time," Merlin informed the others. Every single one of his friends groaned, including Cora. "C'mon guys, it'll be fun!"

"It's not the dancing we're worried about," Rob said.
"Speak for yourself," Cora muttered.

"It's the dates," Rob said, a worried expression plastered onto his face. "I mean, Cora's got a girlfriend, but what about us? We're all painfully single."

"In the words of Cora, speak for yourself mate, I'm asking Cho," Cedric said comfortably, waving over to the Ravenclaw table where the young girl blushed and waved back.

"You are unbelievable," Merlin said. "Where's Pavel?"

"Said he had to go and get something from the dorm about fifteen minutes ago," Vern said, shoving the last of a bread roll into his mouth.

"So why isn't he back yet? He can't have gotten that lost, can he?" Merlin asked, knowing Pavel's notorious talent for getting completely turned around with his useless sense of direction.

"We'll have to go and make sure he doesn't, we've got potions next and however much of an idiot he is, I don't want him getting in trouble," Cora muttered, before draining the last of her pumpkin juice. The five students got up from the table and began to walk in the general direction of the Hufflepuff common room. They were almost halfway there when Cedric pulled aside a tapestry to take a secret shortcut, and all five of them froze.

Leaning against a wall in the hallway, Pavel and Lydia were wrapped in each other's arms, snogging the living daylights out of each other.

"Get it girl," Vern said slyly, and the two jumped apart like they'd been electrocuted. Cora burst out into laughter at the deer-in-the-headlights expression on Pavel's face, and Lydia quickly flattened her hair and began to fix her smudged lipstick with a slightly smug expression on her face, yet her eyes were bright and her cheeks were flushed.

"Uh... this isn't what it looks like?" Pavel tried, and Lydia lightly slapped him on the arm.

"It's exactly what it looks like," she corrected. "And I'll expect this illicit affair to become a proper relationship within the next hour." Pavel looked worriedly down at her, and her smug smile softened into a kind one as she pressed a hand to his cheek.
"I'm not ashamed of you, Pavel, and your friends don't seem to care, so what's the issue?" Lydia asked softly. Merlin felt like he was intruding on a private moment.

"I... nothing," Pavel said. "You want to be my girlfriend? Properly?" he asked hopefully.

"You're an idiot," Lydia sighed, pressing a quick peck to his lips (which were now covered in smeared lipstick). "Yes, Kaidanovsky, I want to be your girlfriend." Pavel's face immediately lit up, and Lydia rolled her eyes at him. The two exited the passageway, and Lydia flounced off to the Great Hall after slinging a wink back at Pavel, who had a disgustingly smitten expression on his face.

"You're disgusting," Cora mumbled, but she couldn't hide the turn up at the corners of her lips.

"And we're going to be very late if we don't get to potions right now," Rob said, checking his watch. "And take that lipstick off, Pavel, it doesn't match your complexion." Pavel dazedly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, making the situation worse, and Merlin laughed with a shake of his head as they began to head down to the dungeons.
"The Yule Ball is one of the oldest and most respected traditions of the Triwizard Tournament," Professor Sprout began. All of the furniture in the room had been vanished for the meantime, with a lone gramophone resting on a table at the front next to her. All of the fourth to seventh years crowded into the room, somehow comfortably with enough space to form a mini dance floor.

"The school that hosts the Triwizard Tournament is also highly respected, and therefore I expect you all to behave in a respectable manner, Miss Dallas," she said, narrowing her eyes at Cora, who positively beamed at her. "As the name suggests, it is indeed a ball, which means that there will be dancing involved. Now stop with all of your groaning, it's honestly not as painful as you think it will be. In fact, the only person this will be painful for will be Mr Emery."

Merlin immediately straightened at his name, and frowned. "Why?"

"Because, Mr Emery, the four chosen champions must be the first to dance in front of everyone." At this, everybody laughed, and Merlin blanched. Cedric put a comforting hand on his shoulder, but Merlin could feel it traitorously shaking with the tremors of his held-back laughter.

"Morgan, you'd better find a date then!" Cora teased, elbowing him in the side. Merlin groaned and slid down further into his seat. All of the girls he knew were already taken or had dates, and the ball had only been announced.

"So in order to prove that just anybody can dance - Emery, up you get," Professor Sprout said, and Merlin shook his head fiercely.

"You know miss, I think Cedric's a pretty good dancer, you should ask him to go up," Merlin tried to reason, and Professor Sprout looked at him with a fond yet exasperated smile.
"Morgan, you're going to have to learn to dance at some point, and this way you won't look like a complete idiot and an embarrassment to Hufflepuff house in front of everyone you know," she pointed out. A few of the fourth years sniggered, and with a groan, Merlin hauled himself out of his chair. Cedric laughed and clapped him on the back, and Merlin was pretty sure that he could hear Cora and Pavel placing bets over something, probably how many times he was going to trip over his own feet.

Professor Sprout was a good deal shorter than Merlin, who was still tall and lanky after several hundred years, and so it took a little bit of shuffling in order to get into a workable dance position. Merlin had his hand on Professor Sprout's shoulder, and she had her hand on his hip in the leading position, their other hands intertwined. Someone wolf-whistled, and Merlin was sorely tempted to wandlessly send them flying. At least he liked Professor Sprout, and it would've been a lot more awkward trying to dance with Flitwick, or god forbid, Professor Snape.

"Now, the dance is in a count of three, and you will follow me, your feet following mine. And... 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2- no, don't stand there, 1-2-3, 1-2- follow my lead! 1-2-3, chin up, Morgan, 1-2-3, 1-2-3," Sprout recited, Merlin awkwardly trying to follow her movements despite the slow pace. He nearly stood on her foot a few times before he memorised the moves, and began to actually tell where he was supposed to put his feet. Sprout smiled proudly as he fell in time with her, and just to be cheeky he twirled her spontaneously, and she let out a rather undignified snort of laughter. They came to a stop, and everyone in the room cheered.

"Now there will be lifts and switching involved, but I'm sure you can do that with somebody else," Sprout said with a proud pat of his cheek. "Now everyone take up a partner, it doesn't matter who, and learn this dance." Cora grabbed Pavel, and Cedric slung his arm around Merlin's shoulders.

"We're going to be the most beautiful couple on this dance floor, Morgan," Cedric said, and Merlin laughed, settling into the dance position with Cedric. Rob and Vern shrugged and went with each other, and the gramophone was turned on as sweet music filled the room. Merlin led Cedric to teach him the dance at first, everyone awkwardly backing into each other and stepping on each other's feet, and quite a few cuss words echoed throughout the room, although Sprout didn't say anything about it. She wandered around, correcting posture and shaking her head at the absolutely hopeless pair that was Rob and Vern, especially when they attempted to do the lift before they'd been taught it and collapsed onto the floor.

"That, everyone, is why you follow instructions," Sprout said as the boys laughed so hard their faces turned red. Cora and Pavel were surprisingly good at the dance, and once they'd been taught, pulled off the lift perfectly, and were the first couple to almost master the dance.

"You'll be here all night until you look at least like you know what you're doing, so I would take this seriously if I were you, Abbott," Sprout scolded as Hannah Abbott and her friend giggled in the corner.
"Just pretend I'm Cho," Merlin muttered to Cedric, who snorted.

"You have beautiful hair, Cho, and your skin is positively glowing," Cedric teased, and Merlin placed a hand over his heart and gasped.

"You're so handsome Cedric, I might pass out," Merlin mocked in a high-pitched voice, pretending to fall to the ground. Cedric, however, hadn't been prepared for it, and the two actually fell to the floor, giggling like teenage girls.

"Hopeless, all of you," Sprout sighed.

The next two weeks were absolute chaos. Girls walking in packs, giggling every time a boy even so much as looked their way, and guys wearing expressions of lost hope, fear and even outright rejection could be seen moping in every single corridor. Merlin'd felt especially bad for Harry and Ron when the two walked past a large group of Ravenclaw girls, including Cho Chang, and they'd all giggled loudly; the two Gryffindors had hurried away after that.

Cedric had already asked Cho, who obviously said yes, and Cora and Maya were already discussing dresses and colours and what would compliment each other without being too matchy-matchy. Pavel and Lydia were publicly dating, and were pretty much the talk of the school, and Merlin had to admit that they made an incredibly good-looking couple.

"Oi, Emery!" a voice yelled, and Merlin turned around to see Arthur power-walking down the corridor, apparently oblivious to the number of girls hopefully swooning his way and flipping their hair. Merlin felt a little tug of satisfaction at that, and smiled when Arthur caught up to him.

"What've you got next?" Arthur asked.

"Free period, but Potions after. Why?" Merlin answered, helping to hold Arthur's bag open while the Gryffindor shoved all of his books haphazardly into it.

"Do I need a reason to be in your ridiculous presence?" Arthur said sarcastically, and Merlin rolled his eyes. "Okay, I was actually thinking about re-opening the Dueling Club, and I thought that you should do it with me." Merlin frowned and sat down in his usual windowsill, Arthur leaning up against the wall.
"Re-opening?" Merlin asked.

"Oh, yeah, I forget that you're a new student," Arthur said. "There was this absolutely mental DADA professor about two years back, Gilderoy Lockhart. Heard of him?" The name sounded familiar, but Merlin couldn't actually figure out if he knew who he was, and shook his head.

"He wrote a couple of best-selling books, Trouble with Trolls and a few more. Anyway, he was hired to be our DADA professor, and he was the most self-centred guy I've ever seen in my entire life," Arthur said. At this, Merlin laughed, and the Gryffindor rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know, hypocritical as hell, but this guy had a massive life-size painting of himself painting a portrait of himself. He thought he was hot shit, and he decided to start up a Dueling Club with Snape to teach some of the younger years some practical defence skills. You can imagine how well that went down."

Merlin did recognise the name after Arthur's explanation from the few times he'd read about the man in the Daily Prophet, and laughed at the thought of the egotistical blonde being thrown onto his ass by a nonplussed Professor Snape.

"Anyway, the guy was useless, and everyone found out that Potter spoke parseltongue after he tried to stop a snake from attacking some Hufflepuff kid, and everyone thought that he was the Heir of Slytherin, which the Weasley twins thought was particularly funny. The Dueling Club was cancelled, Harry and Ron found the Chamber of Secrets and killed the basilisk that'd been petrifying students all around the school and it was the second year in a row that they'd managed to save the whole school from a fatal threat," Arthur explained, sounding both equal parts proud and disapproving.

Merlin raised his eyebrows at the news and thought that he should definitely ask Harry what he'd been getting up to in his free time, because defeating a basilisk wasn't an easy task for a twelve-year-old to do.

"So you want to start up the Dueling Club again, with you and me?" Merlin asked, and Arthur grinned.

"Yeah, you remember that duel we had during first week? I've never experienced anything like it. So I figured, we're both talented at dueling, so why not help some of the other students who aren't so good? I mean, I'll have to get permission from Dumbledore and McGonagall, but I think it could be pretty fun," Arthur said, eyebrows raised in expectation. Merlin's mind went back to their duel out on the field and grinned, remembering how good it was to be able to use magic so freely in front of Arthur, to have him use it back, the adrenalin rush that had made his hands shake.
"I'll have to ask Sprout, but it sounds great, and it'll probably be good training for the Triwizard," Merlin said, and Arthur positively beamed, the exact same way he always denied doing whenever he thought that Merlin'd been lost and they found him again. A sensation similar to having a helium balloon in his stomach came about when he saw that smile and the excitement on Arthur's face.

"Great, I'll go talk to them and get it sorted out as soon as possible," Arthur said. "See if the other seventh years would be interested in helping out too, and talk to some of the younger years to see if they'd like to join."

"I'll get on that as soon as I suffer my way through Professor Snape's class," Merlin sighed.

"Really? I've heard that you're the best Potions student that this school has ever had," Arthur said with a sly grin. Merlin groaned and smacked him on the arm.

"Don't you start, or are you forgetting how absolutely abysmal I am at Transfig? Clearly not, considering the fact that you're laughing at me every single lesson," Merlin accused.

"All in good fun, my friend," Arthur teased. Merlin shoved him, and then got to his feet to start heading down to the dungeons.

"Oh, Morgan," Arthur said as Merlin started to turn away. "Have you got a date for the Ball yet?"

"No, you?" Merlin asked. Arthur had an evil smirk on his face that Merlin really didn't like.

"Nope, that doesn't stop the girls from throwing themselves at me," Arthur said, and my god he really knew exactly what reaction he had on the female population, and Merlin wanted to smack that smile off his face.

"Are you going to ask someone?" Merlin asked curiously.

"Maybe," Arthur said with a shrug. "I don't really think having dates are a big deal. I might ask Mako to go with me, I could ask Rinko if she wants to go with you?"
"Sure, that sounds like a good plan," Merlin said with a smile. He didn't actually know any other girls outside their limited friend group, except for Arielle in Ravenclaw, and she was going with one of the prefects. Arthur headed off down the hallway with a backwards wave to Merlin, who shook his head in exasperation at the swagger he injected into his walk when he passed the girls.

Merlin hoisted his bag further up from where it was slipping from his shoulder and headed in the opposite direction, downwards towards the dungeons. Merlin was honestly surprised that he managed to traverse the Hogwarts hallways – most days the hallways and doors were in the right places, but every now and then they switched around or mirrored each other like some screwed up Escher room. He felt sorry for the flustered looking first years that were yelling about needing to be on the third floor when they’d somehow made their way onto the eighth. There was a particular staircase that Merlin usually used to get to potions, but it always lead to the library on Fridays, so he had to take the long way around.

He passed Hermione in the hallways and nodded to her and gave a small smile. She looked a little stressed but nodded back, and Merlin figured that he should check in with Harry and Ron sometime too. He made it to potions within time, everyone else waiting out in the hallway, Cora and Pavel throwing some weird squidy-looking lump at each other like a tennis ball.

“You’re late,” Cedric noted, checking his watch. Merlin was usually one of the first to arrive to class.

“Stairway changed, had to take the long way around,” Merlin huffed, slightly out of breath, and everyone nodded in realization. “Hey, what would you guys think of the Dueling Club being re-opened?” he asked, catching the attention of the other students milling about waiting for class.

“You mean without that idiot Lockhart doing it? Fantastic,” Rob said.

“Would it be open for all years?” Cora asked.

“Not sure,” Merlin replied. He’d have to suss the details out more with Arthur, but the general looks of agreement and nods seemed pretty good, even from the students who weren’t really in the conversation.

“Would it be like, remedial DADA?” one of the Slytherin students asked.

“Nope, just a club anyone can go to so they can get some duelling practice in, we don’t really do much in DADA that isn’t practising spells on cushions,” Merlin explained.
“Who’d be running it?” a Hufflepuff girl asked.

“Me and Arthur Pendragon in Gryffindor,” Merlin said. A few of the Slytherins screwed up their noses at that, and Merlin rolled his eyes. “C’mon guys, just because he’s a Gryffindor doesn’t mean he isn’t one of the best duelists this school has ever seen, and nobody’s going to judge you because you’re in the same room as a Gryffindor. This whole house rivalry thing is ridiculous, to be honest. We haven’t sorted anything out, we’re just seeing if there’d be a general positive opinion for reopening it,” Merlin explained, slightly annoyed.

“Well if it’s you and Arthur running it, I’d definitely go,” Vern piped up. “That duel first week was wicked, and if I can learn to be even a fraction as good as you both were, I’d go every damn day.”

“That was pretty cool,” a Slytherin student admitted.

“So you’d all join?” Merlin asked. There were multiple murmurs of assent and nodding, and it was just then that the door to the potions room flew open and Snape stood there like an overgrown bat, leering at them all with narrowed eyes.

“I hope you’re not all discussing some sort of rebellion,” he drawled in that oil-slick voice of his.

“No sir, never,” Cora said, entirely too innocently. Snape glared at her but motioned for everybody to go into class, and Pavel held back a giggle as he passed Snape. Merlin crowded around the desk in the front of the class, where a mother-of-pearl potion sat in a cauldron, steam rising from it in curling tendrils that were rather pretty to look at. Merlin caught the peculiar scent of chocolate, hay and something unidentifiable that reminded him inexplicably of Camelot.

“Can anybody inform the class as to what this is?” Snape drawled.

“Amortentia,” a Slytherin student piped up. “The most powerful love potion in the world.”

“Technically it’s not a love potion,” another student from Slytherin said. “It’s more of a mind-altering drug that causes false infatuation in the person who consumes it. It’s never used innocently or for any good reason, and there are actually a lot of laws surrounding it’s use,” they informed.
“I heard that a lot of sexual assault cases often had Amortentia involved,” a Hufflepuff student said. “My mother works in the Ministry, said she’s seen a surprising number of them come through.”

“While this is an interesting discussion, it is not the tangent I wish you to be going on,” Snape said, drawing the attention back to him. “Amortentia will have a different scent to each individual of the things they find the most attractive, whether they are aware of it or not.” Snape looked incredibly displeased to be speaking about this, and Merlin wondered if the man was even capable of love.

“I can smell Maya’s perfume,” Cora whispered to Pavel under her breath.

“I can smell Lydia’s lip gloss,” Pavel replied, both of them giving gross looks to each other.

“That was not an invitation for a discussion, Dallas and Kaidanovsky,” Snape barked at them. “I am however curious if there is a member of this room who cannot smell anything.”

A quiet Slytherin girl put her hand up and came forward. “I wouldn’t say I can’t smell anything, Professor, but rather I can smell the ingredients that make it up. I’m aware that Amortentia has well over twenty ingredients, but it gives off the distinct smell of bloodroot, which is used in a very small amount of potions.”

“What is your name?” Snape asked.

“Tanith Sorrows, sir,” she said.

“Miss Sorrows, retrieve some bloodroot from the store cupboard,” Snape said. The girl hurried off to do what he said, and Merlin noticed a few of the students had gotten closer to the Amortentia to see what they could smell. “I am required by the ministry to teach you to identify the scent of bloodroot within Amortentia so that if it is ever slipped into your food or drink, you will be able to detect it.”

“That’s a really good decision,” Cedric said thoughtfully.

“I can’t believe something called a love potion has something called bloodroot in it,” Rob said, slightly grossed out.
“It’s a very misleading potion,” a Hufflepuff boy said. Tanith finally came back from the storeroom, holding a plant that was blood red, as the name suggested, both stem and leaves a dark, disarming crimson.

“You will pass it around, smell the bloodroot, and then attempt to identify it in this potion. When you can smell it, you may return to your desks and begin brewing Angel’s Trumpet Draught,” Snape said. Eventually the branch was passed to Merlin, and he held it right up to his nose and took a deep whiff. It also smelled like the copper of blood, but also like an incredibly sour berry mixed into one. He screwed up his nose and passed it on to Cedric, and then approached the potion. It took a few concentrated efforts, but eventually Merlin was able to detect the faint scent of bloodroot that eventually got so strong he didn’t know how he didn’t recognize it before.

As he headed back to his desk, Tanith Sorrows nodded to him as he passed, with a small smile on her face. Merlin managed to lose himself in his not-quite-there state as he brewed the potion, fixing Vern’s whenever he could, laughing when Cora turned in her bubble-gum blue potion that should’ve been a shimmering powder pink. Snape very nearly arched an eyebrow as she skipped happily back to her cauldron.

That night at dinner Merlin snuck around the house tables and slipped in between the Weasley twins, opposite Harry, Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table.

“I’m trespassing, make sure they don’t notice me,” Merlin whispered. Fred Weasley laughed and threw his scarf around Merlin’s neck, hiding the yellow hood of his robes and tie.

“So how was everyone’s dance practice?” Merlin asked, grabbing a hot bread roll to slather with butter.

“Harry danced with McGonagall,” Ron laughed, and Harry turned bright red.

“Ah, it’s okay, I danced with Prof Sprout,” Merlin said with a grin. “It was quite fun actually, she’s a fabulous dancer. It wasn’t too hard to pick up, actually.”

“Are you kidding?” Harry groaned. “I’m absolutely terrible, I’m going to screw up on the night I know it.”

“I can help you out if you want, Harry,” Merlin offered. “I taught Cedric rather well, if I do say so myself. Hey, have any of you got dates yet?”
“Yup,” the twins said smugly, one of them winking over to Angelina Johnson, who rolled her eyes fondly back.

“We don’t,” Ron said, gesturing to the three of them, and Hermione frowned.

“Speak for yourself,” she huffed, and Merlin felt his eyes widen in surprise as a smile found its way onto his face.

“You’ve got a date, Hermione? Do tell,” he needled, and she rolled her eyes.

“I’m not saying anything, none of you will believe me anyway, you’ll just have to find out on the night,” she said haughtily, refusing to say anything more on the subject. Merlin didn’t know who she’d be going with that wasn’t believable, but he remained silent on the subject and waved down Arthur, who was sitting a little further up the table.

“Hey, Arthur!” he called, and the blonde turned to him, chewing on some mashed potatoes. “I talked to my potions class, they’re all keen for a re-do of the Dueling Club, I haven’t talked to Sprout yet though. Did you ask Mako and Rinko about the ball?”

“Yeah, Mako’s good to go with me but Rinko’s already been asked by some Ravenclaw girl, sorry mate!” Arthur said with a slightly guilty expression, but Merlin waved him off.

“It’s okay, thanks for trying,” Merlin said, trying to hide his now sheer terror at trying to ask a girl (or guy) out to the Yule Ball.

“Did you say Dueling Club?” Ron piped up.

“Oh yeah, Arthur and I are gonna see if we can get permission from Dumbledore to start up the Dueling Club again, although it’s still going to involve an egotistical blonde teaching you,” Merlin said smugly, and Arthur flicked a bit of mashed potato at him, that landed on the Gryffindor scarf he was wearing.

“Oi, that’s my scarf, Pendragon!” Fred hissed.
“Oh it’s just a bit of potato, Fred, honestly,” Hermione sighed. “I think the Dueling Club sounds like a great idea, Morgan.”

“Thank you, Hermione,” Merlin said rather pointedly. “Though I should probably get back to my table, I’m pretty sure Sprout’s eyeing me up suspiciously,” he said. “D’you want help with the dance, Harry?”

“Yes,” the fourth-year almost gasped out, and Merlin laughed.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you make an idiot out of yourself. Meet me outside the kitchens tomorrow, say eleven? I’ve got some essays to work on but we should be able to get an hour or two in,” Merlin said with a smile, handing his scarf back to Fred.

“Thanks, Morgan,” Harry said gratefully. Merlin winked and then scurried back across the Great Hall, slipping in between Vern and Rob at the table, picking up a chicken drumstick as he did so.

It wasn’t until that night when he’d nearly fallen asleep that he remembered that he was actually at Hogwarts for a purpose, not just to have fun, and a ball of lead settled in his gut.

The next day Harry showed up on time outside the kitchens and followed Merlin into one of the abandoned classrooms, which was mainly all of them, considering it was a Saturday and most of the students were freaking out over their workload.

“Sorry I don’t have music,” Merlin apologized.

“It’s okay, it was terrible anyway,” Harry said, and Merlin laughed.

“So the dance is really very simple, there’s three steps that you take in a triangular formation, after every round of four you switch arms, and every eight you lift,” Merlin said. He and Harry settled into the dance position, with Merlin in the lead, and he slowly showed Harry the foot movements, counting aloud until Harry had mastered it. Then they factored in the switching until Harry was getting that without the counting, and then they both nearly died of laughter when Merlin tried the lift.
“Okay, it’s probably going to be much easier to lift someone your age,” Merlin said with a laugh as the two stumbled back. “All you have to do is grip them comfortably around the waist, right under the ribs, they’ll put their hands on your shoulders and push up as you lift up. You’ve only got to do it for a half-turn, so you should be fine. I’m pretty sure the first dance only lasts a minute or two anyway, so you shouldn’t have anything to worry about,” Merlin comforted.

They practised for another half hour or so, not doing the lift but announcing the count, so that when they were finished, Harry was able to lead the dance and be in complete control of all of his extremities.

“Thank you so much for this, Morgan,” Harry said gratefully as the two shrugged on their robes. “I’ve been worried for days, on top of the egg which I still haven’t figured out…”

“You haven’t figured out the egg yet?” Merlin asked.

“I’ve been a little… busy,” Harry said sheepishly, in a way that Merlin knew he wouldn’t try to figure it out until a week before the second task, and he didn’t have a Cedric who knew what Mermish sounded like to help.

“You need to hold the egg underwater,” Merlin said. “We took it to the Prefects’ bathroom and opened it in the bath there. It’s definitely got something to do with the merpeople living in the Black Lake.”

“There’s merpeople in the Black Lake?” Harry asked, mildly shocked.

“Apparently,” Merlin shrugged.

“I… thank you, Morgan,” Harry said.

“It’s only fair, you told me about the dragons so I figured that I’d tell you about this. Knowing you, you probably wouldn’t try to figure it out until the day before,” he said, and Harry flushed knowingly. Merlin held the door open for Harry, and the two stepped out into the mostly empty hallway, except for a familiar figure holding a book to her chest, leaning against the wall a few metres down.

“Anyway, keep practising the dance, and I’ll see you around, Harry,” Merlin said with a smile.
Harry waved and hurried down the hallway, and as he did, the figure turned and approached Merlin.

“Morgan, I’m not sure if you remember me…” the girl began.

“Tanith, right?” Merlin asked, and the girl positively beamed.

“Yeah, that’s right! I heard what you said before potions yesterday about the Duelling Club, and I just wanted you to know that if you and Arthur restarted it, I would definitely come. I have a few friends who would too, we’re sort of the outcasts of Slytherin just because we don’t agree with the whole rivalry thing,” she said, smiling. Merlin thought she was rather pretty – she was short but obviously muscular like a dancer, with cropped blonde hair and strong features.

“That’s great news,” Merlin said gladly. “Are you friends with Maya Reed?”

“She’s one of my dorm mates,” Tanith said. “I’m really happy for her and Cora, though I don’t know much about her except for the fact that she takes potions with us.”

“You’re welcome to join us anytime,” Merlin said.

“Also, I was wondering,” Tanith began, chewing on her bottom lip. “I heard that the Triwizard Champions have to dance in front of everyone first. I’m not sure if you’re going with anyone, but if you aren’t, I’m a professional dancer and I figured that I could help you, maybe, not look like a complete idiot in front of the whole school?” she asked rather unabashedly, and Merlin couldn’t help but laugh.

“I would love to, Tanith,” Merlin said. “Quite honestly I was terrified about asking someone to the ball, but it looks like you’ve saved me the trouble.”

“Ahh, I think the whole boy-asks-girl thing is a little out-dated to be honest,” she sighed, brushing her fringe out of her eyes. There was something very outspoken about Tanith that Merlin liked.

“Agreed,” Merlin said. “Especially when there are nervous wrecks like me. I haven’t dated anybody in years, much less ask someone to a ball,” he said, catching himself before he said decades. That Veela had definitely put him off dating for a while.
“I don’t date,” Tanith said. “I don’t really see the point in it, honestly, I’m happy enough just keeping friendships. That’s why I don’t smell Amortentia, I think,” she mused.

“So you don’t want to date anyone ever?” Merlin asked curiously.

“Nah,” Tanith said. “I’m not bothered. Some people can’t live without dating someone, some people date many people, some people date multiple people, I don’t really have any interest in it.”

“Huh,” Merlin said.

“Anyway, I’ve got to head off to do my arithmancy essay and smash my head against a wall, so I’ll see you around, yeah?” Tanith asked, sending him a rakish grin.

“Sure,” Merlin replied. “We’ve got to colour co-ordinate our Yule Ball outfits anyway,” he said. Tanith laughed and clapped him on the back before heading back down the hallway, green robes flowing out behind her. Merlin seemed to be very good at befriending Slytherin girls.
Merlin cleared his throat nervously as he tugged at his collar; feeling like it was much too tight around his neck when it wasn’t even close. His robes were a dark midnight blue, made of a fine material that matched his eyes – or so Cora said, it wasn’t really Merlin’s area of expertise.

“Stop fussing,” Cedric sighed, fixing his own tie in the mirror. “You look fine, you know the dance, calm down before I jinx you.” Merlin laughed and smoothed the robes down his front, his wand comfortably tucked into the inside pocket of his robes. Although it was a formal occasion, nobody went anywhere without their wand, it was like having an extra limb. Not that Merlin exactly needed a wand.

Despite the fact it was Christmas Day, most people were more excited for the Yule Ball than the usual Christmas feast, or even presents. Merlin’d put in owl orders a week or so ago and sent Gaius off to pick up the deliveries. He’d woken up that morning to find Gaius perched on his bedside lamp, a pile of mismatched presents sitting at the end of his bed. The boys had waited for Cora to join them before they began to unwrap them, and Cedric had bought Merlin a lovely pair of golden cufflinks that he was currently wearing. (Arthur had sent him a book called Dragonology, featuring all species of known dragons, their history and breeding, and Merlin had felt his throat tighten up at the bright red cover. He’d sent the Gryffindor a bright red hooded robe with the Pendragon crest hand-stitched into it in gold).

“Well don’t you lot look dashing,” Cora drawled from the doorway, leaning on the jamb to stare at the five Hufflepuff boys getting ready. She was wearing a dark emerald green dress that was absolutely stunning with her dark skin and chocolate curls that she’d neatly styled. Her eyes were bright and excited, teeth glinting in the light.

“Could say the same about you, Cora,” Vern said with a grin.

“Oh, stop it you,” Cora teased, waving her hand. “But are you going to take any longer? We’ve got
to be there in twenty minutes if Morgan’s gonna get there in time for the first dance, honestly you lot took longer than our entire female dorm.”

“We’re good, let’s go,” Rob said, bodily shoving everyone out of the room. All of the first to third years were looking on longingly in the common room as everybody passed through, excited grins on almost everybody’s faces. The walk to the Great Hall was surprisingly short, Hogwarts was obviously feeling lenient about the girls in their heels, and their dates were already congregated around the entrance hall.

Cora immediately rushed to wrap her arms around Maya, who had pinned her silvery hair neatly onto her head, with dark eye makeup that matched her black dress, although the emerald lace on the bodice of her dress perfectly matched Cora’s. Merlin was pretty sure that Maya’s dress would’ve cost a small fortune, and then remembered that she was from a pureblood family. Pavel grabbed Lydia’s hand, the both of them incorporating silver into their outfits. Cedric took Cho’s hand, who looked particularly stunning in an Eastern-style dress, and Vern and Rob smiled at two younger girls that Merlin hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting yet.

Tanith broke away from Maya’s side to join Merlin, one of the only girls in a shorter dress that grew out longer at the back, short blonde hair styled still a little too casually for the occasion yet suited her very much.

“You clean up nicely,” she teased.

“So do you,” Merlin replied, taking her arm. “Oh, Arthur!” he called out, waving the Gryffindor over, who dragged a giggling Mako behind him. The two were wearing red and looked incredibly good together, and Merlin had to admit that they were all a pretty damn good-looking group.

“Mr Emery!” McGonagall exclaimed, shoving through the throng of students rather elegantly to meet them. “You are due out on the dance floor in ten minutes, could you please make sure that Potter gets there too?”

“Of course, professor,” Merlin said with a smile.

“Good, that boy gets in too much trouble for his own good, I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t make it tonight because he found another basilisk…” McGonagall murmured to herself, heading away to deal with some other students. Merlin laughed and introduced Tanith to those who hadn’t met her before. Merlin was actually surprised at how delicate she still managed to look even with her corded muscles and wondered what kind of dance she actually did that required so much strength.
“There’s Harry!” Pavel said, waving the younger boy over, who was with Ron and two dark-skinned twins that Merlin had seen around a few times. They joined them quickly, and Harry smiled at Merlin with his arm linked around the girl he was with.

“We’re on in a few minutes,” Merlin informed him. “McGonagall wants me to make sure you actually get out there alive.”

Harry gulped, obviously nervous, and Merlin found it hilarious how the two of them had faced threats that nobody in Hogwarts had ever seen before and yet they were both absolutely terrified of dancing. McGonagall announced for everybody to file into the hall except for the four champions and their dates. Fleur Delacour was with a student that Merlin vaguely recognized, and Krum was with a beautiful girl in a periwinkle-blue dress, with bright eyes and perfect teeth.

Then Merlin realized that she was Hermione Granger, and he nearly choked ungracefully on his own saliva.

“Hermione?” he gasped, and she grinned slightly sheepishly at him. “Wow, you look amazing.”

“Thanks, Morgan,” she said quietly, cheeks flushed and obviously excited. It didn’t escape Merlin’s notice the way that Krum looked at her, with soft eyes and a smile like he really liked her, and not just as a girl to hang off his arm. McGonagall approached with a stern expression and looked at the eight of them.

“Please make your respective schools proud out on that dance floor, and good luck,” she said with a tight smile. Even though it was a night that everyone was supposed to – metaphorically – let their hair down, McGonagall’s hair was still tied up into that ridiculously tight bun. Merlin had a cheeky thought of slipping some firewhisky into her drink to see what would happen, but he was both too respectful and too terrified of her to do that.

The music began and McGonagall preceded the four duos into the Great Hall, and Merlin caught sight of Ron Weasley’s shocked expression when he realized that Hermione was with Viktor Krum. They all paused at the four cardinal points of the room, and Merlin felt the anxiety in him disappear at Tanith’s confident and reassuring expression. Even if he messed up, Tanith knew the moves like breathing, and they’d be okay.

The champion’s song started, and after a count of three, the four pairs began to move in sync. Merlin kept himself concentrated just on Tanith as the pair of them moved almost flawlessly through the
moves, silently counting 1-2-3 in his head as they did so, executing the first lift perfectly. Tanith winked as he put her back on the ground, and Merlin had to hold back a laugh. A quick glance around the room showed that Fleur, Krum and Hermione were doing fine, and Harry was a little ungainly but he and his date were still doing well.

Then Dumbledore took McGonagall’s hand and came out onto the dance floor, followed by a few more teachers, and then Neville Longbottom with Ginny Weasley, who looked particularly smug about being one of the only third years in the room. Soon the dance floor was filled up with students from all three schools and their teachers performing the dance with perfect synchronisation, the lifts actually looking incredibly beautiful. A few of the guys being lifted by their partners, however, looked slightly terrified.

“What did you say you were worrying about?” Tanith asked as Merlin lifted her again for what seemed like the twentieth time.

“Must’ve been your dance prowess that’s rubbing off on me,” Merlin teased, switching their arms. He was surprised that nobody had toppled over like a domino effect yet considering how many people were on the dance floor. Fred Weasley and Angelina Johnson passed, both of them mid-laugh, sneaking looks at Draco Malfoy who was wearing a ridiculously high collar that made him look like a priest.

“Obviously,” Tanith drawled. “Surprised a skinny boy like you can even lift me.”

“It’s a talent,” Merlin replied with a wink, and she threw back her head and laughed. The dance lasted maybe a minute more before it slowly came to an end, and everybody stopped and clapped. Then a few gasps erupted from the crowd as some rather odd David-Bowie looking guys got onto the stage.

“Am I supposed to know who they are?” Merlin asked.

“Have you been living under a rock?” Tanith retorted. “Those are the Weird Sisters, probably the biggest band out at the moment. I can’t believe Hogwarts managed to book them, they must’ve had to do it months in advance.”

Merlin was about to ask more when the drummer clacked their sticks together, and the heavy beat echoed throughout the room, almost sending the students into a frenzy. Most of the teachers immediately extricated themselves from the crowd, but some like Professor Sinistra joined in, a grin on her face.
Cedric and Cho pushed their way through the crowd towards Merlin, followed by Arthur and Mako, Lydia and Pavel, Cora and Maya, and soon all of Merlin’s friends had somehow managed to congregate around him and Tanith.

“I love this song!” Mako announced as the beat changed, everyone’s hands going up in the air as they jumped up and down, the song something about trolls and elves and hippogriffs. Mako and Lydia seemed to know all of the lyrics and were belting them out at the top of their lungs, barely able to be heard above the magically amplified music. Merlin had to admit that it was pretty catchy, and soon he was dancing along with everyone else, very little space available, so it was more jumping up and down and stumbling into each other.

He laughed when Arthur popped up behind him, at his back like he’d always been, and the feeling hit him in the sternum like a physical blow. It finally hit him that after hundreds of years, of decades and centuries of longing, of staying out by that damned lake every single day, of watching the world change and disappear around him that Arthur was finally here with him, even if he didn’t remember who he was or who they had been. It was difficult to breathe in, and he turned around to Arthur with what was probably a half-mad grin on his face.

“Wanna get drinks?” he asked. Arthur nodded and the two broke away from the crowd, their friends hollering drink orders at them. Merlin let out a breath as he finally got out of the crowd into some empty space by the tables, a few couples who weren’t into dancing sitting there – including, inexplicably, Harry and Ron. Merlin raised an eyebrow as they passed, and Harry gave him an expression he couldn’t quite decipher, somewhere between bored, concerned and annoyed. Ron’s however was much easier to understand – bitter and jealous – as he stared at Hermione dancing with Krum.

The bar at the end of the room mostly served punch that the Weasley twins would probably try to spike, some pumpkin juice, Butterbeer and a few hot beverages, but for the seventh years and the teachers, firewhisky was allowed, a maximum of two per person.

“Uh, four firewhiskys, three Butterbeers, two pomegranate punches… a pumpkin juice?” Merlin asked, desperately trying to remember the number of beverages shouted at him from the dance floor. He looked to Arthur, who shrugged.

“Who are the firewhiskys for?” the bartender asked.

“Morgan Emery, Arthur Pendragon, Cora Dallas and Pavel Kaidanovsky,” Merlin said, the bartender finding their names on a list and adding a tally mark next to their name. They really were organized here, but at least it was safe for everyone. Merlin leaned on the bar while their orders were
being made and looked out to the crowd, trying desperately to not just stare at Arthur, a dumb grin on his face.


“It’s a good night and I’m with people I love, why shouldn’t I be happy?” Merlin replied, raising an eyebrow at Arthur, still unable to stop the smile on his face.

“Ahh, you should be happy Morgan, especially when you could die horribly later this year,” Arthur teased.

“Don’t remind me,” Merlin sighed, looking over at Cora and Maya who were probably dancing too close to be allowed. “Remind me why I left the countryside again?”

“My devilishly good looks,” Arthur replied, and Merlin spat out his laughter, the answer much too close to the truth, which only made it much more hilarious.

“I’m offended,” Arthur said, placing a hand on his chest.

“I’m sorry,” Merlin spluttered. “No, you’re absolutely right. I couldn’t resist the pull of the ever-handsome Arthur Pendragon,” he teased, not quite lying.

“Damn straight,” Arthur sniffed, with a smirk on his face. Merlin smiled and looked at him for a few more seconds than were probably socially acceptable, before their order was up and he grabbed one of the tray of drinks. Arthur grabbed the other, and they carried them to the table closest to the dance floor while waving over their friends.

Everyone fought their way out of the dance floor, grinning and flushed, to down their drinks. Cora winced a little as she sipped her firewhisky, but Pavel almost skull his, and Lydia rolled her eyes and muttered Russians under her breath.

“You can get juice boxes in Russia with 50% vodka,” Pavel said after he put his glass down. “No lie.”
“Oh come on, juice boxes? With little straws and everything?” Maya asked, unbelieving. Pavel just nodded, but at this point nobody knew whether he was telling the truth or just screwing with everyone. Merlin knew by now that Pavel didn’t actually think everything was from Russia, but he enjoyed saying so just to get a rise out of those around him. He really was a little shit.

“Okay, let’s get back out there!” Rob said excitedly, his and Vern’s dates having gone off to dance with some other Gryffindors. Everyone finished their drinks and shoved their way back into the crowd, dancing and laughing together, the music filling the room, and Merlin couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so happy and free, even with his gangly limbs nearly taking off a few heads. The night got longer, more drinks were consumed, there was what looked like an argument between Hermione and Ron with a confused looking Viktor Krum holding drinks and looking around, Cora and Maya got incredibly intimate on the dance floor and Lydia and Pavel had left at some point to have a romp in the shrubbery.

Vern and Rob were doing some weird thing on the dance floor that looked completely ridiculous but absolutely hilarious, and a circle had formed around them while they kind of flailed about like oversized jellyfish. Cora and Maya had left to go and make out in the darkest corner possible, Mako had joined Rinko and the two Asian girls busted out some awesome choreographed dance moves which were pretty damn impressive, Cedric was sitting at a table with Cho, and soon it was just Merlin, Arthur and Tanith.

“My feet are killing me,” Tanith groaned as she continued to dance through the pain. Merlin was surprised it had only taken a few hours for her to reach that point, considering the fact that the heels looked like they could kill a man. “I might call it a night.”

“Aw, just leave your shoes with Cedric and Cho,” Merlin said, but Tanith shook her head and grinned.

“I don’t trust anybody with these babies,” she said. “And I’m too short without them, I’ll get trampled by the crowd. I’ll see you tomorrow in potions, yeah?” Merlin drew her into a hug and pressed a kiss to her cropped hair.

“If I haven’t died overnight, yeah,” Merlin said. Tanith grinned and flicked Arthur on the shoulder.

“You’re not too bad for a Gryffindor y’know,” she said. “I’m looking forward to your dueling club.”

“You’re the second best Slytherin I know,” Arthur replied. “And only because Maya buys me chocolate.” Tanith laughed and stumbled her way off the dance floor, removing her feet from the shoes, shrinking about four inches as she did so. She fist-bumped Cedric and Cho on her way out,
and then she was gone, leaving only Merlin and Arthur together.

“You got any firewhisky tabs left?” Arthur asked.

“Nah, but I think Tanith had one. You wanna split it?” Merlin asked. He wasn’t usually a fan of alcohol, especially around Arthur, but it was two in the morning, most of the seventh years had managed to get smashed off their faces anyway, and it was Yule Ball night, so why the hell not? And, if Merlin had been reading Arthur correctly, maybe letting go a little wouldn’t have such a disastrous outcome.

The two stumbled out of the crowd, holding onto each other as they did so, passing Cedric who had a knowing look on his face. They arrived at the bar and ordered Tanith’s second and last firewhisky, then pottered outside to sit on one of the railings, sticking their legs over the edge so they could see the dark grounds before them.

Snape and Karkaroff were walking together, not surprising seeing as they were the two biggest creeps in the entire school, and Merlin didn’t realize that he’d said that aloud until Arthur burst out laughing. Merlin took the glass from him and sipped the firewhisky, feeling it burn down his throat. He was pretty sure that Sprout had one too many of them, judging by her balance issues earlier.

“How many people are making out in the shrubbery, d’you reckon?” Arthur asked, slurring ever so slightly. Merlin narrowed his eyes and peered out into the dark, seeing a few of the bushes wiggle slightly.


“Five people? Did three of them fit into a shrub?” he asked.

“I don’t know, why would you want to fit into a shrub anyway? It’s so pointless, we have dorms for a reason,” Merlin sighed. “At least we know that Cora and Maya are smart enough to realize that. I don’t think Lydia and Pavel would’ve made it that far. Which is closer?” he asked.

“Probably the Gryffindor dorms,” Arthur replied, taking a sip of firewhisky. “It’s up a few flights of stairs, but the kitchens are further away. You guys are lucky that you get the kitchens.”

“I know,” Merlin said smugly, snatching the glass from Arthur’s hand. They were down to the final
dregs of firewhisky, and he finished it off quickly, putting the glass on the opposite side of them.

“What’s the Hufflepuff common room like?” Arthur asked, staring up at the moon, a waning gibbous in the sky.

“Big. Yellow,” Merlin said, not quite able to form larger words. “Great beds, like sleeping on little clouds.”

“Didn’t know you were such a lightweight,” Arthur smirked, and Merlin groaned.

“This is why I don’t drink, I always get made fun of. And I’m not that drunk,” Merlin argued. Two and a half firewhiskys wouldn’t usually do much, but he hadn’t had much in terms of food from the buffet table, and he’d been hit harder by the alcohol than he usually would’ve been, but nothing to compromise his common sense. Not really, anyway.

“Not as bad as Rinko,” Arthur said, turning around to see Mako pretty much dragging her sister towards the common room. “How she could’ve performed a choreographed dance with that much alcohol in her is beyond me.”

“Stop using so many big words,” Merlin sighed. “I’m too drunk for that. And tired.”

“Maybe you should get back to your common room,” Arthur said pointedly. Merlin just grinned and laid his head down on Arthur’s shoulder.

“Nah, I’m okay here,” he said, relaxing as he stared out at the dark gardens, the lake further out, the surface disturbingly still for the amount of creatures that lived within. Merlin knew that he’d have to dive in there at some point in the future, and he was reminded by how much he really hated lakes. Arthur leaned his head on top of Merlin’s, and the two sat comfortably on their window ledge, snorting with laughter as Snape would send a spell into a shrub, mussed-up students yelping and running out.

Eventually Merlin found himself yawning, boneless and relaxed, unable to support himself against Arthur anymore. The prefect sighed and slipped off the ledge, hauling Merlin to his feet. Merlin stumbled and laughed at his terrible balance, nearly tripping over the edge of his robes.

“Okay, you are not getting back to your dorm by yourself,” Arthur said, sounding much less drunk
than Merlin to his annoyance. He was still slurring though, and was probably just trying to be the mature one in the situation, which led Merlin into a little fit of giggles.

“Where’s your dorm?” Arthur asked. Merlin frowned, but couldn’t actually remember the route back to the Hufflepuff dorms this late on a Sunday, knowing that the hallways were different in single-digit hours.

“I’ve got no idea,” Merlin said, and Arthur sighed, tightening his grip around Merlin’s arm that was draped around his shoulder.

“Looks like you’re coming to Gryffindor,” he said. Drunk as he was, Merlin couldn’t help but think about the irony of the situation, how Arthur was now the one dragging a lax Merlin around, except Merlin wasn’t dying with a piece of dragon-tempered steel in his stomach.

Merlin nearly got his foot stuck in a trip step, and barely noticed Arthur give some sort of password to a drunken Fat Lady, but his head popped up at the warmth of the common room. It was small and cozy, with plush red couches and a warm fire crackling away.

“I like it here,” Merlin said. He noticed that there was already a passed out Ravenclaw in one corner, and a Gryffindor boy wrapped around another Hufflepuff boy on the couch.

“That’s cute,” Merlin slurred as they walked past, Arthur helping him up the stairs to the dorm rooms.

“Eric is probably gonna crash in the Ravenclaw dorms, knowing him, so you can take his bed. I’ll be surprised if anyone other than me wakes up in their own dorm tomorrow,” Arthur said, dumping Merlin onto a bed. It was comfortable, but nothing like his own marshmallow bed in the Hufflepuff dorms, and he regretting not being able to find his way back. He opened his eyes and watched Arthur slip his ruby robes off, slipping into the opposite bed in just a plain shirt and pants. Merlin managed to unclip his robes from around his shoulders, remembering how expensive they’d been, splaying out in his underclothes.

He was nearly asleep, warm with the alcohol in his stomach, when Arthur spoke up from the other bed, “I feel like I know you.” Merlin raised an eyebrow and rolled over to see Arthur lying on his side, staring at him.

“You do,” Merlin said with a silly grin.
“I feel like I’ve known you since before I met you, though, y’know?” Arthur stuttered, realizing that his words didn’t really make any sense as he said them. Merlin laughed, and then yawned.

“No, I get it, I know what you mean,” Merlin said.

“Is that weird?” Arthur asked. “I mean, we’ve known each other for like… three months, and I feel like I’ve known you for like three years.”

“Ten, actually,” Merlin let slip.

“Yeah, that sounds more accurate,” Arthur slurried. “I feel like I’ve known you ten years. Why?”

“Probably because I’m awesome,” Merlin replied, and Arthur snorted into his pillow, loose-limbed and exhausted.

“You are pretty awesome, Morgan,” Arthur admitted. “I’m not gonna lie.”

“You’re pretty awesome too, Arthur,” Merlin said with a stupid grin. “And hot. Really hot. Like disgustingly, rudely attractive. Like someone should lock you up it’s illegal to be that attractive,” he slurred, and Arthur laughed.

“And you have a really good butt,” Merlin said, pointedly looking at said butt. “Your booty is so fine it’s written on a ticket attached to my windshield for parking in a no parking zone,” he said, and Arthur nearly choked on his laughter.

“Your arse is so tight I need scissors to cut it off because there’s a lot of swelling and we need the shirt off for surgery quick someone get the crash cart he’s failing sir can you tell us how the car accident happened!” Merlin exclaimed madly. Arthur was at this point laughing silently, tears running down his cheeks, and Merlin had gotten so worked up he was hanging half-off the bed, gesticulating wildly.

“Your butt is so firm it’s got lawyers sitting at office desks inside of it trying to put a case together,” Merlin said, punctuating his statement by soundly falling off the bed and onto the carpeted floor.
“Please stop,” Arthur wheezed in between his laughter, face going red like he was literally unable to breathe, and Merlin grinned stupidly before joining in the contagious laughter. One of Arthur’s dorm mates who’d come in early groaned as he woke up and cast a silencing charm over his bed to get some sleep.

Eventually Arthur calmed down and sniggered when he saw Merlin lying spread-eagle on the floor, one of his legs still hooked up in the sheet of his commandeered bed.

“What’re you doing down there?” Arthur asked.

“Not admiring that booty, that’s for sure,” Merlin slurred, and the Gryffindor had to fight to not get set off again.

“That doesn’t look comfortable,” Arthur said.

“You’d be surprised,” Merlin replied, wiggling like he could burrow down into the floor. It wasn’t the most comfortable, but he was drunk and exhausted enough that he could pass out anywhere. Arthur held a hand out and Merlin used it to haul himself up, but not before Arthur tugged and pulled Merlin into his bed with him. Merlin laughed as he accidentally kneeled Arthur in the gut, and the blonde groaned in pain.

“You’ve exploded my drunken kidney,” Arthur groaned.

“Your fault.” Merlin said, settling down onto the other side of the bed. “You shouldn’t have dragged me in here with my fatally sharp kneecaps.”

“You’re an ass,” Arthur accused, without heat.


“Douche.”
“Wanker.”

“Tosser.”

“Clotpole.”

“Clot- what the fuck’s a clotpole?” Arthur asked.

“You,” Merlin replied, and nearly got shoved off the bed for his snarky statement. Merlin giggled but eventually the exhaustion took hold and he yawned, rolling over so that he was facing Arthur.

“You know this could get potentially very awkward in the morning,” Merlin slurred through a yawn.

“Only if you’re gonna find it awkward,” Arthur said, turning his head to look at Merlin. “I’m fine with it.”

“What if we end up spooning in the night?” Merlin asked with a teasing smirk.

“Then I hope your fatally sharp joints don’t blow up any of my other organs,” Arthur replied smoothly, and Merlin grinned widely. They were silent for a few more moments.

“Arthur, is this your way of admitting that you like me?” Merlin teased.

“Of course I like you, Morgan, don’t be an idiot,” Arthur said, rolling his eyes.

“No, you like-like me, don’t you?” Merlin drawled with a shit-eating grin.

“What are you, twelve?” Arthur asked sarcastically. Merlin just laughed and plopped himself closer to Arthur and threw an arm over his chest.

“You liiiiiike me~” Merlin sing-songed, and Arthur groaned, throwing an arm over his eyes.
“Times like these I question why,” Arthur sighed, and Merlin giggled in a spectacularly drunken fashion. Arthur shoved him away with a little nudge, and Merlin comfortably settled on the other pillow, smiling gently, giving into the exhaustion. Everything was calm and silent until-

“Your butt’s so round you could find its perimeter using pi.”

Merlin got shoved onto the floor for that one.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, yes, the vodka juice box thing is real. With the straws and everything.
Breathing

Chapter Summary

The boys see Dumbledore regarding the Duelling Club, and research is done on how to breathe underwater.

Chapter Notes

Sorry I've been off on a tangent recently but we're finally back on track and the crew is all here together, although I kinda regret that there aren't any Ravenclaws in the group (considering that I'm one??) Anyway, hope you enjoy :)

The next morning was chaos as confused, drunken seventh years woke up in dorms that weren’t theirs. Harry laughed at Merlin as he stumbled downstairs in his wrinkled dress robes, hair sticking up in every direction. The Ravenclaw student was still passed out in the corner, so Merlin poked up until he woke up with a jerk.

The halls were filled with confused seventh years with dress robes in various states of distress as they shielded their eyes from the sun while teachers smugly looked on. Merlin passed a pleased looking Maya as he entered the Hufflepuff common room, a rather dishevelled looking Cora standing in the dorm room doorway with a grin and a wave.

Vern, Rob and Cedric had managed to make it back okay, and a mostly naked Pavel and Lydia were cuddled up under the sheets, passed out and covered in little bruises.

“Looks like someone had a good night,” Merlin noted teasingly as he entered.

“We didn’t dare come back until after three,” Cedric laughed. Merlin pulled off his dress robes and pulled on his uniform, fumbling with the tie.

“So I heard you slept in the Gryffindor dorms last night,” Vern said, wiggling his eyebrows in a truly suggestive manner. Merlin flushed and ran his hand through his already messed up hair.
“Guys, it’s not like that,” Merlin denied. “I was too drunk to remember how to get back to the dorms and the Gryffindor ones were closer,” he argued.

“Mhmm,” Rob said, tone sceptical.

“But you’d like it to be like that, right?” Cedric asked.


“If it helps, he totally feels the same,” Lydia murmured, turning around in Pavel’s arms, red hair still perfectly curled. “Go for it.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Merlin sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face, wishing his pounding headache would disappear so that he could think straight. At that point, like a gift from the gods, Cora entered the room with a goblet full of something steaming slightly with a vaguely minty smell.

“Anti-hangover potion, courtesy of Sprout,” she announced. Merlin took it gratefully and had a large gulp before passing it onto Cedric, feeling his headache begin to recede almost instantly, the photophobia leaving too.

“I see you had a good night,” Lydia teased with a sly grin.

“Trust me, it was better than good,” Cora grinned, pulling her robes up from where they had slipped on her shoulder, covering up the small bruises. Lydia laughed and snuggled into a still dead-to-the-world Pavel. She looked at him with a soft, content expression, and Merlin felt something in his stomach at their happiness. He wished he could have that, but there were too many reasons why he couldn’t.

He was here to save Cedric and to stop Voldemort from returning, not to kiss Arthur Pendragon.

Though a little voice in the back of his mind did pop up to remind him that his true destiny had been and always would be Arthur Pendragon.
It was clear that when Merlin waved to Arthur in Transfiguration that the Gryffindor didn’t remember much of the previous night, though the dynamic of their relationship had changed. Merlin noticed that over the following weeks they were much closer and much more relaxed around each other, casual touching more common and accepted. It still made Merlin’s stomach flutter whenever Arthur clapped him on the back or slung an arm around his shoulders exactly like he’d done in Camelot.

Merlin wondered if he’d ever remember.

It was a week before the second task when Merlin and Arthur stood outside the stone gargoyle with McGonagall, eyes gleaming and excited. McGonagall spoke the password, fizzing whizbee, and the gargoyle moved aside to reveal the door to the headmaster’s office.

“Ah, Mr Emery and Mr Pendragon, I’ve heard some very interesting tales circulating around,” Professor Dumbledore said by way of greeting, sweeping his arms wide as he got up from the chair at his desk. Merlin noticed that a beautiful phoenix sat on a perch to the side, in full bloom, majestic and wonderful.

“I hope they’re all good ones,” Arthur joked.

“So do I, Mr Pendragon,” McGonagall said with stern expression, yet Merlin was sure her lips were turned up into the smallest fond smile. Dumbledore laughed and gestured for the two of them to take the seats opposite his desk.

“And how are you, Mr Emery? Prepared for the second task, I hope?” Dumbledore asked, eyes twinkling, and Merlin grimaced slightly.

“Mostly,” Merlin said. “I’ve figured out the clue, still working on how to implement it.”

“You’ll get there,” Dumbledore said confidently. “For someone from such a reclusive family I’m surprised at how constantly high your grades are – with the exception of Transfiguration, of course,” he said, with a small smile to McGonagall. “I also see that you are taking Magical Theory as an elective? A no doubt logical choice considering your Dragonlord abilities; Rita Skeeter has been nagging me for an interview with you for weeks.”

“Thank you, sir,” Merlin said, shocked and a little unnerved at how much Dumbledore knew about
him. He did suppose, though, that as one of Hogwarts’ champions it made sense for Dumbledore to learn as much as he could about him. He just hoped that his story would stick. “It’s an incredibly interesting class, Professor Sinistra teaches it very well and is quite well-versed on the subject. I take it you haven’t given that woman permission, not after the horrible articles she’s been writing about some of the people around here,” Merlin said with a frown, thinking of the articles she’d written about Harry and Hermione, Hagrid and a few others. He’d managed to avoid her every time he saw that bright blonde perm coming through the crowd, and hoped he’d be able to keep it up.

Dumbledore chuckled at his words good-naturedly, steepling his fingers in front of him on the desk. “Of course not, dear boy, and I do not plan to any time soon. I take it, however, that you are not here to discuss the Triwizard Tournament.”

“No sir,” Arthur piped up. “Morgan and I were hoping to re-start a student-run Dueling Club, like the one implemented by Professor Lockhart. Morgan is one of the best duellists I’ve ever seen, and despite our… not entirely legal duel during our first week—” he broke off to look sheepishly at McGonagall, “I think that it would be a good learning opportunity for many of the younger years as well as the older years to get some experience with duelling. We don’t get much practice in DADA, and I think that it could be good life experience, not to mention helpful to prepare Morgan for the second and third tasks.”

Dumbledore peered at Arthur for a few moments, thinking, and Merlin pressed his arm against Arthur’s in reassurance at the silence coming from the man as he thought it through.

“I think, Mr Pendragon, that is an excellent idea,” he said after a few moments, and Arthur burst into a smile. “I take it that there is an interest in it?”

“Yes sir,” Merlin said. “We’ve talked to some of the seventh years and fourth years, a few first and second years, and they seem keen enough.”

“And your heads of houses are fine with it?” Dumbledore asked, looking to McGonagall.

“Both Pomona and I are fully supportive of it, as long as the duels are legal and not where students could be injured,” McGonagall said with a pointed look to the two seventh-years, who looked a little guilty.

“Then I believe that is a fine idea, and I give you my permission,” Dumbledore said. “You can start it up after the second task, I do not think that Mr Emery would like to be distracted in the week leading up to it. You can put up posters throughout the common rooms and the Great Hall will be set aside for you for a few hours on whatever day of your choosing you decide to host the meetings on, just let
“Thank you sir,” Arthur said, standing up. “We really appreciate it. We’ll promise to keep it as safe as possible, and keep the spells at appropriate levels for the students. Maybe we could have two meetings a week, one for first through fourth years, and another from fifth through seventh years?”

“I think that is appropriate,” Dumbledore said with a nod. “Very well, two meetings held a week in the Great Hall. Send me a message when you have decided on dates and times, and I will see to it that posters will be made and distributed throughout the houses.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Merlin said with a smile, and could barely contain himself on the way out of the office. Once the gargoyle had settled into place again and they were alone in the hallways, the two boys whooped and punched the air. Arthur grabbed Merlin and dragged him into a hug, and they did a stupid little happy dance in the hallway.

“I can’t believe it!” Arthur gushed excitedly. Merlin grinned and ruffled Arthur’s hair.

“You did it, your idea has come to fruition, and soon we shall have control over everything,” Merlin said, dropping his voice low on the last word.

“Just as we planned,” Arthur followed, rubbing his palms together like an evil mastermind.

“Now I regret giving you two permission,” a high voice said from behind them, and both boys jumped as a smirking Professor McGonagall exited from Dumbledore’s office. “Run along you two, I expect Mr Emery has a task to prepare for?”

“Yes Professor McGonagall,” they said in synchronisation, and darted off through the hallways. They met up with Cedric and Cora in the hall, and shared the good news about the Duelling Club.

“Great! I’m so excited,” Cora said with a wide grin. “You two will be giving a demonstration, right? I’d pay to see you two duel again.”

“Definitely,” Arthur scoffed, as though it were ludicrouss to think otherwise.
“He’s going down,” Merlin replied with a smug grin.

“Oh really, Emery?” Arthur challenged, narrowing his eyes.

“Flirt later, boys,” Cedric sighed good-naturedly. “I hate to burst everyone’s bubble but the second task is a week away, and you still don’t know how to hold your breath underwater for an hour.”

“Wow, seriously?” Arthur asked, not having been filled in on what the task was.

“Yeah,” Merlin sighed, the group of four making their way to the library, picking up Vern and Tanith on the way. They joined Rob and Pavel’s table once they got there, the two boys looking stressed with hair sticking in all directions, and began trawling the shelves for anything helpful.

Charms books began to pile up on the desk, a few students watching curiously as the piles got higher and higher, the suggestions getting wilder and crazier.

“What about gillyweed?” Maya piped up, having joined their table halfway through the mission. She turned around her copy of *100 Herbs and Fungi* to show the diagram of the effects of gillyweed. “You eat it, and it gives you gills and fins to be able to swim through water and breathe. I think there’s some debate over how long the effects last in salt or fresh water, but depending on the amount you should be able to get an hour out of it.”

“That sounds perfect!” Cedric said excitedly.

“Can’t,” Merlin said with a sigh. “I’m allergic.”

“I… how on earth do you know that you’re allergic to gillyweed?” Tanith asked with a raised eyebrow.

“My family lives next to a lake,” Merlin said, telling half-truths. “There was some gillyweed that grew along the shores of it and I decided to take some one time to see what was at the bottom of the lake,” *to see if Arthur was there.* “Ended up going into anaphylactic shock and I nearly died halfway in.”

“Yeah, my family managed to get to me in time,” Merlin said with a reassuring smile. Actually, I died on the shoreline, and came back to life vomiting up the stuff.

“So that’s no to gillyweed,” Arthur sighed. “Maybe Harry could use some, I’m not sure if he’s got a solution yet.”

“Good idea,” Merlin said with a smile. “Tell him when you see him tonight in the dorms, I’m sure Maya can wrangle up some of it.” The Slytherin in question smirked at Merlin.

“Please, I’m a Slytherin with the highest Herbology grade in the year, I think I can get my hands on some gillyweed,” she scoffed.

“You’re amazing,” Cora sighed wistfully, chin propped up in her hands as she looked over to her girlfriend. Maya flushed and shoved her slightly but couldn’t stop a smile from creeping its way onto her face.

“That’s gross,” Tanith teased, leafing through a DADA book.

“You’re gross,” Cora retorted.

“You’re useless at comebacks,” Tanith replied with an eye-roll. Merlin yawned and looked at the clock, noticing that it was half an hour until closing and curfew.

“We’re gonna have to find something in the next half hour or we’ll be back here tomorrow night,” Merlin said, and Pavel groaned.

“I can’t get anything done with you lot,” Pavel complained, looking incredibly stressed, dark ink smudged across his face and hand from the three-foot essay he was in the middle of writing. “So find something fast.”

Everyone began to speed through books again, the piles on their table growing higher and higher until- “I fucking found it!” Cora announced excitedly, throwing her fist into the air.
“Please, do tell,” Merlin said, unable to keep the exhaustion out of his voice.

“Bubblehead charm,” Cora said with a bright smirk, sliding the book over towards Merlin.

“No, I thought of that,” Cedric said. “That only protects against gases, it wouldn’t work underwater.”

“Yes it would,” Cora insisted. “The bubblehead charm filters whatever is outside it into breathable air on the inside, right? Using that logic, it should filter water into breathable oxygen.”

Merlin looked thoughtfully down at the book, the diagram showing a wizard with a huge bubble taking up half of their face, distorting it as gas was filtered into oxygen. Theoretically it could work, and they definitely had enough time to test it out.

“It could work,” Merlin agreed slowly.

“Even if it doesn’t I’m sure we can alter the charm a little to compensate for the water molecules,” Tanith interjected. “Most charm alterations don’t work but with something so minor as that it should work alright. I can ask Flitwick tomorrow.”

“Sounds like we’ve got a solution then,” Cedric said excitedly, wrapping an arm around Merlin’s shoulders. “We can use the prefect’s bathroom again tomorrow to test it out.”

“You lot used the prefects bathroom without me?” Arthur asked. “I’m offended.”

“We didn’t exactly have time to stop by the Gryffindor common room so you could come skinny dipping with us and a golden egg,” Merlin pointed out, laughing.

“You lot went skinny dipping without me? Now I’m really offended,” Arthur exclaimed. “I thought we were friends!”

“That’s so gay,” Maya giggled.
“I’m going to punch you in the face if you don’t stop,” Pavel groaned, Rob nodding with him. “This essay is due tomorrow and I’m not done!”

“Maybe you two should’ve started it earlier than today,” Vern pointed out.

“We started it a week ago!” Rob insisted.

“That’s very unlike you,” Cedric said with a raised eyebrow. It was common knowledge that Rob left everything to the last minute, and him starting an essay a week earlier than it was due was almost a miracle.

“Ha ha,” Rob deadpanned sarcastically. “You’re hilarious. I’d like to see you lot write this Alchemy essay.”

“I finished mine two days ago,” Merlin replied matter-of-factly. “You guys can read over mine if you want,” he said, pulling the roll of parchment from his satchel. Rob and Pavel almost fell over each other clamouring for the paper, and thanked Merlin like he as a god.

Ten minutes later, Madam Pince began hustling everyone out of the library, frowning in annoyance at the teetering piles of books that the seventh-years had left on their table. Arthur broke off to head to the Gryffindor common room, promising to let Harry know about the gillyweed. Tanith and Maya split off after, Maya also promising to get her hands on some gillyweed, and the rest of them made their way back to the Hufflepuff common room and their marshmallow beds that were exactly what they needed to rest their weary bodies on.
Swimming

Chapter Summary

The Second Task is finally here...

Chapter Notes

I apologise for how goddamn long it's been since I've posted a chapter, and hopefully this'll tide you over in the meantime :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Merlin had a fitful sleep the night before the second task, tossing and turning incessantly. He could hear Rob softly snoring, who sometimes got so loud one of them would cast a silencing charm, but often stayed quiet enough. Pavel would occasionally mumble in Russian as he was prone to, and Cedric and Vern were dead to the world. Merlin wanted to get up and go for a walk, see if he could catch Arthur on his prefect patrol but logically knew that he should try to get to sleep.

He couldn’t help the nerves though, the butterflies in his stomach fluttering about, causing his heart to beat so loud he could almost hear it in the dark, his fingers shaking ever so slightly. Maya had managed to persuade Snape to give her some gillyweed for ‘Herbology purposes’, but had given it to Harry earlier that night with a wink. The younger boy had been feverishly sorting through books in the library with Hermione and Ron and had almost collapsed in relief.

Merlin knew logically that he shouldn’t be nervous – he (mostly) knew what the task was, had practiced the bubblehead charm so many times he thought he’d be able to cast it in his sleep, and Professor Flitwick had confirmed that it would work underwater along with the numerous test trials in the Prefects’ bathroom. Plus he was nearly a thousand years old, was Magic Incarnate and could handle anything thrown at him. He’d done much worse than swim for an hour while fully supervised by experienced wizards.

It was probably just the element of the unknown that Merlin didn’t like. The fact that he had no idea what – or who – would be down there. How would they even judge what would be taken for each person? What if Merlin didn’t rescue it – or them – in time? If it was a person would they really be left to die like the song said? The prospect's black, it won't come back.
Eventually Merlin managed to fall into a fitful sleep, only to be shaken awake what seemed like a minute later by an overexcitable Cedric with both Rob and Vern grinning ridiculously behind him, dressed from head-to-toe completely in Hufflepuff colours. Half of Cedric’s face was painted black, the other yellow, while Rob had opted to go with war stripes. Vern had drawn an intricate little badger on one cheek and had a bright yellow H on his forehead. Pavel, of course, was still passed out in his bed with hair sticking out in all directions.

“Morning Champion!” Cedric said sunnily, and Merlin groaned, feeling like he’d gotten a grand total of two minutes sleep. “You need to eat or you’ll be swimming on an empty stomach, c’mon,” the boy insisted, hauling Merlin to his feet. Merlin swayed with the instant rush of blood to his head and accepted the bundle of clothes that Vern shoved into his arms.

“These were delivered at the door this morning, go get changed,” he insisted. Merlin stumbled into the bathroom and changed into the Hufflepuff coloured swim trunks and shirt, shrugging his school robes over the top so he didn’t freeze to death. He only just managed to brush his teeth before Cedric was once again hauling him out and frog marching him downstairs.

Merlin was half asleep until they entered the Great Hall where a huge cheer had gone up from the Hogwarts students of all houses, Hufflepuff being the loudest, and Merlin couldn’t help but grin at the show of support. Various shouts of, “good luck today, Emery!” and “knock ‘em dead, Morgan!” and “don’t die!” resounded from all corners of the Great Hall, and even Dumbledore raised his goblet of pumpkin juice to him from the main table.

“Even the Slytherins are being surprisingly supportive,” Cora noticed, passing Merlin a plate of food that she’d arranged to look like a smiley face.

“That’s only because the other Hogwarts champion is a Gryffindor,” Merlin replied, though he noticed that Maya, Simon and Tanith had Gryffindor colours on too, to the chagrin of the other Slytherins. Despite his nervous stomach, Merlin managed to start shovelling the food in, barely tasting the pancakes or eggs or bacon. It did, however, manage to make him feel a little better regarding his nerves.

That was, until he saw a familiar group over at the Gryffindor table and saw that Arthur Pendragon wasn’t with them.

“Where’s Arthur?” he asked, stomach turning to lead, struggling to swallow the dry-tasting food in his mouth.

“I’ll go ask,” Cora said, bouncing over to the other table. She exchanged a few words with them,
nodded, and then came bounding back with equal energy.

“Apparently McGonagall wanted to talk to Arthur last night about setting up for the second task and they haven’t seen him since, so he’s probably helping out down by the Black Lake. Are you done with your food?” Cora asked, and Merlin swallowed thickly and nodded, pushing his half-full plate towards Cora, who began consuming it with gusto.

“Are you alright, Morgan?” Cedric asked, placing a comforting hand on Merlin’s shoulder in concern.

“And while you’re searching ponder this, we’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss,” was all Merlin said in reply, and Cedric sucked in air through his teeth in shock.

“You think they might’ve taken Arthur?” Cedric asked quietly.

“It would explain why Harry’s sitting with Neville Longbottom and not Ron and Hermione,” Merlin noticed, jerking his chin in the fourth year’s direction. He looked even more nervous than Merlin was, pushing the food around on his plate with a fork, Neville obviously trying to comfort him by rambling on. Merlin noticed the glob of gillyweed on Harry’s plate and the narrow-eyed frowns Professor Snape sent the boy.

“If they took Arthur as your person and Ron as Harry’s, why would they take Hermione?” Rob asked.

“Krum,” Cora said immediately. “They were dates for the Yule Ball, remember?” The wheels were obviously turning around in her head, before she smirked and gave Merlin a mischievous look that he didn’t like in the slightest.

“So… you’d sorely miss Arthur, eh? Still adamant that there’s nothing going on there, Emery?” she teased, and Merlin groaned and smacked his forehead onto the table.

“Shut up, Dallas,” he retorted. She’d been harping on about it since his confession the morning after the Yule Ball. Cora grinned and opened her mouth to say more when Dumbledore stood up and announced for everyone to head down to the Black Lake for the next task. Harry immediately gravitated towards Merlin who threw an arm around his shoulders in comfort. Maya, Simon and Tanith joined their group, along with the Gryffindors and surprisingly Arielle, and they all headed down to the Black Lake together.
“Alright, Harry?” Merlin asked quietly, looking out to the huge platforms that had been built on the lake for the students and teachers to see. A large clock had been put up in the middle platform and the judges all congregated underneath it. The air was chilly, and Merlin couldn’t even begin to imagine how freezing the water would be and hoped to hell that Madam Pomfrey would have a cure for hypothermia.

“Well I’m not dead yet,” Harry replied glumly. “Wish Ron and Hermione were here though. At least I’ve got the gillyweed – thanks for that Maya.” The Slytherin in question flipped her silvery hair and grinned. Merlin kept his mouth shut about his suspicions regarding Ron, Hermione and Arthur just in case he was overreacting and was wrong, and he didn’t want to freak Harry out any more than he already was.

Their large group reached the platforms quickly and Harry and Merlin were instructed to strip off into their swim trunks and under shirts, and Merlin immediately began to shiver. The air was frigid, the water probably just above freezing temperature, not to mention that it was still relatively early in the morning in a Scottish valley.

Harry had been given an identical set of trunks and shirt to wear in Gryffindor colours, and within a minute Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum had joined them. Krum was bare-chested in burgundy trunks the same colour as the thick coats that the Durmstrang boys and girls wore, and Fleur was in a shimmery blue one-piece that matched the silk of the Beauxbatons’ uniform. Merlin gave Harry a tight smile, and the fourth-year was shivering just as much as Merlin was, gripping the gillyweed in his hand.

Madam Hooch came along the platform, handing out wand holsters to all of the champions. When she approached Merlin she clapped a hand onto his shoulder and smiled at him, just as she had done with Harry.

“Make Hogwarts proud,” she whispered fiercely, and that lit a fire in Merlin, where the cold didn’t feel so piercing and the dread lessened slightly, a feeling akin to a phoenix unfurling it’s wings inside his ribcage.

“I will,” he vowed just as resolutely. Madam Hooch shook his shoulder a little and then moved on to the other two champions, and Merlin strapped the holster onto his thigh and slid his wand into it. Cora wolf-whistled at him from the platform to his right and Merlin rolled his eyes at her. There was still no sign of Arthur, and if he’d really been helping to set up the task, he’d probably be on one of the platforms by now. Merlin’s gut tightened, his hunch pretty much confirmed, and it was the same story with Ron and Hermione.
Dumbledore stepped up onto the judges’ podium behind Merlin and raised his arms into the air. As he did so, the excited chattering died down and all of the students and teachers turned to look at him.

“Good morning and welcome to the second task of the Triwizard Tournament! A clue was given to each of the champions inside the golden egg they all rescued from the first task, and today they will face that. Something very special and very important has been taken from each of the champions and hidden deep within the lake, and it is their job to retrieve it within the hour that they have been given. Points will be rewarded for punctuality, problem solving, attitude and smarts,” he announced. “The task will begin at the sound of the cannon.”

Merlin looked upwards to where Filch was standing next to the cannon, getting ready to light it. He took a deep breath and took out his wand, ready to cast the charm as soon as it went off. There was dead silence from everyone, only the heavy tension and cool wind permeating the atmosphere, so silent it was like someone had died, and the saying *you could hear a pin drop* had never really seemed relevant until that moment in time.

Then Merlin’s heart nearly leapt out of its chest as the cannon went off above them, and the students began to cheer. He cast the bubblehead charm within a second and was diving into the freezing waters not a moment after. He turned to see that Fleur had done the same thing as he had, but Krum had transfigured his head into that of a shark. To Merlin’s left, Harry was writhing slightly in the water, and he made to go after him until he saw Harry calm with gills and fins growing. Merlin sent him a wink, and then swam off into the dark of the lake.

It was completely silent under the water; he couldn’t hear any of the cheering from above although he couldn’t be more than a few metres down, and he couldn’t even hear his own limbs pushing the water aside. He avoided the plant life, knowing that Grindylows were incredibly fond of it, and kept his wand at the ready, a small light on the end that allowed him to make his way through the murky green-grey water.

It was rather strange to be breathing underwater, Merlin mused as he swam. The bubble took up about half of his face like a snorkel mask, and billowed out in front of him in a soft light pink colour. It would occasionally rise above his eye level and skew his vision for a few seconds, but it was remarkably efficient, even when Merlin’s breathing began to become slightly laboured from swimming for so long.

His head jerked to the right when he heard a muffled shout from the reeds, saw them move viciously as the Grindylows probably caught hold of one of the champions, and he hoped to god it wasn’t Harry. He continued swimming and wondered what Cedric would’ve done if he’d still been the champion like he was supposed to be.

Eventually it had seemed like at least half an hour had passed (Merlin really should’ve brought a
watch) and he was beginning to lose all hope of ever finding anything, a soft sound drew his attention from far off in the distance. Merlin narrowed his eyes and changed direction, relieved when the sound began to get much clearer the closer he got – the familiar melody of the egg song. He soon emerged into what seemed to be a merpeoples’ village, with Grindylows attached to stakes in their front yard with leashes.

The merpeople were not like anything the Muggles had thought they were – they were vicious, dark creatures with sharp teeth, jagged nails and a tendency to choke their victims with their harsh, scaly tails. Merlin swam past them quickly, not making any eye contact as he saw four blurry shapes off in the distance. He swam closer, trying to figure out what they are, studiously ignoring the way they seemed incredibly person-shaped until he got close enough to recognise their faces.

Arthur hung on the left, eyes shut and hanging limp in the water, next to an identical Ron, Hermione, and a girl who could only be Fleur’s younger sister. Merlin swam forward quickly and pressed his fingers to the side of Arthur’s neck, the prefect’s pulse slow yet strong. A quiet trickle of bubbles occasionally slipped through his lips, and Merlin had no idea how any of them hadn’t died down there. Arthur was still in his full robes, badge gleaming on his chest, and Merlin knew that he’d probably be pissed when he found that out.

Merlin took a few more moments to take in Arthur’s slack face. It was almost like he was sleeping, Merlin thought, worry and tension slipped from his frame. A few almost invisible wrinkles had begun to emerge at the sides of Arthur’s eyes – laughter lines, and they made Merlin strangely happy to see. Deciding that he’d hung about the creepy village for long enough, as long as getting slightly paranoid at the glares of the well-armed mermaid guards, he slipped his wand out of it’s holster. With a quickly muttered *diffindo*, the ropes binding Arthur to the lake’s floor were cut, and he began to float upwards.

Merlin immediately grabbed his arms and began to swim upwards, seeing two shadows quickly approaching the village from a distance. He knew not to swim too quickly upwards, or to use a spell like *ascendo* from this far down, but kicked as powerfully as he could. Soon the dark, murky water began to turn lighter as he got closer to the surface, and he deactivated the charm just a few seconds before he burst from the surface to take in the pure, freezing Scottish air.

There was an uproar from the students, particularly the Hufflepuffs, and Merlin began to swim towards the platform where a few towels and a dressing gown was waiting for him. Arthur stirred and opened his eyes a few metres away from the platforms, confused and absolutely drenched.

“Morgan?” he mumbled, and Merlin grinned sunnily at him.

“Hello Arthur! Nothing like a good morning swim in the Black Lake to clear your head, right?” he said cheerily, and the prefect groaned.
“I can’t believe McGonagall knocked me out, I’ll never hear the end of it,” he muttered, and Merlin laughed despite the cold that was beginning to seep into his bones. When they reached the platform, Merlin shoved Arthur up into waiting hands who wrapped the Gryffindor in blankets and was administered a pepper-up potion. He then hauled himself up onto the platform with the help of Cedric and Cora who had come bounding over as soon as he’d broken thought the lake’s surface.

“You’re the first one back!” Cedric said excitedly. “We had a running commentary the entire time although we couldn’t see anything. Fleur was defaulted because she was captured by Grindylows and couldn’t bring her person back,” he informed Merlin, pointing over to the terrified Veela girl.

“Her younger sister was down there,” Merlin said. “I hope she’s okay. I don’t know whether they were serious about them never coming back.” Cora then passed Merlin a pepper-up potion that he gladly consumed, the shivers dying down as it warmed him up from the inside. The dressing gown was incredibly warm on his freezing skin, and he sat himself down next to Arthur to watch the now still surface of the lake.

“How are you doing?” Merlin asked the Gryffindor, who was slowly sipping on a cup of tea that Lydia had provided in a thermos.

“Alright,” he sighed. “Kinda cold, incredibly damp, highly confused.”

“That makes two of us,” Merlin said with an annoying grin, knocking his shoulder gently against Arthur’s. “Just Harry and Krum to get back now. Who d’you think will come back first?”

“The betting pool’s got best odds for Krum,” Arthur said, jabbing his thumb over to where the Weasley twins were loudly discussing bets, giving money and taking it from students who’d bet against him. Merlin squinted at their blackboard and found that recent additions had been made on top of the bets of who was going to make it back first. Next to each champion’s name there were also names of students who could have been the person they needed to save, with different odds stacked against each one. The Weasley twins sure jumped on that train quickly.

“So…” came Cora’s voice from behind the boys in a tone that could only mean trouble. “How does it feel to be something that Morgan would sorely miss, Arthur?” Merlin groaned and elbowed Cora in the side and Arthur just chuckled.

“I am deeply flattered,” Arthur said with a strange expression.
“Deeply, huh?” Cora then retorted with wiggling suggestive eyebrows, and Merlin had to resist the urge to shove her into the water. Just then Krum burst through the water, his face rapidly changing back into his own, with a spluttering, drenched Hermione at his side. The clock had nearly reached the one-hour mark with just five minutes to go, and Merlin watched as Hermione was swathed in towels, confused but grinning.

“Harry’s only got five minutes left,” Arthur mumbled, chewing his lip nervously.

“I saw both of them swimming towards the village when I left with you,” Merlin replied. “Harry will be fine, he wasn’t too far away. I’m sure he’ll be up any second now, just behind Krum.” Even as he spoke, he could feel the lie thick on his tongue. There was a feeling deep inside his gut that something was going wrong and he was fighting every instinct that told him to dive back into the water. He was sure that he’d be disqualified if he did. The commentary didn’t help either; the Ministry official was being purposefully vague.

“-Harry Potter arrived at the village at the same time as Viktor Krum, but he has not left yet. He seems to be arguing with the merpeople, though over what I cannot say…” the official commentated, and Arthur made a small noise of worry.

“He’ll be fine,” Merlin comforted, but none of the surrounding Gryffindors seemed to even pay attention as they stared unblinkingly at the murky waters of the Black Lake. Pavel had managed to haul himself out of bed and was holding Lydia’s hand, her knuckles white. Mako and Rinko were standing behind Neville Longbottom who looked like he was going to be sick. Hermione looked worried but also quietly confident in her friend, and that gave Merlin a little more confidence. If anyone knew what Harry was capable of, it was her.

Then a gong rang, signifying the end of the allotted hour, and there wasn’t even a ripple on the surface. Hushed, worried murmurs broke out and a few people were shouting at the commentator, though he had stood away from his commentary box now that the time was up. Merlin could see that Professor McGonagall was shooting Dumbledore worried looks, but he seemed perfectly calm.

Another tense minute passed, and then another, then three, and when all hoped seemed to be lost-

“There!” someone shouted, pointing to faint bubbles that had broken the lake’s surface. Then two bodies popped out of the lake like corks – the ginger head of Ron Weasley and the silver hair of Fleur’s younger sister. The two spluttered for a few moments, flailing as the spell on them wore off, and Ron wrapped his arms around the younger Delacour to help her back to shore. They’d only swum a few metres when Harry burst out of the water with an audible gasp, the crowd surging and cheering as he did. Merlin couldn’t help but shoot to his feet and begin screaming with them,
grinning as Harry caught up with Ron and helped the younger girl back to shore.

Older students hauled them up and Hermione ran over with blankets and pepper-up potions as Fleur collapsed next to her younger sister. Krum picked a water beetle out of Hermione’s hair, but she barely noticed as she dragged Harry and Ron into her arms. Merlin gave Harry a wide grin and a wink; unable to do more considering that he was smothered by his friends. Arthur, in his excitement, wrapped an arm around Merlin’s shoulders as he chanted his house name along with the other Gryffindors. Merlin was immediately thrown back centuries to Camelot, and it made him feel giddy with happiness and also incredibly nauseous at the same time. He wrapped his arm around Arthur’s shoulders too, ignoring the suggestive eyebrows that Cora wiggled.

From behind them an incredibly strange shrieking noise could be heard, and Merlin and Arthur turned around to see that one of the merpeople had popped out of the lake and was in a very intense conversation with Dumbledore, who could apparently speak Mermish.

“That man gets stranger every day,” Arthur murmured.

“No shit,” Merlin replied. Eventually the mermaid slipped back into the water and Dumbledore pulled back to convene with the judges and Ludo Bagman, who looked absolutely delighted at something. Bagman put his wand to his neck to cast sonorous, and a few people jumped as his magically magnified voice boomed across the lake.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision! The Mercieftainess has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have decided to award marks out of fifty to the champions as follows… Miss Fleur Delacour demonstrated excellent use of the Bubblehead Charm but was unfortunately attacked by Grindylows and was unable to retrieve her hostage. She is awarded twenty-five points.” There was polite applause from the stands, and Fleur shook her head and wailed about how she should have received a zero.

“Mr Morgan Emery, who also used the Bubblehead Charm most effectively was the first to return with his hostage, arriving just eight minutes before the time limit. We reward him forty-seven points,” Bagman announced, and everyone in Merlin’s little group cheered. Cora, however, glowered at the man, muttering about how they didn’t have any reason to deduct points from Merlin at all. Arthur shook his arm around Merlin’s shoulders proudly, and Merlin couldn’t help but grin brightly.

“Mr Viktor Krum used an incomplete Transfiguration, and was second to return with his hostage. We therefore award him forty points,” Bagman announced, Karkaroff clapping loudly and looking very superior. “Mr Harry Potter used Gillyweed to great effect, unfortunately he returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However the Mercieftainess informs us that Mr Potter was not the last to reach his hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his own determination to return all of the hostages to safety.” Merlin spotted Hermione and Ron sending Harry exasperated
“Most of the judges feel that this shows moral fibre and merits full marks,” Bagman said, though he gave Karkaroff an incredibly nasty look, “…however Mr Potter’s score is forty-five points.”

“Harry!” Merlin yelled. “You’re tied with me! Hogwarts is tied for first place!” he shouted excitedly, and a dopey grin pulled up onto Harry’s face. Ron made fun of him about something, and Krum was unable to get in a word edgewise to Hermione, who was gushing excitedly. Arthur in his excitement wrapped his arms around Merlin and spun him around in the air. Merlin laughed but also felt like he was going to throw up if he was spun around any more, and with his blurry vision he saw Cora gesturing and shouting at Colin Creevey and his camera.

But Merlin didn’t care. Arthur was safe, Hogwarts was tied for first place, and the next task wasn’t for months.

What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter End Notes

Dammit Merlin, don't you know never to say "what could possibly go wrong?"
Chapter Summary

Yeah, I went there. Also, this fanfic is now officially novel length. Let's slow clap it out for the lack of social life I have.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The party that night in the Hufflepuff common room was a chaotic mass of yellow and red, considering that a large majority of the Gryffindors had been given permission to enter by Professor Sprout to celebrate the Hogwarts tie for the Triwizard Cup. A few green and blue scarves were dotted about the place, but the overwhelming pride of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor was definitely visible.

Harry looked ecstatic and slightly terrified, but Ron and Hermione stuck to him the entire night like Siamese twins, and it definitely calmed him down. The fifth years and below were stuck with Butterbeer, but the seventh and sixth years had been given unofficial permission to have a bit of firewhisky. Professor Sprout had been keeping an eye on them, but she’d long since gotten a little tipsy and was engaged in conversation with a few of her favourite Herbology students – Maya and Neville included – in the corner, cheeks red and a little unstable.

A few of the students had gotten together to form an impromptu band, a young Hufflepuff girl using her wand as a microphone as they performed numerous wizarding songs that a large percentage of the population danced and sang along to like at the Yule Ball. Merlin recognized a few of them, but he was too busy being swamped by his friends to really pay attention. Cora was on Cedric’s shoulders, giggling profusely, little droplets of her firewhisky spilling out from the glass tumbler she was attempting to keep it in at his movements. Cora was looking longingly at Maya in the corner, mumbling every now and then that she found plant life more interesting than her girlfriend. Simon and Tanith had even snuck out from the Slytherin common room to join the party and had joined up with a rag-tag team of other snakes that looked severely out of place. Evidently Slytherin house didn’t get up to much partying.

Pavel and Lydia were immensely enjoying the party, drinks in one hand, the other wrapped around each other, mingling with the masses now that they were Hogwarts’ number one power couple. Pavel looked at Lydia and her strawberry hair like she hung the moon, hand resting gently on her waist, and when he laughed her perfect smile got even wider. It was evident how much they completely adored each other, and bets were currently circulating whether they’d get married before or after Maya and Cora. In the rowdiest corner of the common room, over by the group study table, Rob and Vern had joined together to start a game of beer Quidditch. Merlin hadn’t played the game
before, didn’t have enough coordination to bounce the ball through one of the hoops and into the cups, but the two were clearly winning, racking up bets of sickles, Every Flavour Beans and homework favours as the lightweight balls bounced straight through the hoops and into the Butterbeer.

Merlin, though, was greatly enjoying the feeling of Arthur’s proud arm around his shoulders, ignoring Cora and Cedric’s pointed looks every few minutes when Merlin knew he let his affection for Arthur slip onto his face. But honestly, he’d had a few shots of firewhisky and really didn’t care. Arthur flitted from group to group, sometimes dragging Merlin by the arm to chat with the terror twins Mako and Rinko, or the even more terrifying twins Fred and George, then introducing him to the Gryffindor prefects before joining in with the partying crowd for a certain song. Merlin was happy to just go along with it, revelling in the feeling of belonging with Arthur again. He still couldn’t believe that after all this time, his destiny had led him here – to where he had friends and a purpose after so many decades of loneliness and staring out at a lake.

It was in the wee hours of the morning that the Slytherins scampered off, fearing Professor Snape’s wrath if he caught any of them out, and the Ravenclaws reluctantly left half an hour after them. Eventually Professor McGonagall made her way into the common room to roll her eyes and asked Arthur to get them all back to their own common room safely at a reasonable hour. One-by-one, Arthur sent the younger years home, then the older years, astutely ignoring that Pavel had transfigured his tie into red and gold. Cedric joined in, rounding up all of the Hufflepuffs like a professional prefect, the effect somewhat lessened by Cora on his shoulders pulling faces as he did so. Eventually around 4a.m., the only people left were Merlin’s dorm mates plus Cora, Arthur, Harry, Ron and Hermione.

“I feel like I could sleep for a week,” Cora yawned from atop Cedric’s shoulders.

“I feel like my back’s going to break,” Cedric retorted, and winced when Cora yanked his hair.

“You calling me fat, Diggory?” Cora shot back, and then squealed as Cedric leaned back so she slid off his shoulders and onto the couch. Almost immediately she forgot her vendetta and curled up on the couch using her robe as a blanket, glass still clutched in her hand.

“That’s cute,” Vern mocked.

“You’re… cute,” Cora countered, then frowned and fell asleep. Vern chuckled and swept her into his arms, carrying her up the stairs to her dorm room. Rob followed with a lazy salute as he ascended the stairs, and Harry looked like he was about to fall asleep on Ron’s shoulders.
“You should probably get them back to the common room, Arthur, they look like they’re about to
keel over,” Cedric said, nodding to the fourth years. “They’re not cut out for partying until the early
morning.”

“Yes we are!” Ron replied, although his yawn that cut off half his sentence kind of proved Cedric’s
point.

“I’ll escort you back with Arthur, c’mon,” Merlin said with a smile, slinging an arm around Harry’s
shoulders. He’d really taken to the young Gryffindor, feeling like he was the younger brother he
never had. Of course he adored Ron and Hermione as well, but with Harry, they understood each
other – the pressure to be something they felt like they weren’t, expected by everyone to change the
world. Harry didn’t know that, but Merlin felt like the teenager could almost sense it in him.

“’Kay, good idea, I’ll make sure there aren’t any stray students roaming the corridors,” Cedric said,
and the group all headed out of the Hufflepuff common room. Cedric broke off from their group to
head towards the Ravenclaw and Slytherin areas, and Arthur and Merlin walked the fourth-years
through the darkened hallways, lit occasionally by torches in the more travelled hallways.

Merlin was glad that Arthur was with them, because apparently Hogwarts got even more confusing
at night, and nearly more than one time he’d made a turn that would’ve apparently taken them to the
dungeons, or worse, the teacher’s chambers (which was a weird thought). Eventually they arrived at
the Fat Lady, who yawned and let the fourth-years through. She raised an eyebrow when Arthur
gestured to her when he didn’t follow behind them, and Arthur grabbed hold of Merlin’s robe and
led him back to an offside corridor.

“What?” Merlin asked, heart pounding strangely fast.

“I… I just wanted to ask you something that’s been bugging me slightly,” Arthur said, tongue
coming out to wet his lips. “It’s probably nothing, but…”

“What is it?” Merlin asked, taking a step closer. The hallway was near complete darkness and
entirely silent except for the quiet cadence of their voices, muffled slightly. Apparently Hogwarts
made things quieter at night.

“I… for the second task,” Arthur started, “Harry had to rescue Ron, his best friend, Krum had to
rescue Hermione, his date, and Fleur had to rescue her younger sister.” Merlin frowned.
“And?” he asked, with suspicions that he knew where the conversation was headed.

“I was just wondering, I mean, the person they all rescued was probably the most important person for them on the premises. Like, best friends, crushes, family, stuff like that. They’re all pretty vital people, and the egg said that it was something that they’d sorely miss, right?” Arthur asked, and Merlin gulped.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“And Cora was trying to stir shit up, like she always is, and I mean I know that you’ve been really close to Cedric and the other Hufflepuffs,” Arthur rambled, like he was stalling whatever he was trying to say.

“What’s your point, Arthur?” Merlin asked, trying to help him along.

“What I’m wondering, I guess, is… why was I that person for you? Why not Cora or Cedric or Tanith? I just, I don’t get it. I mean, you’ve known them longer than you’ve known me, and you, Cedric and Cora are pretty much inseparable at this point,” Arthur finally asked, looking at Merlin like his answer held the key to the mysteries of the universe. Merlin shrugged.

“Because you’re important to me,” was all Merlin replied, and Arthur frowned, like that wasn’t the answer he was looking for. Merlin could feel his own hands shaking. He knew Arthur had some sort of instinctual connection to him still, as evidenced by their drunken conversation in the common room after the Yule Ball. He knew that, even though they met again in a fight, they’d become friends incredibly quickly. Merlin knew that Arthur cared about him quite a lot, and they got on just as well as they had done nearly a millennium ago. But they’d never become anything more than best friends, and Merlin still wasn’t sure how Arthur had felt about him back in Camelot. Arthur was married to Gwen, and they both loved each other intensely, and Merlin had never wanted to take that away from them. In hindsight, Merlin had thought that maybe Arthur had felt something similar to that for him… but now, in the twentieth century, without a wife or even a girlfriend, now that Merlin knew for certain his own feelings…

…maybe they could be something more.

“Morgan, I need something more than that,” Arthur pleaded. “I need to know why I was that important person for you. Why am I the person that you’d miss the most? Why not Cedric or Cora? What are you not telling me?” he almost begged, and Merlin felt the world freeze around him.
He should tell Arthur. He should tell him that he loved him, loved him so dearly and he wanted to be with him, hope that Arthur would remember who he was and that they were each other’s destiny, two sides of the same coin.

He should tell Arthur. Even though Merlin’s purpose at Hogwarts was to vigilantly make sure that he got to the final task in time to stop the return of Voldemort, to take Cedric’s place and to stop his friend from dying, to make sure that Harry wasn’t forever traumatized by the return of the man who murdered his parents in cold blood.

He should tell Arthur, let the words spill from his lips, not lie just for once, tell the god’s honest truth like he hadn’t for centuries, to hope to the gods that Arthur felt the same way back. To hope that he felt the same way back even after – if – he remembered who he was.

But…

Merlin knew it was risky. Until he managed to stop Voldemort, everyone he knew was at risk. He didn’t know who Voldemort’s insider was, someone at Hogwarts who was orchestrating the events from behind the scenes. Karkaroff or Snape or someone else entirely, Merlin knew that if they found out that he was Merlin, that Arthur was the reborn King of Camelot… they’d be in danger. Arthur would be in danger; everyone Merlin had grown to love would be in danger. He couldn’t let that happen until he was sure that the Dark Lord was dead.

He should tell Arthur, but instead…

“You know how Hogwarts has a way of knowing things it shouldn’t? You… remind me of someone I once knew. Someone I loved,” came spilling from Merlin’s lips without his permission, and he saw Arthur’s face fall into something like disappointment and anger. Merlin, was once again a coward, and once again couldn’t confide his greatest secret to his best friend.

“What, so I’m just a ghost to you?” Arthur finally responded, spitting out his words while his face contorted in rage and sheer disappointment. It was almost as heartbreaking as the words he’d spoken as Merlin abandoned him before Camlann. It hurt.

“No, Arthur, I-“ Merlin pleaded, but Arthur held out his hand.

“Whatever, Morgan. I don’t want to hear your excuses. I was hoping that something real was happening between us, but… apparently not,” Arthur replied, before sliding past him, around the
corner, and up to the common room. Merlin wanted to scream, to cry, to destroy something, why was he a coward every single time?

His eyes flashed, and the ground underneath him cracked violently, slipping up the walls and shaking the ceiling, dust shaking loose and falling onto Merlin’s head. He slid to the ground, drew his knees up to his chest, and buried his face in his hands.

Why did this always happen?

“You know, Ron thought I put my name into the cup,” a voice piped up, and Merlin looked up to see Harry standing awkwardly at the end of the corridor, where Arthur had just left. “He didn’t believe me when I told him that I hadn’t, and he refused to speak to me for weeks.” The teenager walked down the hallway and sat cross-legged across from Merlin, a sympathetic smile on his face.

“It sucked, my best friend in the whole world had abandoned me, and Hermione was with me but it just wasn’t the same. The whole school had turned against me, and so had Ron. It felt just like it had before I came here, when I had no friends and everyone hated me,” Harry confessed quietly, and Merlin wanted to reach out and put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Ron had stuck beside me through the whole Quirrell thing, didn’t even blink when I told him that I heard voices around the school threatening to kill students, never doubted me when I told him that I was attacked by a dementor. He’d always been there for me, never once doubting the crazy things I said, except for once. And he knew that he’d screwed up, and we talked about it, and now I know that he’s never going to doubt me again no matter what I say,” Harry continued with a small smile.

“That’s nice,” Merlin replied, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“What I’m trying to say is that if you talk to Arthur, I’m sure he’ll understand. Explain it to him, and he’ll be willing to listen, because it doesn’t matter if either of you are in the wrong, if you’re close enough like Ron and I – which you are – you can get past this,” Harry said with a nonchalant shrug. Merlin stared at him.

“When did you become a therapist?” Merlin asked, and Harry laughed.

“I’m speaking from personal experience. I know that Arthur likes you a lot, and you two are really good friends, like really good, it’s actually kinda weird how close you’ve gotten in just a few months. Talk to him,” Harry insisted, and Merlin gave him a sad smile.
“It’s not as simple as that, Harry. I wish it was, but it’s more complicated than you might think,” Merlin replied. Harry frowned, and then got to his feet. His eyes roamed over the cracks in the hallway that were slowly sealing themselves up, and pursed his lips.

“I’m clearly not equipped to deal with this,” Harry said. “Wait here.” Then he was gone. Normally Merlin would’ve chased after him, a fourteen year old walking the hallways of Hogwarts at four a.m., breaking nearly every single rule, but he couldn’t. He just didn’t have the energy to get up, to pull himself together, to do anything but wallow in his own stupidity and cowardice. He thought he’d learned his lesson when he’d waited much too long to tell Arthur about his magic and it ended in his death, but apparently not. After nearly a thousand years, he was still a damn coward when it came to Arthur Pendragon.

Minutes passed, and Merlin began to wonder where Harry had gone. He shut his eyes and sunk into the magic of Hogwarts, feeling the castle sealing up the damage that he’d done. Old Magic created Hogwarts; it was almost a source of it, just like nature, every single brick of the building saturated with it. It was almost akin to a druid grotto, the magic that made up Merlin’s very being surrounding him, almost comforting him. The cracks were closing up along the ceiling, the walls slowly knitting back together, and Merlin wished he could just undo the damage he’d caused the same way.

Footsteps approached, and Merlin didn’t even look up until a figure sat next to him, knocking their shoulder comfortingly to his.

“Harry told me you fought with Arthur,” Cedric said, and Merlin sighed, leaning sideways to rest his head on Cedric’s shoulder. “Must’ve been pretty bad, I’ve never seen you like this.”

“It was,” Merlin sighed, feeling a tightness in his sternum. “Really bad. I think I’ve fucked things up for good.”

“I’m sure you haven’t,” Cedric reassured. “A friendship like you and Arthur’s doesn’t just disappear after one little fight. What was it about?”

“I… he asked why it was him in the lake and not you or Cora. I chickened out,” Merlin admitted. “You know how when I first saw Arthur I said that he reminded me of someone I once knew? I told him that, instead of admitting that I’m pretty much in love with him,” Merlin sighed. He felt Cedric take a deep breath.

“Why don’t you tell him that?” Cedric replied. “It seems like a pretty simple fix to me. I mean, I
know it’s hard to admit that you like someone – asking out Cho felt like the most difficult thing in the world, it’s never as simple as Maya and Cora, but if he’s worth it, you’ve just got to do it.” Merlin chuckled self-deprecatingly, eyes fixed on the slowly healing cracks in the floor.

“It’s not as simple as that, Cedric,” he murmured. Cedric sighed and wrapped an arm around Merlin’s shoulder so he could lean on him more comfortably.

“Tell Doctor Cedric why it’s not so simple, Morgan,” he joked, trying to lighten up the situation.

“I…” Merlin began, before stopping. He was sick of the damn lies, it seemed like he hadn’t done anything his entire life but lie to everyone he loved, and even if he just omitted a few truths, it would feel so much better than keeping everything bottled up until nobody trusted him anymore.

“When I said that Arthur reminded me of someone I knew… that was a lie,” Merlin confessed. “He didn’t remind me of someone I knew, I actually do know him. I knew him long before I came to Hogwarts.” Cedric frowned.

“Explain,” he said.

“He… Arthur and I have known each other for ten years,” Merlin said, and he could almost feel Cedric’s incredulous expression. “But Arthur doesn’t remember. It sounds impossible, I know. He doesn’t remember any of it, doesn’t remember me, doesn’t remember anything we did together. Ten years, Cedric, all of it just gone, and I can’t tell Arthur that because why the hell would he ever believe me? I’ve got no proof. Sometimes I think he remembers, just a look in his eye or something he says, but it always disappears as soon as I think I’ve seen it. I’ve been in love with him for pretty much my entire life, and he doesn’t even goddamn remember,” Merlin sobbed, the tightness in his chest finally releasing, tears flowing freely down his cheeks.

Cedric couldn’t do anything but pull Merlin into his chest, letting him soak the front of his uniform, rubbing a hand up and down his back, and Merlin let out decades of unshed tears.

“It is more complicated than I thought,” Cedric said softly, and Merlin barely felt the cracked floor return to smooth stone.
"What could possibly go wrong?" Merlin thought.

LITERALLY EVERYTHING, MERLIN, YOU HUGE IDIOT.

Also Harry is lovely, and I've just now realised how many parties I've mentioned when there were literally like 2 parties in the book.
By the end of the following week, Merlin and Arthur’s feud had spread throughout the houses. None of the Gryffindors would speak to the Hufflepuffs for fear of Arthur’s wrath, although nothing could keep Lydia or Pavel apart. Cedric had explained to the rest of their group the situation – not the truth of it, just that he and Arthur had a ‘lover’s quarrel’ and that Arthur thought that he had been scorned.

That got Cora sending dirty looks to the Gryffindor prefect, which only made things even worse. Merlin had barely spoken in or out of class, and the only respite he had was the Magical Theory classes, where only one Gryffindor attended who was nowhere near Arthur’s social circle.

“-Mr Emery!” Professor Sinistra snapped, and Merlin jerked up from where he’d been staring out the window, and blushed.

“Sorry, Professor, I’ve got a lot on my mind,” he sighed, and the woman gave him a sympathetic yet stern look.

“The entire school knows about the feud between you and Mr Pendragon, but I would expect that it would not bleed through into my classes,” she said with a raised eyebrow. “What can you tell me about the decline of Old Magic and the rise of current, modern magic?” The class looked interestedly to Merlin, mainly because he sometimes let slip a tidbit of information that the rest of the class, and indeed the Professor would not know, and he blamed that on the knowledge of his ‘dead, isolated family’.

“Old Magic was prominent from the years of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere all the way back past the construction of Hogwarts and her founders,” Merlin began. “The use of all magic was banned by King Uther Pendragon, but was reinstated legally by Queen Guinevere following the death of her husband—“ Merlin had to pause for a moment, forcing saliva down his dry throat.

“However Old Magic never truly flourished again after the instinctual fear that had been drummed into the people during Uther Pendragon’s reign. The magic slowly died out of it’s own accord,
carried only by the druids who integrated into society and forgot their ancient roots. The magical Dark Ages occurred from approximately 1400-1600, where outside of wizarding schools such as Hogwarts, magic was not a practice at all.

“The Wizarding Council, whom had not wielded much power during that time, came together to form the Ministry of Magic. Magic, by that point, had changed entirely throughout the two-hundred-year dark period, and emerged in a different form. Wands were more widely used and created, the only form of Old Magic still carried through to this day. The use of magic both wandless and non-verbal magic, which used to be relatively common in the days of Old Magic, was now only accessible by the most capable and accomplished wizards, such as Professor Dumbledore. Incantations became the most common form of concentrating willpower into magic along with the use of wands, and as a result all of the spells we use today came into effect,” Merlin recited. Even Professor Sinistra looked impressed, and Rob was already muttering about how excited he was to have Merlin as his essay partner.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself, Morgan,” Professor Sinistra said with a wry grin.

“How does he know that?” Petra Alakous whispered to her partner, who shrugged with a confused expression.

“To sum up, nobody truly knows what happened during the Dark Ages of magic, only that the source of magic changed throughout the years of what could almost have been magic extinction. Popular theories suggest that magic itself changed to prevent total extinction, choosing to become less engrained with the earth and more within the souls of our wands, and ourselves to become more prominent. Bouts of accidental magic were incredibly rare with Old Magic, as it was a practice studied and disciplined. This then, naturally, leads to theories of magic being sentient, and not just another earthly force at our disposal,” Professor Sinistra said, and Merlin blinked a few times. He’d been disconnected from the wizarding world for so long that it was the first time he’d heard of that theory, and was surprised.

He didn’t realize that others couldn’t feel magic like himself, like it was a sixth sense, just as easy to access as sight or touch.

“Professor,” Merlin piped up. “That still doesn’t explain why I find transfiguration so difficult.” He remembered back in the cave, he’d cupped his hands and whispered a butterfly into existence, turning the pure energy around him into a tiny little life.

“I have been theorising about this,” Professor Sinistra said. “I think that perhaps your abilities as a Dragonlord have tied you to your druidic roots, and therefore Old Magic itself. Though you are able to use modern magic, you still draw energy from the world around you, rather than from yourself, and therefore the act of balance still impacts you. Turning an inanimate object into an animate one
disrupts that balance, and is therefore impossible for you. However, I believe if you focus on the energies of magic and imbue it into your inanimate object, you should be able to create life,” she finished.

Merlin thought she might be entirely right. An inanimate object had no magical energy, but if he gave it enough, creating a life out of it wouldn’t be difficult at all.

“Thank you, Professor,” he smiled, feeling better than he had for days.

His smile disappeared as he entered the common room and saw the sign up advertising the Hogsmeade trip during the Easter holidays. It had been a tradition for their group to join up with the Gryffindors and Slytherins and to all head down together to the Three Broomsticks. They’d drink Butterbeer and a few of them would bring back chocolate from Honeydukes to share, and occasionally Pavel would sneak out to the Hog’s Head and somehow swindle the bartender into giving him some firewhisky that they’d keep out of view of the professors.

But Merlin’s favourite part was sitting in a warm, friendly tavern, surrounded by his friends, with his arm pressed up tight against Arthur’s.

“Well that’s going to be awkward,” Cora muttered, jutting her chin in the direction of the Hogsmeade announcement. “Hope that asshole isn’t going to ruin our time there.”

“Cora,” Merlin sighed. “It’s not his fault. I fucked things up.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make him any less of an asshole for not giving you a chance to explain yourself. Cedric told me that you were crying on him, and I have never even seen you come close to shedding a tear with the exception of laughing so hard you start to weep like a small, hysterical child,” Cora teased, bumping her hip into Merlin’s. Her tight, bushy curls were tied into two small buns on her head, and she had Maya’s scarf wrapped around her shoulders. One of her pockets was wriggling suspiciously.

Merlin sighed, feeling his mood drop again. He slumped onto one of the couches in front of the fireplace, kicking his feet up on the low coffee table that was covered in parchment, exploding snap cards and a few loose biscuits.

He then had a kitten dumped in his lap.
“I thought it’d make you happy,” Cora said from behind him, smiling down at the tiny, confused animal. “I made him today for Transfig practice and thought you should keep him. His name is Sushi.”

Sushi looked up at him with wide blue eyes, pawed at his lap gently, and then made the tiniest mewing sound that Merlin had ever heard. And like magic, Vern was immediately at his side, cooing and petting the tiny thing.

“Who’s the cutest little kitty? You are, Sushi, you are!” Vern cooed, this large, muscular, 6’4” mountain of a boy, with the goofiest, high-pitched voice that Merlin had ever heard, and he couldn’t help burst out laughing.

“That’s more like it.” Cedric said with a grin, entering the common room and taking his place next to Merlin on the couch. Rob came to sit on the couch perpendicular to Merlin’s, and Pavel sat down next to him with his nose in a book, sniffling slightly.

“He’s allergic to cats,” Rob explained as Pavel sneezed violently.

“That’s just because even his biology is a big meanie to tiny-weenie cats,” Vern cooed, one large finger scratching gently under Sushi’s chin, who’d shut his eyes and was happily purring away.

Merlin ran his hand down the cat’s back, the fur impossibly soft and also with a faint print on the fur that reminded him of a china teapot. The kitten purred and hummed, the stars emerged in the sky outside, and all of his friends chatted to fill up the silence. Merlin didn’t remember the last time he had friends like this.

That night, Merlin dreamed that he and Arthur had their first class of the Dueling Club. The fourth years and up had all turned up, eager to learn, and Merlin bowed to Arthur as they prepared to demonstrate for the class.

Arthur then got into a duelling position with a smirk on his face. Not anything teasing, not like when they vowed to take each other down with a grin and an elbow to the side, but like he was sneering at something he hated, like Merlin was nothing more than something stuck to the bottom of his shoe.

And at once, Merlin suddenly didn’t feel comfortable duelling with him.
“I won’t fight you, Arthur!” Merlin announced, dropping his wand to the floor. Arthur’s smirk simply got wider.

“Of course you won’t, you’re a coward,” he replied, and something in Merlin’s chest dropped. “You always have been, and you always will be. You like to think that you’re brave, and powerful, but you aren’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Merlin replied, the words catching in his throat like a sob.

Arthur then threw a spell at him, something undulating and a terrible crimson red that Merlin only deflected by instinct, not because he wanted to. It wasn’t a spell that Merlin recognized, but he knew that it was something horrible.

Arthur then began to advance, wand out, and Merlin began to take steps backward.

“Ten years, Merlin, and you never told me your secret because you were a coward. You only told me when you knew that I couldn’t punish you for it because I was dying, and you knew that was going to happen too, didn’t you? You abandoned me when I needed you most, and now you’re doing it again,” Arthur sneered, firing another spell at Merlin.

He subconsciously deflected it again, and he looked to the students surrounding them for help, but they just watched the two of them, eyes dead and faces expressionless. Even Cedric and Cora in the crowd didn’t make a move to help.

“You’ve got no reason not to admit that you’re a coward this time, Merlin,” Arthur continued. His spells fired off faster and faster, and even though his barrier was up, Merlin was still pushed back a step with each one.

“You won’t believe me,” Merlin begged. “I’ll lose you.”

Arthur took a step forward, eyes blazing, and Merlin felt his back hit the brick wall behind them. He had nowhere to go, and Arthur advanced until he was inches away, and Merlin could see the bright anger burning within his eyes.

“You’ve already lost me,” Arthur hissed, and this time he was too close for the spell to be deflected, and the world turned to darkness.
Merlin woke up with a gasp, eyes flashing as a shockwave emanated from him to ripple throughout the room. Everyone shot out of bed, confused, before they looked to Merlin. He could only imagine what they saw – clammy, sweaty, pale skin and his hair stuck to his forehead, chest heaving like he couldn’t get enough air.

“Sorry,” he gasped, words thick in his throat. Sushi, who had curled up on the end of his bed, mewed quietly and made his way up the bed to Merlin, barely making a dent in the covers as he walked.

“It’s ok, Morgan,” Cedric said, words slurred from being not quite awake. “We need to get up early today anyway.” The clock on the wall announced that it was just shy of 7am, but most of the students were going home for the Easter holidays, including most of Merlin’s dormmates.

It took Merlin a good few minutes to calm himself down, and the rest of the boys politely let him do so as, for once, Pavel was awake on time. They all got dressed into casual robes or Muggle clothing and headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast, Merlin not speaking a word.

The hall was mostly empty, but it slowly filled up with students excited to head home, though the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students were staying over the break. Merlin was quiet although his friends were all chatting and joking, hoping that they would improve his mood, but he couldn’t get past those words that Arthur had sneered at him in his dream.

>You’ve already lost me.<

Merlin peered up beneath his eyelashes to the Gryffindor table, and for all intents and purposes, Arthur seemed just as cheerful and insufferably smug as he did every day. If Merlin hadn’t known him for ten years he wouldn’t have caught the way his smile dipped slightly when his friends looked away, just at the corner of his mouth.

Merlin couldn’t face seeing him right now, not when the horrible apparition of Arthur was still fresh in his mind, and he practically ran back to the Hufflepuff common room to take refuge in the dorms. He considered packing his things and leaving for his lakeside home in Avalon, but knew that he had no purpose there anymore, staring out at an empty lake that Arthur Pendragon would never rise out of, recognition and happiness on his face at his long-lost best friend.

He sat on the bed and pet Sushi for a long while, gazing out the small window in the room situated between Cedric and Rob’s beds, the sun blearily shining through the thick clouds. It looked to be an
overcast day, no clouds heavy enough to let out their rain.

Soon Cedric, Pavel, Rob and Vern all came back up and began to pack away the little amount they didn’t already have in their trunks, chatting about what they’d be doing during their last free days before exam preparation for NEWTs started. Cedric tried a few times to engage Merlin in the conversation, but he gave monosyllabic responses, and soon they just let him be.

He knew he was bringing down everyone’s mood, and was sure that he’d snap out of it soon, but his throat still felt thick and chest tight at the words Arthur had spat out that Merlin had always been terrified he’d really say. He tried to tell himself that it was just a dream, but it didn’t seem to be working. At least the tiny fluffball in his lap seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Merlin did put on a smile for his friends when they all headed down to the gates to take the carriages back to the Hogwarts Express, and Cedric hugged him so tight he thought he might explode. Lydia and Pavel were hand-in-hand, about to spend the next two weeks at Lydia’s.

Merlin was surprised when Cora kissed Maya soundly on the lips and told her that she’d owl her everyday, but she wouldn’t be joining her at her home (which was most likely a huge and ancient Slytherin mansion).

“You aren’t going?” Merlin asked as Cora bounced her way over to him.

“Nah, got shit to do here,” Cora said vaguely. “Such as be a matchmaker to two complete boneheads.”

Merlin couldn’t get any words out, but simply tugged her into a hug and pressed his lips into her tight curls. She hugged back just as tightly.

Chapter End Notes

i'm so sorry i've been absent and haven't updated this in like months i'm an asshole and i've been working a lot i'm so sorry and this is really sad at the moment i promise it will get happier but like i need ~*~*~drama~*~*~
curly fries to anyone who can guess how merlin and arthur will resolve this feud, how they'll do it and what will happen
Suspicion

Chapter Summary

The Easter holidays start, a bunch of shit goes down, and Cora is acting suspiciously.

Chapter Notes

Holy shit, you guys, it's been so long I feel the need for a "previously on..." segment. Sorry I've been so slack with this, the holidays ended and uni started up again and I've been pretty distracted. That and I started watching anime again, and I've become actual trash.

I was jolted into writing more of this by the absolutely fantastic, mind-blowing, ridiculously brilliant fanart by mushroontale, which you can find here: X. I was honestly speechless for a good five minutes before I started freaking out, hyperventilating, and posting links to it on every single social media site I was on. Still kind of in shock that someone did such amazing fanart of something that I've written!

So sorry for my absence, I hope this extra-long chapter will suffice! And happy birthday to menono1011, whose birthday is in a few days time. I hope this makes your birthday a little brighter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first day of the Easter holidays was quiet – most of the students had gone home, now that there wasn’t anything like the Yule Ball keeping them behind, and a lot of the younger years had been feeling particularly homesick. It felt strange to wake up in an empty dorm, all of his friends having gone back home, though Cedric had said he’d be coming back halfway through the holidays as his father had to go on an overseas trip for the Ministry.

Merlin yawned and made his way through the eerily empty corridors, most students asleep or lounging about in their common rooms, nothing much else to do for the next two weeks (unless you were a seventh year, in which case exam study should already be underway if one wanted to pass).

The Owlery was atop one of the highest towers at Hogwarts, and the stairs weren’t as treacherous as they had been now that the snow and ice had begun to melt and the frost had usually disappeared by the time the sun rose over the horizon. Gaius was curled up happily next to Hedwig, and the owls gave Merlin a sleepy hoot as he approached them.
Merlin smiled and gently pet the soft feathers atop Gaius’ head, the owl closing its eyes and it almost seemed to smile under Merlin’s gentle ministrations. Merlin laughed to himself and pulled out a handful of owl treats that were eaten straight from the palm of his hand, though Gaius kindly left the last three for Hedwig to snatch up. The owls hadn’t yet left to go and pick up the Daily Prophet, but judging from the recent issues, Rita Skeeter had been angling to try and rile Merlin up enough so she’d be able to write about their confrontation.

Merlin wasn’t anywhere annoyed enough to do so, however, not after what she’d written about Hermione last week after her explosion in the Three Broomsticks.

After ten minutes or so, Merlin’s stomach rumbled, and he left the sleepy owls to go down to the Great Hall for breakfast. Uniforms didn’t have to be worn during the holidays as classes were not in session, and due to the lack of students, there were no longer any rules about sitting at one’s own house table (though Merlin and a few other students disregarded that rule on a daily basis). Though the sun was out now the wind was still sharp and chilly, and Merlin had pulled on the red neckerchief he’d gotten from the thrift shop back home to keep his neck warm.

Cora was already sitting at the table, the only early riser Merlin knew, and he sat next to her with a tired smile.

“Weird having barely anyone here, right?” she asked through a mouthful of waffles, absolutely slathered in whipped cream and maple syrup to the point where just looking at it could induce hypoglycaemia.

“It’s almost like a ghost town,” Merlin replied, carefully choosing the strips of bacon that looked the least charred.

“Easter’s usually the emptiest, because at least for Christmas there are decorations up and the feast, where bets begin at one galleon for which professor is gonna get the most drunk,” Cora said, and then leaned in to whisper conspiratorially in Merlin’s ear. “I’ve won the last three years in a row with Hooch.”

“Hooch, really?” Merlin asked, looking up to the hawk-eyed Quidditch coach.

“Oh yeah, most bets go on McGonagall or Sprout, because Hooch manages to maintain composed entirely until she passes out in the hallway,” Cora divulged. Merlin narrowed his eyes, not entirely sure if Cora’s tale was true.
At that moment, his attention was taken away by Arthur entering the Great Hall with Sara and Percy, whom Merlin still wasn’t particularly close with. The terror twins – both pairs – had gone home for the holidays, along with the school’s number one power couple, though Harry, Ron and Hermione had all stayed.

“You know I imagine you’re one of the only people who doesn’t feel disgustingly sick on Easter,” Merlin said, seeing Cora now covering her second helping of waffles with thick chocolate sauce.

“Yeah it’s great, everyone gives me their leftovers when they feel too shite, and then they all regret it the next day when they feel like more,” Cora said with a grin. “That’s why I’m sending particularly large helpings to everyone this year.”

Merlin took a sip of his tea, and the owls began to stream in, Gaius making a beeline straight for him. Along with the Daily Prophet, there was a letter addressed to him in familiar handwriting, with slightly smudged blue ink due to the writer being left-handed.

“I got a letter from Tanith,” Merlin said, and Cora leaned over as he opened it and read the letter.

_Dear Morgan,_

_Sorry to leave you at such an important emotional time, I had initially planned to be scheming with Cora all holiday long, but I've got an important performance coming up. As you know, I'm a pretty serious ballet dancer, and I don't get much chance to practice in a group during the school term, so whenever I'm at home I practice about eight hours a day. I've got my final exam this week, and three theatre performances next week with the rest of our company! I managed to wrangle up a working video camera and some charms that should make it work at Hogwarts, so I'll be able to show you guys the performance when I get back!_  

_Wish me luck, and please dear god make up with Arthur it is literally causing me to grind my teeth at night._

_Love,_

_Tanith xxx_

“Damn, I wish I could be there to watch her performance,” Merlin muttered. He remembered his initial surprise when Tanith had told him that she’d been a ballerina, where with her short choppy hair and muscular stature, he’d thought she’d be doing something more modern. That was before it was clear that her slim yet defined muscles allowed her to pull off the most difficult ballet moves with an ease that had sent Merlin reeling. She’d also said that she practiced pole dancing, which required a strength that Merlin would never, ever have in a thousand years.
“Same, but at the same time I was so looking forward to scheming with her,” Cora replied, and Merlin glowered at her.

“You two are evil,” he said, without any venom in his voice. He was genuinely touched that Cora was willing to sacrifice a romantic holiday away with Maya to help him and Arthur, but he wasn’t sure that the gap between them could be breached. Not, at least, until all threat had been removed and Merlin was sure that Arthur would be safe.

Moody lumbered his way into the Great Hall later than usual, magical eye whizzing about, flask secured on his hip. As always, Merlin got a strange feeling from the Auror, something that he still hadn’t been able to place. Whenever he’d brought it up, everyone else insisted that they felt the same, and it was because it was just the aura that the man brought along with him. However, Merlin had a history of suspecting people who were suspicious straight back at him, and Merlin had the impression that the professor just didn’t entirely buy his estranged-forest-family story.

“Hey Morgan?” Cora asked quietly. “If you and Arthur don’t make up, does this mean the Dueling Club will be cancelled? Because I know a lot of the school were really looking forward to it,” she said.

Merlin damn well knew the manipulative tactics she was using, but he still couldn’t prevent the guilt that welled up in him at letting so many people down – not just Arthur, but all of his friends and all of the students who wanted to join.

“You’re a right piece of work,” he muttered back, and Cora grinned with too many teeth.

“You damn well know it,” she shot back, devouring the last of her waffles. “I’m gonna fix this shit up even if it kills me.”

For the rest of the day, Merlin had been on edge. He knew that when Cora put her mind to something, it damn well happened, unless it was creating a successful potion in which case the more she tried the worse it became. He tried to spend the day relaxing – reading through some of the recreational books he’d bought from Flourish & Blotts, exploring the castle and reading through the personal columns in the Daily Prophet, but his skin itched, like any moment she’d pop out of nowhere with dastardly deeds up her sleeve.

However, nothing happened, and she’d even seemed downright charming, kind and concerned that night over dinner, though he was suspicious at her innocent offer to stay in his dorm room now that it was empty. Although he thought the offer was genuine, he turned it down, far too suspicious of what Cora was planning to let her anywhere near his unconscious form. The whole day – and night –
passed with relative ease, and Merlin had only let his guard down a fraction when it’d happened.

He’d been heading towards the library to get out some textbooks, intent on starting his exam study for Alchemy and Ancient Runes, when he’d found himself suddenly shoved hard into what seemed to be a broom closet, completely darkened and filled with strange odds and ends. When he lit up his wand the space seemed to contain anything imaginable – except, inexplicably, brooms.

He tried the door, pulling on and twisting the handle, but it seemed to be glued shut – the door didn’t even budge. A simple Alohomora had no effect, and when he was desperate enough to try and blast the door down, nothing happened. He tried spell after spell, and even a hard shove with some Old Magic didn’t do a single thing.

Merlin sighed and slid down the wall to sit down, waiting for Cora to come and get him (because this was undoubtedly her doing). He was wondering if he was supposed to be reflecting on his actions when he had nothing to do, when the door flew open with a burst of sunshine, and another person came flying in, tripped over Merlin’s stretched-out legs, and smacked themselves head first on an old paint can.

In the dim light of his wand, Merlin could see the familiar gold hair of Arthur Pendragon.

“How cliché,” he muttered as Arthur swore and rubbed a forming red mark on his forehead.

“You can say that again. Damn, Dallas is fast,” Arthur sighed, sitting opposite Merlin, legs outstretched too. “I have been expecting something like this though. I’m just glad Lydia isn’t involved, she’s bloody ruthless.”

Arthur then actually made eye contact with Merlin and seemed to remember how pissed he was at him, because he turned his head away and shut his mouth. Merlin sighed and also remained quiet. Merlin had thought that the silence wouldn’t last too long, but when twenty minutes had passed without a single word, he sighed again. He’d always hated the competitive streak that the two of them both shared.

It was four hours before Cora opened the cupboard, and Arthur shot straight out without even a word to her. Merlin, by that point, had his jaw clenched shut painfully as the back of his throat burned with the effort of holding back tears. Avalon, he’d really fucked up. Cora’s hopeful expression plummeted, and she left the door open as she came to crouch next to him. She threaded her fingers through his, and he absentmindedly noted the contrast between his pale, spidery fingers and her dark skin with short, bitten nails (he’d remembered them being long and painted earlier in the year).
“I’m so sorry, Morgan,” she whispered quietly, and she pressed a kiss into his hair. Merlin simply let out a shaky exhale, and then bottled everything away like he’d had to do for the majority of his life. He needed to study for exams, and he had to prepare for the third task. He could think about making up with Arthur after Voldemort was no longer a threat.

So study for exams he did, or at least tried to. Everything he read seemed to be going in one ear and out the other, and he’d finish a page before realizing he had no idea what was on it. A good three days passed where Merlin would camp out in the library with a tower of books, none for Potions and an awful lot for Ancient Runes, and he barely spoke a word to Cora when she came around to see him or at meal times.

“Morgan!” came a voice, and Merlin looked up from his books to see Harry, panting a little and slightly red in the face. “They want all the champions down at the Quidditch pitch.”

“What do they want?” Merlin asked, packing his study books away as he got to his feet.

“No idea,” Harry shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out.”

The two of them headed down to the Quidditch pitch, Harry asking questions about NEWT exams and Merlin asking Harry how his Easter was going, and neither of them brought up the elephant in the room.

Harry came to a complete stop as they emerged out onto the Quidditch pitch only to find that instead of the smooth, even grass that had normally covered it, it was now raised slightly in certain areas and was uneven and rather strange looking.

“Champions!” Ludo Bagman announced, appearing out of nowhere, giving all of them quite a fright. Fleur and Krum had already gathered, and Karkaroff and Maxine were nowhere to be seen. “This is the site of your third task! Have any of you figured it out yet?” he asked.

“Maze,” Krum said immediately, and Bagman’s face lit up.

“Correct, Mr Krum. It looks a little sad now, but it will be much more menacing in no time! The hedges are coming along beautifully, and you should all know that the task isn’t just as straightforward as making your way through the maze – you’ll be pitted up against enemies along the way. So prepare in any way you can!” Bagman laughed, and Merlin raised an eyebrow.
Three out of four champions were seventeen and over, and Harry was fourteen, only a few months away from turning fifteen. There was no way they’d have dialled down the enemies for Harry’s sake, and no matter what stories Merlin had heard about the boy, he was worried.

Harry must’ve caught the expression on his face, because he gave Merlin a comforting smile. “Don’t worry, I’ve got highest grades in Defence, I should be fine.” Merlin let out a worried sigh and slung an arm around Harry’s shoulders.

“I know, but it’s my job to worry,” he muttered.

“Me too,” Harry said, and pulled back with a frighteningly observant and stern look that Merlin had seen quite a few times on McGonagall’s face. “Which is why I’m letting you know that Arthur has been absolutely painful to be around recently and whatever the hell is going on with you two I’d really like you to sort it out.”

“Harry-“ Merlin began tiredly, but the younger boy cut him off.

“No, you know what, I don’t care. This sucks, for both of you, and for whatever reasons you’re not telling him whatever you need to, you need to re-think them, because this isn’t getting either of you anywhere. Arthur is a big boy and he can handle himself,” Harry said, punctuating his words with a stern look over the top of his glasses. He’d definitely gotten that from McGonagall, and it was both funny yet reassuring.

“I-“ Merlin began, and stopped when Harry’s glare only got harder. “Fine,” he sighed. Harry’s face then immediately transformed into a grin, and he gave Merlin a hearty slap on the shoulder.

“Great, I’ve got to go catch up with Krum before he leaves. See ya!” Harry said chirpily, and hurried off along the pitch. Merlin narrowed his eyes as he left, that kid was nearly as bad as Cora.

Merlin didn’t even attempt to go back to the library, knowing that any study would have no effect on him while he was in a feeling of such limbo. Harry did have a point though – Arthur could damn well handle himself, he’d been the top DADA student the school had ever had, and Merlin had felt how strong he’d been in their duel. Even though it was still somewhat strange to equate Arthur with magic, he wasn’t surprised that Arthur was stronger than anyone he’d ever met in the field. He always had to be the best and would try his damn hardest to do that. Though the fact that magic had reincarnated Arthur probably had something to do with his affinity for it too.
Merlin sat down in the mostly empty common room, Sushi excitedly chasing a strand of string that a few third years had attached to a stick and were waving about. Merlin’s view had been skewed since he’d arrived at Hogwarts – his whole way of thinking had been. His destiny had been, and always would be Arthur, ever since he’d first stepped foot in Camelot. Although his task here was to restore the balance and make sure that Voldemort never made it out of the cemetery, it was not the most important thing that he had to be doing.

Voldemort returning would send the world into magical free-fall, but Arthur would be here to restore it, just as he had been prophesized to do. Merlin had forgotten that while he’d been here. Arthur was strong, and powerful, and he was the goddamn reborn Once and Future King, whether he remembered it or not.

But he didn’t remember, another part of Merlin whispered. Voldemort undoubtedly had a spy at Hogwarts who had put Harry’s name into the Goblet of Fire and was working to get Harry to that graveyard. Merlin and Harry were both tied for first place, and would both have an equal chance of winning the tournament, and Merlin was not part of Voldemort’s plan. His follower, whoever it was, would have to eliminate Merlin from the competition by any means possible, and now that the whole school knew that Arthur was his most important person…

Merlin just didn’t want to risk Arthur. It didn’t matter how powerful he was in a duel, if he was surprised by a person he trusted, completely unaware…

Well, last time Arthur had trusted an enemy, they’d stabbed him through the chest.

“Fuck!” Merlin swore, loud enough that the third years playing with Sushi were startled and shocked by it. He grimaced apologetically and stalked out of the common room, through the corridors and out onto the grounds. With a deep breath he inhaled the air, smelling of pine and petrichor, and lost himself in the feeling of nature.

One thing the druids knew how to do, was to commune with nature, and they’d taught that to Merlin. He didn’t have to be at a grotto or source of power to be at peace, just simply delved into the magic that twined through everything in nature and fell into the stream. He could distantly sense some sort of commotion over by the Durmstrang ship but ignored it as he sunk to his knees and meditated quietly under one of his favourite trees.

He found out what the commotion had been yesterday when quite a pale Harry called him up to Dumbledore’s office. The password had been changed to cockroach clusters, though the Headmaster was nowhere to be seen. Fawkes, the phoenix, had recently undergone his ‘death’ and was a mostly hairless chick sitting on Dumbledore’s desk. Merlin smiled at the creature and petted him gently with
a finger, and Fawkes let out a quiet, beautiful trill.

“We’re more alike than I thought, huh?” Merlin asked. It seemed they both knew what it was like to die over and over again.

Out of the corner of his eye, something moved, and Merlin turned to see the Sorting Hat twitching slightly on the bookcase where it was perched. Merlin grinned and headed over to it, Fawkes lamenting slightly at his disappearance. The hat went completely still when Merlin approached it, but he just crossed his arms and smirked at it. He had the feeling that the hat was trying not to twitch uncomfortably.

“What do you want, Emrys?” the hat eventually muttered.

“You seem to be nervous,” Merlin replied, and the folds in the fabric that formed the hat’s face moved into a deep frown.

“Why would I be nervous?” the hat said indignantly, and Merlin grinned.

“I dunno, you were pretty nervous when you sorted me. I didn’t know a hat’s voice could be so high pitched and stutter quite so much,” Merlin retorted, and the hat’s mouth twisted.

“You caught me by surprise. I’ve had almost a year to adjust to you being here, and I can say that I won’t be making that mistake again. You’re just another student,” it said, sniffing, and Merlin laughed.

“Good to know your reputation hasn’t been tarnished by me,” Merlin shot back, and walked away before the hat could say anything. The noise that did come out though, seemed to sound suspiciously like the hat was blowing an offended raspberry. Merlin carefully lifted Fawkes back to his perch, and continued to pet him for a few minutes; then the stone gargoyle made a grating noise as it moved out of the way, and Professor Dumbledore entered the office.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting, Mr Emery,” Dumbledore said. He paused for a moment to watch Fawkes preen under Merlin’s ministrations, and then his eyes lit up with that familiar twinkling. “It’s not often that Fawkes takes to a student.”

Merlin shrugged. “I tend to have that effect on animals.”
Dumbledore gestured to the seat in front of him as he sat down at his desk. “Please, have a seat, this shouldn’t take too long.” Merlin did so, and Dumbledore steepled his fingers as he levelled a gaze at Merlin.

“Yesterday, after you and the other three champions were called to the Quidditch pitch, there was an incident involving Harry, Mr Krum and Mr Crouch,” Dumbledore began.

“Barty Crouch? The judge? Hasn’t he been sick?” Merlin asked, thinking of Percy Weasley’s appearance at the Yule Ball over Christmas. “What happened?”

“It appears Mr Crouch has disappeared, but from what Harry tells me, it sounds as though he were fighting off the Imperius Curse. When he wasn’t talking to thin air, he was apparently asking to see me, and mentioned Bertha Jorkins. When Harry came to get me, Mr Krum was knocked out, and Barty had vanished entirely,” Dumbledore said. Merlin’s eyebrows shot to his forehead. Merlin wasn’t sure what Crouch had to do with anything, but it couldn’t be a coincidence that one of the tournament judges had disappeared before the final task. It seemed as though something was coming into motion.

“I called you in to ask if you had seen Mr Crouch recently, or noticed anything about him that may have given some indication as to what has happened,” Dumbledore asked, and Merlin raised an eyebrow.

“Honestly, sir, nothing. I saw him back at the Quidditch world cup before any of this began and he was exactly the same as I’d seen him here – stoic, not easily impressed. His house elf was however found with Harry’s wand, which had been stolen and used to cast the dark mark,” Merlin said, and Dumbledore’s brows furrowed.

“Interesting. His house elf was Winky, who works in the kitchens now, wasn’t it?” Dumbledore asked.

“Yes sir,” Merlin replied. He’d seen Winky in the kitchens a few times – crying, almost drowning herself in alcohol. Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully, and the silence between them was only broken by soft keening noises from Fawkes on his perch.

“Well, I guess this still remains a mystery. Please do come to me if you have any more information, otherwise you are free to leave. I’m sure you have a lot of studying to do,” Dumbledore said with a small smile. Merlin nodded and let himself out of the office, mind whirling. He blindly walked about
as he wondered what it could mean, and then began to swear quite profusely internally when he nearly walked straight into Rita Skeeter.

“Mr Emery! What a surprise!” she gushed, and her acid green quill seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“Fuck,” Merlin swore under his breath. He clenched his fists to stop them from shaking, his mind going back to the article she’d recently written in the Daily Prophet – accusing Hermione of dating both Harry and Krum, both of which were not true, though Merlin had seen the way the Durmstrang boy looked at her. He’d put up with it when Rita Skeeter wrote about him, when she wrote about Harry, but attacking Hagrid and Hermione like she had was damn well despicable.

Her voice was high pitched and grating as she began to ramble about how much she’d wanted to interview Merlin ever since the first task and it’d been ‘surprisingly difficult’ to find him, interspersed with politely derogatory comments about anyone else she mentioned.

“Haven’t you been banned from the Hogwarts ground?” Merlin cut in, remembering something he overheard Hermione say a few days ago.

“Oh, details, details,” Skeeter tittered, waving a hand that was tipped in poison red nails like she was the wicked witch from Sleeping Beauty. Her acid green quill was already scratching along a floating piece of parchment, and Merlin had no idea what it could possibly be writing considering that he was barely saying anything.

“So,” Skeeter began, “I’ve been getting some very juicy stories recently- that Granger girl for one, and that oaf of a Magical Creatures teacher, and now I’ve heard some rather interesting rumours regarding one Arthur Pendragon-“ her voice was cut off immediately as Merlin levelled his wand at her, the tip digging into the hollow of her throat as he fought to keep his hands shaking.

“If you even mention Arthur in anything that you write, I’ll show you just how many other secret talents that I have, and trust me when I say they’re much more dangerous than my abilities as a Dragonlord,” Merlin threatened, his free hand clenched into a fist, trembling violently. Skeeter’s eyes were wide and shocked from behind her glasses, and Merlin fought to keep the swirling gold from his own eyes.

“And if you write anything about me, the same rule applies. Am I clear?” Merlin said, digging the wand in just a little further.
“Yes!” Skeeter squeaked, and Merlin whirled around and stalked away, grabbing the green quill as he did, snapping it in half. Probably not the best way to handle that, he mused on the way back into the castle. Manipulation probably would’ve worked better than threatening.

Cora was anxiously waiting for him back in the common room with Sushi purring in her lap. Her foot was tapping against the floorboards, and she was chewing on the end of a quill as she wrote a letter to Maya. Next to the piece of parchment she was writing on were half-open envelopes from Maya’s previous letters, and though Merlin didn’t read them for their privacy, he did note that Maya had impeccable handwriting. Maybe it was a pureblood Slytherin thing.

“Hey,” Merlin said, slumping down into the chair next to Cora. Sushi immediately launched himself from Cora’s lap to Merlin’s own, and began to paw at Merlin’s lap.

Cora didn’t take her eyes off the parchment. “Hey, where’ve you been?” she asked.

“So apparently Barty Crouch isn’t just sick, he’s been missing for weeks, and showed up yesterday out of the blue talking nonsense like he was actively fighting the Imperius curse, which isn’t fun to think about. Harry saw him and ran to get Dumbledore but by the time he did, Crouch had disappeared and Viktor had been knocked out. Then I ran into Skeeter who’s supposedly banned from the grounds, and I kind of maybe threatened her a bit?" Merlin recounted, the end of his sentence coming out more as an unsure question, and Cora’s eyes widened in shock.

“You threatened Rita Skeeter?” she repeated, and Merlin nodded his head, feeling his face flush slightly. He was beginning to realize how stupid a decision he’d made – she was as stubborn as a mule, and if his threats hadn’t worked she’d probably write an article on him being a dangerous dark wizard or something. Oh, the irony.
“That was both incredibly stupid and awesome!” Cora crowed. “I wish I could’ve been there. I don’t like what might come in the aftermath though.”

“She threatened to write about Arthur,” Merlin admitted quietly, and Cora’s mouth shut with a snap as she looked to him. Merlin didn’t meet her eyes, just watched Sushi run happily about the two of them, barely feeling any pressure on his legs as the kitten marched along it.

“Morgan, you are such an idiot,” Cora sighed.

“I know, I know,” Merlin replied. After a few moments Cora rest her hand on his ankle comfortingly, and he looked up to see her smiling sympathetically.

“You know despite my scheming I really am trying to get you two back together. It hasn’t just been painful for you – it hurts all of us to see you both suffering like this, when we know that the two of you just want to be side-by-side again,” Cora whispered, keeping the conversation out of the ears of the others in the common room. “I don’t care what your reason was for not telling him that you’re ridiculously in love - because I am myself and trust me I know the symptoms – but you need to. Or at least admit to liking him for Merlin’s sake.”

Merlin jolted a little at the use of his real name, still not quite used to it, and looked up to Cora from underneath this lashes sheepishly.

“I would love for it to be that simple, Cora,” Merlin said. Cora made an annoyed sound and threw her hands up in the air.

“Then please do explain to me why it isn’t because I am trying to make my best friend happy and said best friend is refusing to tell me why he’s unhappy, and that’s making all of this very difficult,” Cora exclaimed, slumping back into her chair in defeat.

Merlin sighed. He hated doing this to Cora – she and Cedric were his best friends and only Cedric knew what was going on, but he wouldn’t be coming back until tomorrow.

“I…” Merlin began, and then sighed. He couldn’t quite bring himself to let the lie slip out of his throat and pass his lips, not when Cora looked so miserable. “You know that first morning when we woke up early and I told you that I’d broken my promise to a far away friend?” he asked, and Cora perked up with interest. She looked a little shocked that Merlin seemed to be telling her something.
“Yeah?” she asked. “And then you said that Arthur reminded you of that far away friend.”

“That’s kind of a lie,” Merlin admitted. “And I don’t want to get into the whole thing because it’s confusing enough as it is, but… Arthur doesn’t remind me of that far away friend.”

Cora’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Merlin said, dropping his voice so low that nobody outside their table would be able to hear him, “that Arthur is that far away friend. I promised him that I’d always be by his side, and then I came here, and he went and fucking forgot me entirely.”

Cora’s eyebrows shot straight up, and her eyes opened so large that Merlin could see the whites on all sides of her iris.

“You mean you were, like, childhood friends?” she asked, and Merlin bit his lip.

“Not entirely. As I said, it’s complicated,” he replied.

“Then un-complicateit,” Cora insisted, leaning forward eagerly like a starved animal who’d found an oasis in the desert. Merlin felt slightly bad at keeping the information she so desperately wanted from her.

“We, uh… we knew each other for ten years,” Merlin admitted, and Cora’s mouth dropped open slightly at the admission. “And he doesn’t remember a goddamn minute of it, or me, and it hurts to be around him, but what d’you think he’d say if I told him? He’d think I was fucking crazy, and it’s better for him to hate me than for him to think I’m crazy for having loved him for the majority of my life.”

Cora was quiet for a minute, letting the shock of his words sink in, before she slid off her chair and pulled Merlin into a hug.

“Oh Morgan, I’m so sorry,” she whispered into his hair, and Merlin hugged her back, digging his fingers into the back of her clothes, bunching them up in his fists as he buried his face into her neck. Sushi was caught in the space between them, pawing at Merlin’s chest and meowing concernedly.
Cora made gentle noises as she ran a hand through his hair, and Merlin could feel the back of his throat burn as tears welled up in his eyes.

God, what had he done to deserve someone like Cora? And what had he done to deserve Arthur forgetting who he was?

He pressed his lips tight together as he felt his shoulders start to shake, and the tears began to roll down his face. Cora’s hand came to the back of his neck and began to rub gently as Merlin tried to fight his sobs, knowing that they were in the middle of the fucking common room. Cora seemed to be able to read his mind, and gently pulled him up, Sushi sliding to the ground, and led him up to his dorm room, the tiny kitten following behind.

Merlin let out a dry, painful sob as soon as the door shut behind them, and Cora bundled him up on his impossibly soft bed, wrapping her arms around him as Merlin cried into her chest, letting it all out.

Fuck, the hole in his chest ached at the thought of Arthur. Nearly a thousand years he’d walked the earth and the pain hadn’t lessened at all, it’d only grown stronger, and now having Arthur so close but out of each, and no hope of Arthur remembering who he was…

Merlin cried until his throat hurt too much to continue, and through it all Cora lay with him, a hand rubbing up his back and in his hair, until he had exhausted himself enough to fall asleep. She woke him up just once, enough to get some food in him that she’d brought from the hall for dinner, before he fell asleep again, not able to find enough energy in himself to stay awake.

He was still exhausted the next morning when he was woken up by Cora’s loud and excited screaming, though more from oversleeping than anything else. Merlin rubbed his eyes and sat up; Cora was gushing happily over the mounds of chocolate Easter eggs she had in her arms, along with what seemed to be half of Honeydukes dumped onto Merlin’s bed.

“Wake up, sleepyhead, we’ve got chocolate to eat and amnesiacs to kiss!” she announced, and Merlin raised an eyebrow.

“Amnesiacs to kiss?” he questioned, and Cora rolled her eyes.

“Well duh. Today you are going to snog the life out of Arthur Pendragon,” she said matter-of-factly, and Merlin’s heart stopped beating for a whole second as he tried to catch up with her words.
“Uh… I am?” he asked.

“Yes, but that’s not important, the important thing is all this chocolate!” Cora said, ripping open a chocolate frog.

“Have you even had breakfast yet?” Merlin asked.

“This is breakfast!” Cora replied with a grin. Merlin looked down to the chocolate that covered the end of his bed and was a little grossed out by how much there was.

“Okay well I have to eat proper food before I make myself sick with chocolate,” Merlin said, hauling himself out of bed. He headed into the bathroom and splashed some water on his face, brushed his teeth and changed into clothes that he hadn’t slept in but kept the red neckerchief. Cora dragged him down to the Great Hall where other students were excitedly drizzling chocolate sauce over their pancakes, drinking hot chocolate and screeching when their owls delivered large packages of sweets.

“I didn’t know so many people liked chocolate this much,” Merlin said in shock. “I thought you were just a freak,” he teased. Cora jabbed him in the side before she too began to slather her pancakes with a frankly disgusting amount of chocolate sauce.

Across at the Gryffindor table, Harry and Ron were happily opening packages that Hedwig and Errol had delivered, while Hermione looked distraught at the tiny mini egg she held between two fingers.

“Oh dear,” Cora sighed, looking over at them too. “Looks like Mrs Weasley reads the Daily Prophet.”

“How?” Merlin asked.

“Y’know, the whole ‘Hermione leading on both Harry and Krum’ thing?” Cora said, tone slow and mocking at the fact that Merlin had forgot. Merlin looked back over to Hermione, who was clutching a letter alongside the tiny Easter egg, and Ron and Harry looked a little guilty.

Feeling sympathetic, Merlin gathered a few chocolates of his own to take over to Hermione, but was
stopped by Cora who grabbed his wrist in a death grip.

“Don’t you dare give her that,” she said, taking a small praline chocolate from Merlin’s arms, one shaped like a seashell. “That is the best chocolate ever and I am looking forward to your reaction.” Merlin rolled his eyes good-naturedly and headed over to the Gryffindor table, and dumped all of it in front of Hermione, who jumped at the surprise.

“You guys want some? I got way too much, and I don’t even have half of Cora’s stash,” he said, jabbing a thumb over to Cora, who was still obsessing over the small seashell chocolate.

“Sure!” Ron said happily, and Hermione looked up with a small smile and suspicious eyes, like she knew exactly what Merlin was doing. Merlin gave them a wink and headed back to the Hufflepuff table, but crossed Cora halfway there. He frowned and watched her head over to the Gryffindor table, to Arthur at the far end, and hand him one of the small seashell chocolates. She muttered something quiet to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Merlin could barely read Arthur’s face from so far away, but from the slump of his shoulders and the twist of his mouth, Merlin was pretty sure Cora had said something about him. He headed back to the Hufflepuff table and sat down, spooning some scrambled eggs into his mouth, looking at the small seashell chocolate. He’d never seen it before, but Cora being the chocolate connoisseur was probably right when she said it would be the best chocolate he’d ever eat.

Cora headed back to the table with a spring in her step and a strange grin on her face, and Merlin’s suspicions came flooding back. Cora, however, said nothing as she consumed her pancakes with gusto, and Merlin pet Gaius on the head as he delivered the chocolate from Cedric.

Cora didn’t make a noise until Merlin had finished his breakfast, when she looked over at him excitedly.

“Try it!” she insisted, pointing to the small seashell chocolate. Merlin picked it up between his thumb and forefinger with narrowed eyes.

“Is it really as good as you say it is?” he asked.

“The best! Please Morgan, for me?” Cora begged, eyelashes fluttering. Merlin gave an overdramatic sigh but took a bite of the chocolate anyway. Immediately the taste of hazelnut flooded his mouth, and Merlin legitimately had to close his eyes as he enjoyed the taste, the soft chocolate pretty much
melting in his mouth. He heard Cora giggle.

“I told you, right?” she teased.

“One hundred percent correct, Cora,” he replied, once he’d finished the mouthful. He quickly consumed the rest of the tiny chocolate, Cora watching with an insufferably smug grin on her face.

Cora leaned in towards Merlin like she had a secret to reveal. “I’ve got more up in my dorm room,” she whispered.

“You’d share them with me?” Merlin asked.

“I can always buy more,” she said with a casual wave of her hand. The two of them left the Great Hall, and they were halfway to the common room when Merlin stumbled back as a sudden wave of dizziness hit him.

“Morgan?” Cora asked, and Merlin had to shut his eyes and lean against the wall, legs dangerously close to giving out under him under the sudden onslaught of dizziness and fatigue.

“I…” Merlin managed to stutter, before his legs collapsed under him and he fell to the stone floor, hand to his forehead as though he could draw the dizziness out. He wrenched open his eyes to see his vision spotty and bright, and Merlin knew the signs of passing out, and immediately wondered if he’d been poisoned. He couldn’t keep upright any longer and fell to the cold stone, and peered up at Cora.

She was grinning.

“Nighty-night, Morgan,” she said happily.

Merlin didn’t have any time to formulate a response before he was out like a light.

He wasn’t sure what time it was when he woke up, or where he was, but the floor was cold and unforgiving underneath him. Merlin struggled out of the darkness, limbs barely responsive and brain slow and sluggish as he held himself up on his elbows, looking around. The room was dark and
made of stone, and a few dim torches were flickering on the walls that reminded him of the dungeons, and strangely like Camelot.

On the other side of the room, similarly passed out, was Arthur Pendragon.

Cora had given him a seashell chocolate too.

Confused, concerned and a little bit scared, Merlin waited for his heart to stop thundering in his chest before he struggled to his feet. There didn’t seem to be any door, and there was a pile of colourful, soft cushions piled into a corner. He raised an eyebrow and headed towards it, and saw a piece of parchment folded up on the very top.

With shaking hands and weak muscles, Merlin unfolded the parchment to reveal Cora’s messy handwriting.

Morgan,

You’re probably wondering what you’re doing here and why I’ve done what I have. You’re also probably wondering how I managed to sneak some knockout potion into that chocolate, considering how useless I am at potions.

I’ve had a co-conspirator. Before you, Cedric was the best in the class, and he gladly made me a knockout potion while he’d been at home, and sent it to me the day before Easter while you were in Dumbledore’s office.

You were so easy to fool, Emery.

There’s no door, and no way out – you’re in the Room of Requirement, and I made sure that there was only one way that you could escape from the room.

You have to kiss Arthur Pendragon, and you have to damn well mean it. There’s still five more days until term begins, so none of the teachers are coming to rescue you.

Have fun, boys!

Love, your well intentioned but fed up best friend,

Cora

P.S. Also Cedric.

Merlin’s heart stopped beating double time, and soon he couldn’t help but let the laughter bubble out of him. Fuck, for a few moments he’d honestly thought that Cora had somehow been Voldemort’s insider. He wasn’t surprised that Cedric had teamed up with her either, now that they both knew the
reason for Merlin and Arthur’s fight.

Arthur…

Merlin looked across the room to see that the torches flared up a little, and the room got brighter as Arthur made a soft little noise as he fought his way back to consciousness. Merlin tucked the parchment into a pocket in his jeans and dragged a few of the comfortable cushions over, one for him to sit on and another for Arthur when he woke up.

Merlin leaned against the wall, arms resting on his knees, as he waited for Arthur to regain consciousness.

This was gonna be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

When I asked ya'll how you thought Cora was gonna get them back together, I don't think any of you predicted that she'd pretty much roofie them and lock them in the Room of Requirement, but then again that's a pretty outrageous plan that only she'd be capable of.

Also, I love Tanith the badass ballerina.

And yes, Merlin's confrontation with Rita Skeeter is probably going to have consequences, but he's got more important stuff to worry about atm!

Also sorry if there are any timeline issues, it's been a while since I've read GoF and the book is currently at my grandma's house, so I can't check if I'm getting everything right.
The cushions were rather soft, and the torches’ heat filled the room enough to keep the chill of the stones from sliding their frigid fingers into Merlin’s bones, but that didn’t mean that he was comfortable.

Honestly, he knew that Cora (and Cedric, apparently) had good, well-meaning intentions; even if it did mean that she’d pretty much roofied them with a knockout potion-laced Belgian chocolate. He knew that everyone, including himself, had been miserable at the gaping abyss that had formed between him and Arthur, but Merlin really wished she hadn’t interfered.

On the one hand, he knew there was a very real threat at Hogwarts – a currently unidentified, intelligent and murderous threat that could be anyone Merlin saw, passing anonymously through the halls. A threat that seemed to be intent on, for whatever reason, getting Harry into the Triwizard Tournament, a competition that had claimed the lives of many wixen[1] much older and more experienced than Harry, in some strange effort to kill him. Logically, they’d have to try and get rid of the other contestants, and now everyone knew that the best way to get to Merlin was through Arthur. But if, somehow, they found out that Arthur was a reincarnated king…

Merlin couldn’t let Arthur be put in the path of danger because of him, and that could possibly interest this threat more than killing Harry Potter.

On the other hand, another part of his brain shouted that this reasoning was completely stupid, idiotic and ridiculous. Either way, this threat would probably use Arthur against him, it would be a pretty large and near fucking impossible leap to conclude that Arthur was actually King Arthur, and Arthur had been in more danger for his entire lifetime in Camelot than he was now. That, and Arthur was currently the best duellist that Hogwarts had seen in approximately fifty years – better than Albus Dumbledore had been at this age. He could defend himself.

_I know he can defend himself_, Merlin argued in his head. _But if I distance myself from him – the whole school has seen this gap between us forming – then there’s a chance he won’t be used against me, and I can sort this all out afterwards._
Then another voice piped up in his head, one that sounded strangely like Gaius. You’ve always been two sides of the same coin, and nothing good has ever come of you keeping secrets, Merlin. You’ve always worked best as a team.

Merlin pondered this, but no matter how he tried to argue against it, he knew that in the end, the Gaius in his head was right. Merlin remembered the centuries he’d sat on his front porch at his small house on the edge of Avalon Lake, looking out over the water, a cup of tea nestled in his hands, regretting the way that Arthur had found out that he had magic. He’d been dying, which was Merlin’s fault, and for nearly two full days he’d hated Merlin right down to the bones.

By the time Arthur had accepted who Merlin was – all of him – he’d been dying in his arms, skin cold and greying, begging for Merlin to hold him.

And it was something that had haunted Merlin ever since, the regret gnawing away at him, that he’d known Arthur for ten years and he’d only known who he was for two days, and only accepted that for an hour at the most.

Now, looking across the expanse of the Camelot-esque chamber, the golden strands of Arthur’s hair shone in the flickering torchlight, and Merlin knew that this moment, right here, was his chance to relieve himself of the regret that he’d held for nearly a millennium. Not many people got an opportunity to meet their loved ones again after they’d died.

It was quite possible that Arthur was going to think that Merlin was absolutely mental, that he would never regain his memories, that Merlin would have to build new ones while keeping the ten years of Camelot – the best years of his life – hidden in his ribcage, preserved like mosquitos in amber, for the rest of their lives.

But at least, Merlin thought, they could be together.

Arthur made a small sound on the other side of the room from where he was splayed out on his chest, head pillowed on his arms, and Merlin knew from years of waking up an irritable king that he was slowly clawing his way back to consciousness, and unless Merlin intervened, he’d be about ten minutes from waking.

Merlin certainly wanted to have all the time he could to think, and kept quiet.
Eventually Arthur stirred and groaned low in his throat, fingertips sliding across the rough surface of the stone as he instinctively grasped the ground below him. Merlin recognized the motion from back in Camelot, when Arthur would grasp the sheets in an effort to ground himself to his bed, and to sleep.

Arthur’s head flopped off from his arms onto the stone floor, and Merlin winced at the small pained sound Arthur let out, and resisted the urge to get up and place the nearby pillow under Arthur’s head. For this conversation he definitely wanted to keep his distance. It was another few minutes before the effects of the knockout potion wore off and Arthur raised his head, eyes narrowed, to peer around him.

“What the hell?” he muttered, before hauling himself, with quite a bit of groaning and complaining, to a sitting position. He rubbed his eyes, grabbed the pillow that Merlin had placed near him, and then finally seemed to notice that he wasn’t alone in the room.

“Oh…” the Once and Future King let out quite eloquently, and Merlin’s lips twitched up into a smirk.

“Welcome to the torture chamber of Cora Evangeline Dallas,” Merlin announced. Arthur raised an eyebrow and shuffled back until he hit the stone, and arranged himself opposite to Merlin, with his knees up and forearms resting on them, still blinking the sleep out of his eyes.

“Her middle name is Evangeline?” Arthur asked.

Merlin shrugged. “I think so, I saw it scribbled on one of her essay parchments, but I could be wrong.” Arthur made a non-committal hum at that, and the room fell into uneasy silence. Whatever sort of normalcy had settled over the room while Arthur was waking up had evaporated, and Merlin sighed heavily. Arthur said nothing, but Merlin could see his eyes roaming the walls, looking for a door or way out.

“No way out, I’m afraid,” Merlin piped up. “Well, there is one, but I’m pretty sure the incident with the broom closet earlier pretty much explains it. This is just a bit larger and slightly more comfortable than a closet.”

Arthur gave Merlin a flat look, and said nothing.

Merlin chewed his lip, staring at Arthur, who was stubbornly looking to a point to Merlin’s right,
eyes not even flickering in his direction.

“There’s five days until term starts,” Arthur then said after a few minutes of silence. “I take it the room isn’t just going to let us out if we begin to starve.”

“Probably not,” Merlin guessed. Cora’s note hadn’t exactly been clear on what they’d do for food aside from a small collection of crushed and slightly melted chocolate inside one of Merlin’s pockets in his jacket. The room then descended into silence, and Merlin knew that Arthur could keep it up – not just by how he’d remained stubbornly silent for four hours in that god-awful broom cupboard, but because he knew Arthur, and knew that once he set his mind to something, he would never, ever, give in or up.

And that was the problem, wasn’t it? Merlin knew Arthur, but he didn’t know him back. Would it even be possible for Arthur to remember? Magic was unpredictable, and even after hundreds of years, Merlin still couldn’t say that he knew the extent of what it was capable of or how sentient it was.

What he did know, was that magic had never failed him, just as he had never failed it, because they were one and the same.

“Arthur…” Merlin said quietly, the word only made audible by the slight echo around the chamber it made. It took a few seconds of hesitation before Arthur pulled his eyes from his spot on the wall to look at Merlin. The expression on his face made Merlin’s pulse skyrocket for a few seconds – it was a mirror image of how Arthur had looked at him in his dream: disappointment, anger and frustration, all wrapped into one.

“I lied to you, the night after the second task. I shouldn’t have, but I did, because I was terrified of what would happen if I told you the truth. That’s never really worked out for me well in the past,” Merlin began softly.

“Yeah? And how well has lying worked out for you?” Arthur shot back, unknowingly striking Merlin deep in the heart, and Merlin physically flinched from the verbal blow.

“Historically, much worse,” he replied. The room fell into silence as Arthur waited, and Merlin thought up what he wanted to say. He right now had the chance to make right the biggest mistake of his life, one that he’d been kicking himself for for centuries, and one that he’d always promised he’d fix as soon as he was able. Look how well he’d done that.
He’d been so distracted here – the fate of the balance of the world on the verge of tipping so far that it would be nigh unsalvageable, a balance that too had thrown off Merlin from his own fate. He’d been off kilter ever since he’d arrived, his perception shifted along with the swaying balancing act of reality, and he’d forgotten what his real destiny was. Merlin’s fate was Arthur Pendragon, and the world could damn well wait it’s turn.

Merlin took a deep breath to steel himself. “I lied for quite a few reasons. It’s taken me a while to realize that they’re not reasons, but excuses, for not telling you the truth. Mainly because I was scared, both of what you would think and how you would react. Also because there’s a lot about me that you don’t know, and I can’t bring myself to be with you if you don’t know it.”

“So tell me,” Arthur replied immediately.

“It’s not that simple,” Merlin huffed self-deprecatingly. “You’d think I was mental if I told you.”

“You won’t know that until you tell me,” Arthur said with a raised eyebrow. Merlin took another deep breath, focusing on the way his lungs inhaled and exhaled.

“Well the first thing you need to know about me, I guess, is that you actually know me,” Merlin said. Arthur raised his eyebrows in a distinctly unimpressed way that reminded Merlin uncannily of Gaius, and realized what he’d said. “No, I mean… you knew me before I came to Hogwarts.”

At this, Arthur frowned. “You mean I’ve met you somewhere before? Was it at the World Cup?”

“No,” Merlin groaned. “I… this is hard to say. You’ve known me for a very long time, and you can’t remember it, and it’s painful to be around you, and with you, because while you’re the same person that you’ve always been, you aren’t completely the person I love.”

This shocked Arthur into silence, and his mouth opened and closed a few times on aborted sentences, making him look a little like a fish.

“You love me?” Arthur then managed to stutter out. “I realize that’s probably not what I should’ve taken away from that, but that’s all I can really focus on right now.” Merlin huffed a small laugh.

“That’s the reason I was so terrified to tell you the truth. You were the one who was taken for me, not Cedric, and not Cora, because I’m not in love with them. And I didn’t want to tell you that,
because you’re not in love with me, because you don’t *remember* me, and that hurts more than I could ever put into words,” Merlin replied in a huge rush.

“Morgan…” Arthur whispered, and the dagger in Merlin’s heart drove in a little further. *He doesn’t even remember my name.*

Merlin hauled himself to his feet, pain and determination equally thrumming through his bloodstream as he began to pace, chewing on the inside of his mouth, thinking of how the rest of this conversation was going to go down.

“Okay… what do you mean when you say I don’t remember you?” Arthur asked, also pulling himself to his feet, leaning on the wall slightly as he swayed from the potion still in his system.

Merlin paused in his pacing, and looked to Arthur. “You remember the night of the Yule Ball when we’d both had too much firewhisky and I was waxing poetic about your arse?”

Arthur laughed. “How could I forget?”

“Do you remember when you told me that you felt like you’d known me longer than a few months? That it felt like you’d known me for years and you couldn’t quite explain why you felt like that?” Merlin asked, and Arthur frowned.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“Do you still feel like that?” Merlin asked, pausing in his pacing to look at Arthur.

“I… kind of,” Arthur replied, forehead creasing with confusion and frustration.

“You’ve known me for ten years, Arthur. Ten years that you’ve forgotten, and I’ve been in love with you for the majority of my life, and I can barely remember a time that I didn’t love you, and you *don’t even remember me.* Do you understand how hard that is? To be around the person that you’d give your life for only for them to stare blankly back at you, to know that if you tried to explain it to them they’d think you were crazy?” Merlin ranted, not even noticing his voice echoing throughout the chamber.
Arthur stood rooted to the spot, mouth opening and closing, trying to process the words that Merlin was saying, but it looked like he wasn’t quite managing it. Merlin sighed and resisted to urge to smack his head against the brick wall repeatedly.

“This isn’t exactly how I imagined the conversation about this would go,” Merlin muttered. “Probably should’ve slowly broken the news to you. That would’ve been a good idea. And now you probably think that I’m definitely crazy, and you’re stuck inside this bare-arse room with a madman, because one of my supposed best friends drugged us and locked us in here, and even though I get that she is trying to make things better, I’m pretty sure the phrase ‘the road to Hell is paved with good intentions’ still applies in the twentieth century!” Merlin ranted. He then took a moment to pause, collect himself, and run a hand down his face in frustration.

He looked over to Arthur, who was still frozen in place with a frown that deepened every second with his mouth hanging open, and Merlin retreated back to where he was, sliding down onto the floor.

“I’m going to let you process and come to some sort of conclusion on your own before I keep going,” Merlin said quietly. Arthur gave a vague nod, but didn’t move from where he stood.

Merlin cracked his neck, wincing at the stiffness of his muscles and the fog that hadn’t quite shook itself from his brain. It’d been a while since he’d been forcibly knocked out or drugged – not many people could say that – and his recovery time had slowed down considerably. How many times had something like this happened to him in Camelot? Spirits, the number of times he’d gotten into messes involving strange potions probably outnumbered his countable phalanges.

Being at Hogwarts seemed to be dragging out a lot of memories Merlin had otherwise forgotten about. Well, not forgotten, per se, he didn’t think he could ever forget anything from his time at Camelot; circumstances were just dusting off the cobwebs from the back of his mind and dragging certain things back into the light.

He made a mental note to get revenge on Cora somehow for literally drugging the two of them. She had good intentions, and without her interference the two of them probably wouldn’t be having this long-needed conversation, along with Merlin getting his perspective back, but it was a pretty shitty thing to do. He didn’t want to go too hard on her though, it wasn’t her fault that he’d had some crappy things associated with being knocked out, considering most people wouldn’t have been able to say that something like this had happened to them before.

Arthur shifted slightly, drawing Merlin’s attention, before he moved back to his pillow and sat down opposite Merlin again, biting his lower lip. It was an unconscious habit Arthur had that let Merlin know that he was seriously considering something – which was probably a good thing.
“So . . .” Arthur started after a few more moments of silence. “We’ve apparently known each other for ten years, I’ve gone and forgotten you somehow, and this explains entirely your shitty actions as of late?”

Merlin laughed bitterly. “Not entirely, Arthur. The other half of this equation is that we – meaning myself and the majority of the professors here – believe that Harry’s name was put into the Goblet of Fire by someone who wants to kill him, probably working for Voldemort, considering that he’s been surprisingly active for a dead guy, and it makes sense that they’ll want to get rid of the other champions through whatever means they can in order to get to Harry. It was pretty clear from the second task that the best way to get to me is through you – so distancing myself from you was a good, logical move on my part. At least that’s what I’ve tried to convince myself with the last few weeks so I could sleep at night.”

At this news, Arthur’s eyes widened. “Someone’s trying to kill Harry?”

“Is that not a common occurrence?” Merlin replied. “From what I hear, last year it was Sirius Black, and the two before that it was Voldemort himself. Moody suggested that this whole fiasco was a ploy to kill Harry, considering how many people have died in this tournament, and while some people have brushed it off as his paranoia, Dumbledore and McGonagall seem to be taking him seriously.”

“And you’re worried that someone would try to get rid of the other champions? For what?” Arthur asked. Merlin shrugged.

“They’d have to make it look like an accident, not outright murder, because that’d cause an uproar. The last task is a maze – Harry and I are tied for points, and with four of us in the maze, we all have a somewhat equal chance of getting to the cup first. If something, or someone, in that maze is going to try and kill Harry, they’ll have to get rid of the three of us in order to make sure that it’s Harry in the end,” Merlin explained. He remembered the long nights he’d spent lying in bed, branches spread out before him, ever since Moody had first implied that this was a murder attempt, as to how it could be pulled off. It wasn’t until the third task was revealed that everything seemed to start making sense, and Merlin had developed quite the brain for critical thinking in the last few centuries.

“You know that I can defend myself, right?” Arthur then piped up. “I mean, not to brag, but I am the best duellist Hogwarts has seen for a while.”

“I know,” Merlin replied with a smile. “That’s what the other half of my brain has been telling me.”
Arthur was quiet for a few moments, biting his lower lip. “If you’re so sure that someone’s going to attempt to murder Harry in the final task, why haven’t you gone to Professor Dumbledore about it?”

“Because I still don’t see how they’re going to achieve it,” Merlin said. “I mean the first task was dangerous enough, a live dragon, but it would’ve been difficult for anyone to make murder by dragon look like an accident. It would’ve been much easier to pull off in the second task, where it was all underwater and nobody had eyes on Harry, but he pulled through that top of the leader board. So it’s got to be the third task, but the Quidditch pitch can fit the whole population of the school along with all of the professors and then some, it’s fully supervised and everyone’s in a position to be able to watch the whole thing unfold. I don’t understand how anyone can pull it off.”

“You know, the simple explanation is that it could all just be Moody’s paranoia,” Arthur retorted with a raised brow.

“That doesn’t explain Harry’s name being put into the Goblet without anyone knowing who did it, or why Barty Crouch was suddenly found babbling away like he’d been put under the Imperius Curse, or why the Dark Mark was shot into the sky for the first time in thirteen years,” Merlin replied with a sigh. “Something’s definitely going on, but even I can’t figure it out.”

“Even you? Right – I’m supposed to know who you are outside of meeting you at Hogwarts,” Arthur said, swinging the conversation abruptly back on track so fast it nearly gave Merlin whiplash when he’d had just started to enjoy the stalling.

“I won’t be offended if you think that I’m crazy,” Merlin replied with a shrug. *Just heartbroken.*

“I’m not saying it’s impossible that a memory charm hasn’t been used on me,” Arthur said. “It’s possible that if someone’s good at it, they can remove just a single thing from someone’s memory while keeping everything intact, though it can leave holes, like memories of a one-sided conversation without anyone there, empty chairs and so on.

“But I’ve got none of that – a perfectly normal childhood before coming to Hogwarts, if being born with a king’s name and adopted into a relatively boring family can be considered normal. I’ve got no holes, no empty spaces, no memories of ghosts, and if I knew you for ten years, that means it would’ve been my entire childhood up until Hogwarts,” Arthur argued. The tilt to his lip said that he wanted to believe what Merlin was saying, and something inside of him said that it felt right, but his mind just couldn’t create the connections to his memories and his instincts.

Merlin sighed. “This is where it gets really crazy.”
“Crazier than apparently having you erased from ten years of my memory?” Arthur asked, tone incredulous. “I **really** like you Morgan, you’ve managed to become one of the best friends I’ve ever had within months, you’re an incredible duellist and an amazing person, and I would definitely not say to not dating you, but you’re right when you say this sounds a little far-fetched.”

“I know,” Merlin breathed out painfully. “I know.”

“And, Merlin’s beard,” Arthur cursed, “I thought this was just because you were too afraid to admit that you liked me!” Merlin wasn’t too sure whether he should focus on the fact that Arthur thought he was too much of a weenie to say he had a crush on him or the fact that his now non-existent beard had become a popular curse that he’d heard way too many times. Along with insinuations about his pants, and surprisingly, his balls.

“Dammit, Arthur, I know!” Merlin shot back. “You know me well enough to know that I wouldn’t come up with weird shit like this off the top of my head if I didn’t mean it! I fully recognize that this sounds absolutely batshit cart-me-off insane, even in a world where magic is used on a daily basis!”

“Which is why I’m having such a difficult time with this,” Arthur replied, dropping the volume. “Because logically I know that what you’re saying hasn’t happened, yet I *want* to believe you, and on some level I do.” This gave Merlin pause.

“You do?” he asked, and Arthur smiled, just a twitch of his lip.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I don’t think you’re crazy, and considering how these past few weeks have gone by, I thought there was more to it than you just not wanting to admit you had a crush on me despite, using your words, ‘waxing poetic about my arse’. This whole thing would actually make a lot of sense if it *made any sense.*”

Merlin stilled for a few moments. On some level Arthur trusted him enough to believe him, despite the fact that anyone else hearing this would probably be slamming on the walls begging to be let out by this point. He remembered the look of recognition that had sparked in Arthur’s eyes for just a second the first time they’d touched. Merlin at least had something to work with.

Merlin, his whole life, had always trusted in magic. Even when he hadn’t trusted in himself, the few times he hadn’t trusted Arthur, even when he had *nothing* and he was spinning and confused in a void that didn’t have an up or down and he didn’t know what to do, he could always trust in the magic around him, and inside him.
There was one thing that he’d forgotten, that he’d been taking for granted.

He was magic.

Merlin was Magic Incarnate, the amalgamation of a world tipped so far off balance that it could only restore itself in a last ditch effort by taking all that lost magic energy and place it into the burning, lightning heart of a single person.

Merlin was Magic Incarnate, he was Emrys, and if he wanted magic to do something for him, all he had to do was make it happen.

Merlin surged to his feet, feeling magic coursing within him, tendrils of energy weaving restlessly under his skin, a storm raging in his ribcage, permeating every single molecule that hung in the air between him and Arthur. He felt the telltale sensation of the golden glow in his eyes, and Arthur shot to his feet, looking both apprehensive and slightly awestruck.

“Morgan…?” Arthur asked quietly.

“Do you trust me?” Merlin asked, taking a step towards Arthur.

“I…” Arthur managed to get out, but couldn’t say any more than that.

“Can you trust me for just a few seconds, Arthur? Long enough for me to prove myself?” Merlin asked, walking until he was only a foot away from Arthur, close enough for the magic surrounding him like a whirlwind to make Arthur’s hair lift and pick up in the breeze it generated, to touch his skin like gentle, incandescent fingertips, and something lit up within Arthur’s gaze. Not recognition, but something close to it.

“…Yes,” Arthur admitted, and Merlin smiled gently at him, and took another step forward until there was barely any space between them for his magic to move.

“I’m going to kiss you. Is that okay?” Merlin asked, and Arthur’s eyes darted down to his lips, and then up to his glowing eyes. Arthur took a deep breath and nodded.
Then Merlin gently took Arthur’s face in his hands, watched his blue eyes flutter shut, pulled the whirlwind around him inside himself, and breathed it out through Arthur’s lips. The touch of their lips to each other felt like something in the universe settling into place, like the whole of reality had been slightly out of alignment until that moment, and Merlin finally knew what it felt like to come home. Romance novels had nothing on a moment that had been building up for centuries as a pendulum somewhere in Merlin’s sixth sense dropped down from where it had been poised, and Arthur gripped his biceps to return the kiss.

Merlin wasn’t sure what was more important for him to be concentrating on – the kiss that he’d dreamed about for hundreds of years, or the Old Magic that he was pouring into Arthur as it streamed formless down his throat, through his skin, into his very being towards the bright centre of him as Merlin sent only one thing with the magic – the will to remember.

The will to unlock the memories that Merlin was sure were hidden somewhere, to open up and reveal the Once and Future King and merge him with the idiotic Gryffindor that he’d grown to love just as much as his old best friend. He sent the magic through every crevice he could find, trusting in his instincts and the magic that was just as much a part of him as the world around them.

Merlin wanted to pull the magic from the stars, from the vacuum of space and direct it all into the person he held in his arms if he could just remember, to take his destiny by the reigns and rise up who he was always supposed to be.

He was once the king, and now it was time to be the future king.

The magic dissipated like dust on the wind, and eventually all Merlin could feel was Arthur’s body against his, his soft golden hair that tickled Merlin’s fingers, and the press of their lips together, parted slightly, just enough to be almost unbearably intimate. Merlin then pulled away, Arthur’s fingers tightening on his biceps, and he closely watched Arthur’s face. His eyes were shut, he was breathing heavily, and outwardly nothing had changed, but Merlin could feel the Old Magic swirling beneath his skin like milk in tea.

A few seconds of silence passed, and Merlin tried not to doubt in himself.

“Merlin…” Arthur cursed, and Merlin let out a forced laugh.

“That bad, huh?” he replied, heart beginning to sink in his chest. Fuck, what had he done wrong? Was Arthur not receptive to Old Magic? Was he going to have to remember some other way – did he have to take him back to Avalon Lake? His mind spun, branches spreading out before him,
wondering what the hell he’d have to do when-

“No, that’s your name,” Arthur said quietly, almost so inaudibly that Merlin couldn’t hear it, and his eyes snapped up from where they’d met the floor.

“What?” Merlin asked, feeling like the air had been punched out of him.

“I…” Arthur muttered, and then he opened his eyes. Gold was swirling in the place of aquamarine blue. “I don’t know how, but I know your name is Merlin, not Morgan.”

The gold then faded from his eyes, the blue returning, and Arthur frowned in confusion. He opened his mouth to speak, but the gold returned, and Arthur’s eyes shot wide open and unseeing and he gripped Merlin so tight he thought he’d find bruises in the shape of Arthur’s hands on his biceps the next day.

“You… you held me in your arms,” Arthur muttered, eyes moving like he was watching a scene play out before him. “There was a cold burning in my chest as it stole the life out of me and you held me in your arms as I died.”

Merlin’s mouth went dry at Arthur’s words.

“Do you remember why that happened?” Merlin asked.

“…There was a fight,” Arthur said, his vision starting to focus on Merlin and not whatever he was remembering. “A huge battle, you weren’t there and then you were but… he stabbed me.”

“Who did?” Merlin asked, trying to jog Arthur’s memory.

“M… Mordred,” Arthur replied, brow furrowing. “He betrayed me. He went to Morgana… but I killed him too, and you… you killed Morgana. I remember you taking me to the lake, watching you do magic for the first time, realizing that you’d been using it all those years to save me, to save Camelot. Using it to kill people… using it to cover up our tracks, to call a dragon…”

Arthur’s legs gave out, and Merlin caught him and lowered them both to the floor until Arthur lay in
his lap, the exact position he’d been in when he’d been dying in Merlin’s arms, and the thought made bile rise up in his throat.

But Arthur wasn’t dying. He was remembering.

“How many times did you save my life, Merlin?” Arthur asked, and Merlin huffed a laugh.

“I think I managed to lose count well within the first year of knowing you,” Merlin replied. “I mean, I didn’t do all of the work, but I did quite a bit of it. You really should be thanking me.”

Arthur laughed, his eyes still swirling golden.

“Kiss me again,” Arthur then asked, and Merlin’s eyebrows shot into his hairline. “You heard me, Merlin, don’t make me ask again.”

With another laugh, Merlin bent down and pressed his lips to Arthur’s, wrapped his arms around him and fell into the sensation, not wanting to ever let go, to stay in the moment forever. Arthur managed to get up to his knees, not separating from Merlin even a millimetre, and cupped Merlin’s jaw, while Merlin tightened his own arms around Arthur’s waist.

Arthur finally pulled away with Merlin’s lower lip between his teeth, his own lips red and swollen, and slightly out of breath.

“I know what Guinevere would’ve said to that,” Arthur murmured into the space between them, and Merlin raised a brow.

“What?” he asked.

“Finally,” Arthur replied, and Merlin let out a bright, clear laugh. “I’m pretty sure she knew we were in love before we knew.”

“Did we even know at all?” Merlin asked, ignoring the stupid thumping his heart did at Arthur’s confession. “I mean, I didn’t really realize it until a few years after you…”
“Died?” Arthur supplied helpfully. “I guess dying did it for me too. I realized it lying on the shore, knew that at that moment I didn’t want to be with anyone else other than you.”

“Wonder how Gwen felt about that,” Merlin muttered.

“It is possible to be in love with more than one person, Merlin,” Arthur retorted, rolling his eyes, saying his name in a way that Merlin hadn’t heard in centuries that made his heart feel five sizes too small, like it was ready to implode.

“So what? You got to spend your last life with her, and this one with me?” Merlin asked, practically hauling Arthur onto his lap. The Gryffindor grinned and rest his forehead against Merlin’s.

“Something like that,” Arthur whispered against his lips, and for a few moments Merlin forgot that he was sitting on an uncomfortable stone floor and had arrived there by being knocked out by one of his best friends, and lost himself in the feeling of finally being with Arthur.

Then Arthur pulled back suddenly with something akin to horror on his face as his eyes faded from golden to blue.

“I… Merlin, please tell me that you’ve gone through his whole rebirth business too,” he said, and Merlin pursed his lips and looked innocently to the ground.

“Merlin,” Arthur said sternly.

“Uh, I learned pretty early on that being Magic Incarnate means that I actually, kinda… can’t die,” Merlin muttered. “Not yet anyway.”

“So you’ve just been wandering about for nearly a millennium?” Arthur asked incredulously.

“Pretty much,” Merlin replied, not entirely sure why he felt guilty about that fact, and he refused to look up from the ground, where Arthur most likely had that disapproving frown all across his face.
“Merlin, if you tell me that you’ve spent that entire time sulking by the lake and not being out in the world living an amazing life—” Arthur cut himself off as Merlin felt his face going red, betraying him. “You’re an idiot.”

“You’re an idiot,” Merlin replied back lamely.

“No, you’re a clotpole, even though I still have no idea what the hell that means,” Arthur shot back, and Merlin finally looked up at him and grinned widely.

“You’re clotpole,” he replied, and if Arthur’s eyes rolled any harder they’d have fallen out of his head and tumbled along the ground.

“Remind me why again?” Arthur asked, face raised to the ceiling, and Merlin laughed. He pulled the Gryffindor closer, wrapped his arms tightly around him, and buried his face into Arthur’s neck. It’d been goddamn centuries since he’d been able to do this – actually, he’d only done this very few times back in Camelot, and his heart felt like it was going to explode in a horrifically ugly mess. Arthur clutched him back just as tightly, and Merlin tried to control the shaking in his hands.

“God, Merlin, just how long have you been waiting?” Arthur whispered, and Merlin shut his eyes against the traitorous burn of tears.

“Far too long,” Merlin replied. “But it was worth it. God, it was worth it.”

Chapter End Notes

[1] Wixen: a gender-neutral term for witch/wizard; refers to the wizarding community at large as the ‘wixen community’ to avoid the general masculinization ‘man’ and ‘mankind’.

Oh my god okay so I am SO SORRY for the wait!!!! I had exams and assignments up until the 19th and after that point I came straight to writing and I had from the kiss onwards but I just couldn't come up with the conversation leading up to it, nothing sounded right and I had to write it multiple times to finally get something I was happy with. So I really hope this was everything you were hoping for, and the boys will continue on with this conversation next chapter. Honestly, I love y'all. I couldn't ask for
better fans.

Also sometimes I lose Arthur's voice but I always seem to get it back when he says something particularly bitchy. Same with Merlin, I get his back when he says something sarcastically optimistic.
Trust

Chapter Summary

Shit happens!!!!!! Boys are boys and Cora is Cora!!

Chapter Notes

**Chapter Warnings:** The following two chapters (19 + 20) contain two transgender characters having magical physical reassignment transformations. Please continue with this in mind if this is something that will trigger you, or will affect you strongly in any way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It’s strange,” Arthur said ten minutes later, once he’d thumbed the tears away from Merlin’s cheeks as they’d drawn saltine tracks down his face.

“What is?” Merlin asked, arms around Arthur, still unwilling to let him go. The Gryffindor felt the same way if the death-grip he had on Merlin’s jacket said anything.

“Remembering,” Arthur said, eyes unfocused as he stared at the blank wall opposite them. Well, not entirely blank – a door had appeared sometime ago, but the two were reluctant to leave the room, not when they had so much they needed to talk about. “It’s like… when you suddenly remember a dream halfway through the day after you’d entirely forgot it. Something jogs your memory and you remember a part of your dream, and the more you think about it, the more of your dream you remember. My memories are like that, just slowly coming together the more I remember.”

Merlin hummed and grasped Arthur tighter.

“How much do you remember?” Merlin asked.

“I remember you being an idiot,” Arthur shot back, and Merlin rolled his eyes. “In hindsight, I’m actually remembering myself being the idiot. How did I not notice you saving my life all those times? You weren’t exactly subtle about blasting doors open and such.”
“As you said, you remember me being an idiot,” Merlin replied. “It’s a very good defence mechanism, that is. You discredit yourself. And speaking of discrediting myself, you’re still going to have to call me Morgan in front of everyone.”

At that, Arthur pulled a face.

“I know most recently that I’ve been calling you that and it shouldn’t be difficult, but you’ve shifted from Morgan to Merlin in my head and that isn’t going to be easy to revert,” Arthur said.

“Pretend you’re an undercover auror and it’s my codename,” Merlin teased.

“Ha, ha,” Arthur deadpanned.

Merlin buried his face in Arthur’s chest for a split second, and felt Arthur’s fingers come up to run through his hair. “Is it weird for you?”

“Is what weird?”

“Being… the head prefect and best duellist in the history of a wixen school, and simultaneously remembering the utter hatred that you had for magic?” Merlin asked, and Arthur was silent for a few moments before he burst into laughter.

“Strangely yes, but also not at all,” Arthur replied. “I understand what you mean now about magic being just like breathing. It’s so… innate and easy, I don’t know how you lasted ten years without your head exploding.”

“Well as you said, I just exploded doors open instead,” Merlin replied, and Arthur cuffed him around the head.

They fell into a comfortable silence for a few minutes. “This is probably going to be much more than what Cora expected,” Arthur said, laughing a little.
“What she can expect, is a reckoning,” Merlin promised darkly. “Honestly, ‘the path to heaven is paved with bad intentions’ should be her damn motto. *Drugging* us, of all things.”

“At least it’s not a snake in a box,” Arthur quipped, and Merlin smacked his head against the wall from the voracity of his laughter.

“*Why* was Morgana’s solution to everything always a snake in a box?” Merlin wheezed. “Need to mind control Merlin? Snake in a box. Need to poison someone? Allow me to just take this snake out of this box. Need a distraction? Look no further than the snake in – you guessed it - *this* box.”

“She definitely would’ve been a Slytherin,” Arthur replied. “I don’t know anyone who was as obsessed with snakes as her. Do you think she hid them up her dress?”

It took Merlin a while to be able to breathe properly, and eventually he just leaned his whole bodyweight on Arthur, who wrapped an arm around him, the two of them side-by-side leaning up against a cold brick wall. Merlin leaned his head against Arthur’s shoulder, who in turn tipped his own head to rest atop Merlin’s, and Merlin’s attention was drawn to the pile of cushions in the corner.

Something Harry had said earlier in the year about practising summoning charms on cushions gave Merlin an idea, and he sat up so quickly he nearly headbutted Arthur.

“What?” Arthur asked, confused as Merlin placed his hand on Arthur’s chest, just below his sternum, brow furrowed in concentration.

“Merlin, what the hell are you doing?” Arthur asked with a sigh, and Merlin shushed him as he flattened his palm on Arthur’s chest and closed his eyes. He felt with something that wasn’t one of his five senses, and deep inside Arthur’s chest, in a way that only Merlin had ever felt in his own, there was a slow golden pounding like a second heart.

Merlin’s eyes snapped open and he looked to Arthur, who was giving his patent unimpressed with an eyebrow-raised expression. He’d used it a lot in Camelot.

“I’m not exactly opposed to you feeling me up, Merlin, but this is a little strange, even for you,” he teased, and Merlin resisted the urge to smack him on the back of the head.
“I want you to summon one of the pillows from that pile over there,” Merlin said, and Arthur raised an eyebrow. He reached for the wand in his robes, but Merlin grabbed his wrist and shook his head. Arthur sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Merlin, do you want me to summon that pillow or not? I’m not entirely sure why you’re asking me anyway, considering that you’re Emrys and I’m pretty sure you could summon all of those pillows without even blinking,” Arthur countered, pouting a little like he was jealous. Merlin smirked at that – Arthur being jealous of him for having powerful magic? He never thought he’d see the day.

“I want you to summon that pillow without your wand,” Merlin replied calmly.

“Wandless magic? Is this really the time for a charms lesson?” Arthur asked. Merlin pressed his hand harder onto Arthur’s sternum, feeling the deep golden pulse beneath his skin, hidden within his ribcage, and drummed his fingers along Arthur’s clavicle.


Arthur stared at him blankly. “What?”

Merlin sighed and shook some of the hair away that had fallen into his eyes.

“I used Old Magic to bring you back, and a lot of it. I was told that Old Magic would come back into the world again and flourish once you returned. I always thought those two things would be linked together, but I didn’t think they’d be one and the same,” Merlin said. “I think I gave you the ability to use Old Magic.”

He felt Arthur’s heartbeat stutter beneath his hand.


Merlin smiled gently, feeling his heart somewhat melt at Arthur’s words. “Yes, my magic.”

Arthur seemed to deliberate for a few moments, running over the thought in his head that he’d be able to use the magic that he’d feared for so long. Arthur had been using modern magic for years
now – was considered the best duellist Hogwarts had ever had, he wasn’t a stranger to magic – but this was different. This was something that was theirs, something that stretched back hundreds of years.

It was the thing that killed Arthur, and what Merlin was born of.

“How do I…?” Arthur asked, voice trailing off. Merlin smiled and drummed his fingers on Arthur’s chest.

“You feel it inside you. You draw it in from the world around you and channel it through yourself; pull it from the universe, take it from the atoms and the energy that thrums through the earth. Become one with the world and let it flow through you like oxygen,” Merlin whispered, and Arthur’s eyes fell shut at his words like he was falling asleep.

“Incantation?” Arthur asked quietly, opening his eyes.

“Fleoge,” Merlin replied, having completely forgotten momentarily that Old Magic required incantations; it came so naturally to him now that he didn’t have to use words. Merlin wondered if, in time, Arthur would be able to use it the same way.

Merlin pulled aside and sat next to Arthur again so he could see the pile of pillows opposite them. Arthur stared intently at the piles, and Merlin could see his mind whirling.

“It’s probably not going to work on the first try, so don’t get annoyed at yourself if nothing happens,” Merlin said. Arthur pulled a face at him. Merlin wondered if it would be easier or more difficult for Arthur to use Old Magic, due to the fact that he was used to modern magic. Would both forms of magic come easier to him, or would he be so used to channelling magic through his wand that he wouldn’t be able to use Old Magic easily?

The room seemed to fall into a hush – Merlin had thought it was silent before, but it was like all the particles had stopped vibrating. Merlin felt his heart pound in his chest and his breathing seemed to echo, and he placed his hand back over Arthur’s sternum.

Arthur whispered the incantation, and nothing happened. He tried again, and frowned when once again, the pillows stayed still. The little scrunch between his eyebrows was exactly the same one he’d get back in Camelot when he’d find Merlin next to a dead magical creature, running through every possibility except the one that it might’ve been Merlin who did it.
Merlin felt something stir under his fingers, and looked up to Arthur’s face, and saw that he’d closed his eyes. Then Arthur’s eyes snapped open, the incantation flowed from his throat, and his eyes flashed molten gold, the same colour as his hair.

The entire pile of pillows flew to the opposite side of the room, and crashed against the brick wall.

Arthur had half a second to process the fact that he’d used Old Magic before he was interrupted by Merlin’s lips on his. Merlin gripped the back of Arthur’s neck and couldn’t control the pounding of his heart – he’d felt the magic that was him flow through the earth and into Arthur, and back out into the world again under his fingers, and he hadn’t quite prepared himself for his reaction to feeling that.

Arthur smirked like he knew exactly what was going on in Merlin’s head, and clutched him back just as tightly. Merlin dug his fingers into Arthur’s side, and pulled away with Arthur’s bottom lip between his teeth once the need for oxygen became too great.

The Gryffindor’s hair was a little messed up and his breathing had picked up, his lips were swollen and a little shiny, and Merlin’s heart seemed to stop for a second.

“You gonna do that every time I use Old Magic?” Arthur asked with a smug grin and a raised eyebrow, and Merlin scoffed and pulled away from him.

“You caught me off guard, that’s all, Arthur,” Merlin shot back, pointedly not looking at the Gryffindor. Arthur laughed and caught Merlin around the waist and pulled him back so Merlin sat in front of him, Arthur’s knees on either side of him.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Merlin,” Arthur teased. He leaned forward to rest his forehead against Merlin’s forehead. “I felt it too. I can see why you like it.” Merlin just hummed and pressed their lips together again, lazily, now that they had all the time in the world. Merlin’s fingers gathered up Arthur’s hair, and Arthur’s hands managed to slide under Merlin’s shirt to press flat and warm against his lower back, and the two weren’t in any hurry to get any further along than that.

Eventually Merlin pulled away with a sigh, and Arthur gave him a smile.

“We’ve got a lot more to talk about, but honestly, I’d rather do it anywhere else than a cold brick room,” Merlin said, and Arthur agreed. The two heaved themselves off the floor with quite a bit of groaning and grunting, considering that their joints all seemed to fuse into place after sitting on the
floor for so long. With another quick kiss to Arthur’s lips, Merlin intertwined their fingers and led the Gryffindor out of the Room of Requirement.

Since it was the holidays, the rules were a little more relaxed due to the lack of students (even if the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students were still around) and many of the common room house restrictions had been lifted to accommodate for inter-house study sessions.

Therefore there were no problems with Merlin dragging Arthur into the Hufflepuff common room, where Cedric was engrossed in a Potions textbook, with Cora staring blankly into the flickering fire, nervously chewing on her lower lip, bouncing her leg up and down.

“Do you think they’re okay?” she asked Cedric quietly, and the prefect didn’t even look up from his book.

“That’s literally the thirty-eighth time you’ve asked me. Aside from the knockout potion, they should be fine,” Cedric replied monotonously. Cora whined.

“The knockout potion was your idea!” she argued. Cedric’s eyebrows lifted.

“Don’t you dare blame me for that, Dallas! I suggested it, and then said ‘Cora, don’t put knockout potion in their chocolate’ and you said ‘Cedric, don’t tell me what to do!’ and put knockout potion in their chocolate!” Cedric argued back, and Cora scrunched up her nose at him.

“You were the one who made the knockout potion!” she responded.

“You told me you wanted to study them for the Potions exam!” Cedric shouted exasperatedly, finally looking away from his book.

“And you should know better than thinking that I’d ever study for Potions!” Cora retorted, but at that moment Cedric’s eyes flickered from her to Merlin and Arthur, back to Cora, and then back at them like he could barely believe what he saw. Merlin grinned as his eyes tracked down to their interlaced fingers.

“If it helps,” Merlin said, and Cora gave a yelp at his voice and whirled around, “I totally blame Cora for all this.” Cora glared and raised a pointed finger to argue back, and then stopped once she saw their hands, and then she grinned wolfishly.
“Well it damn well worked, so I’d say you should be giving me a pat on the back,” Cora said smugly, but with genuine happiness in her dark eyes.

Arthur laughed. “Oh no, I believe Mer-Morgan said something about a reckoning coming your way?” he said ominously, and Cora’s eyes bulged out of her head.

“Morgan… you wouldn’t,” she murmured, and Merlin smirked.

“I forgive you for what you did, but I’m definitely getting you back for it,” he said. Cora was perplexed for a few seconds, trying to decide whether that was a good or a bad thing, before she suddenly grinned and launched to her feet, her curls bouncing as she did so.

“Don’t care, so worth it!” she crowed, and then launched herself at Merlin and Arthur. They had to release each other’s hand to grab her, but Merlin couldn’t help but bundle her up in his arms and press his face into her hair, grinning madly as the three of them wrapped their arms around each other.

“Thank you,” he whispered into her hair, and her arms tightened around him. Despite how pissed off he was at Cora, it had been her intervention that’d made all of this possible – he had Arthur back, something he’d been waiting for for centuries, and it was worth it all in the end to feel Arthur’s hand running up and down his spine. Merlin held a hand out for Cedric, who laughed and put his book down and wrapped his arms around them as much as he could.

“Do I get to join in on the hug?” a voice asked, and Merlin turned to see Rob standing in the doorway, smiling with his trunk in his hand. “Does this mean Cora’s plan worked?”

“Oh, come on! Did everyone know?” Arthur groaned, and Rob laughed as he walked over and gave Cora a kiss on the forehead before he also joined in the hug. At this point, Cora was smack in the middle of four teenage boys who were all considerably taller than her, and she made a little high-pitched noise.

“I can’t breathe!” she gasped, and the four of them all pulled away to see her cheeks flushed. “Honestly you three, were you trying to kill me?”

Merlin and Arthur exchanged a look and she frowned. “Don’t answer that.”
“Hey, Morgan?” Rob asked, and Merlin turned around to the larger boy. “You mind helping me haul my trunk up to the dorm?”

“Sure!” Merlin said, and grabbed the other end of Rob’s trunk. As he passed Arthur, he pressed a quick kiss to his lips, and Cora squealed happily at it. Merlin helped Rob manoeuvre the bulky trunk back up to their dorm room, and set it down with a grunt.

“Don’t the house elves usually bring them up?” Merlin asked.

“Usually,” Rob replied. “But that’s only when the students come back on the train. If you come back early like me and Cedric you have to bring your own stuff up. I apparated into Hogsmeade and dragged this the whole way up.”

“You… didn’t featherweight charm it?” Merlin asked, and Rob froze for a second.

“Shit!” he swore, and Merlin laughed. Rob opened up his trunk, and swore even louder once he realised that his ink pot had spilt all throughout the items strewn about his trunk. “Fucking lids!”

Merlin helped Rob to scourgify the ink off everything, and Rob piled all of his clean belongings back into the trunk with a wave of his wand. Merlin had never been able to do packing charms as well as Rob could, who usually packed everyone’s trunks for them.

Merlin turned to head back out downstairs when Rob placed a hand on his shoulder, and Merlin turned around with a raised eyebrow. Rob looked pretty serious.

“What’s up?” Merlin asked, and Rob gave him a small smile.

“You’ve been a really great friend, Morgan. Our old dormmate, James, left at the end of sixth year to go to America with his partners Steve and Margaret, and we thought it’d be really strange having an empty bed. Weirdly enough, since you arrived we’ve barely thought about how much we miss him, because you’ve just fit in so well,” Rob said, and Merlin felt something warm unfurl in his chest at Rob’s words.

“Thanks, Rob,” Merlin said with a smile.
“I just… you’ve been a really good friend, and there’s something I need to tell you,” Rob said, a small thread of nervousness making it’s way into his voice. “I don’t really make a big deal about it, but I guess it’s something I feel comfortable confiding with you in.” Merlin smiled his encouragement, but said nothing else.

“Basically, I was designated female at birth,” Rob started. “I hate to use the term ‘born a girl’, but that’s essentially what it was. I’m Muggleborn, and I learned very early on that I felt uncomfortable in long hair and dresses, and tried my best to dress like a boy. Cut my hair off, shopped in the boy’s section and everything, and my parents didn’t really understand but they tried their best, y’know?”

Merlin was a little shocked that Rob was telling him all this, that he trusted Merlin enough with something that was clearly so close to his heart, and let Rob continue uninterrupted.

“Once I got my letter to Hogwarts I started crying,” Rob admitted sheepishly. “Mainly because the letter was addressed to Rob Carter, the name I chose, not the name that I was born with. The teacher who came to explain everything to me didn’t even blink at all the questions I asked, and said that it would be no problem at all to be able to wear the boy’s uniform.” Merlin smiled as Rob’s eyes began to water a little.

“Being at Hogwarts, and being so accepted almost made me forget about the fact that I wasn’t outwardly the boy I wanted to be, but then puberty kicked in and, y’know, shit hit the fan. I got really depressed and really down, because even though Ced and Cora and Pavel and all the others accepted me and I was never bullied, I just… never looked how I wanted, y’know? Especially since I’m not exactly a size six, so binding my chest never really worked out for me,” Rob said, swallowing thickly.

“What changed?” Merlin asked, because obviously something had, considering that Rob was without a doubt one of the happiest, most cheerful guys Merlin had ever known. Merlin remembered back to when the five of them had gone swimming in the prefect’s bathroom to uncover the egg clue, and though he hadn’t really been paying attention at the time, Rob didn’t have any sort of binder on, and he’d looked completely comfortable undressing in front of the rest of them.

“Magic,” Rob said with an awe-struck grin. “Pomfrey was taking care of me in the infirmary after I got real low, and she told me that there was a sort of… transfiguration magic. It was permanent once it happened, and there was a bit of a process to get it done, but if I wanted they could help me transition physically into a male body. She said that a lot of trans kids went through with it, and that it was okay if I didn’t, but I knew I would. It was a little terrifying to be honest, there were a bunch of healers and Legilimens specifically for the purposes of determining whether someone was genuine in their gender identity and whether they were mature enough to go through such a permanent change. Making sure it wasn't just a case of someone being particularly tomboyish or trying to rebel to piss
off their parents. Some cases can take a while - the younger kids go on some sort of puberty blocker so they don't physically develop in ways that would seriously compromise their physical health, but since I was older they couldn't exactly do that. However, because I was older, my process was sort of... expedited. The healers interview you and they have the Legilimens just as a safeguard, if they're really unsure, but with me it was pretty clear that I was desperate. So after a few months during the next holidays, Cora, Cedric, Pavel and Vern all came down to St Mungo’s with me to support me, and I went through with the transition.

“Some days I can barely believe that I look the way I’ve always wanted to. I’m sure most people would want chiselled abs and muscles along with their transition, but for the first time in my life, the past two years, I’ve been completely comfortable with myself, and I just wanted you to know about this part of me.”

Merlin felt his chest get tight and his throat constrict a little. His vision blurred and he wrapped his arms around Rob, who hugged Merlin back just as tightly.

“Thank you for trusting me with this, and I’m so glad you’re happy,” Merlin whispered. Rob sniffed a little and pulled back with a blinding grin, tears in his eyes too.

“Ugh, gross,” he complained, wiping his eyes, and Merlin laughed wetly. “Okay, we can go down now, and if anyone asks I am crying because you dropped the trunk on my foot.”

“Oi!” Merlin yelled. “Why am I the one who can’t carry the trunk?”

They bickered their way back downstairs, where Arthur had moved to the couch with Cedric and Cora, and Sushi had managed to hop up on his lap and was purring away quietly as Arthur scratched him between the ears. Merlin managed to squeeze in next to Arthur while Rob sat on the couch perpendicular to him, warming his hands up in front of the fire. The sun had set while Merlin and Rob had been up in their dorm room, and everyone was quietly relaxing, trying to enjoy the last few days of peace before the hectic exam rush started.

“Maya’s coming back tomorrow,” Cora piped up. “She said she couldn’t wait until the end of the holidays, and she just got her apparition license.”

Cedric frowned. “Simon told me she failed five times.”

“Well… you know Maya,” Cora replied with a smile, and Merlin cringed at the thought of clumsy,
well-meaning but completely uncoordinated Maya trying to apparate. At least she’d apparently been successful.

“I think Pavel and Lydia are coming back before holidays end too,” Rob said. “Lydia owled me just before I left.”

“Any idea when Tanith’s back?” Merlin asked.

“She’s got her big ballet show so probably on the train with the rest, I’d imagine,” Cora said. “I really hope she can get the video camera to work. I’ve never seen her dance properly but I bet she’d be amazing.”

“Doesn’t she want to become a full time ballerina after she graduates?” Arthur asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Cedric said. “Pavel said some bullshit about having connections with the Bolshoi, and thank god she seemed to know that, but she told me the night of the Yule Ball that it’s always been her dream to make it big.”

“So the whole crew should be back in just about four days,” Cora said with a satisfied grin.

“Just in time for the exam rush!” Cedric said with mock-enthusiasm, and everyone around the table groaned.

“Don’t remind us,” Merlin sighed. He not only had his first ever exams to worry about (along with his abysmal Transfiguration) but also the last task of the Triwizard Tournament, and the confrontation with Voldemort was looming ever closer…

Arthur let out a laugh, and Merlin looked at him with a smile. At least, for now, he had Arthur back at his side.

Chapter End Notes
hey ya'll so i hope u liked this chapter. in regards to rob i tried to write him as well as i could, i'm nb so i tried to do my best, if i accidentally said something offensive or worded something in a way that doesn't sit well with any of my trans readers please do let me know and i'll try to do my best to fix it!!!!! i wouldn't want anyone to be offended i just want ya'll to love rob as much as i do and his damn lid issues

EDIT: shout out to the amazing azurelunatic who helped me switch up the transition process a little from what it was originally!! i really love what it's at now, but again if someone takes issue with it please, please, please let me know!
They began their revenge on Cora the day before everyone was due to return. She was out at the kitchens procuring 'study supplies' and Merlin and Arthur gathered everyone around to let them in on the plan. Cedric was gleeful about the entire thing, and although he technically had a part to play in the drugging, he didn’t know what was happening, and so Merlin didn’t blame him.

“So what’s the plan?” Rob asked, practically bouncing up and down on his feet. “Flobberworms? Separation spell between her and Maya? Acne spell?”

Merlin’s eyes bugged out of their sockets at his words. “God, no, Rob, nothing as juvenile as that.”

“You call that juvenile?” Cedric asked, sounding a little worried.

“Compared to what we’re doing to her, yes,” Arthur said with barely contained glee.

“Here’s the plan,” Merlin said, and they all gathered in. “And we’re going to get the others in on this when they’re back, don’t worry. What we are gonna do is sabotage Cora’s potions in class.”

Cedric frowned. “I don’t think we could make them any worse if we tried.”

“No, we can’t,” Arthur agreed.

“That’s why we’re going to make them better,” Merlin finished. “Think about it. It’s NEWT level potions, which by the way I have no idea how she got into the class, especially with Snape teaching,
but that’s not the point. The point is that the potions are difficult as hell, and Cora manages to fuck up each and every one of them. There will be no expectations for her to do well by the examiners.”

“Your point being?” Rob asked.

“We make her do well the whole semester. Perfect potions – between all of us in class, we’ll swap out her vial for another one of ours and hand it in. Snape will be confused as all hell, but he’ll have to start upping her grades in preparation for the final exam,” Merlin explained. “That means that the examiners will be expecting her to do incredibly well, which Cora can’t do. She’s bound to fail anyway, but this way it adds a lot of pressure onto her, because now she has expectations.”

“That and she’s inordinately proud of how badly she does,” Cedric said, eyes lighting up. “Honestly, did you talk to Simon about this? It’s got to be a Slytherin plan.”

“Morgan’s plenty good at coming up with plans on his own,” Arthur said rather pointedly.

“So you’re going to take away what Cora is most proud of, raise her up onto a pedestal, only for her to fail short at the very end?” Rob asked. “She’s inevitably going to fail, but this just makes it more stressful for her without doing any long-term damage to her grades.”

“It’s definitely a Slytherin plan,” Cedric grinned. “I love it. We’ll do it.”

“Oh man,” Rob said suddenly. “Imagine how much fun Pavel’s gonna have with this.”

The next day they all headed down to the front entrance to wait for everyone to come back on the train. None of the younger students were waiting outside, but now that the weather was beginning to warm up slightly – and by that, it just meant there was no longer calf-high snow to wade through – the older students decided to brave the weather for their returning friends. Merlin was sure that they were all just procrastinating further study, which although it was currently self-directed and not assigned by the teachers, many of the students (particularly Ravenclaws) were starting to look like walking zombies. Cora had overheard one of the house elves in the kitchen saying that they had bulk ordered a few hundred kilograms of coffee beans in preparation of the upcoming exam season.

“There they are!” a Slytherin called, and Merlin turned to see the thestral-drawn carriages pulling up the road. Even from this distance he could see the silvery hair of one Maya Reed as she stuck her head out the carriage window, waving exuberantly at her girlfriend. Cora could barely contain her excitement as she bounced up and down, waving back just as stupidly, hair bouncing along with her.
Maya was out of the carriage and running straight towards Cora before they’d even come to a stop, and the two collided together in a tangle of hair and hugs. Merlin felt Arthur slip his hand into his own at the sight. They had to look away when their enthusiastic hugging became enthusiastic kissing, and turned to see Simon shaking his head at them as he hauled himself out of the carriage alongside Vern, who’d recently re-shaved his head. It had been growing a little long before the holidays started. Tanith climbed out behind them looking exhausted.

Another carriage pulled up and Pavel and his shock of white hair jumped out, looking a little like a surprised kitten. He turned back to the carriage door and held his hand out, bowing his head a little. A slim, delicate hand joined his, and he helped Lydia out of the carriage.

Merlin wasn’t entirely sure what it was about her that had changed, but she looked different. She had always been beautiful and incredibly confident but she seemed to just… glow. Her pale skin was radiant in the pale sunlight; her strawberry red hair fell in perfect, bright waves and Pavel pulled her in so he could wrap his arms around her waist and tip their foreheads together in the picture of a sickeningly in love couple.

“Oh god,” Cedric muttered. “She’s not pregnant, is she?”

Rob laughed surprisingly hard at the comment to the point where his eyes started tearing up a little. “No, I don’t think that’s it.”

The two made their way towards their little group, complete with Maya and Cora who had finally stopped kissing, and Pavel’s entire face lit up when he looked at his girlfriend proudly. Lydia could barely keep a smile off her own face, and she looked directly to Rob, who was grinning back knowingly.

“I’m sure it’s a stupid question, but did you…?” he asked, and Lydia nodded fervently. Rob ran over to Lydia and pulled her out of Pavel’s arms and into his own, picking her up and spinning around as she laughed. Merlin didn't even know that Lydia and Rob knew each other that well. Arthur gasped from Merlin’s side and ran over to join the two, and the remaining Hufflepuffs were thoroughly confused. Once Rob had finally put a delighted Lydia down, Arthur pushed her hair back from her face and kissed her on the forehead.

“I’m so happy for you,” Arthur murmured just loud enough for Merlin to hear.

“Uh…” Simon muttered, looking thoroughly confused as Tanith began to fall asleep against his
shoulder. Pavel took Lydia’s hand and pulled her into his side again. He pressed gentle kisses across her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, eyelids, and once on the lips, and now Merlin had moved on from the pregnancy theory and onto the marriage theory. However, Lydia’s hand was devoid of any rings other than the rose gold one she wore on her right pinky.

“I’ll explain inside, it’s freezing out here!” Lydia said, cheeks flushing a little from the brisk spring air. “Do we have somewhere we can talk privately?”

“By that do you mean talk privately with all eleven of us?” Arthur drawled, and Lydia punched him in the arm.

“Room of Requirement,” Cedric replied, slipping Tanith’s bag off her shoulder and onto his own before it fell to the ground along with her. Merlin didn’t think it was possible for someone to actually sleep upright, but maybe Tanith’s super-ripped ballerina calf muscles kept her standing. Simon and Maya wrapped their arms around her and the trio slowly followed the group into the castle and up to the seventh floor. Cora detoured to the kitchens to grab some food, and while she did so, Merlin and Cedric informed the others on their revenge plan for her.

Pavel, predictably, had a look of unholy glee on his face at the prospect of screwing over his best friend’s potions. They considered dropping Tanith off at the Slytherin common room, but she just waved them off when they tried and she managed to make her way up the stairs despite being mostly asleep.

“You know what Hogwarts needs?” she slurred. “Elevators. Escalators. Anything that goes up without having to expend energy. Do they know how tired ballerinas get?”

“Well, when you join the Bolshoi-“ Pavel began, but was cut off when Cedric slapped him upside the head. Their strange procession finally made it up to the seventh floor where Lydia paced the area according to Cedric’s instructions, and the door appeared. Inside was a comfortable and spacious living room filled with plush couches and soft pillows arranged in a circle, with knitted rugs covering the floor and a warm fire crackling in the middle, like an indoor campsite.

Tanith immediately collapsed onto a sofa and began snoring the second her head hit the pillow. Cedric placed her bag down next to her and everyone arranged themselves comfortably around the fire; Merlin sat next to Arthur on one of the couches and pulled his legs up, leaning on Arthur’s shoulder. The once-king wrapped his arm around Merlin’s back and held him there, and Maya waggled her eyebrows at the development.

“I see Cora’s plan worked,” Maya grinned.
“At the cost of her future sanity,” Arthur groused. “She drugged us.”

“She’s a dangerous one,” Pavel piped up. “Hilarious methods when used on other people but not so much on yourself.”

“See, if she’d drugged Draco Malfoy and his cronies and knocked them out in the middle of the Great Hall, that would be funny,” Simon said. “But you two? Less cool.”

“At least they got their heads out of their asses,” Lydia sighed, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, I was nearly desperate to do something similar myself. I’ve never seen Arthur sulk that much in the seven years I’ve known him.” Merlin laughed at Arthur’s betrayed expression and kissed it off his face.

“Great,” Vern sighed. “How many gross couples do we need?”

“Too many now I’m back,” Cora called out, pushing her way into the room with arms laden with bags of food. “Help? I think I cut off the circulation to my hands.” Rob and Vern hopped up to relieve her of the bags, and her fingers were indeed looking quite purple. She collapsed down next to Maya and immediately laid her head in her girlfriend’s lap; Maya began to stroke her fingers through Cora's tight curls, studiously not saying anything about the revenge plan. Vern and Rob passed around food, and the next few minutes was filled with idle holiday chatter and practiced catching of escaping chocolate frogs.

Finally Lydia cleared her throat, and everyone looked over to her grinning face. Pavel’s arm was around her waist and she was all but sitting on his lap, though it didn’t compel everyone to look away like the sight usually did. It probably helped that they weren’t attached at the face, too.

“So…” Lydia started after taking a deep breath. “I spent the last two weeks with Pavel and his parents in their holiday home up in the Lake District.” There was a low whistle at this.

“Lake District? That can’t be cheap. And it’s a holiday home?” Vern asked.

“Shit, he probably does know the Bolshoi,” Rob muttered. At the word Bolshoi, Tanith woke up to vaguely mumble brisé devant start croisé in fifth position before she went back to snoring. Lydia raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow and continued on.
“Anyway… so Mr and Mrs Kaidanovsky were lovely enough to let me stay at their home for the holidays,” Lydia began again.

“You know they want to be called by their first names,” Pavel interrupted gently.

Lydia sighed. “Sasha and Aleksis Kaidanovsky let me stay at their home because my parents are on holiday in New Zealand and they wanted to meet me, since apparently Pavel here couldn’t shut up about me.” Pavel flushed brilliantly at her words.

“Since I became of age and took the first step in my transition, I have been thinking long and hard about whether I wanted to continue on with it,” Lydia continued, and Merlin’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “I am lucky enough to have a fabulous boyfriend who has never given a single shit about what I have down my pants, and I have been lucky enough to not experience dysphoria to the degree that some trans people do.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming on here,” Cedric said.

“I decided, with the support of Pavel, Sasha and Aleksis, to go ahead with the final step of my transition, and had the charm performed just under a week ago,” Lydia announced with a smile, and Pavel pressed a gentle kiss to the side of her neck.

“And I am so proud of her,” he mumbled into her hair, and Lydia blushed. Rob raised his glass of gillywater, and the rest of them followed his lead, causing Lydia’s blush to deepen.

“To Lydia Lahey, for being brave and doing what makes her happy,” Rob toasted, and everyone in the room echoed him, with the exception of Tanith who was still out cold.

“To Lydia Lahey,” Pavel then said, “for being the most wonderful girlfriend from the moment I met her, for being the most gorgeous human being on the planet, and for being the single thing I adore more than the motherland.”

“Holy shit,” Cedric gasped. “That’s a proposal right there.”

“It better not be,” Vern piped up sullenly. “I had money on Cora and Maya.”
Merlin rolled his eyes and drank from his cup and sunk deeper into Arthur’s side. Lydia met his eye across the room and winked suggestively, and Merlin didn’t have to look up at Arthur’s face to know that he’d just stuck his tongue out at Lydia. Merlin mused on how strange it was to have his two worlds combined so perfectly like this – surrounded by his new friends in Hogwarts yet having Arthur pressed against him where he belonged, and he never would have thought in a hundred years that he’d be able to be this happy. If he were to cast a patronus now, it would be the brightest he would ever have.

“What’re you smiling about?” Arthur murmured, warm breath skating past Merlin’s ear causing a pleasant shiver to run down his spine.

“Just how happy I am right now,” Merlin whispered back under his breath. “Here, surrounded by everyone I love. I didn’t think it would be something that would ever happen again, not after Camelot fell.” Arthur’s arms tightened around him, and Merlin closed his eyes, soaking up the warmth from Arthur’s body and the magically crackling fire in front of them.

Then Arthur whispered a word that Merlin couldn’t hear, but he felt a tingle run through him that only came about when he was in close to proximity to Arthur’s Old Magic that he'd been practising using. His eyes shot open in shock, feeling his heart race a little as he still couldn’t quite control his reaction to it, and he looked down to Arthur’s outstretched palm.

Sitting rather unobtrusively in Arthur’s hand was a silver promise ring.

“I think they should be betting on us,” Arthur murmured quietly. Completely forgetting everyone else in the room, Merlin pulled back so he could look straight into Arthur’s eyes that seemed to be glowing in the firelight.

“Us being official like this is pretty new, I know,” Arthur said, taking Merlin’s hand. “But unofficially, I think we’ve loved each other for a long time now, and so I promise you right here, right now, that if we make it to the end of the year alive and without having killed each other along the way, I will turn this ring gold.”

Merlin’s heart stopped and his breath caught in his chest.

“You never do anything by halves, do you?” he asked, and Arthur laughed.

“I think the fact that this isn’t going on your ring finger means I am doing it by halves,” he replied.
Merlin nodded, and Arthur slid the ring onto Merlin’s left middle finger, where it fit perfectly. Merlin leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to Arthur’s lips, feeling like his heart was about to erupt out of his chest. He felt light enough that he could just float straight through the ceiling and continue up into the sky when-

“Fuck it, I’m putting my money on those two,” Vern said, pointing to where the two ancient boys were wrapped up in each other.

“I think my plan worked way too well,” Cora giggled from Maya’s lap. Merlin flushed and bit his bottom lip, but when he looked over to Cedric, he was grinning brilliantly, and Merlin was suddenly glad that at least he and Cora knew most of the truth.

“Someone needs to get that poor girl to a proper bed,” Lydia sighed, looking over to Tanith.

“Eh,” Simon said. “Term doesn’t start until tomorrow. I propose a sleepover right here, right now.”

“Can we do that?” Maya asked.

“I’m head prefect,” Arthur said. “So I say hell yeah!”

They had the sleepover.

McGonagall lost her shit at them in the morning.

_____________________________________

Chapter End Notes

Cute filler chapter that I hope ya'll love and once again, if any trans people are offended or uncomfortable with anything that I've written, please don't hesitate to inform and correct me!!!!!! I don't want to offend any of ya'll I love you :)

Shit will start to get real next chapter, and then we're on the home stretch people.
P.S. Yes, Pavel's parents are - as some of you guessed - Russian Jaeger pilots. Even though Jaegers aren't around. Yet.

P.P.S. And yes, Lydia's surname is Lahey. Fuckin cry about it.
Merlin was pretty sure that he was dying. He had some experience in these matters, and he definitely knew he was dying. From the moment he woke up to the wee hours in which he tried fervently to fall asleep all that went through his mind were the names of each and every member of the Goblin Rebellions, punctuated by the hundreds of ancient runes that he was due to memorize and Alchemy equations that made his head spin. Merlin loved learning but sometimes he thought that standardised tests and exams should be blasted from the face of the planet.

The house elves had been smart to order the hundreds of kilograms of coffee, and the senior students in Hufflepuff probably consumed half of it if Merlin had to guess. Pavel was the worst – he lived on coffee before, but now it seemed to be the only thing keeping him going. The only one who seemed to be taking this all in stride was Lydia, who always seemed perfectly calm without a hair in place as she made her perfect study notes with coloured pens that she’d bought while on holiday. A few of the pureblood students were a little astounded at all the pens that had begun to pop up as the Muggleborn and halfblood students decided that quills were too ridiculous and unwieldy to be making this many notes with.

Cedric was already beginning to look like the undead, Cora was straight up procrastinating to the point where it made her even more twitchy, and Merlin’s head was swimming with too much and not enough information. And the worst thing about it was that they weren’t even a full week into the term.

“I think we are actually dying,” Rob said one day around their study table in the library. “I don’t think it’s possible to be this stressed without rupturing something.”


Lydia grinned up at him. “Lots and lots of orgasms,” she replied.
“Damn,” Cedric said. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Well I know how we’re spending tonight,” Cora murmured to Maya with eyebrows dancing about.

“If the answer was orgasms I wouldn’t have hands like this,” Pavel said from next to his girlfriend, holding his pale hands out so they could see them shaking from the caffeine.

“That’s your problem right there, hon,” Lydia said to his hands. “You do realise it’s possible to have orgasms without a second person present, right?”

“Can we not talk about orgasms?” Tanith asked, looking a little green. “I don’t see why they’re as amazing as everyone keeps saying.”

“You poor soul,” Maya cooed.

“So segueing on from this highly disturbing topic,” Tanith continued unrelentingly, “my camera should be back from that Ravenclaw third year hopefully tomorrow night, meaning that you guys can see my performance! I didn’t realise she had such a large load of Muggle tech that needed to be converted to magical energy or I would’ve owled her my camera in sooner.”

“I think we all need a break from this,” Arthur sighed, pushing his study notes and books away from him in disgust. He’d complained to Merlin last night that, verbatim, he was ‘a king and didn’t need to be doing things like studying’. Merlin then told him helpfully that he was no longer a king and in the 20th century you needed an education to do anything, including ruling. Which Arthur was not doing, because technically he was seventeen.

“I can’t figure out what I’m doing right,” Cora murmured over her potions textbook. Merlin grinned up at Cedric and Pavel who were hiding their smirks rather well. Operation Sabotage was well underway and as of then she had handed in three perfect potions to Professor Snape, who seemed as confused and concerned as she did about the change. “People expect things from me now. I hate it.”

“Maybe your latent potion master instincts are revealing themselves and you can spend the next three years under Snape’s tutelage,” Arthur teased, and Cora went positively green at the thought. Merlin had forgotten until now the reason that these exams were so important to his friends – jobs and internships.
It was at this point that Hermione Granger stalked over to their table and threw a piece of parchment onto the table between Merlin and Arthur. Merlin looked from her face down to the paper, which was his and Arthur’s old advertisements for the Duelling Club.

“I recognise that you are studying for NEWT level exams, and I respect that more than possibly any fourth-year could, and despite my high hopes for this I would never have brought it up with you if Harry wasn’t about to be in a third deadly task in a few months’ time. Are you two starting the Duelling Club now that you’ve stopped fighting?” she asked sternly, and Merlin was suddenly reminded of the rumours he’d heard about Hermione Granger.

She had apparently beaten Snape’s impossible test of logic. She’d also apparently set Snape on fire at age eleven. She had been petrified but not before it was she who figured out that the basilisk was the creature in the Chamber of Secrets. She was the top of her year level, followed only by Draco Malfoy, and her full body-bind was the talk of the school.

“I totally forgot about that,” Rob said, looking down to the parchment. “You guys should get onto that considering it’s last term.”

“You know,” Merlin said. “I totally forgot there even was a third task. I see why champions are usually exempt from exams.” Hermione rolled her eyes.

“You’re hopeless,” she sighed. “Look, I don’t know what’s going to be in that maze but I can guarantee a fourteen-year-old will struggle with it, even if that fourteen-year-old happens to be the Boy Who Lived. I want Harry as prepared for this as possible and your Duelling Club is going to be the only way to ensure that he’ll be prepared. Ron and I can only do so much.”

Merlin looked over to Arthur who grinned.

“We’ll talk to Dumbledore about it.”

The next day word was out that the first Duelling Club session would be open for business and that for the first and only time all year levels were welcome before they’d start splitting the sessions up by age group. They’d originally planned to commandeer one of the larger classrooms, but Dumbledore had given them special permission to use the cleared out Great Hall, and that had been a wise decision considering that probably half of the school showed up. A few of the seventh years did too, though most of them were studying for NEWTs and didn’t have time for the club, but from the fifth years down nearly everyone had shown up.
One of the house tables had been left in the centre of the Great Hall, like a stage, and Merlin and Arthur stood on it as they watched the students file in. Harry, Ron and Hermione had been amongst the first to arrive, and as the hall began to fill up, Merlin recognised fewer and fewer faces. The other members of their group were there mostly as instructors, though Cora and Pavel were rearing to go at each other. Even Draco Malfoy and his friends in Slytherin showed up with looks upon their faces like they didn’t want to be there. If Arthur had been in any house other than Gryffindor, Merlin was sure that they’d be grinning.

Eventually the hoard of students entering the hall seemed to taper off, and the sea of students surrounding the table looked up at them expectantly.

“Okay, everyone, welcome to the new and improved Duelling Club sans Lockhart!” Arthur announced, and cheers went up around the room. Merlin was suddenly reminded that Arthur was the man who commanded armies and led them into battle, and here he was, rallying students for a war that might begin if Merlin couldn’t stop the return of Voldemort.

“At my side is the wonderful Morgan Emery, who most of you know as one of the two Hogwarts champions, a dragonlord, the guy with the highest potions grade the school has ever had... oh yeah, and my boyfriend,” Arthur grinned, and the students laughed.

“And at my side,” Merlin began in retaliation, and Arthur looked a little shocked like he wasn’t quite expecting it, but he should’ve known that Merlin could be a little shit by now, “is Arthur Pendragon, who not only has the name of a king but the attitude of one-” the crowd laughed “-and the guy who has the highest DADA grade in the history of the school, so you’re damn lucky he’s going to be teaching you.”

“And your boyfriend! Thanks to me!” Cora called out, and Merlin rolled his eyes.

“Yes, thank you for that Cora,” he drawled. “So this is opening night of Duelling Club. If things go well, we’ll be splitting you all up into two sessions from next week onward. I’ll be taking the fourth years and down on Tuesday nights, and Arthur will be taking the fifth years and up on Thursday nights.”

“We were originally going to teach both sessions together but considering how swamped we are with NEWT study, this will be the only session that we’ll be doing together,” Arthur said, and someone in the crowd booed. “Ha, ha.”

“The point of this is not to teach you how to hex people in the corridors,” Merlin said. “It’s to give you some real-life experience on duelling and how to use the spells you learn in a real situation. It’s
all very well and good to practice them in class, but a duel is much different. You’ll have only a second to react, to figure out which spell your opponent is using and to cast something to counteract it, and you’ll have to learn whether you fight better offensively or defensively.”

“Your wand has a lot to do with that,” Arthur said. “Wands made of rowan are famous for having nearly unbreakable defence. Alder are known to channel non-verbal spells better than verbal while wands of dogwood almost always refuse to do anything non-verbal. We’re here so you can get to know how your wand fights and to give you some experience so if you’re ever in a real duel, maybe you won’t die within about three seconds.” Most of the students laughed at this, and Merlin was surprised to find that Arthur knew so much about wands. Come to think of it, all of the classes he was taking were those required to go into the wandmaking practice.

“Nerd!” Cora called out.

“And just for that, Cora, you can be the first one to demonstrate how to duel!” Arthur shot back with a grin, and her face dropped in horror as the crowd laughed.

“What about you two?” a Ravenclaw student called from the back.

“Yeah! Your duel first week was amazing!” called a first-year Hufflepuff.

“Completely non verbal!” came Seamus Finnegan, and soon the entire hall was filled with cheers and encouragement for the two of them to duel, and Merlin turned towards Arthur with his eyebrow raised. Arthur looked both excited and a little terrified, especially considering that he now knew who Merlin was and what he could do.

“C’mon, Arthur,” Merlin said quietly to him, egging him on, “you’re the best Defence student the school has ever seen. I promise not to use any Old Magic.” Arthur narrowed his eyes and him and took a step forward so they were toe-to-toe, and the crowd’s cheering increased tenfold in volume.

“Allright, Emrys, you’re on,” Arthur murmured back just as quietly, and Merlin felt a shiver run down his spine at Arthur’s words and use of his druidic title. Arthur leaned forward to press a quick kiss to Merlin’s lips before his smirk grew devilish and he turned around and headed to the far end of the table. Merlin sighed overdramatically and did the same, turning back to face Arthur once he’d reached the end of his own table. They both drew their wands and the cheers swelled before dying off completely, the air filled with tension and trepidation. This would be their first duel since Arthur remembered who he was, the first time Merlin had ever used magic with Arthur, his Arthur, the one who was the Once and Future King. He could tell that Arthur was thinking something similar, and the blonde winked.
Merlin raised his wand and focused his vision, waiting for the first twitch of Arthur’s muscles that would telegraph his intended move. All spells had a specific movement to them that one could identify even if their opponent cast it non-verbally. Offensive attacking spells usually swept in low from the side with a twist of the wrist, defensive spells were a sharp slash through the air, jinxes started low and vertical while hexes were the opposite. The Dark Arts, though Merlin wasn’t expecting it, were almost like a stab forward, a harsh jab of magic. From those large motions, each spell had a specific wand movement to accompany it that could be used to further identify it – Arthur’s arm suddenly swept up and he gave a quick flick of his wrist, sending the familiar red light of the stunning spell towards Merlin.

A rather aggressive move to begin with, Merlin thought with a grin as he slashed his wand through in a defensive spell, and then sent back a knockback jinx with a quick swipe up and right-turn twist. With the first moves sent, the duel was finally afoot.

Arthur blocked quickly and attacked even faster, but Merlin had the years of experience on him that gave him an advantage in predicting what Arthur would do next. Arthur, however, had better use of modern magic than Merlin did, and his transition from defence to offence to jinx was incredible, often sending three different spells at Merlin in quick succession, immediately putting him on the defensive. Merlin stood his ground, feet planted, as Arthur started forward and sidestepped any spells that he couldn’t block, and Merlin knew that he had to go forward too and meet him.

Spells flew in bright flashes of colour, spinning out through the air and over the heads of the students as Merlin’s breathing and heart rate picked up, feeling the air become thick and heavy with magic like an electric current on his skin that made the fine hairs on his arms raise. Arthur’s eyes were dark with concentration through he was grinning that trademark smirk, and Merlin feinted a hex and then immediately followed up with alarte ascendare, sending Arthur high into the air.

Arthur wasn’t the top DADA student for nothing, though, and as he flew upward, he sent two spells at Merlin before he’d lowered his wand. He managed to block the first but the second spell came in low and knocked him off his feet. Arthur managed to flip himself around right-way up as he fell, and landed back on his feet in a graceful move he definitely hadn’t had before his memories returned. So he was using his regained combat skills in this duel. Interesting.

Merlin rolled out of the way of Arthur’s next spell and used it to hide the motion of his hand, sending a sneezing charm straight at Arthur’s face. He paused to sneeze and Merlin used the advantage to send a serious knock-back charm his way and Arthur went flying through the air. Arthur still had his wits about him and managed to cushion his landing but ended right on the edge of the table, off-balance. Merlin smirked and made eye contact with Arthur, and sent a stunning charm his way.

Faster than Merlin would’ve believed, Arthur managed to shift his centre of gravity forward and
deflected the spell. The room was deathly silent as the two paused, both disbelieving that Arthur had managed to stay on the table.

“Bad move, Emery,” Arthur warned. The two of them launched forwards sent a spell flying at each other in synchronisation. The two spells met in mid air and exploded, sparks ricocheting out in all directions as Merlin’s ears rang from the noise. A shockwave emanated out from it and sent a few students stumbling back, ruffling the hair of everyone in the room.

In the silence that followed, Merlin once again had an overwhelming understanding of the phrase ‘you could hear a pin drop’. He and Arthur looked at each other in shock and awe, and adrenaline pumped hard through Merlin’s system as he took in deep breaths, barely believing what had just happened, and it looked like Arthur was thinking the same thing. Then Arthur rushed forward and Merlin wasn’t sure if he was going to jinx him or kiss him, and just as he tightened his fingers on his wand to prepare for both, Arthur hauled him in by the tie.

Their lips met for a fraction of a second before Arthur hooked a foot around Merlin’s ankle and tugged, sending Merlin sprawling to the ground.

Merlin’s head spun, and Cora was the first one to laugh, and soon the entire hall was filled with cheers and whooping. He flushed as Arthur pulled him up but narrowed his eyes at his boyfriend, promising retribution for that dirty move.

“The point of that, students,” Arthur said, “is that don’t ever trust that during a duel someone won’t start physically attacking you. But this is not self-defence class, this is Duelling Club, so get into pairs with someone you know is of a similar level than you.” There was a great deal of shuffling as everyone tried to pair off with their friends, and the noise level in the hall began to rise again. Cora and Pavel immediately held hands so tightly that Merlin could’ve sworn he heard their knuckles creaking from where he still stood above everyone on the table. He and Arthur used their high vantage point to pair up students who didn’t have partners, and he spied Harry immediately turning from Hermione to pair up with Ron. Hermione raised an eyebrow, huffed, and then paired up with a Ravenclaw fifth-year. Merlin had no doubts that she would have murdered Harry in a duel. Once all the students had paired up, the noise level began to die down as they all turned back towards Arthur and Merlin on the high table.

“Alright,” Merlin said. “We’re not going straight into duelling yet, because this class is first and foremost about safety. We don’t want anyone with jelly-brain or inflated heads, so I want you to talk to your partner about all the offensive and defensive spells that you know and can use. I want you to come up with a list of ones that you will use in your duel so that you don’t run the risk of seriously injuring your partner.”

Arthur then spoke up. “First years, you probably won’t know a lot at this point, and I doubt that
many of you will have learned any defensive charms. Your duels will be a lot less flashy than ours and the other higher years, but it’s important for you to learn the basics, so don’t try and overreach. We don’t want a repeat of the incident during Lockhart’s Duelling Club,” he said, sending narrowed eyes to Draco Malfoy, who had paired up with Blaise Zabini. The two of them were incredibly talented duellists themselves, as they were ranked two and three in their year level, but also because they were Slytherins and wouldn’t hesitate to use some slightly underhanded moves to win their duel – not unlike Arthur flipping Merlin on his arse.

“We’ll go more into detail during the separate Duelling Club sessions, but for now think of this as a taster,” Merlin said. “Once you’ve sorted out the spells you will and won’t use with your partner, I want you all to gather on the left side of the room. We’ve got too many people to duel all at once so we’re gonna break this up a little bit for safety reasons.” It took a few more minutes for all the students to gather along the wall, and Arthur motioned for Cora and Pavel to come out of the crowd and into the empty space in the hall.

“Who else would like to go first? We’ve got room for about ten pairs, and don’t worry about looking like an idiot,” Arthur said. “Nobody could look more dumb than Morgan just did.” Laughs broke out as the tension dissipated, and a few of the older student pairs came out into the empty space, the last pair being Hermione and the Ravenclaw fifth-year, who was looking decidedly worried at the determined set of Hermione’s eyebrows.

“Okay, remember that protego and finite incantatum are your best friends, and when you’re ready, go for it!” Arthur said. He, Merlin and some of the other seventh years were on safety duty, meaning that they had their wands at the ready to protect the crowd if any spells did go astray or awry, and Arthur had barely finished his sentence before Cora lashed out at Pavel, sending an intense knockback jinx that skidded him back a few feet. Pavel, however, had a wand made for defence, and it didn’t affect him as much as it should have. With that, the other duels began in earnest, with Hermione pushing the Ravenclaw student back with every spell she threw at them, not relenting at all to give her opponent time to fight back. Merlin wouldn’t have pinned her as such an aggressive duellist, thought she’d be more careful and logical, and he could see that Harry and Ron had gone white watching her duel. Two students from third-year were doing their best, but with a limited repartee of spells they could only continue on for so long until one of them happened to get the upper hand or it ended in a stalemate.

Cora and Pavel’s duel ended with the two of them on the floor, slammed onto their arses by the concussive force of spells that they sent at each other at the same time, and Hermione managed to get the Ravenclaw in a full-body bind. The third-years had given up, each too of a similar level to win the duel, and the rest of them ended much less dramatically than Hermione or Cora’s duels, but one Gryffindor had been hit with rictusempra and tarantallegra at the same time and was having difficulty breaking themselves out of both spells as their partner was on the ground with laughter.

Arthur cast finite incantatum, the Gryffindor student looking thankful as he did so, and the hall applauded as the opponents all bowed and headed back into the crowd. The atmosphere was much less tense than it had been, and the next set of pairs came out much quicker than in the first round.
This time, Harry and Ron came out, and so did Draco and Blaise.

“Keep an eye on those four,” Arthur told the students on guard, and Merlin watched interestedly as Tanith and Simon prepared to face off against each other. He didn’t have DADA with any Slytherin students and had never seen them in action, and wondered how they’d do.

The duels started out well – Tanith wasn’t an aggressive fighter but she combined defensive spells with her physical ability to literally dance out of the way, which made Simon angry and a little sloppy when his spells didn’t hit their mark; Harry and Ron were very well-matched and Ron’s blocking spell was just as strong as Harry’s disarming spell; Draco and Blaise were far above the level that they should’ve been and were grinning as they fought aggressively and in a way that showed that they had a lot of practice of doing it. Then Draco’s spell ‘accidently’ went wide, and a large python materialised in the middle of Ron and Harry’s duel. A few of the students screamed, but Harry and Ron simply stared down at the snake that had started hissing and spitting.

“Hilarious, Malfoy,” Harry drawled, and then he spoke a few hissing words of his own. The snake then turned and made it’s way towards Malfoy, who blanched and shot finite incantatum at it. Blaise laughed so hard he began to cry, and Draco used the opportunity to send a jelly-legs jinx at him, effectively finishing their duel. Harry finally hit Ron with a disarming charm and plucked his wand out of the air with his seeker skills, and Tanith took a page out of Arthur’s book and danced in close enough to slam Simon onto his arse and perched on his back with crossed legs and a grin.

Maya laughed as she ran over to pick Simon off the floor, long silver hair glinting in a way that made Cora sigh and lean heavily on Pavel. Maya’s partner was Lydia, and Merlin was a little concerned at the expression on their significant others’ faces. He really didn’t want to know what Cora and Pavel’s bedroom faces looked like. He saw a Ravenclaw student approach Tanith in the crowd and pass her a bulky video camera with a smile, and Tanith lit up and wiggled it in Merlin’s direction.

The duels continued well into the afternoon and past dark until all of the pairs had gotten up and duelled, although most of the first years only knew the most basic of spells, and soon the night was up and curfew was quickly approaching.

“Fantastic job, everyone!” Merlin said. “You all did really well, and I hope that you’ve all had fun along with learning something tonight. Remember, fourth years and down will be with me on Tuesday nights and fifth years and up will be with Arthur on Thursday nights, locations will be posted up on the common room notice boards.”

“See you all next week!” Arthur said, and everyone clapped for the two of them. Merlin grinned and slipped his hand into Arthur’s and felt the Gryffindor’s thumb rub over the silver ring on his finger. The students began to file out, chattering excitedly, and Merlin was honestly shocked that they hadn’t had any serious injuries aside from bruised tailbones. The rest of their friends waited behind,
Tanith chatting excitedly as she waved the video camera around, and soon the hall had emptied of all the students except for their immediate friends.

“How was it?” Arthur asked them all.

“I think you two could take over the world if you wanted to,” Cora said. “Your charisma is off the charts.”

“Thanks,” Merlin said, feeling his cheeks flush. He’d never exactly been a charismatic speaker – that had always been Arthur. However next to his side, standing with him as an equal, Merlin felt like he could’ve done anything. Arthur must’ve sensed this as he squeezed Merlin’s hand and pulled him in closer to press a kiss to his cheek. Sometimes Merlin couldn’t believe that this was his Arthur, and his Arthur wanted all of this with him, to the point that he had a magically created promise ring sitting comfortably on his finger. Though, he thought, after centuries of waiting for him to return, he goddamn well deserved all of it.

“Well, we know that we’re amazing, but we need to see how amazing Tanith’s performance was,” Arthur then piped up, and Tanith’s face split into the biggest grin Merlin had ever seen. She flipped open the video camera screen and everyone crowded around as she rewound to the beginning of it. Tinny music began to play out of the built-in speakers as the black screen lit up with a single spotlight. It had been years since Merlin had seen a ballet performance and he’d forgotten how effortlessly graceful they were – though he knew that was false, as Tanith’s calf muscles showed just how much effort ballerinas put in to that façade.

Tanith hadn’t been able to get any of the lead roles as she had been away for all term, but she’d managed to snag a small solo just after the interval. Everyone watched with bated breath, huddled around the camera, as a dozen ballerinas came out on stage, and finally one broke off – one with a blonde pixie cut.

“Holy shit,” Cedric breathed as Tanith’s solo began. They’d never seen her actually do ballet, and she looked more like someone who should be a kickboxer than a ballerina. On stage, in a tutu, en pointe with arms arcing out wide, her back bending elegantly, she looked like she was walking on air. Merlin had a hard time reconciling the blushing Slytherin in front of him with the dancer on stage, and he knew immediately that he would be buying tickets to each and every performance she would ever be in. It was obvious from the way that she danced how passionate she was about the art, and the hours and time she dedicated to it just showed how badly she wanted it. Merlin knew that once children reached about thirteen they had hit the deadline for becoming a professional ballerina, and that it was one of the most demanding arts on the planet.

“Fuck me,” Vern breathed. Tanith’s solo ended and she melded back into the flock of other ballerinas with ease, and she turned off the video and closed the screen back into the camera.
“Please dance at my wedding,” Maya gushed, and Tanith’s cheeks flamed bright red.

“How do you do all of that on one foot?” Cora asked, lifting a leg into the air. Even on flat ground in flat shoes, Cora’s leg didn’t get any higher than a ninety degree angle before she began to wobble, and Rob caught her just as she was about to do a fantastic face plant. “Can you teach me?”

“It’s pretty difficult if you don’t have flexibility,” Tanith said, and then her leg was suddenly vertical and touching her ear.

“Okay,” Cedric said. “I know we go to a magic school and things that should be impossible are not actually impossible, but I’m pretty sure that’s impossible.”

“How does your pelvis even bend that way?” Lydia asked, attempting the same. Her leg got pretty high up before she lost her balance and Pavel had to catch her.

“All that flexibility is wasted on you, Sorrows,” Pavel teased with suggestively wiggling eyebrows, and Tanith mimed vomiting, with her leg still in the fucking air. Merlin didn’t even want to try, even though Vern and Rob were leaning up against each other for support with their legs flailing about.

Tanith laughed and finally placed her foot back on the ground from where it’d been hanging about above her head. “Alright you lot, you can stop seriously injuring yourself any time you’d like. I think McGonagall said something about cancelling this if there are too many injuries.”

“We should celebrate!” Cora said, lowering her leg. “After dinner we can skip out on studying tonight and have some snacks instead. We’ll celebrate the success of the Duelling Club and also Tanith’s impossible performance.”

Tanith flushed, and everyone headed back up to their respective common rooms to get ready for dinner. By the time they headed back into the Great Hall not even half an hour later, all of the tables had been put back and the students began to file in, piling their plates high with food, especially the students that had shown up for Duelling Club. Up at the high table, Merlin looked up to Dumbledore, who caught his eye and gave him a thumbs up that had some of the younger students laughing.

When dessert was well underway and some students had already left to go to bed – or to study, in the older students’ case – Professor Sprout got up from the high table and made her way over to Merlin
with a smile.

“So, I’ve heard only good things about your Duelling Club, Mr Emery,” she said with a proud expression on her face. “Apparently you and Pendragon make a very good team together, and I doubt the students will be talking about anything except your duel for the next few days.”

“I… thank you, professor,” Merlin replied, getting a little flustered at her words. Professor Sprout rarely had anything negative to say and was always kind to her students and freely offered praise, but the raw pride in her voice made his throat close up a little and his eyes burn. The way that she said it reminded Merlin of his mother, and the fact that she had been gone for hundreds of years.

“You’re welcome dear,” she said with a pat on the shoulder, and then she was gone off to talk to some of the other students. Cedric sent Merlin a wink from opposite him with a mouth full of berry pie, and Cora elbowed him in the side and made some comment about his manners. Pavel’s leg was bouncing up and down under the table, still wide awake from the caffeine that was running through his system, and from the Gryffindor table Merlin could see Lydia watching her boyfriend with equal parts worry, fondness and exasperation. From next to her, Arthur wiggled his eyebrows at Merlin, and he stuck his tongue out in response. A strange expression took over Arthur’s face then, something like realisation and confusion in one, and it was an expression Merlin had never seen on his face before. He tilted his head at Arthur in silent question, but his boyfriend just shook his head in a way that said later.

A little concerned, Merlin filed that away, and tried to concentrate on Pavel’s story of the first interaction between his parents and his girlfriend. Supper passed quickly, and soon they were among some of the last students in the hall. Vern slapped Pavel’s hand when he tried to reach for another goblet of caffeine, and Cora decided to distract him by dragging him on a detour to the kitchens for some snacks and chamomile tea, firmly stating that there was to be no studying that night, just relaxation in their dorm room.

“Morgan’ll catch up with you later,” Arthur cut in, grabbing Merlin’s arm with a wink to the rest of their group, and dragged him off down the hall.

“I didn’t take you as one for sneaky snog sessions,” Merlin teased as Arthur pulled him down the torch-lit hallways. He didn’t have to see Arthur’s face to know that he was rolling his eyes so hard they threatened to come out of his head. Merlin wasn’t entirely sure where they were going, and when Arthur diverted them to the prefects’ bathroom, all he could think of was that for some reason Arthur really wanted to go skinny dipping with him.

“Before you ask,” Arthur said, entering the bathroom with Merlin in tow, “we are not going skinny dipping.”
“I wasn’t going to ask,” Merlin replied.

“You were thinking it, Merlin,” Arthur retorted, drawing out the first syllable of his name like he always used to, and it was both so familiar and not that it made Merlin’s heart leap in his chest. “We are, however, getting naked.”

“…We’re getting naked in a bath that’s as big as a pool and that doesn’t count as skinny dipping?” Merlin asked, incredibly sceptical of the entire situation.

“Intent is what makes it skinny dipping, Merlin,” Arthur sighed, pulling off his tie. Merlin stood still, feeling his brain slow and his heart skip a beat a little as Arthur began to undress in front of him. It wasn’t until Arthur’s robe, tie and jumper was on the ground that he turned to look at Merlin, half his shirt buttons undone.

“Well?” Arthur asked expectantly.

“Still don’t understand how this isn’t skinny dipping, but okay,” Merlin replied, pulling off his tie. Arthur started up the water, and apparently the scents changed regularly, as the water now smelled like fresh pine needles and a scent that Merlin directly associated with meditation in druidic camps. He stripped off the rest of his uniform and definitely checked out Arthur’s arse as he bent over to take off his socks before he slid into the water. The look Arthur shot over his shoulder was incredibly knowing, and Merlin flushed a little as he got into the water next to him.

“So you want to explain why we’re not skinny dipping?” Merlin asked, relaxing back into the water. Arthur’s shoulder was warm against his and bubbles broke off from the water to drift up into the air.

“Well, something occurred to me earlier during dinner,” Arthur said.

“I noticed,” Merlin replied. “Your face did something very interesting.”

“Shut up, Merlin,” Arthur sighed. “I was looking across the hall, thinking about how strange it was to see you at Hogwarts, once again hiding who you really were and your magic, before I realised that I wasn’t sure why you were.”
“What d’you mean?” Merlin asked.

“Well… you’re mentioned in quite a few of our textbooks. You’re a legendary figure to most of the wizarding world, your name is invoked frequently, and your druidic title is considered sacred. You’re the most well known figure in magical history, and yet here you are at a magic school under a fake name for… what reason?” Arthur asked, and Merlin blinked.

“Oh,” Merlin replied. “I didn’t even think about it, to be honest.”

“You didn’t think of telling me why you’re hiding your identity in the one place you’d be accepted now? You know it’s illegal to be beheaded or burned at the stake now, right?” Arthur asked with a withering glare, and Merlin pulled a face at him.


“Then un-complicate it,” Arthur said. Merlin sighed and tilted his head back so his eyes were on the ceiling above the two of them that had been enchanted to look like twinkling stars.

“So you remember the Crystal of Neahtid?” Merlin asked.

“Ugh, yes.”

“So that’s still hanging around,” Merlin said nonchalantly. “And occasionally I’ll take a look and see if anything horrific is going to happen. Most of the time I do see something horrific, but I won’t be allowed to interfere.”

“Why not?”

“The Balance. It’s… how the entire universe operates, different balances between natural and unnatural forces. Life and death is usually the big one, but there are a lot of them… it’s difficult to explain to someone who doesn’t feel it as acutely as I do,” Merlin said, struggling to find the right words. “The druids understood the balance, and when something big happened they could usually feel it, but not to the degree that I do, which is that I feel it all the time. I can’t not.”
“Let me guess, something big is about to happen,” Arthur said.

“Yup,” Merlin replied. “In the past, the world would usually right itself again, and so if I interfered, I’d end up throwing the balance off even more. The world is very good at this – for example, me.”

“You?”

“Yeah. When your father went on his massacre of all magic users, the level of magic in the world was seriously depleted when they all died, and the world managed to right the Balance by imbuing all of that lost magic into one individual – me. It’s why I’m tied into magic so much; the world created me to replace what it had lost, and made sure that it would never lose me again, hence why I’m still… around,” Merlin said, ending the sentence rather lamely.

“You can’t die,” Arthur said.

“Oh, I can,” Merlin laughed self-deprecatingly. “Just not for long.”

“Merlin…” Arthur said softly, and Merlin waved a hand through the air.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “The point is, the world is very good at righting itself, and so most of the time I don’t need to interfere, not after you were my destiny and I failed you. I couldn’t interfere in anything until you came back… until now, anyway.”

“What’s happening? What did you see in the crystal?” Arthur asked, sliding his fingers between Merlin’s. Merlin sighed. There wasn’t really any way of saying this.

“Voldemort’s coming back,” he said. Arthur stilled next to him.

“...Voldemort Voldemort?”

“Do you know anyone else called Voldemort?” Merlin asked exasperatedly, levelling a glare at Arthur.
“Just checking that we’re on the same page,” Arthur replied. “So you saw in the crystal that Voldemort is coming back and it’s a big enough event that the Balance won’t be able to right itself naturally and needs you to interfere.”

“You’re much sharper than I gave you credit for,” Merlin teased.

“I should be telling you that,” Arthur scoffed. “So Voldemort isn’t dead?”

“I don’t think so,” Merlin said. “I remember feeling the Balance shift the night he supposedly died, but it never fully righted itself. I thought that was just because of the lingering effects of his reign but now I know that he never died, and he’ll be resurrected at the end of this year.”

“Do you know how?”

“No clue,” Merlin shrugged. “In my vision I saw Harry in a graveyard with the Triwizard Cup thrown off to the side next to a body.”

“A body?” Arthur asked.

“Cedric. It was Cedric,” Merlin breathed out quietly, thinking of the young Hufflepuff boy who had become his best friend. He remembered thinking that he wouldn’t let an innocent die when he first saw the vision, but now that Cedric was the person he’d been the closest to in hundreds of years… he would give his own life, for good, to make sure that he lived.

“So that’s why you entered the tournament,” Arthur said. “Cedric was supposed to be the champion instead of you?”

“Apparently,” Merlin sighed. Arthur leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on Merlin’s cheek and cupped his jaw with the hand that wasn’t entwined with his own.

“Voldemort doesn’t stand a chance against you,” he whispered, breath brushing over Merlin’s ear, and he laughed.

“Your newfound confidence in me is staggering,” Merlin laughed. “It seems like only yesterday that
I could barely tie my own shoes let alone follow you into battle, and now you’re saying that I could easily defeat one of the greatest dark wizards the world has ever seen.”

“My opinion on you changed somewhat drastically in the last few days of my old life,” Arthur said. “That, and you can nearly best me in a duel, and I could take on Voldemort any day, so…”

“I would like to see that,” Merlin laughed.

“I wouldn’t even need my wand,” Arthur said. “I bet Voldemort knows bugger all about hand to hand combat. Give me my sword back and I’ll run him through. I bet he doesn’t have any defences for that. Where is my sword?”

“Probably still at the bottom of Avalon Lake,” Merlin replied in between his laughter. “We could go and get it if you wanted, but last time I tried to swim down there I drowned.”

“…Was that the gillyweed incident?” the Gryffindor asked.

“Yup,” Merlin said. “Don’t really like to talk about it. We could get your sword if you wanted though.”

“Where would I keep it?” Arthur asked. “I can’t exactly hide the most famous sword in history under my bed.”

“I have a house.”

“You have a house?”

“…Yes? Why is that so shocking?”

“I was just thinking that we’d be able to avoid the hassle of buying one for ourselves once we graduate,” Arthur said.

“You want to move in together?”
“I… yes, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I just didn’t think that you would. King Arthur and all, didn’t think that you’d want to live in a little cottage on the lake that you died in,” Merlin said, running a hand through Arthur’s golden hair, getting it wet and covered in little soap bubbles.

“That’s kind of morbid, Merlin.”

“It’s your fault for dying on me,” Merlin accused.

“I didn’t ask to die!” Arthur shot back, managing to look offended. Merlin just shook his head and then shoved Arthur underwater, laughing as he surfaced coughing, spluttering and completely covered with bubbles.

“So that’s how it is, huh?” he asked, shaking the water from his head.

“That’s how it is,” Merlin replied, and then screeched in a very dignified fashion as Arthur launched himself at him. Twenty minutes later they both exited the prefects’ bathroom soaked from head to toe, and when Merlin entered his dorm room to see Cora sitting on the end of Pavel’s bed, she wiggled her eyebrows at him.

“Quickie in the shower with the head prefect, Emery?” she asked, and Cedric nearly snorted his pumpkin juice out his nose.

“Yeah, definitely,” Rob drawled sarcastically, chewing on a liquorice wand. “Can’t you see how sexed up he is?” Cora pulled a face at Rob as Merlin headed into the bathroom to quickly change into his pyjamas, seeing as it was apparently a pyjama party in their dorm. Vern threw him a cauldron cake as he sat down on his bed, and the six of them talked shit late into the night.
AAAAND HERE IT IS FOLKS, THE LAST 'FILLER' CHAPTER BEFORE WE GET ON WITH THIS FUCKING PLOT. We're on the home stretch, guys, and I can see the finish line. I'm sorry it's been so fucking long since I've updated, and I hope the little bits of fluff in this will keep ya'll happy, and thank you so much to everyone who's been reading this and sticking with it so far, whether you've been here since 2013 or just started reading yesterday. I love you all so much, and see you in the New Year!

Love, Evvie.

The maze on the Quidditch pitch was growing much faster than shrubbery normally would without the help of magic, and by the time exams finally rolled around, the hedges towered over Merlin’s head, and they were only bound to get taller. Merlin was immediately reminded of that movie Labyrinth with David Bowie, and thought that he should take a TV and VHS player over to that Ravenclaw and see if they could get it to work in Hogwarts so they could have a movie night in preparation. It also reminded Merlin that it wasn’t his first time being in a maze, and that he should actually take some time out of his study to try and figure out how the hell he was going to get through the maze.

Any of the things he encountered on the way he’d be able to deal with no problem, it was just the fact that he needed to get to the cup first, before Harry and the other champions. Whatever happened with Voldemort’s resurrection, the Triwizard Cup was involved, as he’d seen it in his vision next to Cedric’s sprawled out corpse.

Merlin shuddered and turned from the window where he’d been looking out at the Quidditch pitch to where Cedric was most definitely alive, face flushed and hair sticking out at all angles as he fervently muttered to himself and made notes in the margins of his textbook. The crazed expression and ridiculous hair didn’t take away from his good looks though, Merlin noted. He kept an eye on the clock; it was only ten minutes until he was due to head down to one of the abandoned classrooms in the West Wing that Dumbledore had set aside for Duelling Club. It was large and filled with minimal furniture, just some comfortable cushions and wide-open space.

The few Duelling Club sessions that Merlin had been teaching so far had been going well, and he and Arthur would compare notes afterwards, talking about what went well and what didn’t. Merlin found it much easier to be teaching the younger years, as he still didn’t quite have the best grasp on modern magic outside of what instinctually came to him, and would’ve had a hard time answering technique questions for some of the more complicated spells.
The fourth years and under weren’t learning anything more difficult than basic stunning spells, though a few times Harry, Hermione and the older students had managed to knock one of their mates out for a few seconds with it. Arthur was having much more fun with the older years, teaching more advanced duelling techniques and bringing out mannequins for more destructive spells like confringo and reducto.

Merlin finally kicked himself out of his seat and closed all of his books, sighing at the amount of parchment that piled up next to them, scribbled over in quill ink and then pen ink once he decided that quills, while nostalgic to use, were ridiculously inefficient for note taking. He ruffled Cora’s hair on the way out, which she hated, and cut through the castle to the West Wing, picking up some of the students in his class on the way.

“Alright, is this everyone?” Merlin asked, looking around at the forty or so students that had entered the empty classroom. He noted that the Slytherin students were firmly huddled together in a corner, directing glares at any Gryffindor students that they saw, while the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws mingled together with frustrated expressions.

“We’re going to change things up today,” Merlin said, and everyone stopped their murmuring and looked over to him, even Draco Malfoy. “If you’re a Gryffindor, you must pair up with a Slytherin, and vice versa. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, you can pair up as you see fit.” Immediately the class was in an uproar, and Hermione was the only Gryffindor student that wasn’t going off her head and waving her arms about in anger.

“Shut it!” Merlin yelled. “I would’ve thought you’d all be eager to duel each other.” At his words, the class fell thoughtfully silent again, and Harry and Draco began to glare daggers at each other across the room. Hermione put her hand up.

“Yes, Hermione?”

“Isn’t this a… bad idea, Morgan? Encouraging the house rivalry?” she asked boldly.

“It’s the opposite,” Merlin replied without elaborating. “Now if I see any unfair fighting like I know you’re prone to, I will kick you out of the class or possibly defenestrate you depending on how much you annoy me. Now pair up.” The Gryffindors and Slytherins grumbled but reluctantly paired up, Harry and Draco immediately stepping up to each other with death-glares.

“Great!” Merlin said, and allowed a disconcerting grin to appear on his face. “Now you’re going to
pair up with another pair, and we’re going to have doubles duels. No take backs, your rival is now your partner. Work together!”

He swore that he would remember the expressions on Harry and Draco’s faces for the rest of time. He had to share this idea with Arthur. Ron, who had reluctantly teamed up with Theodore Nott, had immediately run to Harry’s side, and the four of them now stood at the ready.

“All right, now you’ll have five minutes to go over all the spells you know and the counters to them, and come to an agreement about what spells you’re using like normal. Fourth years, I know you’ve been learning more in Charms and DADA in preparation for exams, so I want you to really push the boundaries of what you know. Remember, no seriously damaging spells, but this time I’ll allow the confundus charm if at least one member of each pair knows how to counter it,” Merlin said, and Malfoy’s eyes lit up with an unholy glee as he grinned at Ron, who was baring his teeth. At least he was until Harry harshly elbowed him in the side.

Merlin waited five minutes and then sent red sparks around the room, getting everyone’s attention.

“All right, now since this is a doubles duel and you haven’t had one before, I want you to listen up. You need to figure out who in your pair is better at offense or defence, and you need to plan accordingly,” he instructed. “For example, someone with a very strong protego charm may take first defense.”

“What’s first defence?” a second-year asked.

“Has anyone ever played a game of tennis?” Merlin asked. “Specifically doubles.” A few hands went up around the room, while some of the purebloods just looked confused.

“In a game of tennis, there’s only one ball. One player will stand closer to the net than the other, one on the left and one on the right, and so it’s generally easy to tell who’s going to hit the ball when it comes to them. However, sometimes the ball might be hit right down the middle of them, or not particularly close or far, and both players have a relatively equal chance of hitting the ball. In order for the players to not run into each other or fumble the shot by both trying to hit at once, if the player is nearly one-hundred-percent sure they know who can hit it, they’ll announce it, usually yelling ‘mine!’ or ‘yours!’ and take the shot,” Merlin explained. “If you work well in a team together, you’ll be able to tell immediately who will be better to counter a spell thrown your way, and you won’t fumble. First defence is who in your pair is better suited for immediate defence in an ambiguous situation, and first offence is the opposite. Clear?”

Everyone in the class seemed to understand the concept, and turned to their partners to begin
planning their attack/defence strategy. Ron and Nott looked a little awkward, and Harry and Draco were arguing hotly under their breath to each other. Merlin stealthily stretched his hearing a little in their direction to meet them.

“I’m better than you at defence and offense, Potter,” Malfoy was arguing.

“Don’t be a moron,” Harry sighed. “You’re better at defence but I’m better at offense.”

“I don’t think so,” Malfoy retorted, and Harry made a frustrated noise under his breath.

“Look, your wand is made of hawthorn, right? We learned in Charms that hawthorn’s very well suited to healing magic and other protective spells, also known as defence, while holly is usually used for people who are destined to encounter danger and are more powerful at offensive spells, particularly when paired with a phoenix feather core like mine,” Harry explained, and even at a distance Merlin could clearly see that Malfoy was rather taken aback at Harry’s words.

“Merlin, you do actually listen in class, don’t you?” Malfoy said, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“No shit,” he replied. “So, are you going to be first defence or what?”

Malfoy was silent for a long minute before, “fine. But you’d better not let us down, Potter.” Merlin grinned – he’d noticed that a lot of the Slytherin-Gryffindor rivalry was centered around those two, and if he could get them to not constantly be at each other’s throats all the time, house relations might actually improve. Ron and Nott were arguing hotly too, Nott insisting that he wasn’t going to trust Ron’s wand, and Ron replying that this was his new one, the one that didn’t get snapped by the Whomping Willow, and that his wandwork had greatly improved.

“Alright, are you all sorted?” Merlin asked. Mostly everyone agreed, while a few more pairs were finishing up their arguments. “Right, when you’ve discussed who’s taking first offense and defence, you may begin.”

Hermione had paired up with Millicent Bulstrode against Pansy Parkinson and Lavender Brown, and to the misfortune of their opponents, they were both immediately put on the offensive by Hermione and Millicent’s tandem aggressive first strike. While Millicent simply had incredibly strong spells, Hermione’s were less so but far more focused, not giving Lavender or Pansy any time to think up an offensive strategy on their own. The aggressive start caused Pansy and Lavender, two very noted enemies, to immediately put aside their hatred and start trying to figure out a hole in Hermione and
Millicent’s strategy.

Over with Harry and Malfoy, Ron was doing very well at first defence, and Harry’s instinctive quick thinking in battle was hugely advantageous to Malfoy, who seemed to take more of the backseat while he calculated everyone’s moves to figure out their duelling style. It was immediately apparent that under stress, and when forcibly paired together, Gryffindors and Slytherins made very good teams.

Now only if they’d see that outside of doubles duels.

His attention was snatched away from those two duels, however, by a young third-year student with a shock of white-blond hair who was facing off against Ginny Weasley and a Slytherin. She had probably the most unusual duelling style that Merlin had ever seen. She alternated between offense and defence without a care in the world, and seemed fascinated by every spell in their duel. Merlin also noticed that for a few spells, she managed to do them non-verbally, even though she was only a third year. She’d be one to keep an eye on.

Within ten minutes, every duel had been won or come to a draw, and Harry and Malfoy were the victors of their particular match, with Hermione and Millicent looking particularly smug while Pansy and Lavender had been thoroughly defeated very early on. Millicent seemed to be looking at Hermione in a newfound light, as though she hadn’t imagined that such a bookish girl could be just as aggressive as her in a duel.

“Good job everyone! Unfortunately we need to cut it short tonight, as NEWT exams are starting up this week and I need to drown myself in studying, but I hope you’ve all learned something about yourselves and each other tonight,” Merlin announced. A few students clapped appreciatively for him, and everyone began to file out. Harry hung back a little, and Hermione and Ron waited with him. Merlin waited until all of the other students had filed out before approaching them.

“You three did really well tonight,” he praised. “Harry and Hermione, the two of you would be a force to be reckoned with, and Ron, you’re getting much faster with your reaction times.”

“Thanks, Morgan,” Ron grinned.

“Harry had a question to ask you,” Hermione piped up, and the dark-haired boy side-eyed her a little, and she huffed. “Well, I have a question for you because Harry’s too much of an idiot to ask it. I was wondering if there were any spells in particular that would be helpful to Harry in the third task that he should practice on. I’ve already drawn up a list that I think would be most useful, but I just wanted to know if you think that there are any I should add.” She then produced a roll of parchment
from underneath her robes with a very extensive and thorough list of spells, both offensive, defensive and practical, and many of them were fifth-year and above spells.

Merlin whistled. “That’s quite a list. I don’t imagine you’ll need all of them, though, but if you can master most of these you’ll be good to go.” He didn't tell them that point me would’ve been a helpful spell on the list. As much as he wanted to help Harry, he needed to beat him in the third task to have any chance of stopping Voldemort. All he knew was that the Cup had something to do with his vision in the graveyard, and he couldn't put Harry in any danger.

“Thanks!” Harry breathed, clearly nervous.

“If you want, I could ask Arthur to take you into the fifth year and up session on Thursday and give you some practice with some of these?” Merlin offered.

“That would be great,” Harry said. “If he doesn’t mind, of course.”

“I’ll talk him into it,” Merlin grinned. “Now get some sleep, you lot.”

“Night, Morgan,” they chorused, and headed off down the torch-lit hallways of the castle. Merlin grinned and followed along behind them, breaking away at the entrance hall as he headed over to the Hufflepuff common room. Study was still underway, as the first exam was on Friday and some were even during the weekend, and Merlin plopped himself straight back into the chair he had been in just over an hour ago, and fell straight back into study.

It was nearly eleven p.m. when a sudden, sharp tapping noise made Merlin jolt so hard from the study stupor he was in that he spilled scarlet ink everywhere. He swore and cleaned it up, and looked over to the large bay windows that took up the far wall of the Hufflepuff common room. A small grey owl was impatiently tapping, trying to get in the closed windows.

With a frown, Merlin cracked open one of the smaller windows and the owl zoomed in, dumped a letter on Merlin’s lap, and zoomed back out just as fast as it’d come in. Blinking a few times, not entirely sure if he was hallucinating or not, Merlin closed the window and picked up the letter. It was less a letter and more a scrap of parchment folded in two for privacy’s sake, and when he unfolded it he recognised the handwriting instantly.

Room of Requirement, eleven-fifteen.
That was startlingly vague, Merlin thought. He looked back over to his study table to see that Cedric had fallen asleep, reversed letters staining his face in green ink from where he’d slumped over on his notes. Next to him, Cora had also conked out face-first onto the table, nothing visible except the huge curly cloud that was her hair. Over on the couches, Vern and Pavel were leaning on one another, Vern already asleep and Pavel’s head dipping towards his chest, then snapping up suddenly as he tried to fight off the same urge. Rob was nowhere to be seen.

Merlin shrugged and hastily shoved all his notes into his textbooks, making sure to dry the ink with a spell before he did, and left the common room, grabbing his cloak on the way. The castle was eerily still, and the brisk spring air slipped in through the open archway windows in the stone walls, curling up around Merlin’s ankles. He shivered and let his eyes glow briefly golden as he cast a warming charm that nestled itself comfortably in his ribcage.

He was only two floors below the Room of Requirement, but it was nearly on the opposite side of the castle, and he didn’t want to get caught out late by Filch. Most of the times if he had Cedric with him, Filch would reluctantly let them go considering that Cedric was a prefect, but Merlin didn’t want to run into him alone. However, he did have practice at getting around echoing stone castles unseen, almost an entire lifetime of them in fact, and he was only a few corridors away from the Room before he heard someone.

He immediately froze behind a statue, hearing sharpening as he concentrated. He could make out harsh breathing and uneven footsteps – one of a boot, and the other wood. Professor Moody, approaching quickly.

Merlin took a deep breath and closed his eyes, feeling his power flare beneath his skin. With a thought, there was a slight rippling sensation at his feet that rapidly made its way up Merlin’s body until it covered him entirely, and then stopped. Merlin opened his eyes and looked down at his arm that he held in front of him and saw nothing. He was entirely invisible, both on the visible and some non-visible spectrums, not trusting what Moody’s eye could or could not see.

He held his breath and calmed his rapid heartbeat when the uneven footsteps suddenly rounded the corner and approached his location. He didn’t have to stretch his hearing anymore to hear Moody’s breathing, and eventually the auror came to a stop right in front of the statue that Merlin was standing behind.

The man was holding a folded-up piece of parchment that was incredibly detailed, and Merlin sharpened his eyesight to see what was on it. He nearly couldn’t contain his gasp when he saw what it was – a real-time map of Hogwarts, showing that he was standing no further than three feet away from Moody.

His name was flickering strangely on the map too, as most of the time it read Morgan Emery, but
would occasionally flicker out of focus. Only because Merlin knew what he was looking for did he see Merlin Emrys appear for a split second. Luckily for him, positioned where he was behind the statue, his position on the map made it doubtful which side of the wall he was on – either in the same hallway as Moody, or the one adjacent.

With a little nudge of magic, his name on the map (accompanied by little footsteps) hurried off down the hallway parallel to them, straight back to the Hufflepuff common room. Moody grunted in what seemed to be humour, and then carried on down the hallway. It wasn’t until his footsteps died way that Merlin let out a sigh of relief and made himself visible once more.

He finally arrived at the Room of Requirement just a few minutes after the meeting time. The door revealed itself quickly, and he let himself in before anyone could see him pacing in the hallway-and promptly lost all the breath in his lungs once he entered. He’d been shoved back against the door, and it was only the lips on his that stopped his knee-jerk response of sending his attacker clear across the room.

With quite a note of surprise, but also a larger note of enjoyment, he grinned into the kiss and wrapped his arms around Arthur’s waist, pulling him in so they were pressed flush against the door. Arthur’s fingers came up to tangle into Merlin’s hair, and he tightened his grip on Arthur’s hips as he did so, a pleasantly warm feeling blooming in his chest. Although, that might’ve been the heating charm.

Arthur broke away to start kissing down Merlin’s neck, nimble fingers shoving off Merlin’s Hufflepuff robes, and he let out a quiet laugh.

“What’s brought this on?” he asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

“Nothing in particular,” Arthur replied. “Just you.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that exams are this week and you need some form of stress relief?” Merlin asked with a teasing lilt in his voice. Arthur sighed and pulled away from Merlin’s neck to glare at him, lips red and flushed from their kiss and so very, very distracting.

“Possibly,” Arthur admitted. “But as loath as I am to admit it, Merlin, you are an attractive human being and that may have the slightest of effects on me.”
“Wow, you really know how to compliment a man, Arthur,” Merlin replied.

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Oh shut up,” he admonished, and shut up Merlin did, mainly because Arthur’s lips were back on his and his fingers were quickly doing away with the buttons of Merlin’s shirt.

A questionable amount of time later, Merlin lay on his stomach on the soft grass of the druidic encampment that the Room of Requirement had dreamed up for them. He was half draped over Arthur, resting his head on the Gryffindor’s collarbone, cloak covering the two of them as he enjoyed the feeling of Arthur’s fingertips skating up and down his spine.

“What d’you think would’ve happened if we’d done this back in Camelot?” Arthur asked quietly.

“Done what?” Merlin countered. “Slept together, dated, duelled or gotten sort-of engaged?”

“All of the above,” Arthur replied with a dry drawl.

“Well we would’ve both been arrested for the duelling, I imagine I would have been burned at the stake while you possibly would’ve gotten away with it, being King and all,” Merlin started. “If we slept together, you would’ve had a very large bisexual freak out, and I think if we’d dated and gotten sort-of engaged that Gwen would’ve been heartbroken.” Arthur’s breath hitched at Merlin’s last comment.

“You know, it feels both like it was just yesterday, eighteen years ago and a lifetime that I was in Camelot,” Arthur admitted. “Some mornings I wake up half expecting you to wander in wearing that ridiculous thing you wore around your neck and shove me out of bed with that stupid grin on your face. Sometimes I expect to wake up back home with my foster parents, sometimes I’m lost for a moment when Gwen isn’t wrapped around me, and sometimes I wake up feeling that I’m exactly where I should be.”

Merlin leaned on his elbow and reached up to press a kiss to Arthur’s cheek. “It’s been nearly a thousand years for me, and I still think the same.”

“That you want to wake up with Gwen wrapped around you? There something you should be telling me, Merlin?” Arthur retorted, and Merlin rolled his eyes.
“Why do I put up with you?” Merlin sighed.

“My cutting wit.”

“Yes. Definitely that.”

When they parted ways later to head back to their respective dormitories to get some much needed pre-exam sleep, Arthur showed off his significant prowess in disillusionment charms, pressing an invisible kiss to Merlin’s cheek before he headed off. With a grin, Merlin headed back to the Hufflepuff dorms without running into any more people, and collapsed immediately into sleep.

Merlin’s first exam was on Friday, his Potions practical, where they all had to brew a Shrinking Solution off by heart under the keen eyes of the Ministry of Magic examiners. They kept their attention on all of the students to prevent cheating, but focused more on the students who were top in the class – namely Merlin and Cedric, but they were also focusing on Cora a little more than they normally would considering her recent skyrocketing grades. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun and Merlin could see the perspiration drip down her face from her hair line as she leaned over the steaming cauldron, an expression of mild horror and confusion on her face.

Merlin wanted to feel a little guilty about adding so much pressure onto Cora as of late, but she really did deserve it after drugging him and Arthur (although she couldn’t have known Merlin’s rather traumatic history with knockout drugs and potions) and she didn’t actually seem to be doing too bad once she tried to concentrate and really put her mind to it. She did get into NEWT level Potions under Snape’s incredibly high standards in the first place.

Merlin seemed to be the only student who was totally calm in the entire room, and one of the examiners had stopped roaming to look over his shoulder eagerly at his cauldron bubbling away. He would occasionally stop his stirring to add some chopped daisy roots or leech juice, and he could tell that he’d definitely piqued the interest of the examiner when he went a little off book and decided to shake his peeled shrivelfig before adding it, or adding an extra centimetre of sliced caterpillar.

He turned off his flame just a minute before their time was up, and the examiner behind him quickly bottled and stoppered his potion, labelling it with his name in clear printing. Merlin looked over to Cedric and saw that he’d also finished. The two grinned at each other, and then a loud gong sounded to let everyone know that they were done. Immediately everyone stepped away from their potion, and the examiners came around to bottle a sample. Cora’s potion, surprisingly, was only a few shades off the emerald green that it was required to be.

“Impressive work, Mr Emery,” said the examiner who’d been watching Merlin. “Have you
considered a Potions apprenticeship at Hogwarts or perhaps studying the subject abroad? You have a natural talent I have not seen since Severus Snape.”

Merlin blinked for a few seconds, and then grinned. “I’ll keep it in mind, thanks.”

He left the exam room with Cora and Cedric at his side, the others following behind, and Cora’s high-pitched whine echoed down the corridors like a siren. Pavel laughed, and Cedric wrapped an arm around Cora’s shoulders comfortingly while sending a cheeky grin over to Merlin.

They had their Potions theoretical exam the next day, wherein they had to write an essay about Golpalott’s Third Law for antidote creation, and Merlin thought that he’d probably receive extra marks considering that he managed to link in some of what they’d learned in Alchemy. He wasn’t as thoroughly abysmal at his Transfiguration practical as he could’ve been, but his end result probably still would’ve made Professor McGonagall sigh. His theoretical went much better, as did his Herbology one, which Maya nailed in half the time allotted.

Their two Defence Against the Dark Arts exams were a breeze, especially for him and Arthur, and many students from all levels actually approached the two of them for the next few days thanking them for the extra practice they had at Duelling Club, as it’d helped them do much better in their practicals. Harry didn’t have any exams though, as he and the other champions were exempt, though Merlin rather thought that their third task was rather well-suited to Harry: danger and duelling on the fly.

By far his easiest exam was History of Magic, considering that Merlin had actually lived through most of what they had covered, and soon his final exam rolled around – Magical Theory, just a day before the final task. Their essay question was to list the main differences between Old and modern magic, but then talk about how those things were similar and connected through published theories about the mutation of magic through the Dark Ages. Merlin could easily identify the differences, but struggled to remember the reasons that the two types of magic were the same.

Of course, Old and modern magic came from the same stream of magic, which was the world around them that channelled itself through oneself as a conduit, but Merlin still couldn’t quite pick out why he struggled so much with modern magic. He did his best to remember theses that they’d read to support his answer, and in the end came up with a response that would satisfy the examiners but not himself.

Perhaps Arthur, who could instinctually use modern magic and now had Old Magic coursing through his veins, would be able to understand this kind of magic better than Merlin, Magic Incarnate, could.
That night their entire group – all the Hufflepuffs, Arthur, Lydia and their Gryffindors, plus their handful of Slytherin friends – utilised the Room of Requirement once again to have a butterbeer infused sleepover, celebrating the end of exams. Only the fourth and fifth years had exams the next day, and so Lydia managed to haul in a huge record player, with Vern and Rob carrying the collection of both Muggle and wixen vinyls between them.

Merlin danced with his arms around Arthur’s shoulders, and Arthur’s hands on his hips, and as he leaned his forehead against Arthur’s he managed to completely forget about the fact that the vision that he’d seen in the Crystal of Neahtid, the one that brought him to Hogwarts in the first place, would most likely take place the next night.
**Thirdly**

Chapter Summary

The Third Task is finally here and Merlin Emrys is quietly losing his shit.

Chapter Notes

Holy crap guys, it's here, the beginning of the end. There's maybe going to be one or two more chapters after this.... and then it's over. This thing that I've been working on since 2013, the longest piece of fiction I have ever written is coming to an end. I'm sorry it's been so long, I hope this sates you all, and I'll be back shortly. Thank you to all of you who have supported me, whether you started reading today or two years ago. You're awesome, and keep on keepin' on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That night, Merlin dreamed that he stood outside with Arthur, Hogwarts looming behind them. They were dressed in their school robes, but Arthur was gripping Excalibur in his right hand; Merlin raised his wand while holding a large, red leather-bound tome in his left hand. The air around them was thick with fog and the stray sparks of spells, and Merlin's owl Gaius screeched as he flew past them. All around them, familiar faces of his friends, classmates and teachers stared in awe at the two of them, and Merlin knew that they didn’t just see Morgan and Arthur, but that they saw Merlin Emrys and the Once and Future King.
At their feet lay the corpse of Voldemort, sprawled out ungainly and undignified. At the very front of the crowd surrounding them, Merlin looked up to see Harry breathless and grinning, his scar having disappeared from his forehead – the burden of being the Chosen One removed.
When Merlin woke up, he was curled into Arthur’s chest with their arms and legs twined together. He could tell that Arthur was awake by the cadence of his breathing and the soft fingertips that he was running up and down Merlin’s back. He smiled and burrowed further into Arthur’s chest, comfortable and warm tangled up on the futon with the love of his very long life, feeling the weight of a promise wrapped around one of his fingers.

They appeared to be the only ones awake; their friends spread out around them were all breathing deeply and unmoving, which was rare for Maya who would say the strangest things in her sleep. The couples had all paired off – he and Arthur, Cora and Maya, Lydia and Pavel, and the rest of them were scattered between them all with overlapping limbs and forsaking their pillows to use each other. Merlin had absolutely no idea what time it was, but the task wasn’t until night, and none of them had any more exams.

“Oh,” he said aloud at his own thought processes.

“What?” Arthur asked, muffling the question into Merlin’s hair.

“Third task is tonight,” Merlin whispered into Arthur’s collarbone, keeping his voice down so he wouldn’t wake the others. “I managed to completely forget until now. I wonder what’s going to happen.”

“Whatever happens you can deal with it,” Arthur replied just as quietly. “And if you can’t, I can always rush in and save you.”

Merlin laughed. “I’ve always been the one saving you, if you remember rightly.” Arthur didn’t reply, just pinched Merlin’s waist sharply in retaliation, letting Merlin know that he’d effectively won the argument. He grinned and pressed a kiss to Arthur’s exposed collarbone, then continued up the line of his neck, making the Gryffindor shudder. He worked his way up to Arthur’s lips and lost all grip on reality as he melted into his arms.

It could’ve been a minute or thirty later when they pulled apart at Maya’s unconscious muttering. Most of the words were inaudible or garbled, but they distinctly heard ‘burger’, ‘fuck you I do what I want’ and ‘I don’t want any boiled eggs’. Lydia giggled from where she’d woken up, and then it was a domino effect of everyone opening their eyes and moving into various degrees of consciousness.

Pavel, of course, was still dead to the world by the time everyone else was awake and up. Lydia stroked his hair and pressed gentle kisses to his forehead and cheeks until he reluctantly woke up.
“Question,” Cora drawled from her position on the floor. “Is anyone awake enough to go and get the coffee?”

“I guess we could,” Arthur piped up. “Morgan and I were first up. Who wants some?” All nine hands shot into the air and Merlin sighed. “Lazy bastards.”

The two of them pulled their robes on from where they’d been dropped haphazardly on the floor before they’d gone to sleep and headed out of the Room of Requirement towards the Great Hall and the brilliant all-day buffet. The castle was a strange mixture of stress and relief, considering most of the year levels had finished their exams and were enjoying their first day of stress-free relaxation while the fourth and fifth years were still in the frantic mode they’d all been in for the past few weeks.

The Great Hall was a little busier than it had been, with students waking up late after well-deserved sleep-ins and heading down for breakfast. Most of the teachers, however, had already eaten and the head table held only a handful of teachers. Professor Sprout was making her way through a cup of tea and gave Merlin a bright smile as he entered the Great Hall. He broke away from Arthur, who went to grab the coffee, and approached the head table to speak to her.

“Morning, Professor,” he smiled.

“Hello Morgan,” she replied. “How are you holding up?”

“You mean after the party we had last night or the fact that the third task is tonight?” Merlin asked, and she laughed.

“Both, I suppose.”

“A little tired, but less so than the others so Arthur and I have been tasked on getting the coffee so everyone can finally get down here for breakfast. As for tonight… well, I’ve got all day to ready myself, don’t I?” he said.

Professor Sprout smiled and reached out a hand to grab hold of his. “Unlike the rest of my students you have only been in my house for a few months, and yet I am just as proud of you as I am the others. I have absolutely no doubt that you will do Hufflepuff house and Hogwarts proud tonight, whether you win or not.”
“Thank you, Professor.”

“Though I sincerely do hope that you win,” Sprout said sternly. “Hufflepuff hasn’t had a big win like this in a while. Gryffindor keep taking the House cup, and the Quidditch cup is usually them or Slytherin.”

“I’ll do my absolute best, Professor,” Merlin vowed. She gave his hand a little squeeze and then let go, gesturing for him to head back over to where Arthur had collected eleven goblets, a large jug of hot coffee and some sugar and milk. Between the two of them they managed to levitate the whole lot back up to the Room of Requirement, and many of the first and second years thought that it was great fun to do a rather precarious limbo underneath the hovering coffee.

Cora pounced on them when they arrived back, and soon everyone was awake enough that they could all then head back down to the Great Hall for proper food. Harry was awake and one of the only students in his year at the Gryffindor table, considering that he didn’t have exams, and so Merlin waved him over to join them all.

“Ready for tonight?” he asked.

“As much as I can be, I guess,” Harry replied. “I’m kind of relieved that Hermione has exams today because she’s been working me to the bone with that list of spells and jinxes she thinks I’ll need to know.”

“But do you feel more prepared?” Cedric asked.

“Yeah, actually,” Harry replied.

“Then it was worth it!” Cedric said. “Thinking on your feet is something you only get with experience and practice, and as a fourteen-year-old in a competition with students who are over seventeen, you’re left at a severe disadvantage. So having practice with Hermione and going to the duelling club will hopefully bump you up a few notches.”

“Harry’s the most instinctive dueller I’ve seen in a while,” Arthur weighed in. “He’s going to be fine.” Harry preened at the praise, and Merlin wrapped his arm around the younger boy’s shoulders. He was far too young to have such a burden placed on his shoulders, and if everything later on went according to plan, he wouldn’t have to shoulder Atlas’ burden for much longer.
Now that exams were over for most year levels, the atmosphere of the castle switched to the thrumming tension of excitement and anticipation for the third task that everyone had pretty much forgotten in the wake of exams. Nearly all of the students who passed the Hufflepuff table paused to wish Merlin and Harry good luck, including some of the Slytherins who were friends with Tanith, Simon and Maya, though that was more of a, “Good luck, Morgan, you’re gonna need it.”

Harry broke away from them early, saying that he was going to wait outside where Ron and Hermione were having their Care of Magical Creatures theory exam. After that, their group dispersed with everyone going off to enjoy their free time, and soon it was just Arthur and Merlin left sitting at their table.

“The weather’s pretty good today,” Merlin said, looking out to the sun-bathed grounds that students free from exams were lounging around on.

“We can go and say hi to the giant squid,” Arthur replied, getting to his feet, standing directly into a beam of sunlight that made his golden hair shine like a halo – like a crown. Merlin had outgrown superstitions and omens once he’d left his village and moved to Camelot, but even he couldn’t deny a portent like that. Good things were coming.

The two of them headed out onto the grounds through the sundial garden. The sun was shining through the clouds and a warm breeze picked up the leaves around their feet, and it was the nicest day that Merlin had experienced in a while considering the usually abysmal weather in the UK. Students from all year levels were lying out on the grass, on benches, sitting in the stone windowsills of the castle and dipping their feet into the Black Lake, enjoying their first truly stress-free moments of the term.

Merlin led Arthur over to his favourite tree, a huge beech with wide enough branches to sit on, and enough leaves had grown back over the months that there was some privacy. They climbed up a bit of the way and sat as comfortably as they could on a branch, and stared out at the first years laughing and having fun with the flailing tentacles of the giant squid.

“So…” Arthur began. “Third task. Do you really think Voldemort is coming back?” Even without the memory of Cedric’s sprawled out body in the graveyard next to the shining Triwizard cup, Merlin’s sense of balance had reached a critical tension point, where it felt like the final thread on a fraying rope would snap and the whole world would drop out from under them.

“Yes,” he replied. “I wish I knew exactly when it would happen but the only clues I have are that both Cedric and Harry were there, and so was the Triwizard cup. My theory is that once Harry wins, in the confusion and excitement, the mole will take Harry out of Hogwarts grounds and apparate him
to the graveyard. I’m just not sure why they’d go through the trouble of taking Cedric too.”

“Maybe they couldn’t take Harry without Cedric noticing and had to take him too, and then killed him to cover up the tracks?” Arthur mused.

“Maybe,” Merlin sighed. “Fuck, I wish the Crystal had told me more.”

“At least you’ve got this much,” Arthur replied, pressing a kiss to Merlin’s jaw. “And if anyone can handle this, it’s you. And I don’t have to worry about you going off and getting killed now at least.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t chomping at the bit to come with me,” Merlin grinned. “This is all very domestic – me, going off to save the world, you waiting at home for me to come back with a kiss.”

“Trust me, I would be going with you if I could,” Arthur said. “But I doubt Dumbledore will let me, and I’m not sure any of them will believe the whole reincarnated thing. Do wizards even recognise royalty?”

“Not Muggle royalty,” Merlin replied. “Maybe they’d recognise you, though. If not, you could always run for Minister.” Arthur shuddered at the thought, and Merlin laughed. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Arthur’s lips, holding tight onto his waist to make sure that they didn’t overbalance and fall from the tree. Arthur smiled into the kiss and wrapped his arms around Merlin.

Eventually they pulled away from each other. “So what do you want to do for the rest of the day?” Arthur asked.

“Honestly? I get the feeling that nothing is going to be the same after today,” Merlin replied, enjoying the warm breeze that shifted through the leaves and surrounded the both of them. “I just want to enjoy what we have. You?”

Arthur pressed another kiss to his lips. “Sounds perfect.”

The rest of the day passed the way it did when you were waiting for something to happen – agonizingly slow and yet all at once. Merlin and Arthur had stayed in their tree until they’d started to feel rather numb in the backside and returned to the Great Hall for lunch, which had been returned to its usual self now that the last exams had finished up that morning.
The air seemed to thrum with anticipation as the sun finally started to dip down towards the horizon, and excited squeals and yells could be heard all throughout the castle. Merlin and his group had all gotten together in the early afternoon and retired to the grounds just by the Black Lake with the Quidditch pitch fully in view. With its shadow looming over him all day, Merlin was rather desensitised when he finally got up and headed over with the excited crowd.

“Good luck, Morgan!” Cora gushed, wrapping her arms around Merlin so hard he thought his ribs might crack. Nevertheless he hugged her back, repeating to himself that tonight was going to go fine and he was definitely going to see all of his friends again. He received hugs from the rest of them too, and may or may not have teared up a little when Cedric hugged him and ran his hand up and down Merlin’s back.

This was why he was doing this. Not just for the Balance – which is initially what he was here for – but for this. To have Cedric, his best friend after Arthur, the boy who made space for Merlin on their first day and welcomed him into their dorm room, the boy who believed Merlin when he said the impossible, the boy that had remained by his side throughout everything that had happened in one of the most tumultuous years of his life; to have Cedric in his arms, alive and well and not spread-eagle and dead-eyed in some unknown graveyard, flung away like garbage.

He squeezed Cedric tightly back until the prefect complained, and Cedric allowed him the dignity of pretending that he didn’t see Merlin wiping away tears. All of them left Merlin and Arthur alone as they headed up into the Quidditch stands, promising to get the best seats in the house.

Arthur gripped Merlin’s hands tightly, voice low and intimate and private. “You’ve got this.”

“I know,” he replied.

“You’re Merlin Emrys, you’re the greatest sorcerer the world has ever seen and ever will see. Your name is sacred and you’re Magic Incarnate and Voldemort doesn’t hold a candle next to you,” Arthur said, staring deep into Merlin’s eyes, words the most serious he’d spoken since just hold me. “And if somehow it all goes wrong, just know that I’m right here with you, and I will never, ever, leave you again. Not now, not ever.”

Merlin very stubbornly ignored that his eyes started to water again.

“I love you,” Arthur breathed against Merlin’s lips. Merlin didn’t even care about the students and teachers that could see them as he buried his hands deep into Arthur’s golden hair and kissed him for
all he was worth, a warm slide that sent shivers down Merlin’s back. He could hear cheering close by, but couldn’t quite tell if it was excitement for the task or jeering at their rather frowned-upon PDA, but he didn’t care, and he was pretty sure that tonight of all nights he’d earned it.

Someone cleared their throat behind Merlin, and it could’ve been Uther Pendragon for all that Merlin cared. He simply linked his fingers at the back of Arthur’s neck and pressed into him, Arthur’s hands warm where they gripped him around the waist.

“Mr Emery,” the person said, and this time Merlin did pull away, if only because he recognised that voice as Professor McGonagall.

“Yes, Professor?” he asked, still adamantly refusing to release his hold on his Once and Future King.

“You’re needed in the pitch,” she said, amusement curling throughout her voice.

Merlin sighed. “All right, I’ll be there shortly, Professor.” As McGonagall passed, she placed a hand on Merlin’s shoulder and wished him a quiet good luck. Arthur pressed another quick, gentle kiss to Merlin’s lips.

“Well,” Arthur huffed. “I believe in you, even if you are a gigantic clotpole. Good luck.”

“You still don’t even know what that means!” Merlin laughed as Arthur pulled out of his arms and headed off towards the stairs. “And you’re the clotpole!”

Arthur simply responded with a jaunty wave that then turned into an upright middle finger, and Merlin’s laugh echoed throughout the bottom of the stands. He put his hands in his pockets, wearing fitted jeans and a shirt as opposed to robes which would only get in the way, and casually made his way through the locker rooms and out onto the Quidditch pitch.

It had been transformed since the last time he’d seen it, when the maze had only begun to sprout. Now the massive hedges stood about three-quarters of the height of the stands – tall enough to make sure that nobody would cheat and try and climb up or over, yet low enough that everyone in the stands would have a good view of what was happening inside. There were already some excited murmurs and audience members pointing into the maze, though Merlin was sure some concealment charm would be over the maze so the audience wouldn’t see what was coming until the champions did.
Harry was vibrating slightly over where he was standing with Molly and Bill Weasley. Merlin had forgotten until that point that the champion’s families were all allowed over to witness the final task, but considering that all of Merlin’s family was dead (both real and false) they hadn’t even raised the topic with him, which he supposed would have been a touching gesture had he really been a nineteen-year-old reeling from the sudden death of all his family members who didn’t want to be reminded that he had none.

“All right, Harry?” he asked.

“Sure, fine, absolutely great,” Harry replied in a tone of voice that said he was definitely not sure, fine or absolutely great. “Have you met Bill and Mrs Weasley?”

“No, I haven’t,” Merlin said, holding his hand out. “You must be the only Weasleys I haven’t met at this point. Morgan Emery, nice to meet you.” Mrs Weasley – call me Molly, dear – and Bill both shook his hand with wide grins. A little further away, both Viktor and Fleur were with their families, looking just as nervous as Harry did.

“How are you so calm?” Harry asked.

“Because I’m desperately trying not to think about what’s going to happen in there,” Merlin replied brightly. Desperately thinking about how he’d had all year to come up with a plan but had been distracted by exams and drama and parties and was now, at most, only a few hours away from a resurrected Lord Voldemort, and he had absolutely no idea what he was going to do. He had no plan, not even a hint of a plan, and he couldn’t even try and think about what Voldemort’s spy would’ve done because ever since Arthur had remembered who he was that had suddenly dropped to the backburner. Merlin still had no idea who the spy was, no idea what the plan was, no idea how to stop what he didn’t know from happening, and absolutely no idea as to how he was going to prevent Voldemort’s resurrection beyond be in that graveyard and hope for the best.

“Fuck,” he swore to himself. Harry grinned.

“Thought about it?” he asked.

“Yes,” Merlin groaned. “I’m so fucked. Shite. This is a disaster. Wish I had a time turner.”

At that exact moment, a voice called out in the crowd, and Merlin turned around to see a huge banner strung up along one of the stands, half in bright yellow and the other half in brilliant scarlet.
Bisecting the two colours where they overlapped was the Hogwarts logo, and the words on the banner read Morgan and Harry for a joint Hogwarts win! It was being held by Arthur, Cedric, Cora and the rest of their group, alongside Hermione, Ron, Neville and the other fourth-year Gryffindors.

Merlin gave them a bright smile and a thumbs up, and the crowd that had been looking in his direction went wild. He was pretty sure a few cameras went off.

“Wow, Morgan, you might have Lockhart beat for Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award,” Harry drawled, voice thick with sarcasm, and Merlin snorted unattractively. “On second thought, maybe not.”

Just at that moment, Ludo Bagman stepped down from the judges’ panel and headed out onto the pitch to stand with the champions. The crowd surged and cheered so loud it was almost deafening, and Bagman just grinned and waved at them all before pointing his wand at himself and casting *sonorous*.

“Welcome one and all, to the final task of the Triwizard Tournament!” his voice boomed, and the crowd went wild. “It’s the day you’ve all been waiting for, and I’m sure our champions are all thrilled to find out exactly what is waiting for them inside!”

“That’s one word for it,” Merlin grumbled.

“The goal is thus,” Bagman continued. “The Triwizard Cup has been placed somewhere in the maze, and it is up to our champions to reach it first. However, obstacles of all manners of dark and terrifying have been placed within the maze, and our champions must defeat, solve or avoid these obstacles to get to where they need to go! This task is quite possibly the most difficult of them all, as it requires constant vigilance—” the Hogwarts students laughed at his phrasing, “—quick thinking and a vast knowledge of spells to successfully navigate the maze!

“The champions’ entrances into the maze will be staggered to add just that extra level of difficulty,” Bagman said. “Due to the final scores racked up by our champions in the previous tasks, the two Hogwarts champions, Mr Emery and Mr Potter will enter first. Five minutes behind them will be Mr Krum, and five minutes behind him will be Miss Delacour. Good luck, champions!”

Merlin shook out his hands and rolled his shoulders, bouncing on the balls of his feet as the adrenalin started to pump through his system. Harry simply dealt with his anxiety by seemingly cracking every single joint in his body. Bagman gestured for all the champions to come forward, and Molly Weasley placed a final kiss onto Harry’s head before she disappeared up into the stands with Bill, whom Fleur had been eyeing up at a distance.
“Right,” Bagman said once they were all close enough. “I’m hoping none of you will be in serious danger in there, you’ve all proven capable, but there are some things inside the maze that could potentially seriously hurt you. If you are injured and cannot continue, simply send up red sparks and one of the referees will come and get you out. Okay?”

“Okay,” they all said.

“Brilliant. Now there are multiple paths to take in this maze, but in the end only one will get you to the cup. This means that you could potentially meet each other in the maze. You have the choice to either walk away, work together, or if you’re really desperate, you may duel. Obviously, nothing illegal or life-threatening is allowed, but you are allowed to do what you must to advance on by either stalling your opponent or forcing them to yield from the competition,” Bagman said with a strange amount of glee on his face. Merlin’s stomach dropped as the four of them all looked around at each other. They’d never really considered each other competitors up until now… and now it was a free-for-all. Merlin wasn’t quite sure who he’d hate to duel the most.

But if it was a matter of life-or-death, of righting the Balance before it was destroyed forever...

...he’d even be willing to duel Harry.

Bagman waved for them to get into their starting positions, and Merlin and Harry stood side-by-side at the entrance, with Krum and Fleur behind them. Merlin pulled out his wand, gripping it tightly, and sent a prayer to the universe that he wouldn’t fail them all. Merlin mused on what it’d been like last time he’d visited a maze like this.

The cannon sounded, and he and Harry stepped into the maze.
Chapter Summary

Merlin makes his way through the maze, trying to reach the end before Harry.

Chapter Notes

Here we go, guys.

As soon as they stepped within the dark, shadowed hedges of the maze, all sound cut out. Merlin looked behind them, and sure enough they could still see Krum and Fleur, the other judges and the stand immediately behind them, but a silencing charm had been put over the maze that caused everything to fall into a frightful, haunting silence. As quiet as the grave.

Merlin looked up, and where he should have been able to see the tops of the Quidditch stands beyond the hedges, he saw nothing, even though he knew that the audience would be able to see him. The illusion that they were alone in this maze was all-pervasive, and it was working to unnerve him already.

With a shudder, he gripped his wand tighter and saw that they only had one path ahead of them that split into two further up. He nodded to Harry, feeling that words were going to be far too loud in this death-like silence, and the two started forward, hyperaware of each step they took and every rustle of noise.

Merlin, who long ago had finally mastered not being a clumsy idiot, managed to walk completely silently across the pitch grass, while Harry’s jeans swished together with every step. He shot an accusing look at Merlin for this, who pulled an innocent face back, and soon they arrived at the fork in the road, Merlin on the left and Harry on the right.

“See you at the end?” Harry whispered, his voice carrying unreasonably far.

“See you there,” Merlin replied with a smile. “Good luck.”
Then the two of them took a final look at the entrance they could still see, the only sign that there was still a world around them, and split up. A chill curled through the air and fought to creep up the hem of Merlin’s jeans and he shivered, raising his wand for light as a slight fog descended. It was like they’d read a book titled *How to Create a Creepy Atmosphere* and had followed it step-by-step, and it was working, no matter how logically he thought about it all, how he knew that there was a crowd of people and supervisors watching his every step.

*Get it together, Merlin,* he said to himself, and shook his arms out again, then started forward determinedly. He knew that if you wanted to get to the end of a maze, you should place your hand upon the left wall and follow it until you got out. However, he wasn’t trying to find the end of the maze, he was trying to find something in it, so that tried and true technique wouldn’t work.

He laid his wand flat on his hand and whispered *point me.* North was to his right, and he figured that the cup would’ve been placed somewhat near the centre of the maze, and so that was the way he had to go. So when the next fork in the road appeared, he turned right.

*Straight into the path of a thestral.*

Merlin frowned as he stared at the creature, which wasn’t doing much but idly grazing its hooves and snorting occasionally. Thestrals were generally very benevolent creatures, and there was no chance that it was going to attack him, so what the hell was it doing here? Merlin approached cautiously, wand ready at his side and palm outstretched to the creature, ready for anything.

But nothing happened, and he soon came to rest his palm on the creature’s head, which pushed up into his hand. He smiled and ran a hand down it’s bony neck, and wondered what the hell was so challenging about this thestral other than its somewhat unexpected and terrifying appearance to those who were unaware of their temperament. If they were violent at all, they wouldn’t be allowed to draw the carriages to school grounds.

“Oh,” Merlin said aloud as it came to him. Thestrals were invisible to anyone who had seen death, and it was likely that none of the students, including the champions, had seen anything so horrific. To anyone else, the thestral would be invisible and unknown, and they would simply hear it’s hooves digging grooves into the grass and the occasional snort of hot air, but not be able to see the creature it came from. That would be mildly terrifying.

“I wonder if Harry would be able to see you,” he said, brushing a hand down the creature’s flank. Harry had seen his parents murdered by Voldemort, but was he even able to remember that? Did his mind at the time register that as seeing death, or was he too young?
He’d lingered too long with the thestral. It was time to move on if he had any hope of beating Harry to the cup. Merlin then wondered what would happen if Harry weren’t the first to make it to the cup – how would the spy get him to the graveyard? Would they simply wait for another opportunity to steal Harry away or would they, in their desperation, do something much worse?

Shit.

Merlin gave the thestral one last gentle stroke along its flank and continued onwards, making sure to use point me to try and make his way further into the centre of the maze, noting that both cannons had gone off and now all four champions were in the maze. At one point he encountered a very smooth, conspicuous rock lying right in the middle of the path, but he passed it without any problems and wondered if they just threw in false obstacles to keep everyone in the maze on edge.

He was finding it all far too empty and easy until he hit his first dead end. And then another. And another. And another. He ended up backtracking so far he lost a good amount of time, and began to think that he’d never get to the centre of the maze. Other variables he could control – dragons he could speak to, Arthur he could rescue from a lake (again), but a maze? A supervised maze? He couldn’t control this one bit. He just had to hope like hell that he managed to get to the cup before Harry and that was possibly his worst, most ill conceived, stupidest outline of a plan he’d ever come up with.

There was no guarantee that tonight he’d be able to get to the graveyard and stop Voldemort’s return. He’d be stuck in this goddamn maze and all its dead ends for the rest of the night and he’d feel the Balance shift and drop into a state that was impossible to repair, and he’d fail his one duty as Magic Incarnate. There was no way he could beat this maze.

Wait.

That little fucking rock was definitely in the middle of the path before, and now it had been moved over to the right. And it hadn’t been at an intersection before either; it had been in a straight area-

“Christ, Merlin, you idiot,” Merlin swore. “Pogrebin.” He levelled his wand at the rock and shot out the strongest stunning spell he could muster. The red light hit the rock, which squealed, and sent it tumbling away a few metres. Immediately feeling better, Merlin gave the rock a good running kick just for good measure, and sent it flying down into the maze, far enough away that its dementor-like effects stopped working on him. He shook his head to clear his mind, and used point me. It was telling him that straight down one of the paths at the intersection would lead into the centre of the maze.
Smiling, Merlin continued down the pathway, injecting just enough confident swagger in his walk to say *fuck you* to the Pogrebin. That was until he turned the corner and had to drop to the ground in order to not be immediately decapitated – or burned to a crisp – by a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

“Dammit, Hagrid!” Merlin swore as he tucked and rolled. He didn’t take Care of Magical Creatures but had heard a lot about the Skrewts from those who did, but hadn’t actually seen one before. It was at least ten feet in length and ugly as all hell, covered in thick, impenetrable armour. So that put stunning spells out of his arsenal, along with probably everything else, considering that its hide would probably send any spells ricocheting off.

The Skrewt made a strange gurgling noise, and then Merlin yelled as the blast that emanated from it set his shirt on fire and burned the skin on his arm. Fuck, those things were faster than he’d thought. Steeling himself against the pain – it was nothing compared to some of the things he’d endured – he raised his burned arm which was, unfortunately, his wand arm, and sent a softening charm at the Skrewt’s back.

Its shiny armour shell took on a dull appearance, and Merlin quick-fired multiple stunning spells at the Skrewt. Due to its now softened hide, the spells had the effect that he wanted, but not before the Skrewt’s stinger went wild in its panic and slashed Merlin across the shoulder.

“Fucking hell,” he swore. He tore down some vines from the hedge wall and transfigured them into strong chains, which he wrapped around the Skrewt to make sure that it didn’t hurt anyone else once it woke up. Hissing in pain from both his burned arm and bleeding shoulder, Merlin cast an *aguamenti* to soothe his arm. The only healing he knew was derived from Old Magic, and casting it now would reveal to everyone watching that he knew much more than he let on, so he grit his teeth and kept going.

Straight into Krum’s path.

Merlin was immediately on edge, not knowing if Viktor was the type to duel or pass without conflict, and though he was wary, from what he’d seen of Krum he was a good sportsman and would probably not be a duellist.

That was until he turned to look at Merlin with a horrifyingly blank expression that Merlin recognised from his classes earlier that year with Mad-Eye Moody. Someone had Imperiused him, and Merlin got the feeling that it wasn’t Fleur or Harry. So the spy was getting desperate.
“Viktor, I want you to listen to me,” Merlin said, hands out and voice soft as though he were speaking to a spooked animal, though he didn’t relinquish his grip on his wand. “You’ve been Imperiused. I know that it feels like you don’t have a care in the world right now, but you need to listen to me. You have to fight this. You’re Viktor Krum, you’re the Durmstrang Champion, you are far stronger than this curse.”

Krum didn’t do anything but continue to stare blankly in Merlin’s direction, face horrifically slack.

“Think about something you love,” Merlin said. “Think about how much you love flying, the feeling that you get when you fly out onto the pitch and hear people cheering your name. Think about the freedom that you feel when you’re weightless and the wind is streaming past you. Think about happy memories – think about the Yule Ball, think about dancing with Hermione Granger, think about the Goblet of Fire picking you out of everyone to represent your school. Think about your parents, in the crowd, watching you right now, hoping with all they are that you can beat this. You’re better than this, Viktor,” he pleaded.

Krum’s face changed slightly – not much, just a small furrow appearing on his brow – but it was enough for Merlin to know that his words were doing the trick. Krum was thinking, and if he could think then he could break free of the curse.

“That’s it, Viktor, come on, you can fight this, you are so much stronger than this,” he continued, adjusting his grip on his wand. Krum’s lips parted as though he wanted to speak, but then the snapping of a twig made both of them whirl around to where Harry emerged from one of the hedges, looking particularly dazed and confused.

Krum’s face fell slack again, and Merlin had no defence against the Cruciatus Curse that was sent his way.

He fell to the ground, and his burned arm that was rubbing up against the coarse grass of the pitch as he spasmed didn’t even hold a candle to the pain that exploded within him. He kept trying to tell himself that he’d been through worse but couldn’t help the scream that burst out of his throat unbidden as fire burned in his bones, thorns grew from his muscles and his skin bubbled and boiled away, as his eyes were being torn out with sharp pokers, his head was bashed in with a medieval mace, he was being torn limb-from-limb and no, he hadn’t been through worse than this.

All of a sudden, the pain stopped, and battle instincts urged Merlin to his feet with his wand up instead of remaining curled on the ground like he wanted to be. Harry had sent a stunning spell at Krum, who had stumbled, but he’d hit him in the shoulder and it hadn’t downed him entirely. Merlin raised a shaky arm and sent one straight at Krum’s chest, and he fell heavily to the ground.
Merlin dropped to his knees and dry-heaved. He felt hands on his shoulder, and leaned back into Harry’s weight, glancing over at Viktor’s crumpled form.

“Are you okay, Morgan?” Harry asked breathlessly.

“I will be,” he replied, voice rough and croaky from his screams. “He was Imperiused. It wasn’t his fault. It- it wasn’t his fault.” Harry nodded his understanding, still in shock, and Merlin wiped away the tears that had slipped down his cheeks during the torture. He then struggled to his feet, Harry helping him get upright somewhat, and Merlin stumbled over to Viktor, making sure that he was okay.

He was fine, though he’d have one killer headache and a hell of a bruise on his head from where he’d fallen, and Merlin sent up red sparks for him. Harry held him up for a few steps as he tried to remember how to walk on legs that felt like jelly, and soon they came to an intersection of two passages that continued on the same direction, but were parallel to each other. Harry cast *point me*, and they were both the direction they needed to go in.

“Are you sure that you’re okay?” Harry asked.

“Fine,” Merlin said, weakly smiling. “It’ll take a lot more than that to knock me down.”

“You said he was Imperiused?” Harry questioned, brow furrowing. “I’m pretty sure that’s still illegal, even if this is the Triwizard Tournament. He was a champion, not an obstacle.”

“Exactly,” Merlin said. “Keep your eyes peeled, Harry, I think there’s more going on here than either of us realise.”

“Like what?” Harry asked quietly.

“Well, who else messes with you at the end of every school year?” Merlin asked pointedly, and Harry’s eyes widened to the point where Merlin could see the white all around his irises.

“You mean…?” he trailed off, not quite wanting to voice his realisation.
“Yup,” Merlin replied. “I don’t think I’m wrong, no matter how far-fetched it is. So just… look out for yourself, Harry.”

“I will, Morgan. You look out for yourself too,” Harry said with a bright little smile. Merlin gave his hair a quick ruffle, and then the two of them took off down their parallel passageways, wands raised and ready. With each step, Merlin regained his strength, and tried to put what just happened into the back of his mind to deal with later. He had a maze to navigate, a cup to find, a Dark Lord to put down and a spy to reveal.

The Blast-Ended Skrewt and Krum had been two very nasty surprises, so Merlin made sure to check every corner before he went down them, not wanting to be surprised again. Nothing much happened until he turned a corner into a path that was exactly where he wanted to go, but it was far wider than any of the other passages in order to make room for a large puddle that looked more like a shallow pond.

Right in the middle of the pond was one of the stranger creatures of the magical world. It looked like a monkey, but dark in colour and with scales instead of fur. That was where the mammalian similarities ended. Instead of a round skull like most mammals, above it’s face it instead resembled a bowl; a concave hollow in which water sat and rippled around a bit.

“Kappa,” Merlin said to himself, thinking back to his copy of Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them. He remembered that it was something really strange that could stop a Kappa from trying to drain you of all your blood, along with trying to trick it into bowing so the water drained out of its head, causing it to temporarily lose all of its power.

Something about a vegetable?

Shit. Merlin knew this, his memory was almost perfect, but after so many years it just took a little longer to retrieve what he needed than for most people. The Kappa didn’t seem to be going anywhere though, as Merlin was pretty sure they couldn’t leave a body of water. It glared at him with little red eyes, and Merlin debated simply levitating the Kappa upside-down.

Then the memory came to him, and he laughed aloud at remembering Cora’s giggles as she told them all this when they were studying in the library, gone a little crazy from all the work.

Merlin grabbed a vine, transfigured it into a cucumber, and carved his name into the vegetable using his wand. Then he tossed it over to the Kappa, who crouched down carefully to pick it up from its puddle. Merlin approached the creature, stopping at the edge of the pond, and instead of glaring up at him, the Kappa instead seemed to look grateful and approving, and hugged the cucumber to its chest.
With a nod, Merlin passed, and figured that if Fleur came down this way it might slow her down enough for him to get a good head start on her.

He wasn’t too sure how long it’d been since they’d all entered the maze, Merlin would hazard an hour, but his sense of time was a little out of whack after his fun torture session with Krum. His head was still insistently spinning, but he didn’t let that stop him. The Balance was screaming at him now, desperately pleading for him to help it before it was destroyed forever, and he kept on going.

His next obstacle was a path littered with small holes, like rabbit burrows, and the ground was darker and a little wetter than the rest of the pitch. Merlin frowned and lowered his lit wand to the ground and touched it, his hand coming away red with blood.

He nearly stumbled away in shock, but was distracted by the horrific, evil-eyed little gnomes that popped out of their holes to stare at him. Red Caps. Merlin had to wonder just whose blood was staining the ground here, because Red Caps only manifested in ground where human blood had been spilled. Maybe there’d been a Triwizard blood drive or something.

At least ten of the little fuckers jumped out of their holes, baring their needle-sharp teeth and gleaming claws, and Merlin really didn’t have time for this. He had to get to the cup, and so with razor-sharp precision honed over hundreds of years, he stupefied each and every Red Cap right in the forehead. They tumbled to the ground one-by-one, and didn’t get back up. With a frustrated groan, Merlin trudged on ahead, and distracted as he was, nearly walked straight into a massive fucking acromantula.

“Avalon!” he swore, backing up a few paces, straight into something warm. He whirled, wand out, but saw that it was just Harry, who’d come from another pathway and straight into Merlin’s back.

“That’s an acromantula,” Harry stated blandly, face paling a little as he looked up at it. Merlin turned back around and stood side-by-side with Harry, wands raised at the towering creature. It was shiny and black, with hundreds of beady little eyes, and easily reached half the height of the hedge walls. Its massive legs were furry and dark, and Merlin swallowed back the revulsion – or was it bile? – that came up his throat.

“You’ve dealt with these before, right?” Merlin said to Harry.

“Kind of?” he replied. “We were ultimately rescued by a feral car.” Before Merlin could ask what the hell that meant, the acromantula lunged forward, and the two of them skittered back, shooting stunning spells at it that had absolutely no effect.
“I’m pretty sure there’s a spell specifically for killing spiders,” Merlin stuttered as they dodged the acromantula and backed into a hedge. He grabbed Harry by the back of his shirt and pulled him along just before the acromantula stabbed him through the chest with its pincers. If Merlin hadn’t pulled him away at that moment, there was every possibility that he would’ve been impaled. Harry stumbled, and Merlin hauled him back just before he stood in a wet patch on the ground.

“What is it?” Harry asked breathlessly, diving to the side.

“Acromantula poison,” Merlin replied. “They secrete it when they’re excited.”

“Gross,” Harry grumbled. He then yelped as he dodged a huge leg, and tucked and rolled. “You said there was a spell for this?”

“I’m a little too busy to remember!” Merlin yelled back as the acromantula began to get irritated and it started to lash out harder and faster.

“Then lets give ourselves some more time!” Harry replied, grabbing Merlin by the wrist as he dragged him down the path. Merlin got with the program and turned, and the two ran full speed ahead as fast as they could away from the acromantula, which was gaining on them quickly. They both slid around the next corner, ducking as pincers snapped right where their heads had been, and they each periodically shot stunning spells at the acromantula. They weren’t too effective, but they did work at slowing it down a bit each time. Then-

“Arania exumai!” Merlin yelled, the spell striking the acromantula straight in the eyeball. The eyeball exploded with a wet squelch and the creature stumbled, nearly falling, but due to its size the spell didn’t have the required effect. Merlin tried again, and this time Harry shot out the same spell in synchronisation, and the acromantula crashed to the ground, limbs twitching in death throes.

"Sorry, Hagrid," Harry breathed.

Merlin’s momentum carried him straight into a hedge wall as he burst into a T-junction, and Harry managed to stop himself from doing the same thing as he skidded across the damp grass, arms windmilling wildly. Merlin’s chest heaved, out of breath and skin crawling, and he placed his hands on his thighs to take some deep, much-needed breaths. All of that action after being tortured, not to mention his burned arm and slashed shoulder, really wasn’t making him feel particularly peachy.
“That was fun,” Harry huffed. “Glad Ron wasn’t here. Arachnophobia.”

“He’s watching, though,” Merlin replied through his panting. “Hope he’s okay.”

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but stopped halfway as his eyes widened behind his glasses. He was staring at something in the distance over Merlin’s shoulder, and he whirled around with his wand raised to face whatever new threat had decided to descend upon them.

There was no threat, only the bioluminescent glow of the Triwizard Cup in the foggy gloom of the maze.

“Is that…?”


The two of them walked towards the cup, feet dragging due to their exhaustion, and Merlin felt like he was a magnet being pulled towards it. He couldn’t have stopped his steps even if he wanted to, and soon he and Harry were standing at the entrance to the small clearing that the cup rested in. The only way in or out was the path behind them, and the maze was once again deathly silent around the two of them.

“You should take it,” Harry said, and Merlin’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You saved my life with the acromantula, I’d probably be dead if you hadn’t pulled me out of the way.”

“You saved me from Imperiused Krum,” Merlin shot back. “We’re even.”

“We got here at the same time,” Harry said. “So we should take it at the same time. Joint Hogwarts win, remember?”

Merlin’s gut instinct was to insist, somehow, without sounding like a dick that he should be the one to take the cup. Whatever happened in the graveyard, the cup was there, and logically if he stayed with it then he should end up there. However, it was possibly the cup that came with Harry, in which case Merlin would run the risk of losing Harry if they didn’t take the cup together and he lost the younger Gryffindor in the crowd when they returned.
Ultimately, he knew that Voldemort would not settle for anyone to watch his resurrection that wasn’t Harry Potter, and so Merlin nodded and reached out for the cup at the same time as Harry.

As he touched one of the handles, something in his stomach twisted, and Merlin had just enough time to realise that the cup was a portkey, and the two of them vanished.

Chapter End Notes

Fuck me, you guys have no idea how long I spent thumbing through my copy of Fantastic Beasts trying to figure out which creatures would be best suited to the maze. Crouch said that he made sure that Harry had the easiest path through the maze, and he ultimately only came up against 4 relatively easy obstacles, so I figured the rest of the maze would just be riddled with shit. Hopefully this chapter was alright, and next up.... Voldemort returns.

Also, fuck, this might possibly the fastest chapter update of my life.
Merlin stumbled upon landing, immediately letting go of the cup in order to grab Harry under the armpits when he nearly faceplanted into the grass. He righted Harry and lit his wand, raising it above their heads in the gloom that they had been transported to.

Any hopes Merlin had of this being another step in the third task disappeared when he saw the headstones reflected back in the light of his wand and the waxing gibbous moon. A shiver ran down his spine as he looked down at the faintly glowing Triwizard cup resting so nonchalantly on the damp grass where Cedric’s body would have been.

“Idiot,” Merlin murmured to himself. “Of course it was a portkey.” Next to him, Harry had pulled his wand out from where he’d put it in his back pocket, and was looking around with a deeply furrowed brow.

“No,” Merlin cut Harry off. “This is definitely not part of the task.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked, peering into the darkness of the graveyard. They couldn’t see much in the distance until a gap in the clouds caused the moonlight to fall upon them. Before them stood a massive cauldron that could easily fit a person or two inside it, and right next to it was a hulking gravestone carved with the name *Tom Riddle*.

“Oh,” Harry breathed. He tightened his grip on his wand and clenched his jaw, eyes flitting around for any sign of movement. Merlin was saddened at how quickly, and how easily, Harry adjusted to the situation. Anyone else who was inevitably about to go up against Voldemort would be terrified, but Harry just swallowed back his fear and got ready. He was fourteen and he was acting like a soldier.
Just then, a sound caught Merlin’s attention. Feet treading across grass, the swish of robes, and he immediately stood in front of Harry with his wand at the ready. Out of the darkness emerged a rather short, misshapen figure, slowly walking towards them as though burdened with a great weight.

Merlin narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out who it was. The figure came to a stop by the cauldron and looked straight at them – the moonlight shone in through the hood of their robes to reveal the pallid face of a particularly rat-like man. Merlin had absolutely no idea who he was but from behind him, Harry gasped.

“Wormtail,” he spat, voice laden with more anger than Merlin had ever guessed the boy was capable of. Wormtail moved a little – and then Merlin realised it hadn’t been him. Something, like a disconcertingly large infant, was gripping onto him, and Wormtail was carrying it. Wormtail’s face quickly turned to one of mostly-repressed revulsion, and then a voice straight out of Merlin’s nightmares hissed out three words.

“Kill the spare,” it hissed. Before Merlin could possibly figure out what the spare was, a green light was flashing towards him, and he didn’t even feel himself hit the ground.

Emrys.

Wake up.

Emrys… you need to get up.

Emrys, the child needs you.

You cannot take all day this time, you need to wake up. You need to wake up now.
Merlin’s eyes opened to the sensation of the final thread in the Balance snapping cleanly in two, the world falling like a pendulum beneath him, like an axe plunging down towards a waiting neck. The world screamed at him in pain, the sensation-sound-feeling echoing throughout his bones hard enough to feel like they were rattling inside his skin, a hollow opening up inside his ribcage that shrieked like a banshee.

He had failed.

Merlin opened his eyes from where he lay splayed out spread-eagle on the grass in place of Cedric, and saw that rising from the cauldron, skeletal and bone-white, was the figure of Lord Voldemort, returned once again to his full power.

“Robe me, Wormtail,” he spoke, voice quiet, high and rasping. The trembling figure of Wormtail, who was hunched over oddly, reached out with one hand and helped to pull a set of dark robes over Voldemort’s naked form.

Merlin blinked again, and suddenly he could see all that he was usually blind to. His brush with death and consequent resurrection of his own moved him much closer metaphysically to the workings of the world and magic than he normally was. There was a deep, angry crimson bond connecting both Voldemort and a figure that was painfully tied to a nearby headstone.

Harry.

Voldemort had used Harry’s blood to bring himself back to life, and that bond pulsed terribly between the two of them. It wrapped itself around and almost entirely shrouded a second connection between the two of them; a thin, white thread that stretched from Voldemort, reaching right into Harry’s chest, where the thread pooled into a small fragment.
It was not the only white thread that emerged from Voldemort. Five more stretched out from his body into the distance, further than Merlin could see, while one thread had frayed, blackened and burned. All seven of these threads were connected to Voldemort’s soul, which sat small but shining within his chest.

Fucking hell, Merlin realized. He’s made seven Horcruxes, and Harry is one of them.

Merlin’s immediate first instinct was to surge up from the ground, stun Wormtail, free Harry and kill Voldemort where he stood. However, there was one immediate reason he shouldn’t do that which rooted Merlin to the spot, still playing dead. If he killed Voldemort here and now, his Horcruxes would keep him alive. Voldemort’s soul would escape like it did the night he killed the Potters and failed to kill Harry, and Merlin would have to not only track that down, but also the rest of the Horcruxes.

No, as much as the Balance was screaming at him that all hope was now lost, stopping Voldemort’s resurrection wouldn’t have accomplished anything, and in fact would have prevented Merlin from finding out about the Horcruxes.

That didn’t mean there wasn’t a way he could restore the Balance now, however.

Merlin lay on the damp grass, not twitching a muscle, mind moving a hundred miles a minute as Voldemort reached over to Wormtail and pressed a finger down on the Dark Mark that was branded into his left forearm. Harry screamed as his connection with Voldemort throbbed and writhed, but he was okay, and so Merlin did nothing.

Voldemort monologued quietly, but Merlin could barely bring himself to listen as he, for what was possibly the first time in his life, planned.

Problem: Voldemort’s continued existence threw the Balance off so wildly it would not be able to right itself without intervention.

Problem (cont.): Killing Voldemort now would worsen the situation. Plus, Voldemort had an unknown number of Death Eaters that would assist him should things go wrong and he escaped from Merlin.

Solution: Merlin had to kill Voldemort, but he had to destroy the Horcruxes first. To make sure he
was not hindered in his search for them in any way, he had to figure out how many Death Eaters Voldemort had, and incapacitate them.

Luckily, at that very moment, Death Eaters began to pour into the cemetery, apparating immediately to Voldemort’s side. They circled Voldemort, Wormtail and Harry; all standing in their assigned places, with a few gaps for presumably those who were dead or imprisoned. Including Wormtail, it looked as though thirteen Death Eaters were in attendance.

Voldemort ever so helpfully listed off who was supposed to be within the gaps that the Death Eaters created in their circle. Six were imprisoned in Azkaban, two were traitors, and one was the spy that Voldemort had placed within Hogwarts.

So all together there were twenty-two Death Eaters. That seemed to be easy enough. That was also all Merlin needed before he could start with his plan.

Voldemort whirled around with his wand extended to Harry, the Cruciatus Curse on his lips, and Merlin leaped into action. He surged up to his feet and didn’t even bother with his wand, just let the magic that he was bubble to the surface, his irises stained a deep gold as he threw his hands out in front of him. With a wordless cry, a shockwave emanated from within him, bypassing Voldemort and Harry entirely, and it hit each and every single Death Eater.

All thirteen of them fell to the ground, unconscious.

Harry was staring at Merlin with wide, disbelieving eyes. With a flick of his hand, the ropes that bound Harry to the gravestone fell away, and the boy dropped to his knees, grabbing his wand that lay on the grass.

“You alright, Harry?” Merlin asked.

“I’m… I’m fine,” Harry breathed, stumbling over to Merlin’s side. “How did you do that? I saw you die! You got hit by the killing curse!”

Merlin grinned at him. “You’re not the only one who can survive it.”

Merlin then took a deep breath, his eyes flashed, and he moved his hands in front of him like he was conducting an orchestra. He crafted steel chains out of whatever he could find that wasn’t a
gravestone, pushing magic through it all to cause it to shift and change into what he desired. He wrapped the chains around each Death Eater, binding them from head to toe, and then summoned all of their wands into a small pile by his feet so they couldn’t escape on the off chance they woke up early.

He now had the full attention of Lord Voldemort, who even Merlin would admit looked frightening. His skin was pale and almost translucent, reflecting the moonlight. His fingers were long and skeletal, ending in sharp nails, and he was completely bald with blood-red eyes and reptilian, slit-like nostrils. He tilted his head like a demented, curious bird, and a shiver ran down Merlin’s spine.

Merlin had never truly believed in pure evil until now.

“My servant told me that you were just a boy,” Voldemort said, voice high, cold and terrifying.

“Your servant was wrong,” Merlin replied. “Who is it, by the way? I spent all year trying to figure out who the spy was. You wouldn’t be so kind as to tell me, would you?”

The expression Voldemort replied with was the furthest thing from an amused smile as one could get, but that was the only way Merlin could describe the horrible twist of his mouth.

“I mean, considering that you’re not letting either of us leave here alive, there’s no harm in telling us, is there?” Merlin continued.

“Something tells me that it would be prudent not to underestimate you,” Voldemort said, showing cunning that Merlin hadn’t expected. Mind you, he had also expected for Voldemort to attack him immediately after he’d downed the Death Eaters, and yet he was calmly standing before him, assessing the situation with a cold calculation that Merlin could see in his eyes. Perhaps Merlin was the one to underestimate Voldemort?

“That’s probably a good decision on your part,” Merlin said. Voldemort did his non-smile again, and then he twitched his wand ever so slightly towards them. Merlin lunged in front of Harry at the same time as he threw his hand up with an instinctive shielding spell. His eyes flashed and Voldemort’s spell sizzled into nonexistence upon meeting Merlin’s barrier.

“I thought I had been the only one to discover the art of the Old Magics… but it appears that I was mistaken,” Voldemort said, eyes shining with something akin to curiosity.
“You picked one hell of an aspect of Old Magic to run with,” Merlin replied. “Dark Druid rituals and soul-ripping? Out of everything, you chose to go with those. You don’t deserve to use that magic.”

Voldemort didn’t have eyebrows, but he still managed to convey the single eyebrow raise expression. “You know of the steps I have taken to achieve immortality?”

“Yeah,” Merlin said. “Honestly, immortality isn’t all its cracked up to be.”

“And you would know this?” Voldemort asked.

“Maybe,” Merlin evaded. Harry shifted behind him, and Merlin knew that he needed to get Harry to the cup, and to do that he needed to engage Voldemort; but he also needed to make sure Voldemort didn’t attack Harry on his way back to the cup.

This decision was made for him when Voldemort lashed out with another spell. Merlin raised his hand, but the spell went straight through his barrier and slashed through his side, tearing the skin apart as it crashed into the headstone behind him. Merlin swore and stumbled, and Voldemort looked quite pleased with himself as he used his calculating mind to figure out Merlin’s weaknesses.

He’d figured something like this would happen. Whenever he’d duelled throughout the year, he’d always used modern magic. He knew that Old Magic could counter Old Magic, and modern magic could also counter itself, but even though the two branches of magic were technically the same, they had also mutated to be different. It was clear that some modern spells would not work against Old Magic – as Voldemort had demonstrated with his first attack – but also that some of them would work, as Old Magic had no equivalent to counteract it.

Which meant, Merlin thought as he summoned his wand to his hand, that he’d have to duel Voldemort his way.

“Harry, get to the cup,” Merlin breathed, placing a hand on his side to send a wave of healing magic through the new laceration. The skin healed as well as it could, but Merlin’s healing had never been the best, and he needed to meditate in order to fully heal. He sent a little healing magic into his arm and shoulder, too, just enough to offset the throbbing that the burns emanated.

“Why?” Harry asked.
“It’s set to portkey back to Hogwarts, I can sense it. You need to get out of here and warn everyone else,” he replied.

“No way!” Harry shot back. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“I need to make sure you’re safe,” Merlin replied as Voldemort watched their interaction curiously. “You don’t know enough to take part in a full-on duel and I refuse to let you get killed.”

Harry glared and planted his feet stubbornly. “I won’t leave. This is my fight too.”

“I know, Harry. But I need my full focus for this and I can’t risk being distracted by keeping you safe too,” Merlin said, eyes riveted on Voldemort’s wand, waiting for the first movement that would start the duel.

“I get it,” Harry replied. “But I’m still not leaving.” The Gryffindor then dived to the side, hiding himself behind the Riddle gravestone, and Voldemort sent a jinx straight at him. Merlin swiped his wand up in a shield spell, and the duel began.

Arthur had been the best duellist in Hogwarts’ history, but he was nothing compared to the sheer speed and power of Lord Voldemort. Voldemort was also willing to use dark spells that could kill or seriously injure Merlin, whereas the worst Arthur had been willing to use was a stunning spell. Merlin didn’t have the strongest grasp on modern magic, but he could hold his own against Arthur.

This was a whole different ballgame.

Voldemort was ruthless, intelligent and cunning, making use of Merlin’s unwillingness to move too far from Harry’s hiding spot against him. Voldemort was gaining ground while Merlin was losing it, and he was only just able to keep up with the spells being sent his way, entirely on the defensive.

If Merlin were able to use his own magic, Voldemort wouldn’t have stood a chance. But he couldn’t risk breaking his defence to use any offensive magic when he didn’t know what spells he’d be able to block and which ones he wouldn’t, and Voldemort was taking full advantage of that.

Merlin attempted to shoot out a harsh *diffindo* after his next shield spell, but Voldemort deflected it as though it were nothing more than a fly buzzing about his head. At that moment, Harry shot a stunning spell around the edge of the gravestone that Voldemort deflected, giving Merlin a chance.
“Confringo!” he shouted, throat hoarse and raw, his exhaustion meaning that he was unable to keep all of his modern spells non-verbal. Voldemort swept his bone-white wand up in a graceful arc, sending most of the spell wide, but enough of the amber blast caught him that he stumbled. Merlin pressed forward at the same time that Harry emerged from behind the gravestone, and now they had Voldemort on the defensive.

Harry’s knowledge of spells was limited, but they were powerful, and he was just as fast and instinctive at duelling as Arthur and Voldemort were. He kept his own, as long as Merlin kept Voldemort angry enough at him so he didn’t change to attacking Harry, and finally, he thought, they might be able to take him down.

Then Voldemort threw out an *expulso* so powerful it sent shockwaves through the graveyard, rippling the grass and cracking headstones, and it hit Merlin in the chest. Faster than he could react, his wand was knocked out of his hand as he was hurled through the air, passing over graves before his flight was interrupted rather painfully by a tall, avenging angel that watched over a plot of gravestones.

Merlin’s ribs crunched as he crashed into the statue, and then again as he failed to buffer his fall with either magic or his hands, and he slammed straight to the ground. He coughed, spluttering blood onto the grass that seemed to be more black than red in the dim moonlight. He wondered idly if Red Caps would manifest.

Instinct urged him up, up, up! but as soon as he tried to push off from the grass, he cried out as agony lashed throughout his chest. Definitely punctured lungs, which unless healed, would cause death in 3-15 minutes. Not that death was necessarily an issue, but he couldn’t leave Harry on his own against Voldemort.

Gritting his teeth, Merlin reached out to the world and pulled magic through his body, wrapping it around himself, trying to heal the worst of his internal injuries. Slowly, slowly, slowly, all the while wishing that he’d spent so much more time focusing on Druidic healing techniques, he stopped the internal bleeding and bit down a scream as his ribs were pulled back into place, slipping out of where they’d punched tiny gashes in his lungs.

When he finally managed to stagger to his feet and look across the graveyard to Harry and Voldemort, it took him a few seconds to process what was happening. Harry and Voldemort were duelling – but their wands were connected by a bright, almost blinding golden spell that was vibrating madly. Harry’s teeth were gritted and blood dripped from his wand arm from a deep gash Merlin could only assume Wormtail had made, and he looked like he was on the verge of collapsing.
Voldemort, on the other hand, was grinning triumphantly as he leaned forward, the spell pulsating on his end. Merlin stumbled closer and realized that small glowing beads had appeared on the golden thread, and that Voldemort was slowly pushing them towards Harry.

Merlin, seeing that his wand was on the other side of Voldemort now, ducked down behind a gravestone. Ignoring the stabbing pains in his chest, the throbbing of his burned arm, the half-healed laceration in his side and the deep gash on his shoulder that had been re-opened thanks to his aerial pursuits, he waited.

Eventually, the beads slowed down and stopped only a few inches away from the tip of Harry’s wand. Then they began to make their way back up towards Voldemort. Merlin had no idea what kind of magic this was, but he could instinctively tell that it was due to a connection between the two wands.

Voldemort’s blood-red eyes widened as his arm shook violently the closer the beads moved up the golden thread towards him, and Merlin could hear the ghostly echo of phoenix song. Just as Voldemort’s wand vibrated so powerfully that it seemed like any second it would shatter into a thousand pieces, Merlin launched himself out from behind the gravestone and raised his hand above his head.

The air pressure spiked as Merlin’s ears popped, the sky rumbled and from the heavens, a bolt of lightning crashed downwards and struck Voldemort straight in the chest.

The connection between he and Harry’s wands broke, and his body crumpled to the damp grass, unmoving.

As quickly as he could, Merlin ran over to Voldemort’s body, and reached out with all his senses. He could see the soul thread that emerged from within Harry’s chest was connected to the soul piece in Voldemort’s corpse, and that piece was trying its best to flee.

Not thinking about it, Merlin snatched the small, struggling piece of mangled soul and trapped it within himself. Almost immediately a grating, horrific screaming, devoid of words erupted within his skull, Voldemort’s soul threatening to overwhelm Merlin’s senses and take over his body.

Merlin’s eyes flashed gold.

_I am Merlin Emrys_, he said to the soul piece, voice thundering. _I am Magic, I am the Balance, I am_
The greatest sorcerer who has ever lived. You, you pathetic, writhing creature, are nothing but a wailing worm pretending at being a man. You have split your soul in half seven times over and you dare to try to take myself over - me, who has lived eight hundred years. You are nothing to me.

The screeching stopped, and Voldemort’s soul was smothered into silence within Merlin. He didn’t even realize that he had fallen to his knees until Harry’s hands landed on his shoulders, the fourteen-year-old crouching down before Merlin with wide, disbelieving eyes.

“Did you just…? Is he…?” Harry stuttered.

“Not completely,” Merlin replied, his voice thin and brittle as the adrenalin began to die down and the pain from his wounds emerged in full force. “It’s complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it,” Harry said. “I deserve to know.”

Merlin looked up into the eyes of this young, skinny, determined fourteen-year-old who up until a minute ago had the weight of the entire wixen world on his shoulders, who was without a doubt the strongest person that Merlin had ever known. This teenager who had never had the chance to be a kid, to feel the embrace of his parents’ arms, to grow up loved in a house that deserved him, who had go through each and every day knowing that one day it would be up to him to destroy the greatest threat the world had seen.

“Of course you do,” Merlin said. He’d never doubted it for a second. “Voldemort essentially split his soul into seven pieces.”

“He what?” Harry spluttered, thrown off course. At this point it was only Harry’s hands on his shoulders that was keeping Merlin from pitching forward and faceplanting into the grave dirt.

“He discovered an ancient, dark Druid ritual from the time of Old Magic that would, theoretically, allow him to become immortal. By splitting one’s soul, it ensured that the individual’s soul would remain tethered to the world should their body be killed, and they would live on,” Merlin explained. “It’s why he didn’t die the night he tried to kill you. He already had six Horcruxes.”

“You said there were seven,” Harry retorted, settling back to sit on his calves.

“Yes I did,” Merlin replied, impressed with how sharp Harry was catching on for a boy who hated
studying and only scraped by in most subjects. “To make a Horcrux, one has to murder another in cold blood. That act is so foul it tears the soul apart, and then it can be stored in an object. The night that Voldemort killed your parents, and tried to kill you, his soul was already so weakened from the other Horcruxes that it split again.”

“Something at my parents’ house is a Horcrux?” Harry asked breathlessly.

Merlin smiled at Harry sadly. “No.”

“I don’t understand, Morgan.”

“Most of the time, creating a Horcrux is intentional. The soul piece knows exactly what object to go into. When it’s left untethered and unprepared… it is drawn to the nearest living being, hoping that it will give it life again,” Merlin said.

Understanding dawned on Harry’s face.

“You’re Voldemort’s seventh Horcrux.”

“You mean…” Harry breathed. “I’ve got him inside me?”

“It’s why you have a connection to him,” Merlin said. “It’s why your wands have the same core – I’m assuming from that light show earlier anyway. He’s split his soul seven times – one half, one quarter, one eighth, one sixteenth, one thirty-second, one sixty-fourth, and one one-twenty-eighth. The piece of soul within you is miniscule, and yet it is the same amount that Voldemort himself had… the piece that I now have.”

Harry’s hands twitched on Merlin’s shoulders like he wanted to recoil in horror but rejected doing that on principle. “You have Voldemort’s soul inside you?”

“It tried to escape,” Merlin said. It was getting a little difficult to breathe thanks to the broken ribs. “I stopped it. I can keep it here, safe and hidden, until I destroy the rest of the Horcruxes. Then I can destroy this final piece that used to be Voldemort, and he will be gone for good. And you won’t have to lift a single finger.”
That seemed to finally get the message through to Harry, who could no longer hold himself upright let alone hold Merlin up, and his body sagged in both relief and shock. Merlin reached a hand out to press against Harry’s sternum, feeling his heart beat rapidly through his thin skin, right alongside the Horcrux within him.

The Horcrux that was desperately trying to escape and re-join with the piece within Merlin’s chest.

“Harry…” Merlin whispered. “Do you want me to remove the Horcrux from inside you?”

“Can you do that?” Harry asked just as quietly.

“It wants to get out,” Merlin said. “Horcruxes are unnatural, and it wants to join up with the piece inside me. I can draw it out, and then I can destroy it. It’s Old Magic. It’s what I was born to do.”

Harry stared for a few moments at Merlin with bright, emerald-green eyes that were surrounded by dark rings, the whites of his eyes a little red and bloodshot thanks to the stress. His hair was more of a mess than usual, and his glasses sat crooked on his face, one of the lenses cracked. Dirt and blood was streaked across his olive-bronze skin, and he looked both fourteen and four hundred.

“Who are you?” Harry blurted, and Merlin laughed.

“If I tell you, will you let me take out that Horcrux?” he asked.

“I’d let you take it out anyway, but I’m curious now,” Harry replied with a small chuckle.

“I’m assuming you know who Merlin is,” he said. Harry nodded, clearly waiting for Merlin to continue on with his explanation. Instead Merlin just continued to stare pointedly at Harry, and then shrugged rather bashfully. “Hi.”

Harry frowned, and then the wide-eyed look of realisation that took over his face was so comical that the only reason Merlin didn’t burst into laughter was the stabbing pain in his side and the breathing difficulties that resulted from it.

“You… no, no, no way. There is absolutely no way that you are the Merlin. He died about a
thousand years ago!” Harry gasped. “I’m no Hermione but I’m pretty sure I know that he’s dead.”

“He is not dead,” Merlin replied, quite unable to keep the childish pout off his face. “And he is currently struggling with broken ribs and lungs that refuse to expand fully, so I’d really like to get this Horcrux out of you so we can get these Death Eaters back to Hogwarts and into auror custody.”

“Professor Moody used to be an auror, right? He could probably help out with all this,” Harry said. The damp grass soaked into Merlin’s knees, and he wasn’t entirely sure if it was just dew. “I still don’t believe you’re Merlin, though.”

Merlin laughed, and then winced at the pain that shot through his side at the motion. “Just wait until you find out about Arthur.”

“If you tell me he’s King Arthur, I might hit you right in the broken ribs,” Harry deadpanned.

“My lips are sealed, then,” Merlin teased.

Harry chewed on his lips for a few moments, brow furrowed. “If you take the Horcrux out of me, what’s to stop it from going into you? Doesn’t that mean that it’ll join up with the piece already inside you and become stronger?”

“Nope,” Merlin replied. His voice was hoarser than he expected it, and he could tell that Harry was surprised as well. He really needed medical attention. Or a healing trance.

“It will want to join up, but I can destroy it,” he explained. “Normally souls wouldn’t be so destructible, and it’d be near impossible to destroy a soul, but since it’s been ripped into pieces it’s like… lighting a ripped up piece of paper on fire. It’s got no real substance, and no protection outside its physical form, which is made indestructible to almost anything. That’s the downside to this type of immortality.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed. “But only because it sounds like you’re about to collapse any second and I don’t want to be left in this graveyard alone with Voldemort’s corpse and a bunch of Death Eaters that could wake up at any time.”

Merlin nodded, and Harry placed his hands on Merlin’s biceps to hold him up.
Merlin closed his eyes and allowed himself to sink immediately into the world around him. When he first started meditating, a few weeks after Arthur’s death when he’d retreated into the countryside with the druid camps despite the legalisation of magic that Gwen implemented, it’d taken him hours to fully settle into the quiet of his mind and the world around him. He had too much going on, too many emotions distracting him from connecting to the magic around and inside him. He’d had years of practice now, though, and could do it within seconds. After all, how could he ever not be connected to what he was and what created him?

Merlin didn’t open his eyes, but behind closed eyelids he could see brightly coloured sparks, tethers and threads, waves of magic pulsating through the world and keeping everything intertwined. Underneath his hand which he’d splayed out on Harry’s chest, he could feel the beating of the boy’s heart right alongside the obscene beat of what felt like a second heart, the piece of Voldemort’s soul that had dared to take up residence inside Harry.

He took in a deep breath, felt Harry do the same, and then released a little control he had on the soul piece inside him. Through the connection between he and Harry, the soul pieces felt each other, and immediately drew toward the other like they were magnetised.

The Horcrux inside Harry left his body, forsaking its physical form, and Harry let out a shudder as he couldn’t see but rather feel such darkness leaving him. Merlin seized the opportunity to pour his magic into the exposed Horcrux. Like a fire, it caught on it’s tattered edges, and the weakened sliver of soul couldn’t take so much raw, unfiltered magic. An eerie echo filled the darkness of the graveyard as it collapsed in on itself, too weak to sustain its own life without a physical form.

The main part of Voldemort’s soul, inside Merlin’s chest, shivered in fear.

Merlin exhaled heavily and nearly collapsed to the ground once he took his hand off Harry’s chest, breaking the connection between the two of them. Harry managed to catch him in time, though Merlin was nowhere ready to haul himself to his feet just yet.

“How do you feel?” Harry asked.

“Great,” Merlin managed to reply through gritted teeth. His hands were shaking both from the pain, blood loss, and the sheer amount of magical energy he’d expended in such a short space of time. He hadn’t had to fight so hard or so much since his days in Camelot, and he wasn’t used to it. “You?”

“I feel... I don’t know what I feel. Free, or light, or... something. Like I can breathe easily for the
“Then it was worth it,” he panted. “I need you… to get back to the cup, get back to Hogwarts, and holler for Madam Pomfrey as loud as you can.”

“What? Why?” Harry asked, hands tighten on Merlin’s biceps where he held him up.

“Because I’m already exhausted and I’m going to be breaking through Hogwarts’ wards with thirteen Death Eaters and Voldemort’s corpse, and I’ll probably collapse as soon as I get there,” Merlin said, head spinning. He propped himself up with his palms flat on the ground, feeling the wet blades of grass and gritty dirt beneath himself.

“You can’t just come through with the portkey?” Harry asked.

“Everyone needs to be touching the portkey to get through,” Merlin replied. “Tell me how you think we’re going to get thirteen unconscious people and a corpse to do that.”

“Good point,” Harry conceded. “But if you haven’t arrived in five minutes I’m coming back for you.”

“The Portkey’s only good for one more trip.”

“And that sign over there says we’re in the Little Hangleton Cemetery. I’m sure I can find someone to apparate me over here,” Harry argued. Merlin looked up through his eyelashes at Harry, who looked determined and a little bit smug, and sighed.

“Okay, five minutes. I promise I’ll be there,” Merlin said. “Don’t leave and don’t go anywhere with anyone – we don’t know who the spy is.”

“Alright, Morg- no, wait,” Harry broke himself off, laughing with a shake of his head. “Merlin. Don’t pass out, okay?”

Merlin would’ve given him a snappy salute if he had the energy to, but instead just rolled his eyes. Clearly that conveyed all he needed to, because Harry hauled himself to his feet with a groan and made for the Triwizard cup that was still faintly glowing on the ground. He had a limp, had blood
pouring from the slash on his forearm and from a wound on the back of his head – presumably from being slammed up against and tied to a gravestone – but he stood tall and he held his wand in an unshaking hand. If this experience hadn’t soured him to fighting for the rest of his life, the boy would make a wonderful Auror.

Harry only looked back at Merlin once more before he grabbed hold of the Triwizard cup and disappeared.

No longer having to stay strong, Merlin let himself collapse to the grass, holding back a scream as the motion jolted every wound and injury in and on him. He was no longer in immediate danger of having collapsed lungs or a fatal CO2 build-up in his chest, but he still required medical attention.

He wasn’t able to get into Hogwarts while feeling like this though, and allowed his face to lay on the blood-dampened grass as he fell into a healing trance. He dug his fingers into the earth and opened his senses – felt the crisp night air brush against his face, the blood spreading beneath his sticky clothes, the throbbing in his side and shoulder. The utter silence of the graveyard around him – no animals remained after what happened here, and they were far enough into the countryside that nobody lived within earshot, no cars driving by this late.

He could smell dirt, ozone and blood, and he could still see magical residue beneath his closed eyelids. It was tempting to just lie on the ground, breathe in and drop into unconsciousness, but Merlin didn’t want to keep Harry waiting.

He opened his eyes and struggled to his feet, healed up just enough to do what he needed to. He summoned his wand to his side, and at his command it lengthened fully into the Sidhe staff that was it’s original form. Merlin leaned on it as he stumbled his way forward, getting stronger with each step he took as he allowed magic to fill him up and give him strength. He felt like he was constantly leaning to the side as the Balance was still broken almost beyond repair, but even with the destruction of the smallest of Voldemort’s Horcruxes, it had begun to right itself.

Soon Merlin situated himself right next to the massive stone cauldron that resurrected Voldemort, and held out a hand with fingers splayed. He located each of the thirteen Death Eaters, and Voldemort’s corpse, and clutched them to him with his magic.

Then he took a deep breath, twisted, and disappeared.

He tumbled through blackness and space, and found himself halted by Hogwarts’ wards when he tried to apparated on the grounds. Most people would find themselves repelled by this force, but there were some who were able to bypass it – phoenixes and house elves, creatures that used Old
Magic, could get through just fine.

And so Merlin only had to ask and invoke his name in order to persuade the wards to part behind him and his cargo, and slip closed behind them afterwards. Merlin slammed down on the dry grass of the Quidditch pitch, just before the entrance to the maze, and groaned as he stumbled and nearly fell.

The cacophony of shouting voices from around him immediately fell so silent you could hear a pin drop. And then it was broken by a single cry.

“Merlin!” Arthur yelled. Merlin turned to see Arthur at the top of one of the Quidditch stands that towered over the hedge walls of the maze. Arthur leaped over the side of the stand, to the shock and horror of the crowd, but Merlin saw his eyes flash golden in the instinctive way that his own did, and the Gryffindor’s downward momentum slowed before he landed safely on his feet. He barely waited to touch the ground before his feet were pounding along the grass and soon his body collided with Merlin’s, wrapping warm, familiar arms around him.

With a sigh, Merlin collapsed into Arthur’s hold.

“I thought you were dead,” Arthur whispered into Merlin’s hair.

“I was,” Merlin breathed back. He didn’t even have the strength to wrap his arms back around Arthur, who was now supporting nearly all of Merlin’s weight. The silence on the pitch had broken, and soon everyone in the area had to yell just to be heard, and Merlin wanted to retreat somewhere quiet and desolate.

“Excuse me, Mr Pendragon,” a prim voice said, and Merlin turned his head to see Madam Pomfrey waiting next to a bedraggled Harry, who had a stupidly relieved grin on his face. “I need to tend to Mr Emery.”

“Madam Pomfrey, I know that I asked for you, but I literally don’t think I can stand without Arthur,” Merlin replied, voice muffled into Arthur’s chest. “I’ve got cracked ribs, a mostly-healed punctured lung, a laceration in my side, plus the injuries on my arm and shoulder I received in the maze. Also severe magical exhaustion, but you can thank Voldemort for that. Asshole.”

Pomfrey’s lips thinned at the mention of Voldemort, but if anything she seemed more annoyed and inconvenienced by him than terrified, and it was so Pomfrey that Merlin nearly burst out laughing. Instead he just relaxed into Arthur’s hold as she started casting healing spells that trickled across his
flesh like warm water, and passed him a multitude of potions that he choked down. Meanwhile, Harry was dragged away by Dumbledore, who was asking him questions in a low voice. What helped more than the healing and potions, however, was the warm, steady trickle of love and magic that Arthur was pouring into him. It made Merlin’s knees feel like jelly.

“Are you doing that on purpose?” Merlin asked, mumbling into Arthur’s neck.

“Doing what?” he asked back far too innocently. Merlin could hear some raised voices getting louder, and recognized the loudest, most insistent as Hermione, followed by an angry Cora and Cedric.

Merlin felt battered, a little broken, and a lot like he’d been thrown about like a crash-test dummy, but he felt okay now. He pulled away from Arthur to stand on his own two feet, though he didn’t break out of Arthur’s hold.

“I’m alright, Madam Pomfrey, thanks,” Merlin said with a smile. “You should probably fix up Harry’s arm.”

“The boy wouldn’t let me tend to him until he knew you were okay,” she sighed, and headed over towards Harry and Dumbledore. Merlin turned to wave his friends forward, who were being held back by the Triwizard security wizards, when a loud, authoritative voice boomed across the pitch.

“WHAT IS THIS!” it yelled, and Merlin whirled around to see Cornelius Fudge pale and shaking, pointing a finger at Voldemort’s corpse and the unconscious, hog-tied Death Eaters.

Merlin calmly pulled himself out of Arthur’s hold and spoke to the Minister across the once again silent pitch. “That would be the corpse of Lord Voldemort, Minister.”

At his words, there were quiet a few shrieks and gasps from the crowd, and the Minister turned to point his shaking finger at Merlin, his face reddening with rage and confusion.

“You lie!” he spat.

“Don’t call me a liar, Minister, I don’t appreciate it,” Merlin scolded like he was telling off a young child. “That is Lord Voldemort, now dead, and surrounding him are thirteen of his Death Eaters. As I overheard him say, he has six more in Azkaban, two of them have turned traitor, and one of them
has been working for him all year as a spy. It’s thanks to Harry and I that he isn’t alive right now.”

“That… it’s… that’s preposterous!” Fudge stuttered. “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is dead! He has been for years!”

“That’s incorrect,” Merlin replied. “He was mostly dead. He was resurrected earlier tonight, and was promptly killed again. For good, this time. I made sure of that.”

“Oh?” Fudge laughed, a little maniacally. “You, a nineteen-year-old boy, killed You-Know-Who? He was alive this whole time and as if you didn’t have enough attention already with being the Hogwarts champion and a dragonlord, you’ve now killed the greatest threat of our time? Who do you think you’re fooling? Who do you think you are?”

The pitch was deathly silent at Fudge’s words, and Arthur’s fingers tightened around Merlin’s wrist. It was Harry, however, who spoke up.

“He’s Merlin,” he said, stepping out from next to Dumbledore with clenched fists and a determined fire in his eyes. “I witnessed everything. Wormtail hit him with the killing curse and less than ten minutes later he was back on his feet, knocked out all of the Death Eaters with one spell and he struck Voldemort down with lightning. It’s unbelievable, but it’s the truth.”

Fudge burst out laughing. “You expect me to believe that this boy is Merlin? Whom we all know has been dead since the time of King Arthur?”

Merlin stepped forward, linking his fingers with Arthur’s, and pulled the Gryffindor with him. Both of their eyes flashed gold, and Fudge took a step back.

“I am Merlin Emrys,” he said, voice amplified to carry across the pitch. “At my side is Arthur Pendragon, the reborn Once and Future King. Tonight I killed Voldemort to bring balance to the world and to stop a war that would have killed many of you before it even began. The only reason I am still here and not far, far away is that my friends and everyone I know is threatened by Voldemort’s spy.”

“The spy’s been here all year,” Arthur spoke up. “Orchestrating events from the beginning – getting Harry into the Triwizard Tournament, making sure he achieved first place and could enter the maze first, and as far as I’m concerned, turned the cup into a portkey and Imperiused Viktor Krum. You should listen to Merlin.”
Fudge sputtered and opened his mouth to protest.

Instead of trying to convince Fudge even more – despite the fact that it was impossible to apparate into Hogwarts much less with fourteen bodies, and to apparate them without physical contact, which on it’s own should’ve proved that Merlin was far more than Fudge thought – Merlin instead closed his eyes and centered himself.

Occlumency and Legilimency were a rare wizarding techniques that stemmed from the Druidic ages. Mordred had been one of the strongest legilmens that he’d seen, even after eight hundred years, and it had taken Merlin a long time to master the art on such a level. Only few of the modern magical community could learn the art, let alone master it, and it had been many a year since Merlin had tried his hand at the art.

Sinking into a meditative state, Merlin held out the hand that wasn’t attached to Arthur, and expanded his mind. Legilimency was a two-way street, contrary to popular belief. It wasn’t the art of one diving into the mind of the other – it was one opening the mind to receiving the thoughts and memories of the other. If it was done correctly by someone with a strong ability, one could open their mind to many, not just one. However, since it was a two-way street, one also had to be even more well-versed in Occlumency to protect their mind from being probed by others once it was open.

One by one, Merlin opened himself to the thoughts of those around him. He felt Arthur by his side, Harry and Dumbledore a little further away standing with Pomfrey, the thoughts of his stunned friends, the boiling ocean of Fudge’s mind – further out, past the professors and students and parents and families and security, until Merlin could feel the minds of every living person in the Quidditch stadium.

He took a hold of them all, and compelled them all to speak the truth. They could not lie while he was in their mind – you couldn’t hide the truth from yourself or your thoughts.

“One of you is Voldemort’s spy,” he said. His voice reverberated through the minds of everyone he was connected with. “One of you placed Harry Potter’s name into the Goblet of Fire. One of you turned the Triwizard Cup into a portkey. One of you has been working all year to make sure that Harry Potter was present at the Little Hangleton Graveyard where Lord Voldemort was resurrected. Whoever the spy is – you will come forward immediately.”

Merlin opened his eyes, and waited for movement from the frozen crowd.
Then, a figure began to move forward helplessly, reluctantly, fighting every step as they came across
the pitch and into the light.

It was Professor Moody, and Merlin released his hold upon everyone’s mind.

“Professor Moody?” Harry breathed, breaking the silence. “You’re his spy? You’re an auror! You’re
supposed to catch dark wizards, not resurrect them!”

Dumbledore took a step forward with a furrowed brow, placing his hand on Harry’s chest, protecting
the boy with his own body. “Alastor?” he asked.

“That’s not Alastor Moody,” Arthur suddenly said. Merlin looked over to see that his eyes were
glowing the warm gold of Old Magic, and he raised his arm. He spoke the first word that Merlin had
taught him – fleoge. But like all Old Magic, the words were open to interpretation. Arthur’s meaning
didn’t mean forward, as in to be pushed forward, but in relation to time.

Just a few minutes forward in the spy’s time was enough for the polyjuice to wear off. Moody began
to convulse, and first the fake eye popped off, followed by the clawed prosthetic leg, and he fell to
the floor in his original form – a young man with messy dark hair and a wild look in his eye.

With a wave of his hand, Merlin bound him, and a few of the older people in the crowd gasped
when they realised the man’s identity.

“Barty Crouch Jr.,” Madam Pomfrey gasped, clutching her robes. “He’s supposed to be dead.”

“Apparently not,” Dumbledore said. Fudge’s face whitened and paled as he looked down at the
frantic, grinning man that lay tied on the pitch along with the other Death Eaters, who looked
seconds away from bursting out into maniacal laughter.

“I wouldn’t be so happy if I were you,” Merlin said, stepping forward until he stood over the man,
Arthur at his side. “You’ve failed. Voldemort is dead.”

“He cannot die!” Crouch laughed. “He’s immortal!”
“Oh, you mean the, uh…” Merlin paused, then leaned down to whisper in Crouch’s ear, “Horcruxes?” He straightened up again. “Yeah, I’ve dealt with those. Your Dark Lord is gone for good this time. Sorry to burst your bubble.”

Crouch wasn’t laughing any more, and was staring up at Merlin in horror. Merlin just turned around and summoned his Sidhe staff from where it’d fallen to the pitch when he’d apparated in. Arthur was grinning from next to him, and Merlin turned to face Dumbledore.

“Headmaster, I recommend that you call in some aurors to deal with the Death Eaters – some arrests need to be made. They, and Crouch here, can testify in court under Veritaserum as war criminals. That one over there is someone Harry called Wormtail, and he seemed to be the one in charge of taking care of Voldemort, so his testimony is probably going to be the most valuable to you. I would however ask that I could take care of Voldemort’s corpse myself,” he said, standing tall with his back straight, shucking his identity of Morgan Emery fully. His voice was polite and respectful but firm, with no doubt that he wasn’t so much requesting as ordering.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled, and he bowed his head. “Of course, Emrys.”

Merlin’s druidic title coming from Dumbledore’s mouth seemed to convince everyone that he was who he said he was, and Harry grinned as the sound level on the pitch shot upwards rapidly. The security wizards, who were also in shock, were too busy gaping to stop the gaggle of fourth and seventh years from running onto the pitch. Hermione and Ron launched themselves at Harry, Hermione fussing over the blood on his face and the healing scar on his arm, while Merlin and Arthur’s friends stopped a few feet away.

“So you’re Merlin, huh?” Cora asked, arms crossed.

“Uh… yeah,” Merlin replied, face flushing. “Sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“Didn’t tell us, he says!” exclaimed a flustered Cedric. “Everything makes so much more sense now. Literally every question I have had this entire year has been cleared up with this. I mean, we’re not surprised you didn’t tell us, and we’re not mad about it.”

“Just disappointed,” Rob teased.

“We shared a room with Merlin, and we didn’t know about it,” Vern murmured quietly.
“Yeah, that’s pretty cool and all,” Lydia said in a holier-than-thou tone, “but we shared with King Arthur.”

“Lydia, I love you, but I must disagree,” Pavel then jumped in. “Rooming with Merlin is clearly cooler than rooming with King Arthur.”

Merlin was quiet for a few moments, trying desperately to stop his lips from twisting up into an amused grin. “Are you literally arguing over which of us is cooler? Because if so, the answer is easy. It’s clearly me.”

“Oh really?” Arthur drawled. “Let’s see, you have a dorky fringe, a handkerchief that you always insist belongs around the neck, elephant ears and the strangest facial structure I have ever seen on a human being. Meanwhile I’m handsome, and the king, and I have a sword.”

“That’s because it’s a neckerchief,” Merlin argued, “and in Ealdor everyone wore one. That, and you don’t have Excalibur, so that point is moot. If you want to go and retrieve it from the lake that you died in, be my guest, Arthur.”

“You’re an ass,” was the witty retort from the Once and Future King.

“And you’re a royal prat,” Merlin replied with a shit-eating grin. “But I love you anyway.”

“Oh my god,” Maya suddenly exploded. “You know this means all of the discourse and historical essays are correct? Merlin and Arthur are totally gay for each other. This proves the homophobes wrong!”

“Bisexual for each other, actually, and we weren’t together in Camelot because Gwen was a literal queen among women,” Arthur corrected, “but I guess your historical essays are correct?”

“I can’t believe people wrote essays about whether we snogged in dark alleyways or not,” Merlin sighed.

“What I don’t get,” Simon interrupted, “is why we’re all so fixated on this when You-Know-Who’s dead body is literally only a few feet away from us. And he looks like a pasty reptile man.”
“Who cares about pasty reptilian men? He’s old news,” Cora said with a nonchalant hand wave.

“These two are literally older news than You-Know-Who,” Cedric pointed out. It was at that point that Hermione finally tore herself away from where she had fiercely been mothering Harry, stormed over to their group, and pointed her finger at Merlin’s face so close he had to swerve backwards to avoid being stabbed in the eyeball.

“I knew it!” Hermione burst. “Ever since you gave me that ridiculously vague answer on the day of the first task about your dragonlord abilities, I knew it. I couldn’t prove it, but I knew that I was right, especially considering that there had never been confirmed proof that Merlin died. It was just assumed.” She was breathing heavily, with her opposite fist clenched, and she looked incredibly vindicated. Behind her, Ron was rolling his eyes, and Harry shrugged at Merlin in a ‘what-can-you-do?’ way.

There was a sudden commotion as the crowds parted and a team of aurors entered the pitch, led by Kingsley Shacklebolt and Professor McGonagall, who had gone to allow them into the grounds. As they began to round up the hog-tied Death Eaters, including a now silent Barty Crouch Jr., McGonagall literally gasped in shock and took a step back as she saw Wormtail.

“Peter Pettigrew?” she gasped. “He’s supposed to be dead!”

“He’s not,” Harry said, voice gone hard and brittle like it had when they’d first seen Wormtail in the cemetery. “Instead of Sirius, my parents thought that he’d be too obvious a choice, and that nobody would suspect Wormtail would be their secret keeper. Instead he betrayed them to Voldemort, and Sirius was locked up for twelve years, innocent, and without trial.” At the end of his declaration, he glared up at Fudge, who was beginning to sweat above the lip. “Looks as though you’ve gotten quite a bit wrong tonight, Minister.”

At Harry’s words, Fred and George Weasley smirked from where they stood nearby with the other Weasleys as Harry’s support. McGonagall looked at Harry for a few seconds, and then turned on the minister.

“Cornelius, I suggest you contact the Auror Investigation Department and get a statement and the files of those who were working the night Sirius Black was arrested. Then I suggest you contact the Law Enforcement Patrol and get them to rescind the arrest order for Sirius and start calculating compensation costs. And then, you should go to the Daily Prophet and give them your statement – that Sirius Black is an innocent man, and has never been a Death Eater,” she ordered. “And that was not a request.”
Merlin had quite forgotten that Minerva McGongall had been employed at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement before teaching at Hogwarts.

Minister Fudge, looking quite small and scolded, simply nodded and walked over to Kingsley to organise all of that. McGonagall was looking quite pleased with herself, and Hermione was looking at her with near-literal hearts in her eyes.

“Someone should contact Remus Lupin and tell him that Sirius is innocent,” McGonagall mused.

“He already knows, professor,” Harry replied. McGonagall’s mouth drew up into a small, pleased smile.

“Good,” McGonagall said with a nod of her head. “I can only imagine what he went through when he thought the love of his life killed his best friends. Honestly, the number of times I caught those two in darkened hallways…”

Arthur snorted at Harry’s comically wide eyes as the aurors carted away the Death Eaters. Many of the spectators up in the stands narrowed their eyes and spat on the unconscious prisoners as they were levitated out by the aurors. Merlin snagged one as they passed and told them that the Death Eaters’ wands were all still in the Little Hangleton graveyard, and that they should probably send someone to collect them. Before the aurors could do anything with Voldemort's body, Merlin placed it in stasis and sent it somewhere far away to deal with later.

“I have a question,” Lydia said. “Who won the tournament? Harry or Mor- no, sorry, Merlin?”

“Harry did,” Merlin immediately replied. “He was the first one to see the cup.”

“You’re the one who killed Voldemort!” Harry argued.

“Killing Voldemort wasn’t one of the tasks,” Merlin shot back. “Mr Bagman!” he called out. At his beckon, Ludo Bagman hurried across the pitch looking particularly delighted.

“Yes, Mr Emery?” he asked. Merlin wasn't surprised that the man hadn't been paying attention.
“Have you decided on who won the tournament?” Merlin asked. Bagman froze, mouth open, looking incredibly awkward. “If you haven’t, give the winnings to Harry. I don’t need them.”

“That’s very generous of you!” Mr Bagman gushed. “I’ll let the reporters know.”

A hand came around Merlin’s waist and grabbed onto his hip, pulling him further into Arthur’s side. With a sigh, Merlin wrapped his own arm around Arthur’s back and lay his head on the Gryffindor’s shoulder, closing his eyes and relaxing into the sturdy hold.

“C’mon, Merlin, you’re dead on your feet,” Arthur murmured. “We can sort all this out in the morning. You look like you’ve gone to hell and back.”

Merlin wanted to argue, wanted to oversee what was going on out here to make sure that it was all okay, but he was truly exhausted. His body was on the verge of collapse, even with Arthur’s strength running through him and Pomfrey’s timely healing spells and multitude of potions. His head pounded from over-exerting his Legilimency after not having used it in so long, his magical core felt sore and worn-out from all of the magic he’d been doing. His soul was fighting with the little sliver of Voldemort inside him and the Balance was still yelling at Merlin like pounding war drums, demanding his attention.

“We’ll all escort you up,” Cedric said. “Keep the masses from hounding you. Though we will be talking about this in the morning.”

“Sure,” Merlin replied absent-mindedly. They hadn’t even gone five steps when a finger gently tapped Merlin’s shoulder, and Arthur swivelled them around so Merlin could see Viktor Krum standing awkwardly behind him, knuckles white from where he’d tangled his fingers together and a dark bruise on his temple from where he’d faceplanted into the pitch after he’d been stunned.

“Shit!” Merlin swore. “Are you alright, Viktor?”

“I am fine,” he replied with a confused frown. “I wanted to… apologise for what I did. And thank you. I know that towards the end I was starting to fight the curse. If you had not talked me down so early I do not know what I would have done. Thank you.”

Merlin smiled and grasped one of Viktor’s hands.
“No apologies necessary, Viktor. Not many people can fight the Imperius Curse at all, and you were Imperiused by a Death Eater. I’d say that’s damn impressive,” Merlin said. “I’ll come and see you tomorrow once I’ve passed out for a solid fifteen hours.”

Viktor smiled at this, and clapped Merlin on the shoulder before their ragtag group headed back up to the castle, three Gryffindor fourth-years following them at Dumbledore’s insistence. Cora and Lydia levelled death glares at any reporters who so much as tried to approach them, and they made it up to the Room of Requirement unscathed. All of them – the Hufflepuffs, Slytherins and Gryffindors – collapsed onto the provided beds that were just as comfortable as the Hufflepuff dorm ones.

As Merlin drifted off to sleep, Arthur twined an arm around Merlin’s waist and pulled him back into his arms, then pressed a gentle kiss to the nape of Merlin’s neck.

“T’m glad you’re okay,” Arthur whispered.

“Not entirely,” Merlin replied. “But I will be soon. And I’ll tell you everything that happened.”

The Balance might be almost entirely out of whack, shoving failure into Merlin’s head, but logically he knew that he was already on the right track to fixing it. He had Arthur at his side, Voldemort was no longer a threat and would be taken care of soon, and Harry was free to live the life he’d never been able to have.

For the first time in nearly eight hundred years, all was well.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit, you guys. Writing this was crazy tough and uploading it has been mega stressful - I went through and discarded so many ideas about what would happen in the graveyard that I hadn't fully settled on an idea until the night I started writing this. Merlin taking in Voldemort's soul is all thanks to one of my besties, James, and I hope ya'll like it as much as I do. I hope this chapter has lived up to everything you hoped it would. I started writing this over two years ago now, approximately thirty-two months, and it's weird that it's finally come to an end.

Stay tuned guys, because I've still got an epilogue to go!
Also, holy shit, 100k.

I've also opened up fanfiction commissions, and you can find more information >>> HERE! So if you like this and want me to write something for you, let me know :)

In regards to horcruxes: most people believe that Voldemort put in $\frac{1}{7}$th of his soul into each one. However, I am personally of the interpretation that it splits your soul in half each time - therefore creating seven horcruxes means that in the end you're left with one/one-twenty-eighth of your soul left. Harry and Voldy both have the same amount of his soul inside them, meanwhile Ginny had to deal with a whole half of his soul with the diary. Sorry, Harry, but I think Ginny has you beat.
“Cedric, Maya and Cora are coming over tonight for dinner,” Merlin called out through the window. “Pavel and Lydia are still on holiday in Moscow and can’t make it, but they say they’re very sorry to miss the occasion.” He folded the letter back up and stroked Gaius’ back, the owl preening under the attention.

He received a distracted grunt in response from Arthur who was in his workshop. After their big reveal, the Daily Prophet had published article after article theorising on what the two of them were going to do now, whether Arthur would take power of the wixen world and run for Minister, whether Merlin would take over as headmaster at Hogwarts (despite the fact that Dumbledore was doing a perfectly good job).

Merlin had been a little surprised when Arthur applied to apprentice directly under Ollivander as a wandmaker, but Arthur had said that he felt there wasn’t much reason for him to be Minister – their greatest threat was dead (or, would be soon, with only one more Horcrux to hunt down) and the kingdoms were already united.

“I always thought the prophecy would be that you would come back when the world needed you most,” Merlin had whispered into the back of Arthur’s neck one night, just a few weeks after they’d moved back into the cabin. Arthur had turned around and pressed a kiss to Merlin’s forehead.

“Did you ever think about the fact that you’re technically the world?” he’d responded. “I think I came back when you needed me most.”

Merlin didn’t even rib him for how sappy that was because he was too busy shoving Arthur back down onto the sheets for round two – or three? That night had become quite the blur.

With a sigh, Merlin turned away from the window and he headed into their backyard, plucking all
the herbs they’d need for dinner. Everyone had graduated from Hogwarts and moved on – Cedric was training to be a Curse Breaker, Cora and Maya were on-and-off travelling the world, Lydia had joined the Ministry Research Committee and Pavel’s parents had helped him secure a position with the Russian Ministry. Vern had gone to the U.S. to stay with his brother and brother’s boyfriend for a while (in a town that even Merlin found strange), while Rob had gone into Healing at St Mungo’s. Simon had surprisingly gone into the Arithmancy field, and Tanith was going through whatever rigorous training was needed for her ballet. Pavel hadn’t been lying when he said he could help her get an audition for the Bolshoi.

Hands filled with bundles of herbs, Merlin entered the kitchen and his eyes alighted on the golden sword that was mounted above their couch. Arthur had retrieved Excalibur not too long ago and had emerged looking ridiculous and soaking-wet but victorious. He said that he kept it in an easy-to-reach place just in case a new threat emerged that required King Arthur and Merlin.

The press had also run multiple stories about Merlin, mostly excited gushing, historical discourse or straight-up denial. It’d taken the Daily Prophet a few days to finally admit that Merlin was who he said he was, but the Quibbler had been surprisingly fast on the uptake. Merlin had been more than happy to do an interview with them, and considered Xenophilius Lovegood to be a friend nowadays. Even if the man did insist that Merlin’s hair was naturally blonde and he dyed it darker with magic.

Merlin for now was happy living at home, relaxing from the stressful year at Hogwarts, cooking dinner and stargazing with Arthur at night. His NEWT results were pasted up on their corkboard in the study – he’d passed all his exams, with nine NEWTs in total: three O’s, four E’s and two A’s. Being Merlin, with the grades he had, he could go into practically any job field he wanted.

But for now, he was happy at home. He did miss teaching, however, and every now and then would toss up between going back to teach at a Muggle university or whether he wanted to undergo an internship to be a professor at Hogwarts; or potentially another international wixen school.

He had to physically drag Arthur out of his workshop at six, just half an hour before Cedric, Maya and Cora were due to arrive, and shoved him into the shower with a fond order to get ready and wash the wand residue off his face and hands. As per usual, Merlin cooked far too much food than was needed. Eight hundred years and he still hadn’t mastered his proportions.

Cora and Maya were the first to arrive, stumbling out of their fireplace with wide grins, arms laden with gifts and souvenirs from around the world.

“Usually we wouldn’t be so into the souvenir thing,” Cora explained, “but we stayed in Japan for two months and it really rubbed off on us. We’re lucky Maya has all that pureblood money stored away.”
“It’s gonna be your money soon too, remember?” Maya asked, picking up Cora’s hand so she could wave around the diamond ring for all to see.

“That is how you’re announcing that you’re engaged?” Arthur drawled, exiting the bedroom in dry clothes though his hair was still wet and a little bit of a mess. King Arthur indeed. “That’s pathetic, you two.”

“Just because we didn’t splatter our engagement all over the front cover of the Quibbler like someone doesn’t mean that you get to judge us,” Cora replied, poking Arthur in the chest. “Speaking of which, when’s the wedding?”

Merlin and Arthur shrugged, and Cora threw her hands up in the air. “You’re hopeless.”

A knock sounded on the door, and Cora perked up as Merlin quickly washed his hands in the kitchen sink before he headed over to open it. Cedric was standing on their front porch, holding what looked to be the most delicious cake Merlin had ever seen.

Cedric had also apparently brought every single person that they knew – Lydia and Pavel were wrapped in furs with kubanka hats on their heads, clearly having apparated straight from the Russian winter. Tanith was dressed similarly, with dramatic stage makeup still on; Vern and Rob were arm-in-arm, each carrying a plateful of food; and behind them all stood three fifteen-year-old Gryffindors, still clad in their Hogwarts robes.

“Please tell me you didn’t kidnap those three from Hogwarts grounds,” Merlin sighed once the shock wore off.

“We would never!” Cedric insisted in a tone that sounded very much like the one the Weasley twins would employ whenever they denied involvement in a prank that was very much their own. “McGonagall gave us permission to take them off the grounds on a non-Hogsmeade weekend. We just… neglected to say how far off grounds we were going to take them.”

“It’s a technicality she’ll appreciate,” Lydia insisted. “Can we come in?”

“Yeah, it’s freezing out here!” Vern said, holding onto Rob as he shook from head to toe in shorts and a t-shirt. “All the apparition stations between here and Arizona were indoors, I pretty much forgot it was winter. It doesn’t rain so far out into the desert.”
“Oh please, this is not cold,” Pavel scoffed. “We have spent the last few months in Russia, temperatures in Moscow once reached over negative forty degrees celsius in the winter of 194-“

“Pavel, if you don’t shut up, I’m sending you straight back to Russia!” Cora interrupted, shouldering Merlin out of the doorway to glare at the blonde.

“I missed you too, Cora,” he simply grinned, and Cora rolled her eyes as she bodily heaved everyone inside. Merlin couldn’t stop the laugh that burst out of him at the fact that Pavel was still winding everyone up. Merlin moved out of the way to let them all in, taking coats and levitating them onto the coat rack, catching Arthur’s bewildered look to reply with a confused shrug in response.

Once everyone had de-robed – or in Vern’s case, he’d taken Rob’s coat and then stole the blanket from Merlin and Arthur’s couch – they all placed the food they’d brought on the table. Along with the excess of food that Merlin had made and was currently cooking, there’d definitely be enough for them.

“Considering that the entirety of Hogwarts has just arrived,” Arthur drawled, “I’m a little confused as to where Simon is.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Tanith waved him off. “He’s picking up the firewhiskey.” Ron suddenly perked up at the mention of it, but was slapped across the back of the head by a frowning Hermione. Harry, between the two of them, was grinning.

Merlin took a few moments to look at the young boy. Despite the fact that he had turned a year older since Merlin had last seen him, he seemed younger than ever. His eyes were constantly alight, like he found joy in every single thing around him, and his posture had changed to be more relaxed and less hypervigilant. His hair had started to grow out, the dark unruly curls obscuring his lightning bolt scar slightly, and he seemed more like a young boy than Merlin had ever seen him.

“Alright, Harry?” he asked. The Gryffindor winked at him.

“Never better,” he replied.

Maya clapped, getting everyone’s attention. “Right, so who can conjure up some more chairs? And can maybe transfigure this table to be a little larger, Merlin knows that I’m terrible at Transfig.”
“Well I don’t actually, but thanks for letting me know,” Merlin snorted.

“Oh, shit, right,” Maya blanched. “That’s gonna be awkward.”

Arthur laughed and slung an arm around Merlin’s shoulders. “Just be grateful he doesn’t appear from nowhere every time you invoke his name. Now, who here knows about the second engaged couple? No-one? For shame, you two!”

“Wait, who’s engaged?”

“Arthur and Merlin!”

“No, Ronald, we already know that. Honestly…”

“Is that a ring on your finger, Cora? Is it you two?”

“Who else was it going to be?”

“Uh, actually, Lydia and I have an announcement to make too…”

“What?”

“Oh, that’ll be Simon at the door—“

”Merlin, did you hear that I’m living with Sirius and Lupin now? Since McGonagall got him acquitted—“

“Hey, Rob, pass me a cauldron cake.”
Holy shit, you guys. It's been a wild fucking ride, I can't even believe that this is done. I started writing this thirty-two months ago. That's well over two and a half years I've been slaving away at this absolute monster of a fic and I can't believe it's done. I'm in a state of total disbelief right now. This fic has been my baby, my mortal enemy, the number #1 reason I've wanted to smash my head repeatedly against a brick wall and the number #1 reason for me to keep going as a writer, to keep improving, to keep going, to keep trying to one-up myself.

This fic has meant more to me than anyone could possibly imagine. And I couldn't have done it without you guys - everyone who left a kudos, who left a comment no matter how long or short it was, every critique, criticism and declaration of love. Every single I loved this and every goddamn please write more! has inspired and motivated me more than you will ever know. I have never, in my entire life, written anything of this magnitude or length, in either my original novels or my fanfiction, and this is a huge milestone for me. So thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for every single person who has read this, loved this and lived this, whether you started reading yesterday or have been with me ever since 2013. I love you all, so, so much.

I do, however, need to make some special shoutouts.

The first is to mushroomtale for their absolutely wonderful, amazing, astounding and breathtaking art that they did for this fic, which I'm sure you've all seen, since I've mentioned it at least three times and embedded it twice into here. I have never in my life seen art for anything that I've written, and to have something that someone so clearly put a ridiculous amount of time, effort and love into for something that I've done is just... unbelievable. Sometimes I can still barely believe it happened. Thank you so, so, so much, my dear.

The next is to azurelunatic, for helping me out with aspects of life that I incorporated but didn't fully understand. They helped me out with changing up and refining the wixen transitioning process for transgender magical folk, and did it in such a patient and kind way. They helped me to improve upon something that I had limited knowledge of, and I thank them every day for being such a good critic and for helping me to improve something that I believe is so incredibly important both within Jo's world that I've expanded upon and within real life. Thank you, dearest.

Now to some wonderful people who have left me the most in-depth, considerate and most highly motivating comments of my entire life. These are moonyluciferous, sunrunner, kayura_sanada and queenofthepirates. The four of you have left what I think may have been the largest comments in existence, and you'll never know how much your kind words inspired me and made me tear up when I was alone, convinced
that this entire fic was complete shit and I was never going to finish it. Thank you, sweethearts, from the very bottom of my heart for being my number one motivators and cheerleaders.

And thank you so much to everyone else for getting to the end of this, for loving it enough to get here, for being with me and supporting me and these dumb boys that we all love so much.

I could never, with my vast vocabulary, put into words how much you all mean to me.

Love,
Evvie

P.S: Psst, if you really enjoyed this and want me to write something specific, you can ask me >>HERE!

Works inspired by this one
Panart: Emrys Ascending by mushroomtale, Potion class - FANART for Emrys Ascending by Alix_pumpkhin, Merlin Emrys and the Goblet of Fire by PIPESx2

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